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BANNER THIS WEEK

Curtain goes up on new theater

By [Derek Burritt](#)
Banner Staff

WELLFLEET — More than 220 theater-goers saw the curtain go up for the first time on the Julie Harris Stage last Thursday night at the newly completed year-round home of the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater.

The small theater company that began 22 years ago with an Off-Off Broadway-style production of Ionesco's "Rhinoceros" celebrated a momentous event in its evolution with a cocktail reception



Photos Sue Harrison
WHAT artistic director Jeff Zinn and Julie Harris at the opening of "The Clean House" on the Julie Harris Stage in *WHAT*'s new theater.



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and ribbon-cutting ceremony that officially opened its

The front of the WHAT's new theater.

\$6.8 million theater on Route 6 next to the post office. The new 200-seat theater meets the criteria for an Off-Broadway theater, according to the Actors Equity union the company belongs to, and with the opening of its new space, the company has already succeeded where many in Manhattan have not in attracting the elusive attention of The New York Times.

In character with the company's reputation for daring productions from a wide range of scribes, from David Mamet and Sam Shepard to Paula Vogel and Adam Rapp, the opening production of "The Clean House" by Sarah Ruhl is "challenging and multi-leveled," according to Dan Lombardi, WHAT's dramaturg. He says audiences instantly fall in love with the characters, and by the end, "you're deeply involved in their pain and joy." Moments before the theater doors shut Thursday night, Lombardi spoke excitedly about the new space.

"As soon as the curtain opens, you're in another world," he said.

The "magic," he said, was built right into the space by John Freeman, of Platt Anderson Freeman Architects in Boston. Freeman approached the project, Lombardi said, by first inquiring what the company liked about its space at Wellfleet Harbor, which will continue to be used. The level of intimacy was high on the list, and even though the new theater has more than twice as many seats as the small one, "you can [still] look into people's eyes," he said.

The sincerity could clearly be seen in Artistic Director Jeff Zinn's eyes when he told the opening audience, whom he called WHAT's "most loyal supporters," that "a lot of people" have made this possible — from a broad pool of generous supporters to WHAT's more than 60 volunteers, as well as "a fleet" of interns, who, under the direction of Kevin Hardy, resident lighting designer and production manager, and Technical Director Chris Huge, built and lit the production's set and also installed the theater's technical systems in the last three weeks. Those close to the theater especially point to the house sound system as one of the shining features of the new space.

The festivities before the show had all the elements of a major happening, including waitered hors d'oeuvres, champagne and notable political faces — from state Sen. Robert O'Leary and state Rep. Sarah Peake to Selectmen Dale Donovan and Ira Wood, who's also on the WHAT board of directors.

In one sense, the new theater proved one of its major intentions



before the show even began by hosting the event within its walls. WHAT hopes the new space will become an integral part of the community as both a theatrical venue and a place where other artistic events can happen, thanks to the facility's central location, reception room, kitchen and two-floor lobby.

One interesting fact about the theater is that partial funding for the project came from the federal Dept. of Agriculture through a program that gives low-interest, long-term loans to develop cultural facilities in rural areas. Zinn has joked about receiving a USDA stamp on the new building, but Thursday night there were a couple hundred people present who believed, indeed, great things are growing there.

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