

# A Curtain Rises *Across America*

by Michael Goia

NY1's venerable theatre program *On Stage* celebrates 15 years on the air and spreads the love of theatre to the rest of the country with a brand new program



Scenes from *On Stage*: Frank DiLella, co-host of *On Stage Across America*, at the 2013 Tony Awards with newly crowned Best Actor in a Musical winner Billy Porter from *Kinky Boots*; on set with the Tony-nominated stars of *Motown*, Charl Brown and Valisia LeKae; catching up with five-time Tony Award winner Audra McDonald; and with *Grace* star Paul Rudd at a recent Broadway function for Our Time.

For over 15 years Time Warner Cable news channel NY1 has taken the camera behind the curtain to bring theatrical news to the forefront with their popular program *On Stage*—offering a glimpse into Broadway rehearsals and covering high-profile theatre events and opening nights. Now Time Warner Cable is taking the camera across the country as *On Stage* heads *Across America*.

"We're actually bringing the real stories that are happening behind the scenes, backstage, on Broadway, on the road, and in high schools across America to a national platform," says NY1 theatre reporter—and occasional *Playbill* contributor—Frank DiLella, who co-hosts the new monthly series alongside *Playbill* editor Blake Ross. "Truth be told, more arts programming is needed."

Arts programming takes center stage in *On Stage Across America*, where the show sets out to inform theatregoers about theatrical happenings across the nation because, as the team at TWC believes, "Broadway no longer applies to just New York City. Broadway is a national name." The new half-hour program will simultaneously bring Broadway to audiences across the country, while at the same time sharing theatrical successes from around the country with audiences in New York.

"Our goal is to try to [provide] coverage in areas that are undercover," adds Steve Paulus, senior vice president of news and local programming. Besides covering the current scene on and Off-Broadway, each episode will give viewers a taste of regional theatre—including productions that plan to transfer to the Great

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White Way, various world premieres, and pieces birthed at nationally recognized arts festivals—plus a look at youth-driven amateur productions commanding the spotlight of attention.

"There are some incredible high school theatre programs that are part of our fabric that is the United States of America," says DiLella, who visited the Rochester School of the Arts in the first episode. It featured the school's production of the Tony Award-winning musical *Avenue Q*, in which, during a state of panic where the musical's puppets were unavailable to be licensed, the show's leading player, Ben Northrup, took the reigns to handcraft the furry creatures that populate *Avenue Q*.

"There are so many small stories that keep unfolding across the country that we can [travel] to and place on the air that just are very interesting [and show] how things come to fruition," says Tom Farkas, the director of local programming for TWC. Throughout the school year, *Across America* co-hosts DiLella and Ross will search out productions across the country, travel to the school, check in with the students, and assist the creative team in creating their own Virtual Internet Playbill, via PlaybillVIP.com.

"Over the years, Playbill has formed a wonderful relationship with *On Stage* and their flagship station NY1. When they asked us to help launch a national edition and give Playbill its first foray into TV, we said 'Where do we sign up?'" says Ross. "I especially love the idea of exploring regional stories that don't normally get national media attention. Amazing stuff is being produced outside of New York."

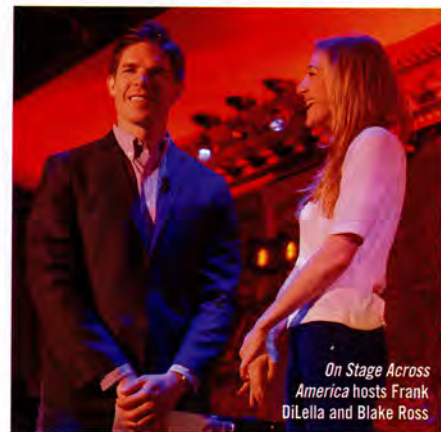
In *On Stage Across America*, DiLella adds, "We're focusing in on professionals who are celebrated and Tony winners here in New York and masters of their craft, but we're also turning a spotlight on folks who are up-and-comers, and their dream [is] to be on Broadway. [Being able to] put them both side by side [is] the beauty of this community. We're showing what can happen [for both] those who are successful and those who are coming up in the ranks and wanting to fulfill this dream—this dream of being on the stage and making a life and career out of being in the theatre."

This month's *Across America* sits down with *Glee* star and Tony-nominated actor Matthew Morrison; shares star interviews from Tony night; visits with *Jersey Boys* alumni The Midtown Men, currently touring the country; and follows kids from across the country who come to New York to compete for the High School National Theatre Awards.

Jeremy Bitz, vice president of local programming and new media for TWC, explains that *On Stage Across America* is available on a Video On Demand platform for subscribers as well as on TWC local channels in regions including Southern California, Maine, North Carolina, New York State, and Texas, among others.

Bitz hopes that *On Stage Across America* "generates more interest and more discussion and just continues to generate energy around what we're doing." Paulus adds, "Regional theatre, community theatre, and high school theatre [are] very vibrant [entities] in this country, and we're going to do a show about theatre in our regions."

DiLella, a red carpet fixture and familiar face in the theatre community, hopes to keep developing *On Stage Across America* and suggests that the "possibilities are endless." The beauty of the program, he says, is that "you can tune in, get your theatre news, [and] see what's happening [and] what's playing in your backyard. It's an outlet to learn about the theatre, to find out about the theatre, and to be educated about what theatre is and what it can be." ◆



*On Stage Across America* hosts Frank DiLella and Blake Ross