Here's to the next 50

UCSB Arts & Lectures celebrates a milestone of an anniversary

By Ted Mills

A name you can trust has become, in these economic times, a bit of an ironic slogan for most businesses and organizations, but for UCSB’s Arts & Lectures, it’s well-earned.

The word “trust” peppers an interview with Celeste Billeci, who in her ninth year as director at A&L finds herself presiding over the organization’s 50th anniversary season.

One can count on the appearance of a David Sedaris or a Phillip Glass, but where trust comes into the picture is right there in the season lineup. Sure, there’s some performers, companies and authors foreign to the masses. But trust us, A&L says, buy a ticket.

"Whether it’s marriage or business, 20 years is a milestone," says Billeci. "It takes a lot to get there."

As one of only three directors to wield the A&L baton, Billeci jumped right into the middle of things in her first year and has gone on to produce seasonal lineups that similarly sized universities can’t match. A quick skim through the list — Yo-Yo Ma, Suzanne Vega, Ravi Shankar, John Leguizamo (and that’s just the fall quarter) — and the mix of favorites and Santa Barbara debut performers is apparent.

But back to the birth of Arts & Lectures, formed just after UCSB became an official campus in the UC system, when the organization was called the Committee on Arts and Lectures. Committee in name and nature, chaired by Professor of English Homer Swander and staffed by other arts instructors, the first year’s modest pamphlet included a lineup of classical musicians lost to time and fame, along with lecturers of which only Aldous Huxley (who gave eight lectures that would go on to form his book “The Human Situation”) stands out. It was a good-for-you, high-brow arts education.

It was also 1969 and the night of dancing in the aisles (and onstage) were on the horizon. When the staff realized that they needed professional organization, the first director, Pam Armstrong, was brought on and Arts & Lectures as we now know it was born.

"People have said to me, ‘I can’t imagine living in Santa Barbara without (Arts & Lectures),’ " says Billeci. "It makes you feel so appreciated, but with it comes a great level of responsibility... We have to raise the bar higher and higher every year."

So here are the coups in the schedule, as we see it:

Merle Haggard (Oct. 1). A&L has not been known for its forays into country music, but Haggard transcends those labels as much as fellow highwaymen Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash. A&L does reassurances well, and this is certainly one of them.

Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (Oct. 6) and DVS Physical Theatre (Nov. 18 to 20). Billeci comes from a background in dance and calls the latter company her favorite. Both push boundaries in contemporary dance, and the London-based DWV has been on the wish list for some time. That’s followed in the winter season with Morphoses/The Wheeldon Company (Jan. 29), choreographer Christopher Wheeldon’s latest venture.

In the “just trust us” department, the Carolina Chocolate Drops (Nov. 6) is a young African-American string band with fiddle and banjo in tow. "You’ll be sorry if you miss this event," Billeci says, adding that a quick YouTube search will give you all you need to know.

Billeci notes that A&L gave a young Yo-Yo Ma one of his earliest performance spots, when nobody knew his name and the cellist was in his early 20’s. (He returns Dec. 7, by the way.) Tickets were $5 back then. And now Billeci is forecasting the same things for Yuja Wang, the pianist who has floored the critics with her recent recitals and CD release. Wang played here two months ago at a small concert at Hahn Hall and stunned the audience. Her April 23 performance will be much larger. "She’s going to be a superstar, I can tell you without a doubt."

Other highlights include Wynon Marsealis (Sept. 27), Alme Mann (Oct. 2), Ravi and Anoushka Shankar (Nov. 1), They Might Be Giants (Nov. 15), Suzanne Vega (Feb. 18), Rashid Maal (Apr. 18) and Patti LuPone (May 13).

Although the full schedule has gone to press, Billeci notes that the show is not over.

"We will make more announcements in August," she says. "It’s an alive and vibrant program, and we add things every three months."

Noting that she’s already busy at work thinking about the next 50 years of Arts & Lectures, she does have one thing on her wish list. A bigger on-campus location.

Campbell Hall, as much a fixture as it is, holds 600, and there’s 20,000 students on campus. Which means selling out even the largest downtown locations, the students will prefer when the events are close to home.

"I like to see the people from Montecito sitting next to the students," she says. "That’s a good mix."

For the full schedule (so far) of Arts & Lectures 2009-2010 season, go to www.artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu.