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## Brian Mackey: New Sangamon Auditorium season down, but not out

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*View the complete [2010-11 Sangamon Auditorium schedule](#), with links to all the artists, at the SJ-R's [Off the Clock](#) blog.*

Look! Up in the sky! It's a folk singer! A blues legend! A public radio personality!

That's right, Sangamon Auditorium has formally announced its 2010-11 season, featuring the usual mix of world music and dance, baby boomer nostalgia acts and other performers.

The schedule, however, is noticeably lighter than last season, with only 18 scheduled acts instead of 23. That's two fewer Broadway series titles and three fewer shows in the Visiting Artists series.

"The economy has been pretty rough," said Robert Vaughn, the director of Sangamon Auditorium.

Then there was the parting of ways with Theatre Council Productions, which had presented the Broadway series at Sangamon Auditorium for the past several years. This season, Theatre Council will present a competing slate of shows at the Prairie Capital Convention Center, leaving (or freeing, depending on one's perspective) Sangamon Auditorium to present its own series.

That includes three performances of "A Chorus Line," celebrating its 35th anniversary; "Spring Awakening," the 2007 Tony Award winner; "Legally Blonde the Musical"; and "Mamma Mia!"

This season will also see the return of writer David Sedaris, who first rose to prominence on the public radio program "This American Life." It's the third public radio personality at Sangamon Auditorium in as many years — "This American Life" host Ira Glass appeared two seasons ago and "A Prairie Home Companion" host Garrison Keillor appeared earlier this year.

Vaughn said the attendance for Keillor's show was below expectations, which he blamed in part on the fact that it had to be rescheduled after Keillor suffered a "minor stroke" and was temporarily barred from travel by his doctors.

Last season's schedule had a few other disappointments, including former Beach Boy Brian Wilson's solo concert.

"Boy, what a nice concert. I'm sorry nobody came," Vaughn said.

"People had had some bad experiences with Beach Boys out at the fair and thought they were arrogant and so forth. Other people didn't even probably know that he was connected with the Beach Boys," Vaughn said, calling the show an "object lesson."

Another disappointing show from a numbers standpoint was the concert by the British chamber music ensemble Academy of St. Martin in the Fields.

But it was heartening to hear Vaughn say, in essence, that the numbers are not necessarily the most important factor in evaluating the success of such performances: "Area audiences deserve the chance to see that kind of thing — without having to go to Chicago — from time to time."

An act that might fall into that category in the upcoming season is the Paul Taylor Dance Company. It'll be the first contemporary American dance company booked into the auditorium since Hubbard Street Dance Chicago performed during the 2008-09 season, and Taylor is a welcome addition to the calendar.

If that kind of "good for you" show is at one end of the performance spectrum, pop tribute acts such as last season's "Rain: The Beatles Experience" are at the other. Vaughn said the show did surprisingly well, considering it was here for the second straight season.

"The tribute bands now that are out there, there's some spectacular ones," he said. "If you want any kind of a live performance that resembles something of the day, it has to be a tribute band, because a lot of these guys can't play or sing the same material."

Nevertheless, there's still something magical about seeing an original artist perform his songs, even if — like Brian Wilson — his voice is no longer what it once was. And this year, Sangamon Auditorium will have several original artists, including Chicago bluesman Buddy Guy.

Vaughn said this is Guy's first Springfield performance, even though he's based just three hours up the road.

"I don't know very many blues guitarists that can touch what he's doing," Vaughn said. "I like B.B. King, but to sit and watch a blues artist perform, I'd much rather watch Buddy."

The last time Vaughn saw Guy, the musician was venturing out into the audience during his set, allowing patrons to strum his guitar while he played the frets.

"He did a spectacular survey set and also did tributes to Jimi Hendrix and some of the more modern players as well," Vaughn said.

Among the other musical acts playing here this season are folk legends Arlo Guthrie and the surviving members of Peter, Paul and Mary (Peter Yarrow and Noel Paul Stookey).

Call it a baby boomer nostalgia tour — it's a phrase Vaughn doesn't shy away from.

"There are, of course, a lot of baby boomers," Vaughn said. "Baby boomers have been kind of starved out here for a number of years in the concert fare. They were hungry for it."

He got his first inkling of that a few years ago when Alice Cooper and Jethro Tull did a brisk business among, in Vaughn's words,

"folks with gray hair."

And it doesn't hurt that many boomers, approaching retirement age, have a fair amount of disposable income.

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