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# TIMES UNION

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## Sweeter Tier 6 benefits could pinch local budgets

It may help recruitment, but municipalities fear higher costs, tax hikes, program cuts

By Timothy Fanning  
STAFF WRITER

ALBANY — When a water main breaks in Niskayuna, a dwindling pool of workers is responsible for fixing it. Finding these employees has

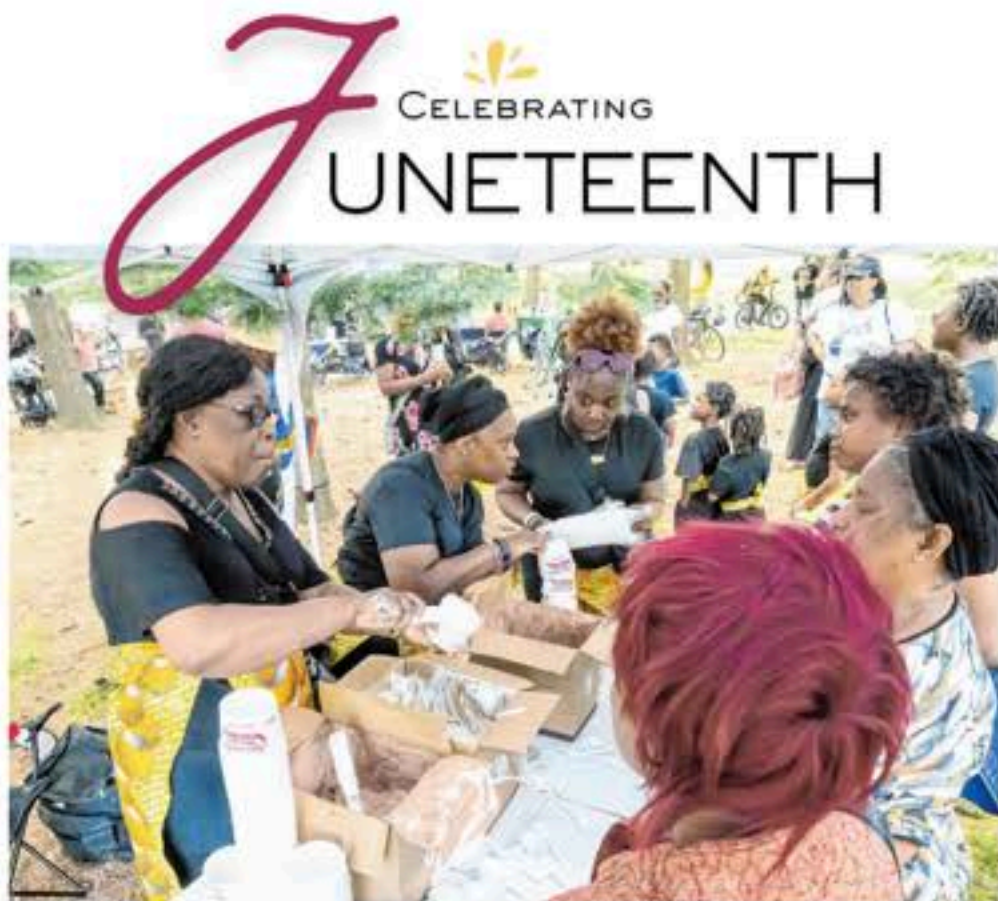
become increasingly difficult for the suburban town of 22,000, said Supervisor Erin Cassidy-Dorion, who oversees its day-to-day operations. That's why Cassidy-Dorion welcomed last month's announcement of New York's

more generous pension package for employees hired after April 1, 2022, known as Tier 6. Gov. Kathy Hochul signed the measure into law after unions argued it would improve recruitment and retention. But Cassidy-Dorion worries that the added costs that will flow from the changes could

See TIER 6, A4



A water main break is repaired in Niskayuna in 2016. Water and sewer jobs are among the hardest for towns to fill. Cindy Schultz/Times Union



JIM FRANCO/TIMES UNION

H.I.P.H.O.P. and Community Praise volunteers, above, serve ice cream during the annual Juneteenth Freedom Day Celebration Friday at Swinburne Park in Albany. At left, Eric Kersey cooks corn-on-the-cob. The event featured food, entertainment, vendors, train rides and other festivities in observance of Juneteenth.

## Can Lyme defy the funding odds?

Feds raise profile of the tick-borne illness as other research faces major cuts

By Nora Mishanec  
STAFF WRITER

Given his high-profile comments about Lyme disease, people suffering from the tick-borne illness had reason to hope that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s tenure at the Department of Health and Human Services would produce breakthroughs many had long awaited. In late May, the department announced what it called a "sweeping plan" to combat the disease with funding for tick control programs and research incentives. But those initiatives arrive at a time of extraordinary uncertainty for a scientific community reeling from the drastic reduction in grants that have long fueled new medical discoveries. Observers say President Donald J. Trump administration's attacks on biomedical research funding may undercut progress on Lyme, Alpha-gal syndrome and other tick-related pathogens. "We are in a funding crisis that has affected every single institution and every single investigator," said Nicole Baumgarth, an immunologist specializing in tick-borne diseases at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of

See LYME, A8



Francis Chung/ABACA  
President Donald Trump and HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House last September. During the second Trump administration, Kennedy's agency has made sweeping cuts to scientific research, while signaling support for Lyme disease initiatives.

## Educators see a bright future with AI

Some say the technology will allow deeper learning, time spent on other work

By Kathleen Moore  
STAFF WRITER

Artificial intelligence has been panned for all the

things it does wrong, with teachers saying most of their students are using it to avoid learning and new grads saying their job pros-

pects are slim due to AI taking their positions. But some educational experts think it will usher in a vastly better world, in

which students learn deeply and workers spend more time on the parts of their job that they love. See FUTURE OF AI, A14

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2026

# SPAC created in 'act of belief'

CEO Elizabeth Sobol reflects on why founders' promise remains vital 60 years later

By Elizabeth Sobol  
FOR THE TIMES UNION

Sixty years ago, a group of community leaders and visionaries walked through Saratoga Spa State Park and imagined something that, at the time, seemed quite improbable, even audacious.

They envisioned a world-class performing arts center rising from a landscape of pines, pathways and mineral springs, far from the major urban centers where cultural institutions traditionally took root, believing that extraordinary artistic experiences belonged not only in great cities, but here, in upstate New York, where art and nature could exist in conversation with one another.

The ultimate creation of the now-legendary Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC) amphitheater was not simply a project of building and construction; it was an act of belief — a belief that a community could gather around beauty, excellence and shared experience in the heart of nature and be galvanized and transformed by it.

Among those early champions was Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, who firmly believed that arts and education are fundamental to a democratic society. The founding of SPAC in 1966 reflected a profound civic confidence — a belief that investing in culture was, ultimately, an investment in people, society and devotion to the common good.

As SPAC celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, I think often about the legacy of the past and about the challenge embedded within its founding vision.

Across the country, Americans are grappling with unprecedented levels of polarization, loneliness, social fragmentation, and anger. We live increasingly mediated lives, connected by technology, yet more and more disconnected from one another.

In moments like these, it is tempting to think that the arts are secondary to society's seemingly more pressing



Donna Abbott-Vlahos/Albany Business Review

Elizabeth Sobol is the president and CEO of Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

concerns. I would strenuously argue that the opposite is true.

As Rockefeller believed, a healthy society depends on qualities in its citizens of empathy, curiosity, imagination, attentiveness, and the ability to engage with complexity —

all qualities awakened and strengthened by engagement with the arts.

At SPAC, these experiences are powerfully evoked by the twinned beauties of art and nature that spring from this place like its curative waters

— experiences that, we now know from scientists, break down the cognitive barriers between self and other, uniting us, nourishing us in the shared spark of humanity that lives in beauty.

