

## TRANSITIONS

## Founders depart ATF with a 'BOOM!'

By STEVE BARNES  
Senior writer

In 1993, a Manhattan theater director named Martha Banta was working on a pair of nascent projects that turned into unlikely successes.

One was at the New York Theatre Workshop, where Banta had gotten to know a promising Broadway songwriter, Jonathan Larson, who was struggling to write a rock opera that reset Puccini's "La Boheme" amid the impoverished artists living on New York City's gritty Lower East Side.

Another was in the Glens Falls-Lake George area, where Banta had spent her middle- and high-school years. She and David Turner, her partner and future husband, were trying to start a professional summer theater company serving

the North Country and Capital Region.

The former project, with Banta as assistant director, was "Rent." The latter, the Adirondack Theatre Festival. If "Rent" became a worldwide phenomenon, the upstate theater venture was, in its own, smaller way, a triumph, too — of artistic will, individual vision and galvanized community support.

It's fitting, then, that Banta and Turner are closing their final season as directors of ATF with a Jonathan Larson musical about artists and the urge to create. Titled "Tick, Tick ... BOOM!," the show, opening Friday, is their send-off to the company they conceived, birthed and grew for 13 seasons, from its original home in a suburban Lake George campground to its place as anchor of a newly built theater with a central role in a revitalized downtown Glens Falls.

"When we started (ATF), it wasn't because I wanted to 'come home' with a theater company. This just seemed like a place that could support a professional summer theater but didn't have one," says Banta. "We couldn't have known everything else that would happen."

That first summer, 1995, with Banta as artistic head and Turner managing administration, ATF produced a musical, a comedy and two cutting-edge solo performers — all little known or new material — over three weeks. Among the performers were friends from the New York theater world. ATF's venue was the French Mountain Playhouse, a 150-seat space in the Lake George RV Park, which is owned by Dave King, a high school friend of Banta's whose parents opened the park 40 years ago this



JOHN CARL D'ANNIBALE/TIMES UNION  
FIFTEEN YEARS after conceiving the idea of starting a summer theater in the Glens Falls area, Adirondack Theatre Festival founders David Turner and Martha Banta have decided

## ATF: Transition time for theater company

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summer. The entire season's budget was \$50,000. In a year-end round-up, noting that the company was planning its second season, Times Union theater critic Michael Eck wrote, "They're worth keeping an eye on."

Some things have changed. The budget is now \$330,000 for five weeks. Banta and Turner are married, parents of a 2-year-old, Henry. ATF's home is the 300-seat Charles R. Wood Theater, open since 2004 on the site of an abandoned Woolworth store that the company began using as a performance space during season two.

But other things remain the same. Lisa Kron, one of the solo artists that first season, is back this year with another edgy piece. Productions — all little known or new material — include a comedy and a musical, and among the castmembers are professional actors from New York drawn upstate by the opportunity to do original work in the Adirondacks. The company is planning next summer. Among the first details to be released, due before this season ends with the final performance of "Tick, Tick ... BOOM!" on July 28, is the identity of the producing artistic director hired to replace both Banta and Turner.

After looking at 125 resumes, conducting 50 phone conversations and 14 in-person interviews in New York, ATF's board brought four finalists to Glens Falls. Banta and Turner met the quartet — they judged three of the four able successors — but did not formally participate in the search or decision-making.

"That's part of us looking forward to being audience members," says Banta.

Adds Turner, "We're ready to do that. Next summer we're going to come back and freeload off all the people who made offers to let us stay with them. ... We already know who has nice lake-front places."

## The shows will go on

The responsibilities of parenthood, combined with the feeling that 13 seasons' worth of energy was about all they had to give to

## Curtain call

"TICK, TICK ... BOOM!"  
■ **Where:** Adirondack Theatre Festival at the Charles R. Wood Theater, 207 Glen St., Glens Falls  
■ **Opens:** 8 p.m. Friday. (Pay-what-you-can preview at 8 p.m. Thursday.)  
■ **Continues:** 8 p.m. Saturday and July 23-28  
■ **Tickets:** \$28  
■ **Info:** 798-7479; <http://atfestival.org>

ATF, spurred Banta and Turner's decision early last year that the company's 2007 season would be their final one.

The second-biggest challenge faced by an arts organization, after its creation, is the transition from the founders to whoever succeeds them.

"It's a live-or-die moment," says Turner. "We told (the board) how hard it would be, and we also told them we fully understood if they didn't want to do it."

Says Banta, "It was always an option that (ATF) just might end when we left. That's not what we wanted, but we knew that it was possible."

The 11-member board quickly and unanimously decided, after being told last year of the pair's decision to leave, that the company should continue, and they used the subsequent months to plan for the hand-off.

"What Dave and Martha have given this community is such a gift, and we as a board were not ready to give that up," says King, who has been on the ATF board since its founding in his RV park and has been president for the past six years.

Banta and Turner say they will be as available — or as scarce — as the new producing artistic director wants.

"We won't be hanging around," says Banta.

"But we'll only be a phone call away," says Turner. "It would be just impossible to put everything that we know, everything that we do, everything that we've learned in 15 years down in one big manual. The new person can call us anytime."

In the fall, Banta and Turner will return to work in New York theater. Banta is resident director of the Broadway and touring productions of "Mamma Mia!" — she makes sure the show stays true to original director Phyllida Lloyd's vision, and hires and fires castmembers as needed — and will pursue other directing projects. Turner, who devoted several years exclusively to ATF and getting the Wood theater built, will become company manager for the Broadway production of "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

Part of moving on, the pair knows, will be accepting that they



JAMES SUBINSKY/ADIRONDACK THEATRE FESTIVAL  
RYAN DUNCAN, from left, Colin Hanlon and Sarah Glendening co-star in the Adirondack Theatre Festival Production of "Tick, Tick ... BOOM!," a musical by "Rent" creator Jonathan Larson.

no longer will be in control of the festival they founded. Turner admits that he would find it painful if, for example, the festival, which made its name doing new and/or challenging material like "Three Tall Women," "Wit," "Fully Committed" and "Barbara's Blue Kitchen," were to become a summer-stock company in which non-professionals performed warhorse musicals.

"Well, as long as it was quality work, that would be OK," says Banta, sounding as if she's trying to convince herself. She adds, "But I'd rather the focus continue to be on new material. That's what we've done best."

## Emotional production

Jonathan Larson's "Tick, Tick ... BOOM!," though written in its current form before "Rent," did not premiere until 2001. An unfinished work — Larson died the night before "Rent" was to open, of an undiagnosed heart ailment — "Tick ..." was put into final shape by David Auburn, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Proof." Auburn reworked Larson's solo material into a three-person story about Jon, a promising young theater composer who is approaching 30; his girlfriend, Susan, who is pushing him to leave New York for a settled life elsewhere; and his gay best friend, Michael, a former actor who traded his theater dreams for a successful career in advertising.

Set to a rock score that will

sound familiar to "Rent" fans: "Tick ..." traces Jon's efforts to make his mark artistically, and the story's powerful echoes of Larson's life profoundly affected Banta, who worked with the composer for years on "Rent."

"I resisted doing 'Tick, Tick ... BOOM!' because it was so very personal to me," she says. "I went to the opening night in New York and I was numbed by it. It was so weird to see this person's life — life I'd known and watched and been a part of — on stage."

While she knew Larson would have wanted "Tick ..." to be produced at ATF — indeed, the company had talked with him early on about commissioning a work from him — Banta knew she could not direct it herself.

"I couldn't be objective," she says.

"When you see it and you know the story of Jonathan and his life there are two or three moments that are so powerful. It's almost as if he knew he was going to die young," says Turner.

"Jonathan was constantly questioning what it meant to have an artistic life, to pursue it," says Banta.

Says Turner, "That's been the question for us, too."

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