

Puttin' on the Ritz

Walhalla auditorium gaining reputation as cultural gem

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WALHALLA — As the audience exited the Walhalla Civic Auditorium (WCA) after seeing Andy Cooney's recent Irish Christmas Show, Ray Burroughs could not help but smile at the complimentary things people were saying about the performance and the venue.

"I heard someone say this was as

good as anything you could see at the Peace Center," Burroughs said.

Comments such as that makes Burroughs' day. As the new events coordinator of the 105-year-old landmark, he is convinced that WCA's best days are still ahead.

Cooney put on his show at the auditorium after just having performed Dec. 4 at Carnegie Hall. He brought with him a four-piece band, dancers and a comedian as a warm-up act.

Cooney is no stranger to the WCA. He and WCA Board Member Tom Brosnan are friends, which gives the auditorium an inside track at booking his shows, Burroughs said.

BOOKING BIG ACTS

Two months into his new job as events coordinator, Burroughs brings personal insight into the art of negotiating and booking talent.

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As a teenager in Boulder, Colo., he started a group band out of his garage. He sang and played the guitar for his group, which stayed active for eight years after he graduated college.

"We used to book our own acts, so I have experience negotiating and talking the talk," Burroughs said.

Still, Burroughs understands that booking acts is not an exact science.

"Entertainment is a crapshoot," he said. "Sometimes you think you have everything thought out. You think you have a great show, but few people attend because the local high school has a beauty pageant the same night. You just never know."

The entertainment lineup through the winter and spring includes Russo & Noe on Jan. 9. They are billed as a Las Vegas-style act reminiscent of the "Rat Pack" with plenty of comedy and song.

On Jan. 23, WCA features Rusty Evans, who will present, "The Legend in Black: A Tribute to Johnny Cash." He'll be accompanied by the "Ring of Fire Band."

Just in time for St. Patrick's Day, WCA will present Celtic Crossroads, a troupe from Ireland comprised of energetic singers and dancers.

Another highlight on the bill is John McEuen, a founding member of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, who will perform April 18.

A complete lineup of coming acts can be found at <http://www.walhallacivicauditorium.com>.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

Ray Burroughs, who took over as the events coordinator at the Walhalla Civic Auditorium two months ago, said Tuesday that more improvements and new acts are in store for the 105-year-old landmark in the coming year.

BIG VISION

Maxie Duke, vice president of the WCA Board of Directors, said the group is caught in a pinch because, on one hand, they want to make the attractions affordable to the general public, but in so doing, ticket sales don't fully pay for the acts that are booked.

"The quality of the shows we have cost \$5,000 to \$6,000," Duke said. "We have to furnish a place for (performers) to stay and provide food and things like that. The top price for our tickets is usually \$25. Our ticket sales don't pay the performers."

As a result, Duke said WCA depends heavily on grants and donations to make ends meet.

Duke said WCA plans to invest more than \$20,000 to convert two classrooms at the

auditorium into a reception hall to be dedicated in memory of former WCA board members Alberta Bowers and Leon Cantrell.

Work on the new reception hall will begin in early January and be completed in three to six weeks, Burroughs said. A warming kitchen would also be added so catered events could be held at the reception hall.

Duke said that more than \$450,000 has been invested in the auditorium since it was refurbished into a performing center in 2003.

The building was used as a school for all grades beginning in 1903, and at one time, it was used for offices and Oconee school district's headquarters. The entire WCA complex is listed on the national Register of Historic Places.

In September 2004, the school district decided the entire building and land to a group with a vision for restoring the auditorium. The facility seats 453, including 120 in the balcony.

Burroughs and the WCA Board envisions the auditorium as being the cultural center of not just Oconee but of the Upstate.

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