Over the past decade, SPAC

has sought to expand its offerings of these life-affirming gifts:

- We have transformed from a seasonal presenter into a year-round cultural institution. We have invested in preserving and revitalizing our historic campus as a center for community gathering. Most significantly, we have expanded educational programming from serving 5,000 students annually in 2016 to more than 60,000 individuals throughout the Capital Region.

- Later this year, another chapter in SPAC's history will begin with the reopening of the historic Spa Little Theater. This storied and historic space will soon become SPAC's fully-restored, year-round home — a true jewel in



the crown. A place for intimacy, for innovation, for new voices and new experiences for the whole community. And in many ways, a perfect mirror of that original act of creation in 1966.

The founders of SPAC dreamed boldly. They invested not only in a physical structure, but in a vision of what a community could become when it places art, education, and shared experience at its center.

In a divided age, there may be few acts more audacious — or more important — than creating and maintaining places where people can gather in beauty, wonder, and common humanity.

That was SPAC's founding promise. And 60 years later, it remains as vital and necessary as ever.

*Elizabeth Sobol is CEO of Saratoga Performing Arts Center, a 501(c)(3) charitable organization dedicated to year-round arts and education. SPAC is the summer home of New York City Ballet, The Philadelphia Orchestra, and Saratoga Jazz Festival, and also hosts concerts presented by Live Nation. The 2026 season marks SPAC's 60th anniversary and a decade of Sobol's leadership.*

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Will Waldron/Times Union



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SCAN TO LEARN MORE

# One editor's case for start of SPAC

Piece proposed summer home for ballet, philharmonic

By Features staff

**A**n editorial in the Times Union's sister paper mused — rather pointedly — on two classical performing entities from New York that were planning on establishing a summer home in Vermont, and wondered why a state Council on the Arts wasn't making a case for them to stay in the Empire State. The author, Duane LaFleche, an editorial page editor of the Knickerbocker News, said Saratoga Springs would make an ideal space in the summer months.

That editorial, many say, prompted discussions and the eventual establishment of a performance venue in the Spa City, which would become the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. There is debate about the year that editorial was published: We can find it in a 1966 edition of the Knickerbocker News.

In celebrating SPAC's 60th anniversary, we dug into the archives for that editorial as well as an interview with LaFleche 30 years after the venue's opening date on July 9, 1966.

## "Let Not Thy Left Hand Know?"

*Knickerbocker News, Feb. 4, 1966*

All on the same day there were these three news announcements.

- Governor Rockefeller proclaimed February as American music month in New York State.

- Governor Rockefeller asked the Legislature to appropriate \$450,000 for the State Council on the Arts. It is to be used "to increase opportunities for participation and enjoyment of the ballet, drama, opera and orchestra."



John Carl D'Annibale/Times Union Archive

John Hendrickson, left, his wife Marylou Whitney and Marcia White, president and executive director of Saratoga Performing Arts Center, greet former Knickerbocker News editor Duane LaFleche, following the ribbon cutting to reopen the renovated amphitheater at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center on May 26, 2007.

- The New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the New York Ballet Company let it be known they are seeking \$2 million to establish a summer home... at STOWE, VERMONT.

Seems strange, somehow that a New York Orchestra and ballet should have to look out of the state for a summer home.

Seems even stranger that the Council on the Arts isn't doing anything about it... and seemingly didn't even know anything about the orchestra's and the ballet company's plans.

Wouldn't the state reservation at Saratoga Springs make an ideal location for a summer home for both? Or maybe even, there would be an appropriate site up Thatcher Park way

where the state has plans for park expansion.

Seymour H. Knox of Buffalo is head of the Council on Arts. What are you going to do about this, Mr. Knox?

## Rocky's wink at editor sparked SPAC

*Knickerbocker News, Aug. 7, 1976. By Martin Meyniban.*

No history of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center would be complete without mention of a twinkle in the eye of Duane LaFleche and a wink in the eye of former Governor Rockefeller.

LaFleche, editor of the editorial page of The Knickerbocker News, wrote an editorial in 1960 that suggested the creating of a center for dance and music at the state-owned Saratoga

Reservation in Saratoga Springs.

LaFleche will be honored on Founder's Night tomorrow at SPAC when the New York Philharmonic, under the direction of Erich Leinsdorf, concludes the symphony music season at the popular amphitheater. The Philharmonic is making its first appearance ever at SPAC tonight.

The musicians of that orchestra may not know it, but the Philharmonic inadvertently played a key role in the development of SPAC, now the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra and the New York City Ballet.

In 1960 LaFleche, then ruling the newsroom of The Knickerbocker News as city editor,

noticed an item in a newspaper promoting Stowe, Vt., as a summer home for the Philharmonic.

"For many years my wife and I were drawn to the Saratoga Reservation and the Hall of Springs and we felt we'd be out since there," LaFleche recalled. "About the same time I read a note in some paper (about the Philharmonic) and I said, 'Right over there would be a great place for a summer home for the New York Philharmonic and the New York City Ballet.'

"So I asked Wellington Wales — he was editorial page editor and I was city editor — I asked Duke Wales I could write an editorial proposing

See LAFLECHE, S11

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# SPAC a 'driving force' on economy

Business leaders reflect on venue's financial impact

By Lilli Iannella  
STAFF WRITER

About a decade after Saratoga Performing Arts Center's opening in 1966, Dan Fortier attended his first concert at the venue and was star-struck to have watched Aerosmith "rock" on stage.

He's since been to more than 100 shows at SPAC, a 5,200-seat amphitheater distinguished by its rust-colored facade with capacity for an additional 20,000 guests on its lawn. It sits in the heart of Saratoga Spa State Park and is surrounded by towering pine trees along with naturally spouting mineral springs. From its scenery to its events, the venue has not only left a mark on Fortier as a fan of the arts but also as a downtown business owner — the general manager at Embassy Suites by Hilton in Saratoga Springs.

"It's hard to fathom how big the network is that is SPAC," Fortier said. "Then you look back and say, how has it been 60 years?"

Now, SPAC welcomes around 500,000 visitors annually and generates an estimated \$105 million in annual economic impact to the region. It's



Saratoga Performing Arts Center hosts 500,000 visitors annually.

Lori Van Buren/Times Union

become one of Saratoga County's major tourism drivers alongside Saratoga Race Course, Saratoga Casino Hotel and the Saratoga National Historical Park, according to the Saratoga County Industrial Development Agency.

"Visitors don't just attend a show and leave, they come here, they spend money, they stay in our hotels, they dine in our restaurants, they shop in downtown, they visit attractions," said Darryl Leggeri, president of Discover Saratoga.

"They're coming here, they're spending money, and they usually extend their stay throughout the region as well. I think the ripple effect is huge."

As SPAC celebrates its 60th anniversary, its leaders and business owners alike look back on the decades of work that made the venue and its local community what they are today.

"If it wasn't here, I don't think that we would have the ability outside of the track to truly introduce ourselves to

thousands of visitors that may not ever come to this area but do because they love something that's playing there," said Nancy Bambara, vice president and chief operating officer at DZ Restaurants in Saratoga Springs. "I think that SPAC is a huge driving force. I feel that if we didn't have it, it would be one less piece of why people come here and why people find us."

DZ Restaurants operates three downtown Saratoga Springs restaurants: Boca Bis-

tro, Chianti Il Ristorante and Forno Bistro. Bambara said on a typical show night, she'll speak to half of her businesses' guests who tell her they'll be going to SPAC after their dinner, many of whom share that it's their first time at the restaurant.

"You can feel when there's a concert going on, or the ballet or the orchestra. You can feel it in the people that are walking the streets," Bambara said. "There's so much energy."

A 2023 report conducted by economic development consulting group Camoin Associates for the Saratoga County IDA estimated 54% of SPAC guests in 2023 were new visitors traveling from outside of the Capital Region, with 40% staying in the Saratoga area overnight.

