

# Appreciation: George Puello, man of Westchester theater, dies at 73

**Peter D. Kramer**, Rockland/Westchester Journal News    Published 3:59 p.m. ET Aug. 23, 2019

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George Puello, whose career included composer, lyricist, choreographer, director, producer and technical director, during a rehearsal break from a PMT Productions show in 2008. Puello was a spotter of early talent and helped guide the first career steps of Broadway actors John Treacy Egan ("The Producers") and Robi Hager ("Spring Awakening"). (Photo: Seth Harrison, Staff TJN)

George Puello, a son of Colombia who for decades filled local stages with vibrant theatrical colors — while wearing his signature all-white wardrobe — died Wednesday, after a recent stroke. He was 73.

George Enrique Puello was born June 11, 1946, in Cartagena, Colombia.

Arriving in Westchester in the late '60s, in what he called "the golden age of community theater," Puello became essential to theater companies from Pleasantville to Harrison to Mahopac.

He was an artistic director, producer, composer, playwright, director, choreographer, set designer, prop master, painter, musician and actor. Over the better part of 50 years, Puello's talents were in constant demand.

A 2010 stroke ended his creative output, but friends would still squire him around to opening nights, his presence seen as an endorsement of the production.

Puello was a spotter of early talent and helped guide the first career steps of Broadway actors John Treacy Egan, Robi Hager, and Christine Pedi.

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"We sometimes didn't agree on casting and he would say 'I promise you, I promise you, she'll be great, or he'll be great,'" Arrucci said. "He was always right."



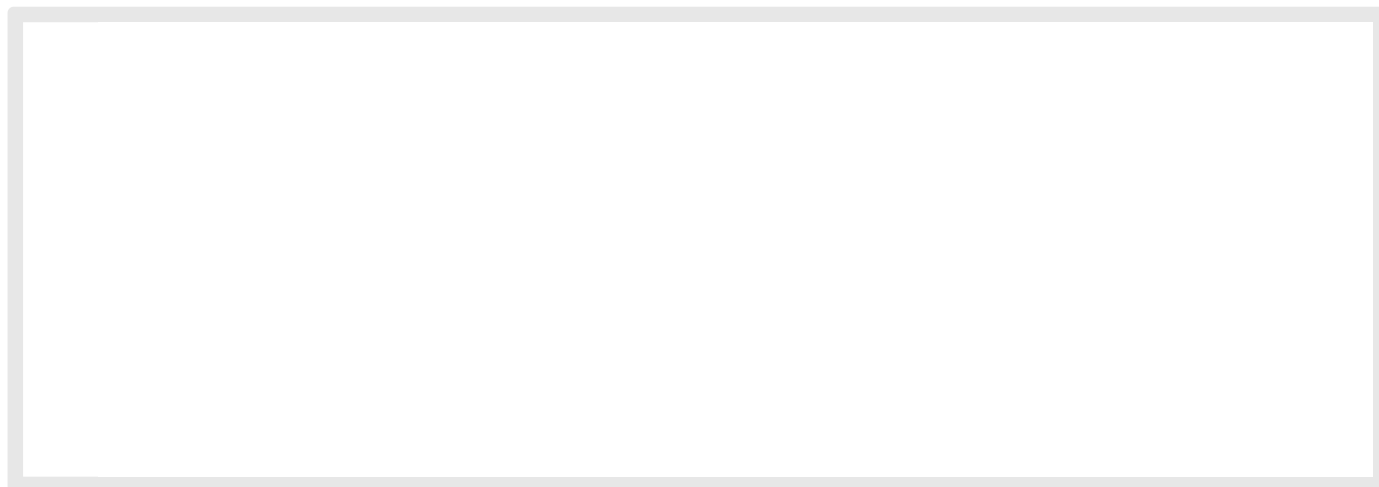
George Puello in the 1982 Mahopac Farm Playhouse cast of "Parusia," the Bible-based oratorio that he conceived, wrote, composed, directed, co-choreographed and starred in. It ran for more than a year. (Photo: Douglas DeMarco)

## 'A man of the theater'

Pedi, host of Sirius XM radio's ON BROADWAY channel, said she'll remember Puello — who directed her in shows from "Mack & Mabel" to "My Fair Lady" — as "a man of the theater."

"He really had faith in me and in the beginning of what became my career," said Pedi. "I didn't even entertain the thought of becoming a performer until I started doing community theater."

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Pedi recalled being passed over for the role of Fanny Brice in a Harrison Players production of "Funny Girl." Two weeks later, she was told the director was stepping away, choreographer Puello would direct, and he wanted Pedi to play Fanny.

"After that, he cast me as Evita and I can't even remember all the roles, but roles that really whet my appetite," she said.

Puello did the same for John Treacy Egan, whose Broadway credits include "The Producers" and "Sister Act."

"George was funny and loving and gave me great opportunities that I would never have had in the professional world," Egan said. "I played amazing roles unc navigate the world of theater."

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Egan recalled a flash of Puello's trademark sense of humor from a 1989 Chappaqua Drama Group production of "Jesus Christ Superstar," in which the stocky Egan played Jesus.

"George used to say 'We're going to need an iron cross to crucify you,'" Egan said with a laugh. "But those were roles I never would have gotten a chance to play elsewhere."

Robi Hager appeared in "Bye Bye, Birdie" with Egan and in the original company of "Spring Awakening."

Puello cast Hager in "Evita" at Saw Mill Summer Theater in 2003 and became a mentor.

"I often remember George when an audition comes my way," said Hager, about to appear in "Ragtime" in Philadelphia. "He got me in to audition for Stephen Schwartz for 'Captain Louie' while I was in high school. I was 15 and thought this was how one gets auditions and didn't think much of it. But now I know that kindness is not as easy to find as I thought."

