

INSIDE INTERVIEW:

AN ADDED EMPHASIS

**Speaking with Cruise Director Rich Clesen about
entertainment on Celebrity Constellation.**

by

Richard H. Wagner

Rich Clesen's career took a dramatic change in direction. After working for ten years at Citibank and doing stand-up comedy at night, Mr. Clesen found himself on an operating table having open heart surgery. "I thought do I want to be a banker anymore?" After taking a cruise, he decided that working on a cruise ship was what he wanted to do so he left banking and began knocking on the doors of various cruise lines.

At first, he was told that he was too old and that he was over-qualified. However, one line needed an emergency replacement for its entertainment staff and so Clesen agreed to take an entry level position. Two years later, he was a cruise director - - a position that he has held for 12 years with various cruise lines.

As the Cruise Director, Mr. Clesen is in charge of the entertainment onboard Celebrity Constellation.

This includes the daytime activities, the lectures, the children's program, the music and the shows. Although television shows such as "Love Boat" tend to leave guests with a contrary impression, "as the cruise director, I am not in charge of the food and I am not in charge of housekeeping."

Celebrity is placing an increased emphasis on entertainment. "Celebrity was always known for the food number one, the service number two and then the entertainment. What we are really trying to do is drive the entertainment."

When people think of cruise ship entertainment, the first thing that often comes to mind is the production shows in the ship's theater. In this area, Celebrity has been "hiring new production companies to come in with much bigger productions with mass appeal. The production companies put together the shows. They hire

the dancers, the singers. They rehearse on land and they bring them onboard. The [cast] gets about a cruise to learn the stage and get the costumes going. But they are paid onboard by Celebrity. "

"The next show on this cruise, 'Land of Make Believe,' is something I have never seen on a ship before. It is really excellent. It is not so much a revue; it has a nice story line."

In addition to changing the content of its production shows, Celebrity has been changing how they are scheduled. Traditionally, production shows on cruise ships were scheduled so that there would be two performances on a given night. The first performance was for people dining on the first seating and was scheduled to coincide with the time when the second seating was taking place in the dining room. Guests on the second seating could attend the performance that took place after the second seating finished dinner.

While Constellation still follows the traditional approach on some nights during a cruise, "we have been utilizing reverse shows - - having a show and a dinner instead of dinner and a show." Under this system, the first performance is for the second seating guests and takes place before those guests have dinner.

"If you are in the late seating, your night begins earlier. You go to a seven o'clock show; it is done by eight o'clock. You have half an hour for pre-dinner cocktails, maybe some dancing and then you go on to your dinner. And then [after dinner], your night will continue. "

"Our main seating guests have their dinners early. [After dinner, they can] go watch the [second performance of the] show and then [after that] they can still go and see another show or go dancing."

Under the reverse show approach, the shows are over relatively early in the evening. This allows the cruise director to schedule other shows and events for later in the evening. As a result, there is more entertainment without going too late into the night.

Celebrity has "come up with several new theme nights. One is called 'Sizzle' where we actually use our production cast - - the dancers have a choreographed



Cruise Director Rich Clesen

routine but it is to get the guests up dancing. They put on a little bit of a show and then they get everyone up. 'Live at Sky' is more of a show but it ends up getting everyone dancing. It's a great show - - when I first saw it I thought that it should be on the main stage." These interactive theme parties take place in the ship's nightclub lounge or weather permitting on the open decks.

Another late night entertainment event that capitalizes on the resurgence of interest in ballroom dancing is the ship's dance contest "Dancing with the Stripes" - - we have the guests teamed up with the officers [and we have] judges. It is a good time."

Going back to the future, the Entertainment Team works with the Food and Beverage Department

to put on a once-a-cruise Dessert Extravaganza. "It is sort of from the old days of the midnight buffets but at eleven o'clock. It is just so people can get the feeling of the ice carvings and desserts."

The two departments also work together to produce "other shows like 'Star Chef.' We have taken a regular cooking show and gotten the guests involved, putting it on the main stage."

The entertainment offerings are not limited to after the sun goes down. Particularly on sea days, the ship has to offer daytime activities to entertain the guests. These activities are designed with the type of person who cruises on a Celebrity ship in mind.

"We like to think that we get more of a sophisticated crowd, more experienced cruisers, who have seen a lot of the activities. So that is why we have done away with some things but have re-introduced them [in a form more tailored to a Celebrity guest]."

For example, "arts and crafts [meant] beaded bandannas on every cruise line I went on. Now we have hired a company to give us the scrapbooking 'Memories at Sea' - - all complimentary. [We are] just trying to enhance the product a little bit more. You go home with something that hopefully matches your experience here."

Along the same lines, the speakers who appear as part of the enrichment program are geared toward satisfying an intellectually demanding audience. "We have teamed up with the Smithsonian Journeys - - their speakers are unbelievable. [They are] not on every cruise - - usually the longer ones with a lot of sea days. I have never had one where the audience hasn't gone like 'wow.' They are really good at drawing you in and [they have] passion about what they are talking about."

"Last cruise, we had this lady who worked for the NASA Goddard [Institute for Space Studies] and truly she was a rocket scientist. She uses the Hubble Telescope on a weekly basis and was trying to explain how time stops. She would draw about 500 to 600 people for each of her lectures."

"Then we had two other gentlemen. One was more of a historian on Europe from 801 up to the 1400s. We had another gentleman who was a destination lecturer who talked about the ports that we are coming to, the histories and things that were under the ocean since we were doing a transatlantic."

"Usually for a Panama Canal cruise, we get an expert. We had one gentleman who actually worked in the Panama Canal. He was a scientist [studying] the rain forest. The audience was seething to see the Canal after he talked. He got everyone so excited about it. It really helps enhance a cruise."

In short, on Constellation "we are trying to do more."