"Every time they host one of those events, it brings more visitors to our community, and it also makes the people who live here feel special," said Todd Shimkus, president and CEO of the Saratoga County Chamber of Commerce. "Saratoga is a place where people love to gather, and SPAC is one of the places that they love to gather. So not only does it benefit us from a hospitality perspective, but it benefits us in terms of talent and recruitment."

"Our destination appeals greatly to people that are traveling for cultural tourism," Leggeri added. "Cultural tourism is a huge part of our economy." See **ECONOMY**, S12

# SPAC, New York City Ballet's decades-long pas de deux

Organizations' leaders reflect on history, partnership

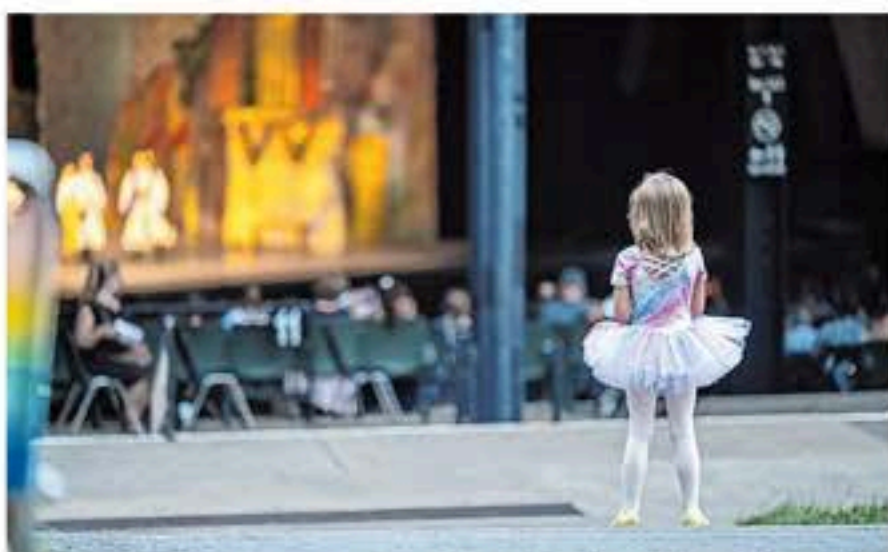
By Tresea Weinstein  
FOR THE TIMES UNION

A pas de deux — French for "step of two" — is a dance between two performers in classical ballet. It's also defined as an intricate, interdependent relationship between two people or entities. That's the kind of relationship that the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and the New York City Ballet have been engaged in for the past 60 years.

The two women currently at the head of the organizations, SPAC CEO Elizabeth Sobol and Katherine Brown, executive director of NYCB, recently reflected on their collaboration in a joint interview. Over the course of the conversation, they traced the history of the partnership, the challenges along the way and the performances set for this summer.

Here's a look at the past six decades of this collaborative duet, structured in the sections of a classical pas de deux.

**Entrée: The dramatic entrance when the dancers arrive on stage together**



A young spectator watches 2025's Family Night showing of "Coppelia" by the New York City Ballet at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

Francesco D'Amico/Courtesy of Saratoga Performing Arts Center

The idea to build a summer home for the New York City Ballet originated with Duane LaFleche, a reporter with The Knickerbocker News (an Albany paper that was absorbed by the Times Union in 1988). LaFleche heard that the town of Stowe, Vt., was considering hosting a summer festival for the New York Philharmonic and the New York City Ballet, and he wrote an editorial advocating that Saratoga host them instead.

The notion caught on with local and then state luminaries, including state Conservation Commissioner Harold Wilm, who reached out to NYCB and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Spa City elites like the Duke family and Marylou Whitney quickly got behind the project. The initiative was officially announced in 1962, and in June 1964, New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller officially broke ground (atop a bulldozer) for the \$1.8 million construction.

"Community and government visionaries came together with these cultural visionaries and dreamed of starting a world-class performing arts center in this exquisite 2,400-acre New York state park," Sobol shared. "It was a rather audacious vision."

George Balanchine, artistic director and co-founder of NYCB with Lincoln Kirstein, was involved from the beginning, working closely with the architects. He suggested a

basketweave of yellow pine for the dance floor to provide a combination of spring and solidity, and influenced another unusual feature: a rehearsal space that's exactly the same size as the stage.

"For (Balanchine) to be able to be a part of the design of the theater was remarkable," Brown said. "He was an integral part of thinking about what would be the most ideal performing arts space for ballet, which is something that doesn't happen very often. It's also such a special thing to be performing in an outdoor facility where you can hear the birds and all the nature sounds."

The surroundings were the perfect backdrop for Balanchine's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the company's first public performance in the amphitheater, on July 9, 1966. Since then, City Ballet has performed at SPAC every summer, with the exception of 2020 when SPAC programming — along with many other venues' seasons — were canceled during the COVID pandemic.

**Adagio: A slow, lyrical section filled with fluid balances and challenging lifts**

Sobol likes to call the 60-year collaboration with the ballet company "the SPAC miracle" — a miracle that requires a See **BALLET**, S12

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# Orchestra celebrates 'second home'

Summer residency special for musicians, community

By Katherine Kiessling  
STAFF WRITER

**O**n a warm August night in 1966, then 16-year-old Carla Skodinski begged her parents to go back to the new performing arts center tucked in the pines of Spa State Park. She had already gone once to see the New York City Ballet dance among the fireflies. Enchanted, she wanted to return, this time for the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Eugene Ormandy.

"I had never heard an orchestra play live," Skodinski said. "I absolutely couldn't believe the sound I was hearing. I had never heard anything like this. ... I was just mesmerized."

That evening, a lifelong Philadelphia Orchestra and classical music fan emerged, as did a partnership between one of the world's top orchestras and the new Saratoga Performing Arts Center. The musical residency, like the performing arts organization, turns 60 this summer.

A main reason the SPAC residency was extended to the Philadelphia Orchestra was because of then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's wife, Happy, said Ryan Fleur, president and CEO of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Ensemble Arts Philly. She grew up in Bryn Mawr, a Pennsylvania suburb just west of Philadelphia.

"When the discussion was happening of what to do, who to have, they knew they wanted Balanchine. And Happy told Nelson, 'Well, why not my orchestra?'" Fleur said. And so Happy's hometown orchestra, the



Yannick Nézet-Séguin leads the Philadelphia Orchestra during its annual residency at Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

Philadelphia Orchestra, got a new summer home.

The residency — as well as its partners — has evolved over its six decades. The orchestra's summer season has been led by five music directors, from Ormandy that first summer to Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who has led since his appointment in 2010. Programming, once under the auspices of the orchestra in its early years, has become a collaboration between the musical group and its summer home, said Elizabeth Sobol, CEO of SPAC. In addition to performing, the orchestra hosts PlayIN with local musicians of all ages and frequently collaborates with Albany Pro Musica for large choral works.

"The people who are coming to our venue are my neighbors. They are our bankers and our grocers and our shop owners, and they're our teachers," Sobol said. "That's really extraordinary. And to feel the whole com-

munity wait for this moment (when the orchestra arrives), I've never seen anything like it."

The musicians also wait for this moment. Some spend the summer camping upstate, Fleur said, while others stay with friends or family or rent.

"SPAC — it's not a residency, it's a second home," Fleur said.

Summers in Saratoga are the beloved "capstone" to the Philadelphia Orchestra's long seasons, said David Kim, concertmaster since 1999. Musicians' concert days often begin with rehearsal, Kim said.

"Then it's go to lunch, take a nap, take a shower and then show up and really make music on that stage," Kim said.

Evenings often end with a celebratory gathering of "nice charcuterie and a nice bottle of wine or two" at a player's home, Kim said. Then the ritual repeats for 12 concerts over three weeks.

For anyone who may have noticed a teary-eyed musician during the final concert, Kim said it is because most retiring players end their tenures on SPAC stages.

"It's a very emotional moment," Kim said. "Usually there's at least one or two or three every season. Some of them have been coming up to Saratoga for like 40, 50 years, and they get handed a bouquet of flowers and extra applause on the last night. It's very emotional for them, and for all of us too, to say goodbye, so that gives an extra layer of intensity to the end of the SPAC season."

The Philadelphia Orchestra's residency has been filled with memorable moments. Perhaps the most historic was opera legend Marian Anderson's performance of Aaron Copland's "Lincoln Portrait," under Copland's baton, in 1976 as part of the nation's Bicentennial. This summer's presentation of the work, this time with Broadway star Brian Stokes Mitch-

ell narrating, is a deliberate nod to Anderson's performance, Sobol said. There are other callbacks to notable figures in this season, including pianist Emanuel Ax and conductor Marin Alsop.

There have also been concerts that may not make the history books but have had no less of an impact on their viewers. Fleur recalled Verdi's "Requiem" from last summer. After the morning's two-hour rehearsal block for a roughly 90-minute piece (and one the orchestra had performed before elsewhere), Nézet-Séguin went rogue during the concert.

"Because Yannick has such a rapport with the ensemble, he got up there, and he did it entirely differently, and the orchestra, they just followed him, and they breathed with him," Fleur said. "It was the most extraordinary hour-and-a-half experience I've ever had. The audience, everybody, was connected at once. It was this music-making thing that happened to be Verdi. It was about the surroundings, it was about the park, it was about being outdoors, it was about just being focused and in a moment where we're very comfortable making music."

For Sobol, one of the "most profoundly meaningful performances of (her) tenure" was John Luther Adams' "Vespers of the Blessed Earth" in 2023. Sobol described the work as a "lamentation about climate change" that featured the recitation of hundreds of species now extinct. Though it had been performed elsewhere by the Philadelphia Orchestra, including Carnegie Hall, experiencing it outdoors, in an audience that included local conservationists and climate activists, transformed the piece.

"It summoned the essence of what makes this place so special," Sobol said.

See **ORCHESTRA**, S11

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Jim Franco/Times Union

Albany Medical College graduates, from left, Hannah Gilroy Fitzgerald, Taylor Humphrey and Amina Mason during the school's 118th graduation ceremony on Friday, May 5, 2023. Many schools host their high school or college commencements at the Spa City venue throughout the spring and summer.



Skip Dickstein/Times Union archive

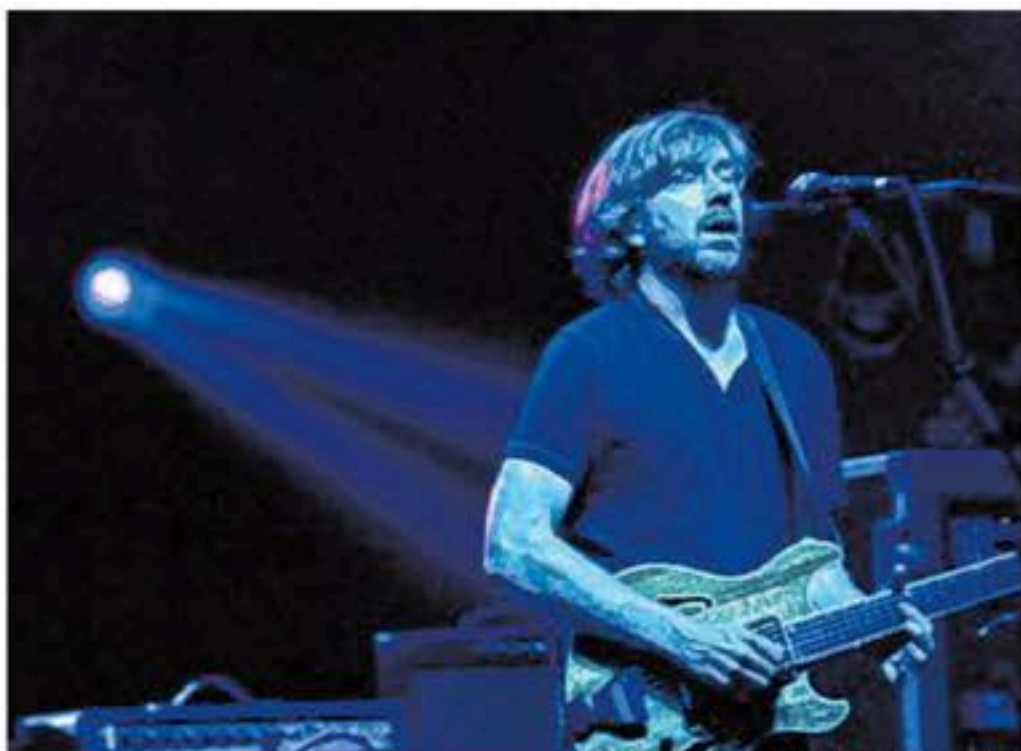
Yo-Yo Ma and guest conductor Marin Alsop joined approximately 100 Capital Region cellists of all ages and abilities to play on the SPAC stage during the first PlayIN in 2017, a unique, shared music-making event, akin to a rehearsal.

## Frame by frame: SPA



John Carl D'Annibale/Times Union archive

Crowds for the 2013 Farm Aid music festival pile on the lawn outside the main amphitheater. The lawn seats are often a lower-cost way to enjoy the acts at SPAC.



Philip Kamass/Times Union archive

Trey Anastasio of Phish plays a sold-out concert at Saratoga Performing Arts Center on Aug. 16, 2009. Phish has become one of the acts that returns often to the Saratoga amphitheater.



Ray Charles slaps his thighs as he's introduced at the Ja Center. Charles was Sunday's headline entertainer of the

### TRACING SIX DECADES OF MILESTONES

**1964**

- **June 30:** Ground was officially broken for the amphitheater by Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller. The parking areas would accommodate 5,000 cars. Construction on the amphitheater began in October.

**1966**

- **June 16:** The center was dedicated by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller.
- The first time in history a ballet company was to have a permanent home; a total of 21 New York City Ballet performances were presented during the four-week season, which ran from July 8 through July 31.
- **Aug. 4:** The Philadelphia Orchestra's first performance at

the center: Overture from Beethoven's "The Consecration of the House," conducted by Eugene Ormandy.

**1967**

- **June 29:** The first Special Event concert at the center: Harry Belafonte.

**1968**

- This year's concerts include Simon & Garfunkel, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Bill Cosby, the Bee Gees and the Doors.

**1970**

- **June 25-27:** "Fiddler on the Roof" performed in the amphitheater.

**1971**

- **Aug. 18:** The first joint performance of the NYCB and the Philadelphia Orchestra,

conducted by Andre Kostelanetz.

**1972**

- **July 6:** A single performance attendance record of 6,358 set for matinee performance of "The Nutcracker."

**1973**

- Establishment of the Patron's Club, a reserved dining and reception area in the Hall of Springs for the center's Patron members.

**1975**

- **July 30:** SPAC commissioned George Balanchine's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier."

**1977**

- Concerts included the

Captain & Tennille, England Dan & John Ford Coley, the Spinners, Chick Corea, Oscar Peterson and Jackson Browne.

**1978**

- **July 8:** Superstar dancer, Mikhail Baryshnikov made his NYCB debut at SPAC.

**1979**

- **July 26-28:** Saratoga debut of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater.

**1981**

- **June 29-July 2:** SPAC debut of The Abbey Theater in the SPAC Little Theatre.

**1982**

- Concerts included Aretha Franklin, Olivia Newton-John, Rick Springfield, Talking Heads,

Cheap Trick and Willie Nelson.

**1983**

- Seven attendance records set, including best season ever; 537,754 total.

**1984**

- **June 24:** Grateful Dead set attendance record of 37,801
- **July 27:** 30,000 ceiling placed on attendance at Bruce Springsteen, first time a ceiling was placed on audience capacity.

**1985**

- Philip Glass featured as SPAC's first ever Composer in Residence.

