

Community At Play

There's plenty of magic to be had in SVCT's production of *Narnia*

Gilroy Dispatch

Posted: Monday, March 20, 2006 12:00 am

By Jenn Van Gundy Staff Writer



Father Christmas (Randy Vidal) sings about Christmas returning to 'Narnia' during dress rehearsals.

Gilroy – South County 'Narnians' are ready for the reign of the White Witch to be over already. The snow and hail of the past weeks have created fitting conditions to be rehearsing a play where a White Witch has cast a spell over all the land so that it is "always winter and never Christmas."

Cast members of SVCT's "Narnia" have been rehearsing in a drafty warehouse in Gilroy where the chill of this unseasonably wintery spring has been all too readily felt.

"There was no heat, so it was really cold, everybody had on their big jackets," said Macy Hanson, who plays a Narnian fox in the production.

But producer Stephanie Woehrmann considers the weather just one more way in which bringing C.S. Lewis' story "the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" to the stage has been an altogether magical experience.



The White Witch (Sandi Lewandowski) sings during dress rehearsals for 'Narnia' at the Morgan Hill Playhouse.

"Having 120 kids audition, that was magical," she said. "We would have cast them all if we could."

In the end the cast was doubled to accommodate 60 kids within the confines of the Morgan Hill Playhouse. Woehrmann considers this cast one of the finest groups of children she has ever worked with.

"This is probably one of the best ... in terms of enthusiasm and positivity; they are so well behaved," she said.

After weeks of singing their hearts out and practicing chaotic battle scenes, the cast of "Narnia" is ready to bring the magical realm alive for audiences. The final week of rehearsals was just as much about bringing all the elements of the play together as it was about applying the finishing touches.

It's Wednesday night, just two more rehearsals to go, and things are more or less coming together. Mild chaos reigns as cast members grapple with costumes that need adjusting, makeup that smears, and impossibly quick transformations from one character to another.

Inside the theater, newly completed sets are in use and the audience is dotted with parents and children watching as Mr. Tumnus (played by Tyler Bushman) breaks down and confesses to Lucy that he has betrayed her to the White Witch.

In the hallway, costume designer Julie Tenner tightens a blue spiral unicorn horn onto a hood. Director Carol Harris orders a blackout from her seat seven rows back. Father Christmas scurries down the hall trailed by a skunk, a dog, and a hornless unicorn hauling a red sack of presents. And the White Witch barely makes it into her sleigh in time for her cue.

"I only have two pages of dialogue to go from Mrs. Macready to the White Witch," said Sandy Lewandowski, who plays the domineering Queen as well as the English housekeeper. "I pray they don't forget any lines. I need those two pages ... I barely made it."

As of Wednesday, Lewandowski was eagerly awaiting the finishing touch: a tall medieval crown with "branchy or antlerish" protrusions all around the top. The crown will add a few extra inches of menace to Lewandowski's petite frame.

"I'm already wearing three-inch heels," she laughed.



Mrs. Beaver (Nicole Kacir) sings as the beaver family gathers around her during dress rehearsals for 'Narnia.'

Where costumes are concerned there's plenty to get adjusted to both literally and figuratively. With a large majority of the cast portraying creatures of some sort, the costumes tend to be heavy, hot, and hairy.

And if anyone had a right to whine it's the lion. Creating a lion's head costume posed a very real challenge for Tenner: the costume had to enlarge the actor's head as well as sport a majestic, detachable mane for the scene where he is shaved.

"It's big and it can be a little hot inside, but it's all part of the fun of the play," said Jay Hanson, who plays Aslan.



Inside his cave, Mr. Tumnus (Tyler Bushman) sings to Lucy (Maddie Hanson) about 'Narnia.'

The Challenges

Opinions abound concerning the most challenging aspect of pulling together the play and they vary mainly by way of perspective.

On an individual level actors point to the challenges of characterization.

For Lewandowski playing an evil character was a swift departure from her real life nurturing role as a kindergarten teacher, and therein lay the challenge. "I had to find that balance ... just mean enough."

For once Aslan and the White Witch agree: balance is key whether you are portraying good or evil.

"It was a challenge to get the right amount of dignity since (that is) such an important part of the play but (Aslan) has a certain playfulness and warmth to him as well," said Hanson.

For third grader Maddie Hanson, who plays a charming Lucy, the tough part was the responsibility of being a main character.

