

Loch Haven Celebrations

MAINSTAYS OF ORLANDO'S SIGNATURE CULTURAL PARK REACH MILESTONE ANNIVERSARIES IN 2014.

BY DENISE BATES ENOS

Located at the junction of North Mills Avenue and Princeton Street and bounded by lakes Estelle, Rowena and Formosa, the 45 acres of Loch Haven Park are chock-full of cultural offerings. The Orlando Museum of Art (OMA), Orlando Repertory Theatre, Orlando Science Center, Orlando Shakespeare Theater and The Mennello Museum of American Art all call the park home, as does "The Mayor," one of the area's largest and oldest oak trees. And in 2014, three of the park's esteemed institutions—OMA, Orlando Shakes and The Mennello—are all marking important anniversaries.

An All-American Institution

The newest kid on the block, The Mennello Museum of American Art, is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year. Originally built around the collection of Earl Cunningham folk art paintings donated by Marilyn and Michael Mennello, the museum began as The Mennello Museum of American Folk Art. It was rebranded as The Mennello Museum of American Art in 2004 in order to broaden its offerings—and its appeal, according to Frank Holt, executive director. The name change, he says, "recognizes the reality that if we had remained a museum devoted only to American folk art, I don't think we would have had the impact we've had on the community. It was when the board was first approached about expanding the programming possibilities for the museum that things really started to take off."

And taken off they have, with a broadening variety of exhibitions and special events, and an impressive rate of growth in general attendance and participation in its many educational programs. The Mennello has a lot to celebrate, and there are big plans to mark the 15th anniversary, states Holt: "The whole year will be devoted to



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FRANK HOLT has been at The Mennello from its inception. Celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2014, the museum will feature a series of exhibits on the art of the American West.

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the art of the American West, and we will be producing a small booklet that will focus on the history of the museum of the past 15 years."

David Cross, the president of The Mennello's Friends Board, notes that the anniversary plans follow one of the museum's most successful exhibits in 2013, which showcased African-American art. "It is a special place," he says of the museum. "It is a special gift which should be treasured by our community."

Michael Mennello, who is committed to honoring the legacy his late wife began, echoes that sentiment, stating that the museum has "brought a tremendous amount of culture to our community."

Shaking It Up

The Orlando Shakespeare Theater marks its 30th anniversary this year, and it's come a long way since the days when the Bard's plays were performed outdoors at the Walt Disney Amphitheater on Lake Eola. Orlando Shakes has been a permanent fixture in Loch Haven Park since 1997, when it moved into the Orange County Historical Museum's former space, which had been slated for demolition (the historical museum became the Orange County Regional History Center when it relocated downtown).

Artistic Director Jim Helsing says that Orlando can expect "bigger and brighter things" from Orlando Shakes during this anniversary year and beyond. "Our vision is about great programming," he says, noting that January's performance of the musical *Nicholas Nickleby* "is an example of the type of vision we have—doing the biggest and best shows we've ever done."

In addition, Orlando Shakes has added a new play series and plans on growing *PlayFest*; Helsing also hopes to pay homage to the organization's alfresco roots with an outdoor performance. "My dream is to do a couple of free productions in the park as our and our donors' gift to the community—returning to everything we built and what we started with," he says.

Longtime patron Rita Lowndes feels that the Orlando Shakes in particular and Loch Haven Park in general go a long way toward enriching the culture of our city. "Laurence Olivier once said, 'I believe that in a great city, or even in a small city or a village, a great theater is the outward and visible sign of an inward and probable cul-



COURTESY OF RITA LOWNDES



ORLANDO SHAKESPEARE THEATER



ORLANDO SHAKESPEARE THEATER



ROB JONES

THE ORLANDO SHAKESPEARE THEATER has been performing for Central Florida audiences for 30 years. From top left: local arts patron Rita Lowndes is one of the group's biggest supporters; founding Artistic Director Stuart Omens; undergoing renovations in 1988, the Walt Disney amphitheater at Lake Eola was the original venue for Orlando Shakes productions; In 2001, the company moved into the John & Rita Lowndes Shakespeare Center in Loch Haven Park.

ture’—to see a Loch Haven entity that people recognize as a cultural center in our midst does say a lot about our community and culture,” she says.

The Original

The granddaddy of them all at Loch Haven is the Orlando Museum of Art, which celebrates its 90th anniversary in 2014. Way back in the 1920s, the museum began as an arts association. “The first gal-

lery was built in Loch Haven Park as an arts center,” says Hansen Mulford, OMA’s curator. “The original gallery was designed by James Gamble Rogers; that building was built on a diagonal, and it’s still there, wrapped by subsequent expansions.”

The museum grew as Orlando grew, say Mulford, noting that it officially took the Orlando Museum of Art name in 1985. A major expansion in 1996 gave the museum its current look. “All of that took place primarily with all kinds of local support—

individuals, foundations, corporations—and some state funding,” he says.

It’s a storied past, and the museum is making efforts to preserve it. “The Archive Project” is an 18-month endeavor that will document the museum’s history. It’s a work in progress that Director Glen Gentele has made a priority. OMA is partnering with the Orlando Regional History Center to complete the project, with some help from students from the University of Central Florida’s public history depart-

ment. The result will be that 90 years’ worth of materials will be easily accessible through a database.

Looking back is a worthwhile endeavor, but the museum also has an eye to the future, says Mulford: “We’re looking forward to the 100th anniversary.”

Signs of the Times

The Orlando Museum of Art has been a part of Loch Haven Park for nine decades, and like the other cultural institutions there celebrating anniversaries in 2014, it’s here to stay. “Loch Haven Park is a beautiful cultural park,” says Munson. “A lot of things that have happened in the last few years have made it even more of a prime location as a cultural park.”

The new SunRail stop slated to open adjacent to the nearby Florida Hospital, the hospital’s expansion, the new development throughout the Ivanhoe Row and Mills-Nebraska area, and even the opening of the Dinky Line Trail, which is from downtown Orlando to Loch Haven Park, are all elevating the park’s profile in the community.

But there’s a lot more that can be done, say Helsing, Holt and Mulford. First and foremost, all agree that the area has a bit of an identity problem; many people driving down Princeton or Mills see the word “park” and don’t realize that there’s more to Loch Haven Park than the trees, says Holt. “One of the challenges the city and all the entities in the park have is how to become more of a part of the community and engage them.”

Fortunately, the City of Orlando and Loch Haven’s cultural institutions are working together to elevate the park’s profile. One of the most noticeable changes that may be seen in the near future is improved signage that more effectively “brands” the park.

With greater visibility, a more cohesive brand, and other efforts to educate and engage the public in the park’s offerings, 2014 and beyond look bright for Loch Haven. “In the future, you’re going to see that this is a place to come and frolic in the grass and have a picnic,” says Helsing. “Have your kids play in the park, and then go to a show or exhibit. That’s a real opportunity. I think the park is a sleeping giant of culture in Orlando.” **OAM**

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ORLANDO MUSEUM OF ART (3)

IN 2014, THE ORLANDO MUSEUM OF ART reaches its 90th anniversary. It originally served as a community arts association, and didn’t take its current name until 1985. Top left: Curator Hansen Mulford says that it’s a priority to document the museum’s history, which includes old photographs such as the one above from an artists’ gathering in the 1920s. A major expansion in 1996 gave the building its current look.



THE MENNELLO MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



CITY OF ORLANDO

THE DINKY LINE TRAIL extends from downtown Orlando to Loch Haven Park, where it fronts the lush grounds of The Mennello. Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer and other dignitaries were on hand for the official opening of the trail, which is just one of many developments helping to increase the area’s visibility.