

BRINGING THE ARTS TO THE 'BURBS

**Dennis G. Assaf reflects
on 40-plus years of
managing the Jefferson
Performing Arts Society**

By Dean M. Shapiro

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: DON AND LINDA GUILLOT

In the summer of 2015 a long-held dream finally came true for Dennis G. Assaf. Thirty-seven years after its conception and eight years after its official groundbreaking, the 1,000-seat Jefferson Performing Arts Center opened its doors on Airline Drive in Metairie.

As the Co-founder/Artistic Director of the Jefferson Performing Arts Society, Assaf recounted the decades-long quest his organization endured to see the facility rise from the ground up and begin hosting musicals, dance performances, children's workshops, Carnival balls and other social and cultural events. It was the crowning achievement of a 46-year effort during which he faced and overcame numerous

financial and political obstacles.

Today, despite still being in a pandemic, Assaf is optimistic for the future of the performing arts in Jefferson Parish.

"We're selling tickets," Assaf proudly noted. "People are itching to get back to some sense of normalcy." And though he is worried about the continued presence of the COVID-19 virus and the restrictions it has placed on large public gatherings, JPAS is "charging ahead" with its plans for opening the 2021-22 season.

The three-time Tony Award-winning production of "God of Carnage" opened JPAS's 2021-22 season over the weekend of October 1-3 at their Teatro Wego performing arts facility in Westwego.

A second round of performances was held on Friday, October 8 and Sunday, October 10.

Due to Hurricane Ida damage to the Jefferson Performing Arts Center, the JPAS mainstage season on the East Bank of Jefferson Parish opened in time for Halloween with a series of performances of "The Addams Family" on October 22-24 and October 29-31 in the auditorium of East Jefferson High School in Metairie.

Growing up in the Lakeview section of New Orleans, Assaf got off to an early start in the performing arts. He sang in the St. Dominic's Catholic Church choir and attended Holy Cross High School where he met and sang in their chorus

with future Metropolitan Opera star Anthony Laciura who would later go on to perform in JPAS productions. All through high school Assaf sang in rock and roll bands and, following graduation, he went into the Air National Guard for six years before enrolling in the Loyola University College of Music.

“I was a voice major and I wanted to become the next Johnny Mathis,” he said.

However, that lofty aspiration changed when Assaf began taking opera workshops and aspired to become an opera singer instead. But, he explained, “In my junior year of college I realized I didn’t have the chops to be an opera singer, although I love opera. So I took my first conducting class and that’s when the light bulb came on. I was so thankful to God that I finally found my purpose in life. It was a great source of comfort to know that now I could really sink my teeth into the music business.”

Having found his niche, Assaf excelled at it and was given opportunities to conduct the Loyola Orchestra. “It was great because I had composition majors bringing me their scores to conduct them with other students. That was a really wonderful time,” he said.

And it was there, in an opera workshop at Loyola, that he met his future wife,



PHOTO BY RAYMOND BRETZ

soprano Nancy Ross, who went on to sing for productions with JPAS, as well as with New Orleans Opera and other opera companies throughout the South.

Assaf’s desire to continue leading musical ensembles after graduation from Loyola led to his hiring as the choral director of Munholland United Methodist Church in Metairie. In that capacity, another fortuitous acquaintance began for him. In the church’s congregation and singing in the choir was a prominent Metairie woman named Hannah Cunningham.

Through Cunningham’s political connections, especially with former governor Dave Treen and former Jefferson Parish Councilmember Bob DeViney,



Conducting Hungarian pianist, Istvan Nadas, in a 1997 performance of Mozart’s “Piano Concerto” PHOTO BY DAVID RICHMOND

both of whom were members of the Munholland Church, good things began to happen for Assaf’s career trajectory. One concert alone, a Handel’s “Messiah” performance in December 1978 with the New Orleans Symphony, netted the choir \$5,500, enough to pay the singers and the orchestra.

“It was a free concert, wall to wall, standing room only, and we passed the hat to raise all that cash. That’s where JPAS was born and the rest is kind of history,” Assaf proudly stated.

Consistently committed throughout his tenure at JPAS to sharing credit with Cunningham, who passed in 2018 at the age of 103, Assaf added, “The founding of JPAS in 1978 began my relationship with



Conducting the Verdi opera, “Simon Boccanegra,” with the Croatia National Symphony in Zagreb, Croatia.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DENNIS G. ASSAF

elected officials, thanks to Hannah. From there on we were a tag team.”