**1987**

- **July 11:** Inauguration of Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt



Neil Young performs during the Farm Aid concert on Saturday Sept. 21, 2024, at SPAC, the first time the event returned to Saratoga in 11 years. Jim Franco/Times Union

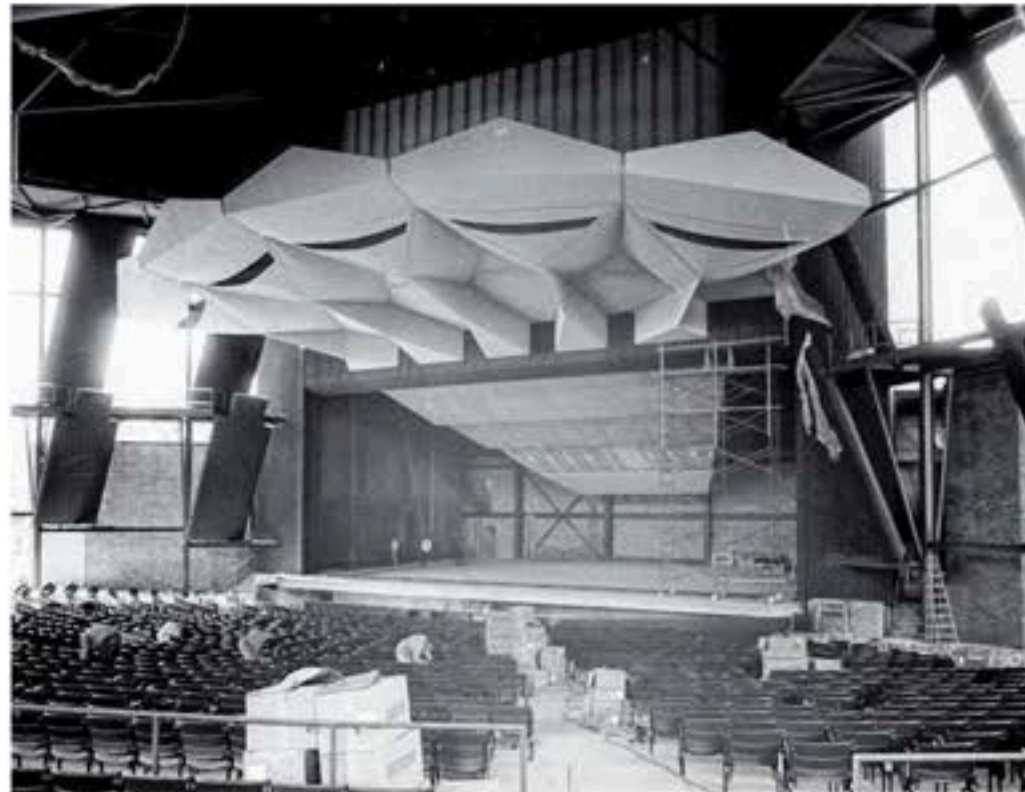


Peter Gabriel and Sinéad O'Connor performing at WOMAD at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in Saratoga Springs, New York on September 6, 1993. Ebet Roberts/Getty Images

# SPAC history in pictures



ZZ Top performs at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center during the annual weekend music festival. Cindy Schultz/Times Union archive



Construction of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in 1966. The venue would open the summer of this year. Times Union archive



The New York City Ballet opened their 2002 summer season at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center on July 9. James Goolbsy/Times Union archive

Whitney Hall of Fame, and induction of 13 dance greats, including Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and others.

**1988**  
• Concerts included Barry Manilow, John Cougar Mellencamp, Earth, Wind & Fire, Ray Charles, Sting, Linda Ronstadt and Rod Stewart

**1999**  
• The addition of a state-of-the-art video projection system.

**2007**  
• Complete refurbishment of the amphitheater interior.

**2012**  
• World premiere of Justin Peck's first ballet for NYCB: In

Creases.

**2014**  
• Bolshoi Ballet chooses SPAC as one of three U.S. venues.  
• The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's inaugural season as SPAC's third Resident Company.

**2015**  
• The Mormon Tabernacle Choir performs at SPAC to a sold-out crowd.

**2017**  
• SPAC's second stage, the Charles R. Wood Discovery Stage, is completed.

**2019**  
• Nearly 50,000 students participate in educational

programs via dance residencies, workshops, family events and more. This is up from 5,000 three years earlier.

**2020**  
• COVID pandemic leads SPAC to cancel its classical season.  
• Pines@SPAC capital project was completed, providing more concessions, gathering spaces outside the amphitheater and opening up sight lines from Route 50 to the Victoria Pool.

**2021**  
• **June 5:** SPAC returns with its Adirondack Trust Company Festival of Young Artists.

• School of the Arts opens the Lewis A. Swyer Studios for music, theater and dance classes.

**2022**  
• Spa Little Theater falls under SPAC administration, hosts year-round Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center residency and more.

**2023**  
• The first Summer SPACtacular fundraiser hits the calendar.  
• **Sept. 2:** Noah Kahan performs to a sold-out crowd of about 24,000

**2025**  
• GE Vernova becomes title sponsor of the Saratoga Jazz

Festival, taking on a five-year partnership

• School of the Arts becomes KultureCity Sensory Inclusive certified  
• **Dec. 11:** Groundbreaking event for a \$12 million renovation project at the Spa Little Theater.

**2026**  
• SPAC kicks off 60th season with new logo, the launch of the Four Seasons Campaign, performances from New York City Ballet, Philadelphia Orchestra and artists such as James Taylor, Lil Wayne, Dave Matthews Band, Muse, John Mulaney and Keshi.

# Spa Little Theater looks to past to build future

SPAC stage ramping up toward end of \$12 million renovation

By Katherine Kiessling  
STAFF WRITER

**T**hrough coats of cream paint and rebuilt walls, the Spa Little Theater has embarked on a time travel paradox: moving towards both its past and future.

A \$12 million renovation, led by the venue's current operator, Saratoga Performing Arts Center, with New York State Parks, will restore the theater's 1930s aesthetics while converting the former lecture hall into a functioning theater with modern amenities.

Ahead of its reopening in December to cap off SPAC's 60th anniversary season, here is a look back on the Spa Little Theater's not-so-little legacy and its historic renovation.

## Spa Little Theater over the years

Before opera, chamber music, modern dancers or theatrical performances filled its stages, Spa Little Theater hosted lectures on the waters that gave the Spa State Park its name.

The Works Progress Administration for the Simon Baruch Research Laboratory, which was studying the health benefits of the mineral waters, built the theater in the early 1930s. Here, academics shared their findings.

Interest in the spas' medical benefits waned in the 1950s, though, and the Spa Little Theater shifted towards performing arts. The Acting Company, founded by actor and director John Houseman in 1972, began presenting plays starring the likes of Patti LuPone and Kevin Kline. In 1985, Home Made Theater presented its first of more than 200 shows at Spa Little Theater, though a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and facility struggles — including a flooding basement where Home Made stored its props and costumes — forced the theater company to leave. Opera Saratoga was another longtime performer at Spa Little Theater, but the company also left amid the pandemic after more than two decades of performances.

In 2022, SPAC entered an agreement to manage Spa Little Theater with state parks, which owns the physical building. Under this arrangement, SPAC programmed dance performances, concerts and educational programming in the former lecture hall and became a year-round presence, all while planning the inevitable renovations. The Chamber Music Society at Lincoln Center, which has held an annual SPAC residency since 2023, played the final concert at Spa



More than 100 students of all ages and abilities from AIM Services and The Arc New York give their final performance as part of Saratoga Performing Arts Center's "Access the Arts" Education Program in 2024 at Spa Little Theater.



Costume designer Dianne O'Neill Filer during a rehearsal of Home Made Theater's "Curtains" on Oct. 5, 2009, at Spa Little Theater in Saratoga Spa State Park.

Little Theater last August before construction began in the fall.

