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For Julie Harris, a Stage to Call Her Own

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES Published: June 20, 2007

WELLFLEET, Mass. — It doesn't have a name yet, the large, earth-tone building that since last summer has risen out of the sand next to the cedar-shingled post office here, but that's what you get when you ask Julie Harris if you can name a professional theater after her. Fortunately for the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, Ms. Harris was open to compromise.

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Erik Jacobs for The New York Times The Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, whose 200-seat stage was named for the actress Julie Harris.

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"She said, 'Well, I don't want the theater named after me, but you can name a piece of it after me,' " the company's artistic director, Jeff Zinn, recalled. "And so we said, 'Well, how about the stage?'"

Ms. Harris has lent her name, in the past, to some theaters, including one at the Clear View School in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y., but in Wellfleet she opted for a lower profile. And so on June 21 the new 200-seat stage named for Ms. Harris, a five-time Tony Award winner who lives in nearby Chatham and is the theater's longtime honorary board chairwoman, will be unveiled with a production of Sarah Ruhl's "Clean House." The \$6.8 million year-round theater is intended to complement the 90-seat seasonal space on the harbor where the company has been performing since 1985.

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The Wellfleet theater company's Harbor Stage.

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The Harbor Stage theater will be complemented by the one under construction.

Its opening marks a substantial expansion for the theater, one of the few Equity companies in Cape Cod that has carved a niche with adventurous productions. [David Mamet](#), [Sam Shepard](#) and David Rabe have been favorites of the theater since its early years. “Hot ’N’ Throbbing,” one of three Paula Vogel plays produced at the theater in the 1990s, was seen there a decade before it had its premiere in New York. Recent seasons have offered work by young playwrights like Lee Hall, Rolin Jones and [Adam Rapp](#), as well as the world premiere of a play by the Clinton administration’s labor secretary, Robert Reich.

That such drama has taken root and thrived in a town of 3,100, where the population balloons to more than 20,000 in the summer, has much to do with the status of the Outer Cape (Wellfleet, Truro and Provincetown) as “a mecca for the intelligentsia,” Mr. Zinn said.

Much as Provincetown thrived as an arts colony, the Outer Cape became a watering hole for writers like Edmund Wilson and E. J. Kahn in the 1940s and ’50s.

There are also the academics from Boston and Cambridge, among them Mr. Zinn’s father, the historian Howard Zinn (“A People’s History of the United States”), who began summering in Wellfleet in the ’70s. It was the elder Mr. Zinn who encouraged his actor-director son to get involved when he noticed a theater company starting up in town.

That company’s gradual, steady growth has gained speed lately. Its operating budget, \$1.2 million this year, has doubled since 2006 and is more than five times the size it was in 1999, the year before the theater became an Equity company. Its full-time, year-round staff, still tiny at eight people, is twice what it was a year ago. Such changes do not come without risk.

“It’s a tough, really tough period,” Jeffrey George, the theater’s managing director, said. “There were times this fall doing payroll that I really sweated. But we did it. Nobody went without a paycheck.”

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A major chunk of the new theater's financing came from a 40-year, \$2.25 million loan from the federal Department of Agriculture's rural development program. Some people ridiculed the designation of Cape Cod as a rural area, Mr. George said, but he is not one of them. "This is rural," he said. "And it's difficult to make a living here."

It is similarly difficult in a summer-boom market to make a go of a year-round enterprise, which is what the new theater is intended to be. The expanded nine-play season, which will include the East Coast premiere of Peter Sinn Nachtrieb's "Hunter Gatherers," directed by Gip Hoppe, a company regular and one of the theater's founders, will have to draw a significantly larger audience.

Ms. Harris, 81, has been a frequent visitor to theaters all over the Cape, offering encouragement and support. In 2001 she had a stroke, which has severely curtailed her public appearances. She was in only one production with the Wellfleet company, in 2000, after Mr. Zinn asked if there was a role that she hadn't had a chance to play. "And she said, 'You know, I'd really like to be that horrible woman in 'Beauty Queen of Leenane,' " said Mr. Zinn, who immediately added that Martin McDonagh play to the season.

That production came to Mr. Zinn's mind recently as the new building's opening date approached. On the morning after Ms. Harris's performance was announced, Mr. Zinn said, he arrived to find a line outside the harbor theater. "And I was like, who are these people? Did a tour bus get lost or something?" But they were there to buy tickets, he said, and the theater wasn't ready for them. "And we're kind of experiencing a little bit of that now."

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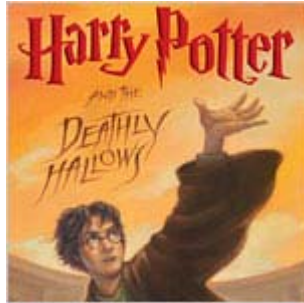
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