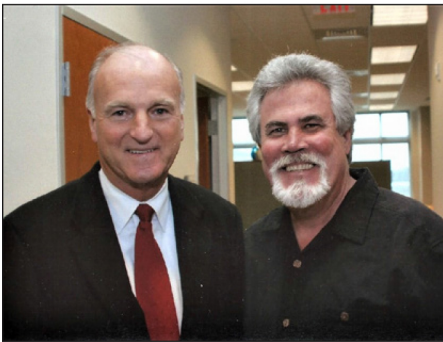
Following the success of that first concert, Assaf realized that Jefferson Parish had no suitable venues to host his dreams of concerts, ballets, opera and musicals. So, at that point, he began envisioning having his own performance venue where he could conduct both his choir and the fledgling Jefferson Symphony Orchestra which he founded. Former Jefferson Parish President Joe Yenni suggested the auditorium of East Jefferson High School in Metairie and, from 1987 until the JPAC opened in 2015, that was JPAS’s performance home. By this time, running the arts organization had become Assaf’s fulltime job.

However, an even loftier goal was taking shape in his mind: JPAS’s own, stand-alone performing arts center. He recommended a site on what is known as the LaSalle Tract on Airline Drive, adjacent to where Zephyr Stadium would later be built. But, before the first shovel could be put into the ground, funds had to be raised. This is where Assaf’s political connections and his savvy in playing the political game came in handy.

As he explained, “I approached State Senator Ken Hollis at an event and got a promise from him to work toward securing funding for a new performing arts center in



With State Senator Ken Hollis and Hannah Cunningham at the JPAC construction site, 2009 PHOTO BY KEITH ADAMS



With State Sen. Ken Hollis PHOTO BY KEITH ADAMS



With Nancy Ross as Gilda in Verdi's "Rigoletto," 1995 PHOTO BY MARK ANDREWS

the legislative session in 1998." Assaf also enlisted the aid of John Hainkel who was president of the Louisiana State Senate at that time and whose granddaughter had danced in JPAS's "Nutcracker" performances.

Hollis came to the Jefferson Parish Council with \$250,000 for a feasibility study which estimated the cost for building the center to be \$30 million. Hainkel told Assaf that if he could get \$15 million would Assaf be able to come up with the rest.

Over time, with intense political lobbying, Jefferson Parish found the remaining funds, but disappointment soon followed for Assaf. Parish officials told him they were going to bring in an outside company to manage the theater when it was completed, a move that still rankles Assaf to this day. He did, however, manage to get JPAS designated as the theater's resident performing arts company, thanks to support from then-Jefferson Parish President John Young.

In 2000, Assaf was pleasantly surprised by an offer that was made to him. As he explained, (former West Bank State Representative) "John Alario asked me to meet with him about a project he was pushing. He said 'We're going to build a theater in Westwego and I want you to run it.' Just like that. And so four years later we had the Westwego Performing Arts Theatre to manage."

In addition to the WPAT, JPAS also manages an adjacent theatre, Teatro Wego. As the smaller of the two venues, it hosts JPAS's "Standup Comic Zone," plus occasional dinner theater productions and other special events. And, with hurricane damage recently resulting to the roof of the larger theatre, "It is our backup space," Assaf said.

And so today, with a full season of shows on the schedule, Assaf remains hopeful that things can return to normal soon and he and his staff can continue presenting quality entertainment for the residents of Jefferson Parish and the greater New Orleans area. Operating on



With Jefferson Parish Councilman Bob DeViney and JPAS co-founder Hannah Cunningham at East Jefferson High School auditorium, 1987

PHOTO COURTESY OF DENNIS G. ASSAF

a skeleton staff of five other key people since the COVID pandemic was declared, he is hopeful of returning to full strength and rehiring the 12 other staff members who were furloughed.

He is also hopeful that this year's re-bidding of the contract for management of the JPAC will result in JPAS finally assuming control over the facility that it originally envisioned and coaxed determinedly into existence. "That would be poetic justice," Assaf declared.

Outside the office, Assaf remains the dedicated family man he has been since he and Nancy tied the knot 47 years ago. With five grandchildren and three daughters, one of whom – Ariel, the youngest – has followed in her parents' musical footsteps, Dennis Assaf is a happy man.

Summing up, he said, "It's been a situation of stubborn persistence for me over the years. I had a goal. I wanted to honor my mother and father to never quit and so I'm really grateful to God for the opportunities I've had. A great wife, beautiful children, grandchildren, a nice home and a rewarding career. To quote from the Gershwin brothers, (in "I've Got Rhythm") "Who could ask for anything more?"