## What will the renovations entail?

During a tour on June 5, Christopher Shiley, SPAC president, and Erica McCarthy, project manager for LeChase, showed off the updates. The deep red foyer, once a claustrophobic hub for the box office and concessions stand, has been repainted, and skeletal walls for bathrooms, gathering spots and backstage areas have been erected. Work on the facade is in its early phases, and textured plaster has been applied to the theater's ceiling where chandeliers await resto-

ration. Despite some unplanned abatement work (and a possibly cursed baby doll found in one of the walls), the project is still on schedule, McCarthy said.

The heart of the work will transform the Spa Little Theater's backstage area. Given the venue's original intention — housing academic lectures — it wasn't equipped to support performances. When the renovation is complete, performers will have a proper backstage. There will be a clear separation between the audience and performer areas in the side hallways, and the dressing rooms and green room will be behind the stage in the former Gideon Putnam room. There

will also be a safer route between wings, eliminating the need to use a set of metal spiral staircases leading beneath the stage or dash through the lobby.

The rigging system, which flies lights, backdrops and scenery in and out, is being replaced with a fully motorized unit. A new HVAC system will offer better climate control without sacrificing acoustics, and retractable curtains lining the wall will enhance sound during amplified productions.

There will also be a new loading dock through the former state parks' breakroom. This is one of the few renovations impacting the theater's exterior, Shiley said, as one of

its large windows will be extended to accommodate a wide door for sets, wardrobe, equipment and more. Additionally, two wide ramps leading to the stage are being built, and the one on stage right will also serve as an accessible pathway for those with disabilities.

Other accessibility measures are underway. Outside, a permanent accessible ramp is being installed. The former box office is being transformed into a family restroom and an extension of the men's room, and most of the bathrooms are getting ADA upgrades, save one women's room that is down a few stairs. Audience entryways to the theater and ADA seating options are being upgraded.

Audience-facing spaces are also growing. A larger box office is being carved into a lobby wall, and the former green room is becoming a lounge area with a small kitchen and wraparound bar. The scene shop will be a multipurpose community room with an adjacent patio.

Archival 1930s documents and photos guided the design process. The team has preserved as much original crown molding, flooring, lighting fixtures, fireplaces and other design details as possible.

Phinney Design Group and LeChase Construction are leading the work. Empire State Development and state parks funding have provided \$2.2 million and \$4 million, respectively, toward the venture. Stewart's Shops' Duke family donated another \$1 million, and SPAC is currently fundraising the remaining cost. A name-a-seat drive is currently underway.

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Justin Smolian and Marc LaBelle of Dirty Honey perform in Milan, Italy in 2024. LaBelle, from Niskayuna, said playing SPAC is unlike many other amphitheatres in the country.

## From SPAC lawn to SPAC stage

By Jim Shahan Jr.  
FOR THE TIMES UNION

Bands, local performers make goal of playing Spa City venue

How many of us have gone to a show at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, looked at the artist on stage and wished they could be up there?

It's a seemingly impossible dream, making the jump from concertgoer to concert draw at a venue that can hold up to 25,000 people. But for a select few Capital Region talents, that dream became a reality.

Last September, Albany post-punk/hardcore outfit Drug Church played there in front of 20,000 concertgoers as support for pop-punk legends Blink-182. In This Moment, led by Capital Region native Maria Brink, headlined a show at SPAC in 2024 and made its debut there in 2012 as part of the heavy metal Uproar Festival. And before hitting it big on the charts with a single featured in the "Minecraft" movie, Dirty Honey — a glam-blues-rock outfit fronted by Niskayuna native Marc LaBelle — provided support for The Black Crowes' 2021 reunion tour as well as a sold-out Guns N' Roses concert in 2023.

I was at all of these shows and each of these acts specifically mentioned the significance of playing a hometown venue during their respective performances. Drug Church frontman Patrick Kindlon highlighted the family and friends on hand to support

them at a show of this magnitude. At the conclusion of In This Moment's 2024 set, Brink noted how special it was to have her family there with her. LaBelle, a frontman in the vein of Aerosmith's Steven Tyler, used his local connection as a way to pop the crowd between songs.

But the local connection is more than stage banter fodder.

In a 2020 interview with the Times Union to celebrate her band's first-ever Grammy nomination, Brink discussed the important role the Capital Region — and SPAC specifically — played in her interests in music.

"My mom was a rock 'n' roll mama and she'd take me to concerts at SPAC. I was 3 years old, barefoot, dancing on the lawn," Brink recalled. "It was surreal to play (with In This Moment in 2012) where I started off."

For LaBelle, a show at SPAC was also a source of inspiration. In a recent phone conversation, he reflected on the first concert he ever attended: a July 20, 1997, performance there from Aerosmith.

"It was a completely surreal experience as a little kid, seeing a real rock band for the first time," he said.

Some of his "fondest memories" are attending shows at SPAC, with distinct recollections of having seen Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and Dave Matthews Band there. When he returned there



Maria Brink of In This Moment performs during Lollapalooza in 2024. Brink, a Capital Region native, and the band debuted in 2012 at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

as a performer in 2021, LaBelle described it as a "full-circle moment to go from seeing Steven Tyler there to performing there with one of my favorite bands (The Black Crowes)."

By 2024 and during the Guns N' Roses tour, Dirty Honey had become well-acquainted with SPAC-like amphitheatres. LaBelle commented that in addition to the nostalgia he has for the space, the venue itself offers something special that distinguishes it from comparable locales.

"We've seen and played pretty much every amphitheater, except for The Gorge (in Washington state), and most of them are pretty cookie-cutter, with the same general feel," he said. "SPAC is huge and

there's a unique look from the stage. It's a really cool place to see and play a show, and it's in a state park, whereas other sheds are these very sterile, manmade spaces."

While returning home does have its perks, there are also unique social factors. In terms of promotion, both Brink and LaBelle worked to market their respective appearances to local media under the "prodigal star returns home" concept and, based on the stories from local media outlets including the Times Union, the interest and demand was there.

For the Guns N' Roses show, LaBelle remembers having 150 family members and friends — and this writer, after a review credential re-

quest was declined by the band's camp — in the audience, and the Guns N' Roses team being very accommodating of his request for tickets. Catching up with such a robust circle of intimates made the build up to their performance "overwhelming, stressful, fun."

Once he and Dirty Honey actually hit the stage for their 45-minute set, the jitters were gone and he was "locked in." With the band's appearance at SPAC Black Crowes tour happening during the slow return from the COVID-19 protocols, the GNR show felt particularly meaningful.

"I remember looking out and thinking about all the times I went there as a fan and thought, 'Wow, this is the place that started everything for me; it was the gasoline on the fire of wanting to do this as a career,'" LaBelle said. "Being able to share that experience with my family was certainly not a moment lost on me."

"As a kid, I'd always hear from the generation older than me about the Aerosmith and Guns N' Roses show at SPAC (in 1988)," he added. "We're not Guns N' Roses obviously, but now I'm part of the next wave of rock 'n' roll like GNR was to Aerosmith back then."

So next time you're at SPAC, whether it's for TLC, GNR or Haley Williams of Paramore, just think: that kid you see having the time of their life on the lawn may grow up to offer that same experience to another generation of 58 fans.

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# SPAC 2026 events

**By Features staff**

The summer season at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center kicked off June 1 with genre-fluid band CAKE, and dozens of performers — from classical musicians and Broadway stars to ballet dancers and Pitbull — are slated to fill this year's season.

