

Arts & Literature

Getto Fabulous

The new executive director of the Stamford Center for the Arts explains how the venerable arts institution will pull its way out of bankruptcy

By William Squier

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Over its 17-year history, the Stamford Center for the Arts has gone through more than its share of head honchos. Legendary theatrical producer Alexander Cohen opened its doors in 1992 and lasted three years. George Moredock hung around for a decade before questions about certain financial improprieties – addressed privately by Moredock and the SCA's Board of Directors – led to his resignation in 2005. It took a year and a half to replace him with Ken Wesler, who left a year and a half later. Then, the SCA went bankrupt.

Running the place was dropped in the lap of longtime administrator Jenny Ober Lake, who then became the General Manager. Around that time Elissa O. Getto very quietly entered the scene. Getto is the founder and president of G2 Consulting Group, a firm that advises arts organizations on ways to improve their administrative and financial management. "I came in as a friend to assist in the writing of new business plans," Getto explains. "Jenny and I work extremely well together. So, the Board decided that we were a good team."

Good enough to help pull the SCA out of bankruptcy (with an assist from NBC, who converted the SCA's Rich Forum into a studio for "The Jerry Springer Show" and a few other trash talk shows). So, when it came to choosing a new executive director for the SCA, the Board split the job between the two of them and Getto officially joined the staff in October.

I sat down with her at the Palace Theater last week to see how things were going.

Squier: The SCA has emerged from bankruptcy.

Getto: Officially, we came out October 23.

Is there any difference now that you're solvent?

We're coming back, stronger and more focused. Perhaps in a different form than has traditionally been associated with the Stamford Center for the Arts. When you go through a bankruptcy, you're understandably more conservative. It's about the business plan and priorities. We used to have a \$6 to \$7 million budget. Under our new business plan, we have a \$1.5 to \$1.75 million budget. That means we're not actively producing. We're presenting to a certain extent. The focus is on programs that support our educational mission. Jenny has been the prime mover in that area. We're in agreement that we can do one thing to propel us forward artistically. We want it to be education."

Is the objective to build an audience from the back end?

That's one of the primary reasons that performing arts organizations do education. There's nothing more exciting than the energy of youth. If you can take that excitement and combine it with some knowledge of the arts and then have them carry it forward in their lives, it benefits everyone. All of our education programs are going to have an element of entertainment and fun. The module we've developed is for a Summer Arts Infusion.



William Squier photo

With Elissa O. Getto, the bankruptcy-emerged SCA went with someone known more for organizational skills than creative vision

What will that involve?

The Lumina String Quartet is in residence working with high school age kids. We're going to put their final concert on the stage – normally, it's in the lobby – and present a scholarship to a talented artist who participates in the program. Next year, we'll give the first Dave Brubeck Jazz Scholarship to the Brubeck Institute (University of the Pacific) in California. They have a fabulous program to develop jazz artists.

I understand Dave Brubeck is lined up for a fund-raiser?

At the Palace Gala, April 29. It's a benefit for the educational program. That night we'll be presenting him with the first annual Legacy Award, and the Brubeck Quartet will perform. And at the party beforehand, we're going to present Kelly Mittleman and her trio.

Your predecessors were primarily theater guys. You have experience on the music side of things. You've been the music director for madrigal groups, worked at the Academy of Music in Massachusetts and Wolf Trap. Will that play into the direction that the SCA takes?

You're going to see a balance in the future of music, dance, theatre and other creative aspects. We're not looking to replicate or duplicate or compete.

Have your relationships with your resident companies changed?

Our relationships with the people who partner with us are critical. We're not going to succeed if they don't succeed. We're very happy to have the Connecticut Ballet and the Stamford Symphony here. There's a new, tangible energy and a desire to work together. We have the space and they have a lot of talent. What's a space without things going on? We don't spend a lot of time talking about the past. If we've had problems, you better believe our friends have had problems, too. We're going carefully, but it doesn't mean that it's not without as much passion as we can bring.

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