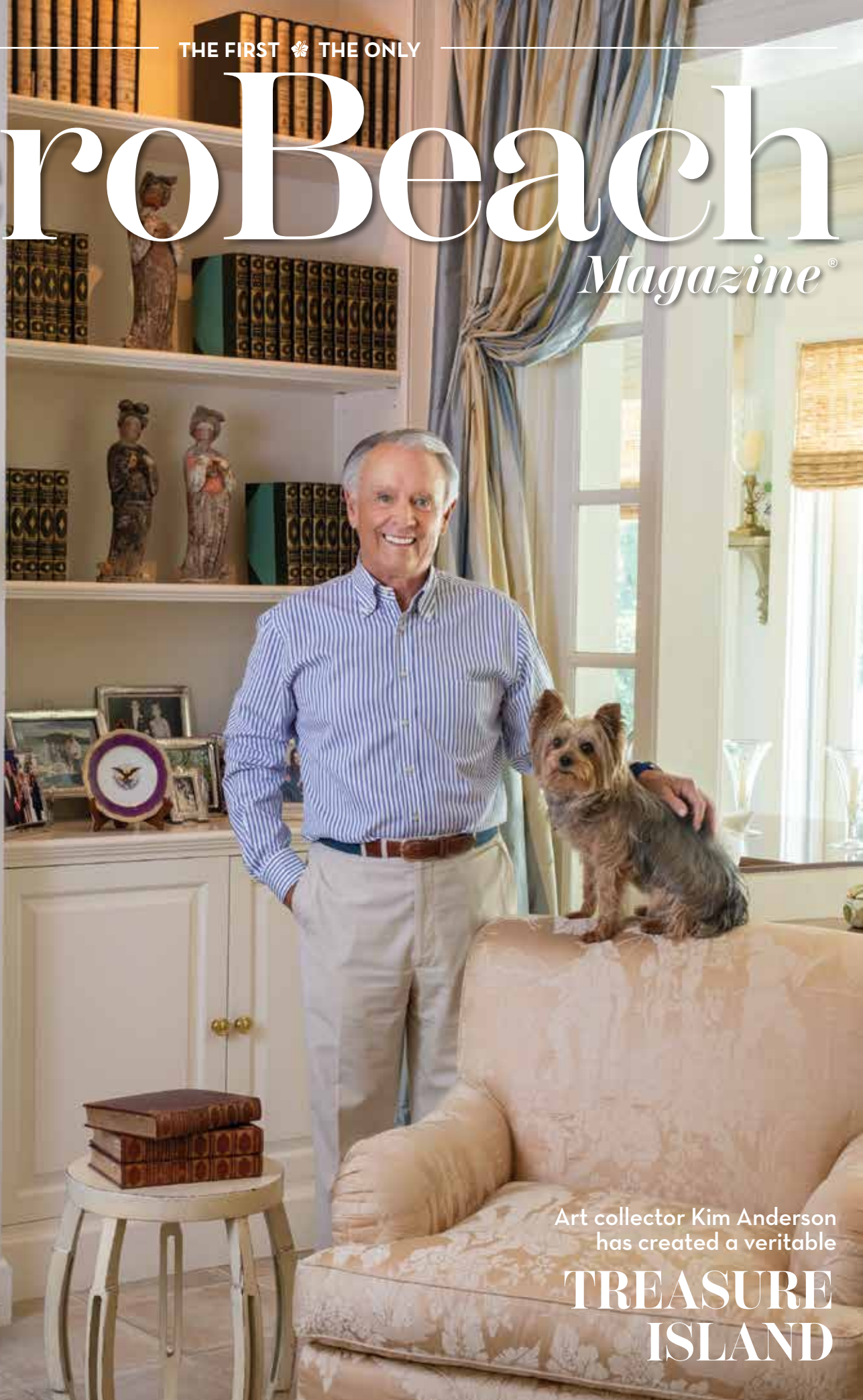


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Art collector Kim Anderson
has created a veritable

**TREASURE
ISLAND**



Hudson, Madelynnne, and Grant perform in *Singin' in the Rain* at Riverside Theatre.

PHILANTHROPY

Theater Dads

OUR COMMUNITY OFFERS MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO GIVE THE PERFORMING ARTS A TRY



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

Did you know there is an entire section of the online marketplace Etsy featuring more than 1,000 handmade, vintage, and other items under the category of “Theater Dad”?

I have never, and doubt I will ever, order one of the countless variations of T-shirts, coffee mugs, baseball caps,

or bumper stickers off the website. I doubt my new friend Daren would either. But scroll through the plucky phrases on some of the more popular items—a few of which I have quoted in this article—and you will start to get an idea of the world we have become immersed in since last season when our sons were cast in

Riverside Theatre’s production of *Singin’ in the Rain*.

“Some people only dream of meeting their favorite performer. I raised mine.”

In my case, my son, Grant, is the star. He played the role of Young Don in *Singin’ in the Rain*. For Daren, it is his son, Hudson, who brought the house down as Young Cosmo.

INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure it was such a good idea to go along with my wife, Stephanie's, suggestion that Grant audition for the part. He'd only performed in one other role, as Harry the Horse in a children's production of *Guys and Dolls Jr.* That was kids' stuff, but this was the real deal. He would also miss quite a bit of school between rehearsals and performing up to eight shows per week from the last week of February through the last week of March. And he'd never even tap-danced!

After he was cast and attended the first night's rehearsal, however, I knew this was going to be a great experi-

ence for Grant and for our family. We were introduced to the show's director, choreographer, stage manager, and several adult cast members, along with Daren, his wife, Nicky; Hudson; and his younger sister, Madelynn. My nerves began to settle, so I trusted the professionals with my pride and joy. That is, until the end of the first week's rehearsals.