**SARATOGA PERFORMING ARTS CENTER**

Avenue of the Pines, Saratoga Springs; 518-584-9330, spac.org

**SARATOGA JAZZ FESTIVAL**

- Patti LaBelle, Miles Electric Band, Cécile McLorin Salvant, The Dip and others, June 27
- The Revivalists, Dianne Reeves, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, Cimafunk and others, June 28

**NEW YORK CITY BALLET**

- "A Midsummer Night's Dream," July 8-11
- "Innovators & Icons," July 10-11

**CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER**

- Dvorák's Quintet in A Major, July 12
- From Haydn to Gershwin, July 15
- Burleigh, Dvorák and Beethoven, July 19
- Winds Around the World, July 22
- Calidore String Quartet, July 26

**PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA**

- Tchaikovsky Spectacular, Aug. 5
- Mozart & Mahler, Aug. 6
- American Dreams with Brian Stokes Mitchell, Aug. 7
- "Harry Potter & the Deathly Hallows Part 1" in concert, Aug. 8



Erin Beiano/Courtesy of Saratoga Performing Arts Center  
Naomi Corti as Hippolyta in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." New York City Ballet first performed the work at Saratoga Performing Arts Center for the venue's grand opening in 1966 and will perform it again as part of the company's annual SPAC residency and SPAC's 60th anniversary season.

- "Pictures from an Exhibition" with Daniele Rustioni, Aug. 12
- Emanuel Ax Plays Beethoven, Aug. 13
- Josh Groban: Stage, Screen & Symphony, Aug. 14
- Beethoven's Ninth with Yannick, Aug. 15
- David Kim Leads "The Four Seasons," Aug. 19

- PlayIN for Brass with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Aug. 20
- Gershwin's "An American in Paris," Aug. 20
- "Star Wars: A New Hope" in Concert, Aug. 21
- Gregory Alan Isakov with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Aug. 22

**LIVE NATION ENTERTAINMENT**

- Evanescence, June 23
- Jack Johnson, June 24
- James Taylor & His All-Star Band, June 29
- Santana & The Doobie Brothers, July 1
- Lil Wayne: 20 Years of Carter Classics, July 2

- Goose Summer 2026, July 3-4
- Lindsey Stirling — Duality Untamed Tour, July 13
- The Guess Who: Takin' It Back Tour 2026, July 14
- TOTO, Christopher Cross and The Romantics, July 16
- Dave Matthews Band, July 17-18

- Train with Barenaked Ladies, July 22
- Five Finger Death Punch, July 23
- Muse, July 24
- Tim McGraw, July 25
- Guns N' Roses, July 26
- Mötley Crüe with Tesla & Extreme, July 29
- Blues Traveler & Gin Blossoms, July 30
- John Mulaney, July 31
- Brit Floyd & Get the Led Out, Aug. 1
- Kesha with Chromeo & Erika Jayne, Aug. 2
- Lynyrd Skynyrd & Foreigner, Aug. 23
- Salt-N-Pepa & TLC with En Vogue, Aug. 27
- Luke Bryan, Aug. 29
- Outlaw Music Festival, Aug. 30
- Pitbull with Lil John, Sept. 2
- Parker McCollom, Sept. 5
- Worship in the Pines with Brandon Lake, Sept. 8
- "The Hayley Williams Show," Sept. 12
- David Byrne "Who Is The Sky?" Tour, Sept. 17
- O.A.R. with Gavin Degraw and KT Tunstall, Sept. 19

**SPAC CLASSES AND WORKSHOPS**

- NYCB Access Workshop for teens and adults, July 9
- NYCB Ballet Essential Workshop for teens and adults, July 9
- NYCB Children's Access Workshop for ages 4-12, July 11
- NYCB Children's Workshop for ages 5-6, July 11
- NYCB in Motion Workshop for ages 8-12, July 11
- Sound All Around — Philadelphia Orchestra Children's Program, Aug. 16



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## LAFLECHE

From page S3

Saratoga as a summer home for them and I wrote it," LaFleche said.

The popular history ends there, but people who know LaFleche know that when he believes in something he not only writes editorials about it, he lobbies for it personally. Suggestions to the contrary to the editor will produce a sour frown familiar for years to reporters, politicians and others.

LaFleche said people in Saratoga Springs took up the idea ("people there had been thinking about something for I don't know how long") and then Robert C. McKelvey, a state Commerce Department staff member, became a principal supporter, backed by others in the community.

"But then I had a friend in Rocky's office, and I asked her to bring the editorial to the attention of the governor. Then I saw to it that I ran into the governor accidentally, and I knew that he knew what I had proposed. Actually, it was in an elevator in the Ten Eyck Hotel," LaFleche said.

"I asked him 'Are you aware of what I have proposed for Saratoga Springs?' I knew he was, but you always leave a man a way out. If he had said no, I would have tried another tactic. He could have said no, but he said yes, and I said, 'What do we do next?'"

"He gave me a big wink, a

real Rockefeller wink, and he said, 'Keep trying,'" LaFleche said.

Harold Wilm, state conservation commissioner, was named chairman of the board of SPAC to look into the matter and the Saratoga Springs Commission became involved, but things got bogged down, the editor said.

"Things went on for months, but seemed to stall. People were enthused and Ballston Spa kids sold pop bottles and got \$5 I remember," LaFleche said. He also said he was "bugging" people to keep things going. Lewis Swyer, now SPAC president, became involved.

After more months a grant from the Rockefeller family was given to study for a performing arts center in Saratoga. But, said LaFleche, "It was largely negative. We bumpkins, you know, wouldn't patronize it. But still people persisted." After more time, funds were made available for an architect's preliminary design.

Then, around 1963, a delegation from this area including Newman E. Wait Jr. and Charles Dake of Saratoga Springs, William St. Thomas of Gloversville and members of the Saratoga Springs Commission went to the Plaza Hotel in New York to present their ideas to the Philharmonic and the New York City Ballet.

"The ballet was hungry at the time and seized on the opportunity immediately," LaFleche said. "But the Philharmonic, which was then considering the possibilities of



Knickerbocker News columnist Duane LaFleche Oct. 4, 1971.

summer seasons at Lincoln Center, rejected the plan. They thought we were a bunch of

bumpkins anyway. They didn't see any signs of getting any money and they gave us the

cold treatment," LaFleche said.

Meanwhile, money was slowly being gathered by fundraisers for the project, and the state had committed itself to some \$600,000 for site development on the project.

In January 1964, Richard C. Leach was named executive director of SPAC by the board of directors. Leach, who had established a music festival in Aspen, Colo., and had been program director at Lincoln Center was, according to LaFleche, "a man of many connections. Then, through the influence of racing people at Saratoga Springs, including Mrs. Kaye Mather and Ogden Phipps and others, he suddenly was able to announce one day that the Philadelphia Orchestra had accepted an invitation to make Saratoga its summer home."

Much work remained to be done, including building the amphitheater. But, LaFleche said, Leach "announced in the spring of one year it would be open the following summer." The Saratoga Performing Arts Center opened July 9, 1966.

Commissioner Wilm was quoted in 1964 as saying, to a reporter from The Times-Union, "You know, Duane LaFleche, city editor of The Knickerbocker News, was the real sparkplug behind the drive to establish this center at Saratoga."

The New York Philharmonic tomorrow will perform Barber's Symphony No. 1 and Mahler's Symphony No. 5. Said LaFleche, "I'm delighted."

## ORCHESTRA

From page S5

Skodinski — who hasn't missed a summer season, even when she was working full-time on Wall Street and could only travel to Saratoga Springs on the weekends — is quick to rattle off a list of concerts on repeat in her mind. Seeing opera stars Beverly Sills and Jessye Norman with the orchestra introduced her and her husband Michael to another

love, the Metropolitan Opera. Then there was the "touching" tribute to Ormandy, featuring the late violinist Isaac Stern. This summer, she will travel from New York City for eight concerts, many with friends who plan their annual visits with the Skodinskis around the Philadelphia Orchestra's season.

"As long as it's classical, we're there," said Skodinski of how she and her husband pick their concerts.

Though not "every single concert is one of those block-

busters," Kim said, some of those splashy moments stand out to him. The orchestra's expansion into popular culture — accompanying hit films or splashy concerts with big-name, orchestra-loving artists like John Legend and Laufey — has packed SPAC's lawn with audiences who may have never thought orchestral concerts were for them. That is exciting to the musicians, even if it meant it took Kim an hour and a half to get out of the parking lot post-Laufey.