Hager didn't get the "Captain Louie" job, leading to a piece of Puello wisdom.

"When I didn't get a role he'd say, 'That's showbiz, move on to the next,' a very hard thing to do in this business," Hager said.



The Westchester Dreamcoats rehearse "The Star-Spangled Banner" for a December 2001 performance at New York Giants game. Leading them is Carol Arrucci, founder, artistic and musical director, alongside George Puello, executive director and co-artistic director. Puello took the Dreamcoats, a group that Arrucci formed to perform in the Broadway revival of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," and added choreography. (Photo: File)

## 'Golden age'

When Puello arrived in Westchester, nearly every town had a theater troupe.

"There were at least five or six premiere community theater groups," he said in a 2008 interview with The Journal News/Iohud. "You could have a cast of thousands. We did a production of 'Chess' at Chappaqua Drama Group with 60 people in it.

"I do community theater for selfish reasons," Puello said. "I get to do what I can't do in a professional production where we have nine days to put a show together. Here, in six weeks, you can really put more of your own stamp on it."

His  
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r's Wife," for which he also designed the set, a loving re-creation of a French village

# 'The Man in White'

In 1975, Puello took the reins at the year-old Mahopac Farm Playhouse and directed every show there till it closed in the mid-'80s. His tenure in Mahopac saw two productions of "Parusia," his oratorio melding Old and New Testaments. The 1981 production ran for more than a year.

Alvin Klein, in The New York Times, noted: "Mr. Puello wrote the book. Mr. Puello wrote those lyrics. Mr. Puello composed the music. Mr. Puello 'conceived, directed and staged' it. Three choreographers are listed, one of whom is Mr. Puello. The Messiah/Minstrel is played by none other than Mr. Puello."

That was around the time that Nellie O'Brien met Puello.

"I met George when, at 16, I was cast in my first professional production at Mahopac Farm Playhouse," O'Brien said. "He was the artistic director and when I was introduced, he was up on a ladder. It seems to me he was always up on a ladder!"

O'Brien will remember Puello's generosity.

"Next to my mother, he was the most charitable person I've ever known," she said. "He never had money because he gave away whatever he made. He was generous with time, advice and opportunities."

His longest tenure, more than a quarter-century, was at Elmsford's Westchester Broadway Theatre, where he directed, choreographed and served as technical director and set designer. He also adopted the Westchester Dreamcoats, a teen choir Arrucci started for a Broadway revival of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," and add choreography.

Ray Arrucci, Carol's husband, carries the Actors' Equity card of a professional actor thanks to Puello, who insisted that his 2005 cast of "Oliver" at WBT include actors from Westchester. The 12-week run qualified the six Westchester actors to join the actors' union, a major step into the business.

"I have no idea who's doing the eulogy for this man, but I hope they gave them three days to get through it, because that's what's going to take," Ray Arrucci said.

Arrucci said Chappaqua productions of "Chess" and "Jesus Christ Superstar" stand out as crowning Puello achievements, as do two separate productions of "Man of La Mancha," a Puello touchstone with its theatrical flair and Spanish roots.

# 'My friends'

Friends have flooded Facebook with tributes, recalling his kindnesses and how he would direct by calling his cast "my friends."

On the Westchester Broadway Theatre Facebook page, owners Bill & Von Ann Stutler and Bob Funking posted a tribute: "George Puello was 'Westchester' theatre!" the post read. "He could do it ALL."

Steve Calleran, the dinner theater's emcee who knew Puello for more than 35 years, said his creative genius included working on a shoe-string budget.

"If you needed a specialized prop and it couldn't be found anywhere, George would somehow craft it out of balsa wood, Plexiglass, a piece of 4-inch dryer-vent tubing, some hot glue and spray paint, and it would always look just like the real thing from the front row," Calleran said. "His invaluable versatility in all aspects of the world of theater meant that the only problem with having George Puello on the staff was that there was only one of him."

The dinner theater is planning a memorial celebration.

From 2001 to 2010, Puello used the dinner theater's stage to bestow honors on the shining stars of Westchester community theater, the Cab Calloway Lifetime Achievement Awards.

The gala black-tie event each October included song, dance and acceptance speeches.

It was, Puello said, a chance to honor local theater greats before their funerals. In a 2007 interview, Puello explained: "Wouldn't it be better to be saying all this to them instead of about them?"

In 2011, after his first stroke, friends gathered at Archbishop Stepinac High School for "George's Turn," a chance to honor Puello.

## A 'George story'

It was Christmas time in the '80s and George was in trouble. He was left holding the bag due to the actions of an associate. Thousands of dollars were needed, thousands George didn't have. Then his friends stepped up.

It sounds like "It's a Wonderful Life," but it's a scene from the life of George Puello, one of those "George stories" that will be swapped and savored in coming days.

Pedi was working with Puello at the dinner theater. (He would always find jobs for her, she said.)

A man working with George hadn't returned a rental car. The car-rental company wanted "some crazy amount of money, I feel like it was \$8,000," she said. "George didn't have that kind of money."

Phil Tocantins, a fellow dinner-theater employee, put out the word that Puello needed help.

"It was definitely before e-mails and we just put out the word and gave an address," Pedi said. "My address was one of them. Every day, I would get mail with beautiful letters saying 'This is for George' or 'Anything for George.' We collected thousands."

*Arrangements: The wake for George Puello will be held at Hawthorne Funeral Home, 21 W. Stevens Ave., Hawthorne, 4 to 7 p.m., Saturday and Sunday. Funeral Mass 10 a.m. Monday at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Elmsford.*

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