"It's kind of hard remembering all your lines," she said.

Matt Alpert had a particularly difficult task in portraying the character whose transformation ties the story together: Edmund.

"The hardest thing was how (Edmund) changes from a spoiled brat to a good kid and I have to play (both) the brat and the good kid," he said.

"The acting and reacting are always the hardest part for everybody, whether they admit it or not," said Jessica Roberts, 12, who plays a cruelie.

Woehrmann and Harris agree, especially by virtue of the fact that the cast is young and in a lot of cases, inexperienced.

"The most difficult thing for the group in general was getting the kids to react ... we had a lot of first-timers," said Harris.

But in working with children it's never about perfection.

"Children are their own characters," Woehrmann noted. "Every little thing doesn't have to be perfect. ... I love their spirit, that's what's charming."

The rather unwieldy size of the cast proved to be another big challenge; the actors work in very close quarters with one another on the small stage, especially in the battle scenes.

"To be on one stage with 60-something people yelling and screaming and waving their swords or weapons it's very cramped, that's why it's so difficult," said Alpert.



Chelsea Burns tempts Edmund (Matt Alpert) with Turkish Delights during rehearsals for South Valley Civic Theater's 'Narnia.'

The Real Magic

Perhaps the real magic of the production is that it is all accomplished thanks to the tireless efforts of a dedicated host of volunteers that support the nonprofit organization.

"The actors get the glory but it's the behind-the-scenes volunteers that really make it," said Becky Kaiser, who is heavily involved in the production.

An array of family connections in the cast also add an extra dose of magic. Whole families have turned out to support the production, assisting in a variety of capacities. Hanson stars in the play with his three daughters in tow and his wife helping with props and their family is just one of many that have chosen to make group contributions to the show.

"It's cool because our whole family can be there, it's not like staying away from family (by being at rehearsal)," said Cali Hanson, who plays a leopard.

The commitment is intense, but no one seems to mind. The magic of bringing a play to life overshadows every sacrifice whether it be doing homework into all hours of the night or getting up for work the next day. By being the lion lord of "Narnia" by night, Cisco systems accountant and father of three by day, no one disputes that actor Jay Hanson certainly has had his paws full.

"You have some very tired nights and some even more tired mornings, but it's a lot of fun," said Hanson.

Favorite moments in the show abound for cast members, from the scene where Aslan brings the statues back to life to the song "Deep Magic" where Aslan and the White Witch negotiate for Edmund's life. But for Harris the best part is always opening night: "when the actors realize why they've worked so hard and they feel the surge of that gratifying feeling of 'Wow, I did it,'" she said. "That's so exciting. The kids have worked really hard, they really have."

Narnia

- When: Friday and Saturday nights at 8pm through April 8. Saturday matinees will be held at 2pm March 25 and April 1.
- Where: Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, Fifth and Monterey streets
- Tickets: \$15 for adults and \$12 for students/seniors. For sale at Gilroy Visitor's Bureau, Morgan Hill Community & Cultural Center, Booksmart.
- Info: 842-SHOW or www.svct.org

'Narnia' Showcases Youth

Special to The Dispatch

Posted: Thursday, March 30, 2006 12:00 am |

Ten-year-old guitar prodigy Zachary Allen warmed up the crowd Saturday night at the Morgan Hill Playhouse prior to the curtain opening on South Valley Civic Theatre's production of "Narnia." The young musician strummed both acoustic and electric guitars, playing a remarkable rendition of "Johnny Be Good" as well as various Beatles selections.

While not his biggest gig (he has played several times on the Greg Khin Show), the hometown crowd rocked in their seats and smiled as they said, "Someday we can say, 'we saw him when ...' He's going to be famous one day!"

Zach has the talent to be a modern-day Mozart with the 20th century twist of electricity (in the amp and in the showmanship). Other talented performers won lead roles in the play, including Matt Alpert as the C.S. Lewis and Judas-inspired character, Edmund. Matt's vocal performance as well as his inspired acting guarantees South County will be seeing more of him in leading roles.

Cruelie (part of the White Witch's army) Natalie Portera as Fenris Ulf wins kudos for the best animal vocalization with a consistent wolf-like howling. Your mother says you have it down perfect, so there's no need to practice at home. Kudos also to the director of Narnia, the multi-talented Carol Harris, who saw the benefit of casting so many eager children in such a worthy community project.