



wouldn't be doing what I do today if it weren't for those early years at Surflight. I felt it was give-back time."

A native of Irvington, Miller, 52, fell in love with acting during his early teens and spent his high school summers as a Surflight apprentice. "I swept floors, built scenery, acted when I was lucky enough to be cast, and otherwise enjoyed every bit of what would become four magical summers at the beach," he says.

But a few years after earning his Actors' Equity card in New York, Miller had an epiphany. "I realized that I was good, but not great, and I quit acting when I was 25," he says. "On a positive note, all those auditions and constant rejections gave me a thick skin and the ability to take on new challenges fearlessly."

His roles as assistant producer and eventually associate producer at Paper

Chenoweth, who starred in 'Animal Crackers' in 1994, and Anne Hathaway, who was a student at Paper Mill's summer conservatory," he says.

It was in a spirit of mentorship, Miller says, that he accepted the challenge to restore Surflight, financially and artistically.

"Having been an apprentice here, I know how important it is for the young stars of tomorrow to have an opportunity to learn the ropes and work alongside their peers. I want it to remain as magical a place for them as it was for me."

He started by leaning on longtime theater friends, such as Judd Hirsch, Megan Mullally, Jo Anne Worley, Ray Romano, Cindy Williams and Dawn Wells, to star in or help promote his first-season productions for little or no pay.

With the help of Surflight's executive

world-class talent at lightning speed."

"I want to run the theater efficiently while restoring it to the old Surflight, the nostalgic 'Broadway at the Beach' destination that the community can always come back to," Miller says.

"Roy was there at the beginning of my career," says Chenoweth, who starred in Broadway's "Wicked" and NBC's "The West Wing" and received her Actors' Equity card at Paper Mill under Miller's watch.

"He always had a smile on his face, and I believe he always knew that theater was built for happiness, to entertain and to make people forget. I'm so proud of all his success and can't wait to see his next chapter in the theater."

Through the end of this year, Surflight will present "Once Upon a Time in New Jersey," an original musical comedy (through Sept. 15), then "Steel Magnolias," (Sept. 19 to

Second Act

Broadway producer Roy Miller helps revive Jersey's landmark Surflight Theatre

By SUSAN BLOOM
Photos by DAVID GARD

Venture inside Beach Haven's Surflight Theatre on any given afternoon and you'll find crew members and lighting designers consulting onstage as they sidestep debris from the latest set construction. Sewing machines in a back room hum with the latest handiwork from costumers as the chorus meets in offices upstairs to review their parts.

In rented space across the street, actors rehearse dance numbers with the pianist and choreographer, while outside on Engleside Avenue, the waitstaff from Show Place Ice Cream Parlor, a fun training ground for Surflight, practice their evening routines.



If it sounds like a scene from "Fame," it is — but it almost wasn't.

A financial crisis nearly bankrupted the six decades-old theater in 2010, when the board called in Broadway producer, and Surflight alum, Roy Miller to help save the Long Beach Island oceanside landmark, then sinking under \$4 million in debt.

Miller, whose producing credits include 13 seasons at Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn as well as Broadway's five-time 2006 Tony Award-winner "The Drowsy Chaperone," returned to Surflight as producing artistic director.

In a now-famous public gesture, "I agreed to run the theater for at least a year and donate my salary provided the board matched it in donations, which they did," says Miller. "I love that theater and



Clockwise from top: Roy Miller speaks with members of the LBI Singers before a choir rehearsal for an upcoming show; Miller's autographed wicked witch of the west photo; performers Alex Golden, 18, of Manahawkin and Ashley Carlo, 17, of Barnegat rehearse at the Show Place Ice Cream Parlor; Miller, at the Surflight Theatre; The Surflight Theatre on LBI.



Mill Playhouse from 1991 to 2004 proved a far better fit. "It allowed me to feed my creative soul and have a hand in the entire process," he says. He was associated with productions such as "Follies" with Ann Miller and "Gypsy" with Betty Buckley in 1998, and "I'm Not Rappaport" with Judd Hirsch and Ben Vereen in 2002.

"I also had the privilege of nurturing the careers of then-newcomers Kristin

producer Tim Laczynski, the 1950s-era, 450-seat theater emerged from Chapter 11 in just 10 months, enabling this year's season — its 63rd — to proceed.

"Over his career, Roy has amassed an extensive network of theater professionals, with whom he has an outstanding rapport," says Laczynski, 34. "At Surflight's moment of need, Roy was able to procure much-needed financial support, donated services and



Oct. 7), "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" (Oct. 10 to 21), "Barefoot in the Park" (Oct. 24 to Nov. 4) and "White Christmas" (Nov. 22 to Dec. 21). Meanwhile, on the other side of the Hudson, Miller's producing musical versions of the hit films "Animal House" and "A Christmas Story," both Broadway-bound.

"I didn't plot this course, it just happened," Miller says of his 35-year journey in theater. "Follow your passion, be willing to fall on your face, don't take 'no' for an answer, and things will happen.

"In the end," he adds, "this business is all about relationships. Nobody works for me, we're all part of a community and we all work together. For me, it's all about the people." @