



Mark Danni, TheatreZone cofounder and artistic director, confers with Charles Fornara, music director for *Grumpy Old Men, the Musical*, one of its newest offerings this past season. Photo courtesy TheatreZone



TheatreZone offered a glimpse of its Sixties hitmaker saga, *Leader of the Pack*, at its season reveal. Photo courtesy TheatreZone

‘Barcelona,’ the Beatles, Barry Manilow

Vitamin ‘B’ from TheatreZone

By Harriet Howard Heithaus
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It’s easy to imagine Mark Danni leaning on the door of licensing agents, waiting for that special musical. Because he does.

When Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical take on the 1950s film noir *Sunset Boulevard* comes to Naples as part of the 2026-27 season, it’s because TheatreZone’s cofounder-artistic director had his bid in long before it became available.

“I’ve been watching that one for years,” he declared.

Then there is *Harmony: A New Musical*. It’s been singer-songwriter Barry Manilow’s baby, full of new melodies from the tunesmith and a wrenching story about six entertainers whose aspirations to perform internationally run headlong into World War II. This is neither a bi-drama nor a jukebox musical, but fully developed for the stage, unlike his *Copacabana*, which had been refigured from a TV movie version.

“I ran up and saw it before it closed about a year ago and I loved it, and so I have been on them,” Danni said of agents for *Harmony*. “I wanted to get the rights before somebody else did.”

TheatreZone will have the first Southeast regional production.

The theater announced its new season last week, and you can’t get much newer than a world premiere by a local author, Mike Ruffolo. The Naples resident wrote the script and lyrics to *Barcelona: The Musical*, another play with a theme of war’s havoc on family, love and life direction.

It will be a double premiere. Ruffolo not only wrote the story to the theater but created the music with a new technique: artificial intelligence.

Danni admitted he first turned the music down on principle.



Peter McClung and Curt Denham face off as rivals in the TheatreZone production of *Grumpy Old Men, the Musical* from this past season; the theater specializes in new musicals and “undiscovered gems.” Photo by Harriet Howard Heithaus

“I immediately said, ‘I can’t do this.’ That was my initial reaction as a live musician,” he recalled. Ruffolo said he understood. But then, two weeks later, Ruffolo was in Boston and brought up his predicament to a producer, who told him, “Well, it’s going to be going that way. So either you’ll be on the front end of it or the back end of it.”

Danni said that in the meantime he had his own epiphany about the concept: “After the initial shock of it, I said, ‘Well, am I being stupid here?

Because AI is everywhere. And why not be in the forefront of it?” — but mostly because it was good.

“We realized the human fingerprint is all over it. I mean you don’t just say ‘Write me a song’ to AI. There’s huge amounts of input that Michael was working with about what is driven behind the lyrics.”

The final musical is a bio-tribute to Brill Building luminary Ellie Greenwich, whose name may not be familiar, but her songs are. “Be My Baby,” “Da Doo Ron Ron,” “River

Deep, Mountain High,” and the title song, “Leader of the Pack,” fueled the girl groups and duos of the ’60s. It’s the celebration of a fertile musical era and a composer who helped create it.

The theater’s popular holiday revue returns, as does its concert series. Mersey Beatle fans will be happy to know the tribute group is back, and there are three more concert shows, including one celebrating Neil Diamond music.

Tickets are \$55, \$65, \$75 and \$100, depending on seat selection. They are on sale now at **theatre.zone** or by calling 888.966.3352. All plays and concerts are in the G&L Theater at The Community School of Naples, 13275 Livingston Road, Naples.

Theater

Shows are at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays.

TBA Oct. 2026: Combined show with Florida Gulf Coast University (at FGCU’s Bower School of Music), to be presented at the FGCU Theatre Lab. Details will be announced at **theatre.zone**.

Home for the Holidays: Dec. 18 to 20. TheatreZone’s annual musical revue returns with a celebration of the season, blending classic and contemporary holiday favorites with costumes, choreography and a festive holiday spirit.

Barry Manilow’s Harmony: Jan. 7 to 17. Music by Barry Manilow and book and lyrics by Bruce Sussman.

Barcelona: The Musical: Feb. 4 to 14. A world premiere set in 1939 Spain, during its era of civil war and uneasy unification that tore apart families and devastated romances, by Naples playwright Mike Ruffolo.

Sunset Boulevard: March 4 to 14. With Tony Award-winning music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and book

and lyrics by Don Black and Christopher Hampton. Features songs such as “With One Look” and “As If We Never Said Goodbye.”

Leader of the Pack: April 22 to May 2. Tracing the life and music of legendary songwriter Ellie Greenwich, following her journey from a teenage girl to her composition of iconic ’60s songs.

Curated Concert Series

Sam C. Jones’ Rockabilly Rumble!: 4 and 7:30 p.m. Jan. 18. Actor-musician Sam C. Jones and a powerhouse band perform a high-energy concert experience celebrating the roots of rock ‘n’ roll that germinated in the 1950s American South. It includes the signature sounds of Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley & His Comets, Johnny Cash and more.

Mersey Beatles — Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band: 4 p.m. Feb. 16 and 17 and 7:30 p.m. Feb. 16 and 17. The internationally acclaimed Mersey Beatles present an all-new concert celebrating the 60th anniversary of the groundbreaking *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album.

Hello Again — Eric Gutman Sings Neil Diamond: 4 and 7:30 p.m. Feb. 18. Broadway and national tour performer Eric Gutman — acclaimed for his work in *Jersey Boys* — backed by a dynamic live band, brings Diamond’s best music to a concert that includes “Sweet Caroline,” “Cracklin’ Rosie” and “America.”

Johnny Rogers and The History of Rock N Roll Show: 2 and 7:30 p.m. May 8. A musical journey celebrating the artists who pioneered rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s through the classic rock artists of the 1960s. It begins with his portrayal of Buddy Holly and expands through the music of Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Ricky Nelson, Chuck Berry and more. **NT**

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