

A RETRO ROMP

‘Bye Bye Birdie’ promises a fun experience for the whole family

By **SUSAN BLOOM**
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Looking for a great way to celebrate Mother’s Day this weekend — or just a fun activity the whole family can enjoy? Take a retro romp and see “Bye Bye Birdie,” performed by Our Gang Players, on stage at the new OceanFirst Theater in Stafford Township through May 8.

The musical tells the story of a 1950s Elvisesque pop star and his draft into the Army against a backdrop of lively period sets, costumes and music.

Ryan Mulholland, 28, said he is excited to play the famous lead.

“Conrad Birdie is such a cool part,” he said. “I’m doing my best to make him a real-life celebrity and embody him, all the way down to the James Dean haircut.”

There is a sense joy emanating from the cast and crew.

“Everyone is encouraged, and it’s such a warm environment here,” said Stacey Schnep-Stoops, assistant artistic director of Our Gang Players and “Bye Bye Birdie” director.

For 18-year-old Barnegat resident Kara Faraldi, a nine-year veteran with Our Gang Players, the troupe’s “noncompetitive, fostering environment” helped nurture her passion for performing as well as set a future direction.

“I got started in theater here and will be going to school for theater this fall,” she said.

Our Gang Players got its own start in Barnegat Light in 1977, when Schnep-Stoops’ mother, Sherry Schnep, 63, and her friend Nancy Gallimore founded the troupe so that Stacey and her friends would have a creative outlet and a fun activity during the area’s quieter winter months. Thirty-four years later, Our Gang Players has become an institution in the LBI area.

The all-volunteer troupe is comprised of about 200 adults and 100 kids who perform 3 to

4 musicals and 4 to 5 fundraising events each year.

Productions have included such popular Broadway standards as “The Sound of Music,” “Peter Pan,” “South Pacific” and “Annie” and showcase the group’s broad range of acting, singing, dancing, scene-building, costuming and musical skills.

“Our Gang offers a great opportunity for anyone who loves to perform or be part of a production experience. We find a comfortable spot for everyone,” Schnep said.

“The process of pulling together all of the elements of a show such as “Bye Bye Birdie” is a great, exhausting and sometimes overwhelming experience,” Manahawkin resident Schnep-Stoops, 37, said of the 100-member cast and crew. “But when you sit back and watch the finished product and the joy that beams from each individual on the stage, that’s what it’s all about.”

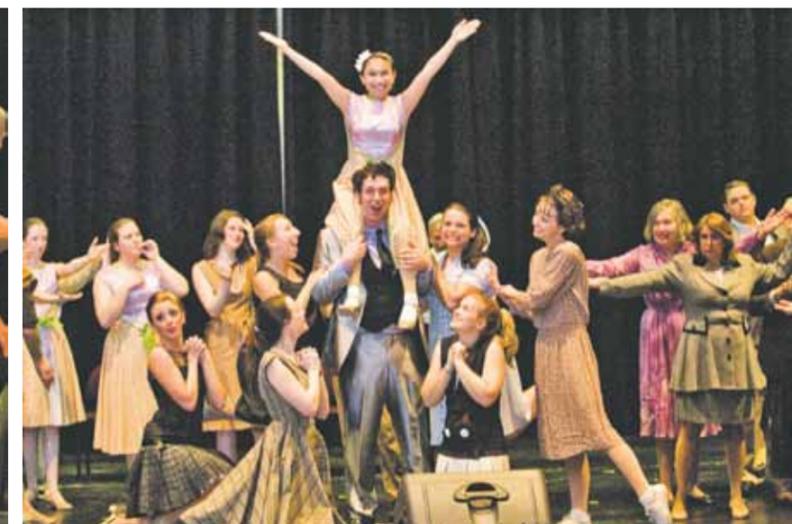
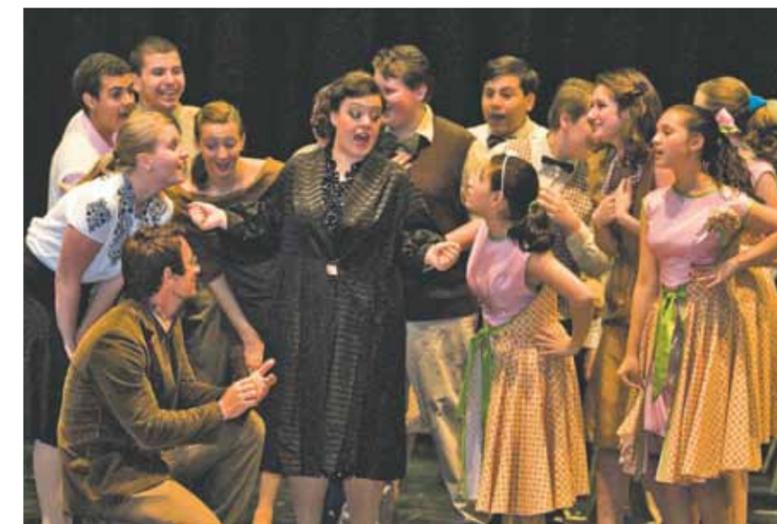
“Our cast and crew members work so hard and are so good,” said founder and artistic director Sherry Schnep. “We didn’t give them the talent, we just give them the opportunity. Overall, we hope people will come out and support us because our cast loves to perform and our shows allow people to enjoy the thrill of live productions affordably and right in their own community.”

“It will definitely be a special, not-to-miss show,” said Schnep-Stoops.

“Bye Bye Birdie” will be performed 7 p.m. today and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at OceanFirst Theater, 1001 McKinley Ave. in Stafford Township. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$12 for seniors and students, and \$8 for children 12 and younger.

For more information about the show or about auditioning for the group’s upcoming production of “Oliver,” call 609-597-0553 or visit www.ourgang.org.

The OceanFirst Theater can be reached at 609-489-8600.



Members of Our Gang Players rehearse “Bye Bye Birdie.” The show is on stage at OceanFirst Theater in Stafford through May 8. (STAFF PHOTOS: KEITH J. WOODS)