

STEPPING OUT

Where the audience always comes first

Long Island Children's Museum Theater Director Jim Packard says goodbye to his role of a lifetime

By Danielle Schwab

There are 140 seats at the theater at Long Island Children's Museum and Jim Packard has sat in almost every single one.

"There's not a bad seat in the theater. Wherever you sit, you can see the whole stage, and you're no more than five, six rows away from the stage, which is pretty special," he says.

Packard has been instrumental in the growth of the museum's theatrical programming from inception, since the theater's construction in 2001. It all began with a committee he didn't know he was on, when he was asked to consult on the museum's theater then in development.

Prior to joining the museum, Packard was involved with theater and event management in Manhattan, and has taught stage technology and design.

"I was asked by a friend on the LICM theater committee to look at the plans the architect had drawn up. Then that spring, they had listed me as 'not present' at a theater committee meeting," Packard recalls.

"I said: 'I didn't know I was on this committee, but I'm happy to serve on it and to help out the museum in whatever way I can.' They said: 'That's all right. The committee has dissolved at this point.'

"I asked: 'Who's watching out for the theater?' And that's when I got hired."

From his first position — as Theater Coordinator to his final role as Director of Theater Programs — Packard has made his mark over these past 24 years.

His philosophy, in keeping with the museum's mission, is to put the audience first.

"It always boils down to making sure that the audience is the one that you're paying attention to, because there's no point in doing theater without an audience," he explains.

The productions are carefully chosen with a strong focus on audience interaction, with many tying into exhibits and related events.

"Our dressing room door has a big sheet of brown paper on it, and every time the actors hear something fun or interesting coming from the audience, they will write it on that board, just to remind them to pay attention to what the audience is saying," he adds.

There is sure to be plenty of audience response to the upcoming production of "Elephant and Piggie's We are in a Play!" The beloved show, opening April 14, which involves the audience as a character in the story, is always popular with visitors. Adapted from Mo Willems' best-selling children's series, the hilarious duo of Elephant and Piggie gets tangled in all sorts of antics, learning the meaning of friendship along the way.

"Elephant and Piggie realize there's an audience watching them, and then they talk and interact with the audience, invite them to sing along and be a part of the show," Packard says.

With Packard's retirement this month, the production



- Performances April 14-19, 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.
- View the LICM events calendar at licm.org for additional information or call (516) 224-5800 for tickets
- Long Island Children's Museum, Museum Row, Garden City

acts as a passing of the baton to new hands. Taking on the assignment are not one but two folks: Lisa Rudin as artistic director and Austin Costello as technical director.

It's a full circle moment for both Rudin and Costello, who appeared as Elephant and Piggie in previous stagings of the production.

Costello, a distinguished puppeteer in his own right, has worked with the museum's theater since 2015.

His love of puppetry started back as a kid in '90s, when he visited the museum and saw a puppet on display. His career led him to roles in children's theater, including Sesame Street.

"The little lessons that we find along the way in our shows are the major takeaways that we get to share with families

and especially with kids who might be having problems. It's such an important thing to me to bring children up in a good way, and to help them understand the world around them," Costello says.

"It's wonderful to be able to carry on the legacy of Jim, who's worked so hard for so many people, and who has taken a lot of time to take me under his wing and train me," he adds. Rudin also has a personal history with the museum.

"The first time I came to the theater here was when I brought my children in 2019. I was like, 'what a beautiful theater this is.' This is just perfect," she says.

She has worn many theatrical hats throughout her career, including as an actor on Sesame Street Live and an education director for a children's theater school.

Rudin and Costello will surely continue the theater's aim to connect with children through imaginative and creative storytelling.

"Children learn empathy from watching characters on stage. They understand content and what happens in the story more from seeing it live," Rudin says.

While Packard may be waving goodbye as director, his legacy remains rooted to the museum's very foundation.

"When I was 19-years-old, walking across my college theater's auditorium, I thought I could do this every day for the rest of my life — and I got that opportunity," he shares.

"It's been one of the more wonderful experiences in life, in terms of just getting to do so much that makes so many people happy."

Photos courtesy LICM

Top photo: Outgoing Director Jim Packard, center, and cast and crew of "Interstellar Cinderella" gather at the final performance.

Bottom photo: Elephant (Finn MacDevitt) and Piggie (Anneka Shepherd) return to the museum's stage in a production helmed by new Artistic Director Lisa Rudin.



Joan Osborne sings Dylan

The seven-time Grammy nominee brings her extraordinary voice and artistic depth to the timeless music of Bob Dylan. The recent biopic "A Complete Unknown" brings Dylan to the forefront once again. Meanwhile Osborne has spent over 25 years captivating audiences with her fearless exploration of genres ranging from rock and blues to soul, gospel and country. Her journey with Dylan's catalog began in 2016 with a series of "Dylanology" concerts. Her critically-acclaimed 2018 album, "Songs of Bob Dylan," and her live performances showcase her ability to reimagine Dylan's iconic works, highlighting the emotional resonance and poetic brilliance of his music. Osborne turns back the clock with her soulful reinterpretations that exude passion, emotion and energy.

Friday, April 11, 8 p.m. \$59, \$55, \$48, also special VIP package.

Jeanne Rimsky Theater at Landmark on Main Street, 232 Main St., Port Washington. Tickets available at landmarkonmainstreet.org or (516) 767-6444.



Rick Wakeman

Experience the magic of progressive rock legend Rick Wakeman when he brings his "Final Solo Tour" to Long Island. Renowned for his keyboard wizardry and captivating stage presence, Wakeman invites you on a journey through iconic Yes classics, unforgettable solo compositions and personal favorites. With a career spanning over five decades and album sales exceeding 50 million, Rick's extraordinary contributions to music have earned him accolades, including a CBE from Queen Elizabeth II. This tour is a heartfelt farewell to his legendary one-man shows in the U.S., but his music will continue to inspire fans worldwide. Rick's career is a testament to his versatility and enduring artistry. His live performances seamlessly blend masterful musicianship with humor and storytelling, creating an intimate and unforgettable experience.

Wednesday, April 16, 8 p.m. \$75, \$65, \$55, \$45, \$35, \$29.50. Tickets available at ticketmaster.com or paramountny.com. The Paramount, 370 New York Ave., Huntington.