The physical amphitheater, which Ormandy helped design, is also special to the orchestra. Acoustically, SPAC ranks highly for musicians, Kim and Fleur said.

"Being on that stage, whether it's really rain or shine, and when we are playing concerts, it is, you know, at nighttime it's 90 degrees, it's humid, there are bugs everywhere — those are all part of the memories," Kim said.

With the lifelong spell that fateful summer concert cast

upon Skodinski and — after convincing them the late-night drives were worth it — her parents, she hopes more families take advantage of the Philadelphia Orchestra's summers at SPAC.

"My parents started loving coming here to SPAC," Skodinski said. "They ended up being mesmerized by it. They weren't necessarily people who were high, classical music people, but when you hear it, and in that environment, I can only describe it as magic."

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## ECONOMY

From page S4

ism is incredibly valuable, because these visitors that come often stay longer, they spend more and they like to engage with the destination."

### A reimagined organization

From performances by resident companies of the New York City Ballet and The Philadelphia Orchestra to its annual Saratoga Jazz Festival and concerts by Live Nation, SPAC draws a wide audience. Shimkus and Leggieri said CEO Elizabeth Sobol's vision, including her push for year-round initiatives, has helped expand its economic impact to the region over the past decade.

"I saw a lot of untapped potential," Sobol said. "I just knew that an organization of its

magnitude that takes the nutrients out of the soil that it does needed to be putting them back in."

Sobol has reimagined what SPAC considers art, including the completion of its The Pines@SPAC in 2020, which offers new and expanded concessions, restroom facilities and gathering spaces for culinary demos, author talks, educational programming and more.

"I don't really believe in a siloed definition of the arts. I look at how we can best serve the community," Sobol said. "Everybody comes to art in different ways, and if you only say it looks like this on this kind of stage, you're going to severely limit the number of people who come or want to come. ... Once you start to look expansively at what the arts mean, then people feel more

welcome and interested."

The following year, SPAC launched its School of the Arts. It will further expand its education programming — which serves 60,000 people annually — with the completion of the Spa Little Theater renovations later this year.

"I think SPAC has always been an anchor for our community, and with any entity like SPAC, the more improvements and cultural opportunities they give to our community, the more well-rounded our whole community stays," Barnbara said.

"Our job is to create trust," Sobol said about successfully introducing new events, a process she said takes time and instinct. "Create trust by giving people things that will be familiar to them and hopefully things that they want, but also presented in the context of

absolute quality."

At the same time, Shimkus said there is an almost 0% vacancy rate among available commercial spaces in downtown Saratoga Springs, where the vast majority of businesses are locally owned.

"For them to have succeeded here, grown here, thrived here, for them to have survived COVID and essentially a shutdown for nearly a year and a half, is a testament to our community's resilience," Shimkus said. "There's probably a million different pieces to the puzzle of how Saratoga became so successful, but in that, SPAC is a pretty large puzzle piece."

Before he became president of Discover Saratoga, Leggieri worked at The Saratoga Hilton from 2005 to 2008. He said the hotel expected and planned for incremental demand around the dates of SPAC performanc-

es, something Fortier has also faced as general manager at Embassy Suites by Hilton since 2014. Local hoteliers, including Fortier, provide accommodations for not only SPAC guests but band members, crew and conductors.

"They're a notable contributor to our business," Fortier said. "Without SPAC, it would strain our ability to be as prosperous as we are."

Since 2005, Saratoga and Warren counties have consistently seen a net increase in residents. Shimkus thinks SPAC is a big reason why.

"It's not a coincidence that our population growth also is on that sort of timeline for SPAC for 60 years," Shimkus said. "They created an amenity that people love, whether they want to visit here or live here, and that makes it a special place."

## BALLET

From page S4

tremendous amount of tenaciousness and commitment, she said.

"It's an enormous undertaking for an organization of our size, in a city of this size, in a region of this size, to support residencies of this magnitude," she said. "I know there are people who wish it was the old days and there were two weeks (of NYCB programming) or three weeks or four weeks. But I look at it as a miracle that we've sustained this. When you look at our field right now, you see enormous challenges. There is no government funding for this kind of program, and there's less and less philanthropic support."

Meanwhile, NYCB faces its own logistical complexities when planning SPAC programming. The company's New York City season, which runs from September through May, is jam-packed with 60 to 65 ballets every year, each with its own tight rehearsal schedule — planned "literally almost to the minute," Brown said.

"The production part of it is huge," she explained. "We can't

always do everything we might want to do (at SPAC) because we might not have time to put everything together and get it rehearsed. Finding the balance between what is actually feasible and what is the most appealing for the audience is really the trick." That typically includes a mix of classical story ballets with elaborate sets and more minimalist works by contemporary choreographers.

Nurturing new ballet audiences is top of mind for both organizations. The SPAC School of the Arts opened in 2021, and SPAC's community outreach programs now serve some 60,000 people throughout the Capital Region. New York City Ballet dancers are often involved in the educational programming.

"It's very hard to convert somebody into a ballet fan in their 40s," Sobol noted. "It's really about introducing kids to this, so they feel that wonder and awe and joy."

### Variations: The dancers take turns showcasing their abilities

As early as 1967, Sobol said, the financial realities of sustaining the two major residencies became clear, and leaders ac-



Erin Balano/Courtesy of Saratoga Performing Arts Center

### New York City Ballet will perform "Opus 19/The Dreamer" in its 2026 residency at SPAC.

knowledge that additional revenue was needed. That year, Harry Belafonte became the first nonclassical performer to perform at SPAC, followed by the band The Doors the following year and the first Saratoga Jazz Festival in 1978. In 2000, SPAC partnered with Live Nation to promote rock and pop groups at the amphitheater.

"The organization that I inherited in 2016 has a kind of a bifurcated identity," Sobol shared. "For a lot of people, when you say SPAC, they think of Live Nation. They don't realize that SPAC is a 501(c)(3) charitable cultural organization that survives thanks to the philanthropic support of the

community."

Founded in 1948, New York City Ballet has been on its own identity journey over recent decades. Brown was hired in 2009 as the company's first-ever executive director, overseeing administrative management. In 2017, longtime Ballet Master in Chief Peter Martins resigned amid allegations of sexual harassment and physical and verbal abuse. Now Brown works closely with artistic director Jonathan Stafford and associate artistic director Wendy Whelan, both former City Ballet principal dancers.

The largest dance troupe in the country, the company employs 90 dancers and maintains an active repertory of more than 150 works, most by Balanchine and Jerome Robbins. In recent years, NYCB has commissioned works from a diverse array of choreographers, including Kyle Abraham, Alysia Pires and Jamar Roberts, as well as resident choreographer Justin Peck and company ballerina Tiler Peck, whose newest work will be on the SPAC stage this summer.

### Coda: An energetic, upbeat finale

This summer's 60th anniversary

NYCB run includes six performances spread over four days, July 8-11. The "Innovators & Icons" program features Balanchine's "Serenade," Robbins' "Opus 19/The Dreamer" and Tiler Peck's "Symphonie Espagnole," which premiered to rave reviews last month. The company will also reprise "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in homage to its opening night at SPAC, with a large cast of local children on stage.

"There's this woven texture between SPAC and the community that is unique from anything I've ever experienced," Sobol said. "When I first moved here, everybody wanted to tell me their story — how their grandchild took their first steps on the SPAC lawn, or their son got engaged to his girlfriend in the front row of the SPAC Amphitheater, or the first time they saw the ballet."

The company feels those bonds as well, Brown said. "Because we've come year after year, the dancers get to know the community — they're out at restaurants, in stores, going to the Victoria Pool. Being in this environment and taking a break from urban life is something they really enjoy and look forward to."

Milestones worth sharing.

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