It was Saturday morning, and Grant and Hudson were not called for that day's rehearsal, so Grant and I hit the beach for one of our favorite activities—surfing. While paddling out, I casually asked how his first week had gone.

"It was so great, Dad," he said enthusiastically.

Performing arts can be a great creative outlet for people of all ages.



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It is a special community that supports the arts the way we do here in Vero Beach.

“Oh yeah,” I asked? “Can you tell me about your scenes?”

“Uh-huh,” he replied. “First, Young Don and Young Cosmo get pushed out of a saloon through swinging doors right onto the sidewalk. We didn’t have any money, so we put out a hat for tips and danced a couple of jigs. Once we had enough money, we went into a strip club to get something to eat and drink. We watched some ladies dance and then we were thrown out.”

Saloons? Child labor? Strip clubs? I was quickly starting to think of myself as the worst theater dad ever. But if it was okay for Daren, then I guess it was all right for me.

“Theater Dad. Wallet out. Curtain up. Bravo! Repeat.”



For the next eight weeks, we lived by the call sheet that provided daily instructions of which actors needed to be where and by when. Thankfully, our home in Central Beach is just three blocks from Riverside Theatre, because the daily back-and-forth for rehearsals and performances was both a grind

and a team effort.

It gave me a whole different level of appreciation for the effort made by the adult cast members, most of whom lived in New York City and were in Vero Beach away from their friends, family, and regular day-to-day routines. While in town, their temporary home was the Star Suites, which

Riverside Theatre owns and operates.

I was surprised when our family was invited to an impromptu potluck Super Bowl party, and touched by how welcome this itinerant collection of performers made Grant, Stephanie, and me feel. By the time Grant was pulled into the group sing-along during the halftime performance, he felt right at home, too.

Stephanie and I did our best to reciprocate this kindness and hospitality by stocking the green room with a combination of healthy and not-so-healthy snacks. We hosted lead actors Michael Starr and Joe Capstick for lunch and got together on another day with supporting actor Patrick Richwood for Sunday brunch. I even played “hooky” one afternoon to join Grant and Stephanie for a cast pool party thrown by Riverside Theatre board president Sandy



McManus and her husband, Mike. These interactions gave me a new understanding of the special chemistry that develops among cast members over the course of a production like *Singin' in the Rain*, and how it contributes to successful performances night after night.

If this is the kind of positive experience that Grant can look forward to as he pursues this passion, then I am all in. Wallet out. Curtain up. Bravo! Repeat.

"Theater Dad. Just like a normal dad but much cooler."

There is a certain type of cool I had to learn in my new-found persona of theater dad. For example, after recording

Grant's audition video, I had to play it cool and follow the specific instructions for sending in his submission. I'm a natural networker, so it was all I could do to avoid calling and texting friends and colleagues who I thought might be able to improve his standing and influence the casting decision. It's much cooler to stand back and watch the actor put himself out there and earn something special on his own merits.

It's also way cooler to hang in the background when dropping off and picking up the actor for rehearsals and performances, rather than "helicopter" over him before and after the show. For some



Dancing, singing, and acting are all available in local performing arts programs for children.

reason, Stephanie was able to bring a swagger to the dotting, ever-present role of theater mom, offering an enthusiastic "Break a leg" before curtain call, casually chatting with the cast backstage during scene changes, and mingling in the afterglow of another terrific

performance. She's a natural and made it all look effortless. I, however, felt like a fish out of water and just did my best to avoid embarrassing myself or Grant.

Eventually I managed to find my own "cool" in the form of an end-of-show gift of

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ANGEL UDELHOVEN



ANGEL UDELHOVEN

Scenes from Riverside Theatre's performances of *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* (above and below right) and *Singin' in the Rain*

a record player that I overheard Grant talking about with one of his fellow cast members. Grant was interested in "buying some vinyls," so we made our first trip to Wax Records and started a new father-son activity that I look forward to each month.

Since his debut in *Singin' in the Rain*, Grant has fully immersed himself in theater and the performing arts. After hearing Stephanie and me talk about how much we enjoyed the next Riverside Theatre production, *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, Grant insisted on attending. He and I took in the matinee on Easter Sunday, and he loved it so much he brought Stephanie to an evening performance later that week. As a bonus, he was able to say hello to the stage crew and visit with the sound engineer, who were all more than happy to spend time with him.

Over the summer, Grant auditioned for several more



ANGEL UDELHOVEN

roles with the children's theater. He also attended a two-week intensive dance workshop coordinated by Riverside Theatre, Ballet Vero Beach, and the visiting L.A. Contemporary Dance Company. I must admit, I had low expectations for the free recital, but the kids proved me wrong. I was impressed by what Grant, Hudson, Madelynne, and their classmates were able to learn in such a short time. I can't wait to see what next summer brings.

There is a whole cast of characters working tirelessly, year after year, to provide young people with opportunities to be exposed to and get involved with the arts right here at home. Ballet Vero Beach founder and artistic director Adam Schnell and ballet master Camilo Rodriguez are just two who deserve their own standing ovation for their efforts to promote dance as a universal language in our community. Riverside Theatre CEO Jon

Moses should also take a bow. When the credits roll, I hope they all get the recognition they are due.

It is a special community that supports the arts the way we do here in Vero Beach. However, after several years of declining public support, it will take some extraordinary acts of generosity by private donors to sustain them. One way or another, the show must go on. Theater dads everywhere are counting on it. At least this one is. 🌟