

City of Angels brings film noir musical to MH Playhouse



Aaron Weisberg, right and Bruce Pember. The concluding show dates are at 8 p.m. June 13 and 14. For information, visit www.svct.org. Photo by Marty Cheek

Play includes 40 set changes and more than 50 characters, with all actors playing at least two parts

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By Staff Report

Hurry and get your tickets for the closing weekend of the South Valley Civic Theater's production of the musical comedy *City of Angels*, a homage to the 1940s film noir genre of motion pictures which has been wowing audiences at the Morgan Hill Playhouse since it opened May 23.

The Broadway hit is a performance weaving the story of the "real" world of novelist Stine (played by Morgan Hill's Rob Christopher) trying to convert his detective book into a screenplay with the "reel" world story of the fictional film.

Every theater season, the SVCT does five shows — a teen show, children's show and three main stage productions.

"When we do the main stage, there's usually one show that's a little different, a little more challenging and less known, and that's what *City of Angels* is for us this year," said producer Peter Mandel. "Last year it was Putnam County Spelling Bee, which was a little unusual. *City of Angels* is not done all that often, even though the music is incredible and it's a very funny play."

One reason that it's rarely performed by local theatrical companies is because the show is a complicated play with 40 set changes and more than 50 characters, with every actor playing at least two different parts."

Because of the complexity of the scene changes, the set for *City of Angels* was built on a turn-table stage so that the next scene can be put together in the backstage area as the performance takes place at the front of the stage, Mandel said.

Lighting the stage also came with its share of complexity as the lighting had to switch between the color of the real world and the black and white of the "reel" world of the story's film.

"It's a fun time out. It's an adult-themed show. It's a 1940s film noir murder detective kind of story and a story about the screenplay writer is writing that movie and the challenges he's having with the producer and director of the movie," Mandel said. "It's got jazz music so it's a different type of score than many musicals in that it's modern sounding. It's got an amazing voice in the cast who are from all over the Bay Area who came down to do the show. There's a lot of people performing whom the local audience have never seen before."

Among them is Aaron Weisberg, a Sunnyvale resident who plays the hard-boiled detective Stone in the movie story of the play. Weisberg describes him as a "little bit of Mitchum and Bogart all in one" character.

"This is one of my favorite musicals," Weisberg said. "It's got a great jazzy score and really intelligent writing both with the lyrics and the book. It's very smart."

When he was in high school, Weisberg heard the musical big show-stopping number “You’re Nothing Without Me” that Stine and Stone sing at the end of Act I and was impressed by the emotions of the song. That song got him interested in City of Angels.

“As I started getting more into theater, I saw a recording of a show that they worked on in L.A.,” he said. “When they did it there and I thought, ‘I love this show.’ So I got to know about the music. I did the show once nine years ago playing a different role and had a blast doing it. When this came around in Morgan Hill, I thought, ‘Hey they’re doing City of Angels, let’s go for it.’”

This is the first play that Weisberg has done with SVCT and he finds the local group welcoming of actors from outside Morgan Hill.

“People here are really nice and they want to give their all to make the show as good as it possibly can be,” he said.

Christopher said that the cast and crew really focuses on the details of the set and the costumes to add to the entertainment value of the play.

“The cast put in hundreds of hours building the sets so that it would play better and be faster with a turn table set so that it would move faster,” he said. “The orchestra is behind us so that the blend and mix of sound coming out to the audience is better. It wasn’t an easy thing to do but the director and producer all put it together.”



Mary Beth Anderson, Joyce Bedard, Cindy Powell, and Patrice Lyn. Photo by Marty Cheek

SVCT's 'City of Angels': A play within a play

Lora Schraft/Chief Photographer

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Camille Bounds



Members of the cast of City of Angels perform during a dress rehearsal for the South Valley Civic Theater production.





Rob Christopher, playing the role of Stine, Suzanne Guzzetta, playing the role of Gabby, and Aaron Weisberg, playing the role of Stone, perform during dress rehearsals for the South Valley Civic Theater production of *City of Angels*.

Go back to the 1940s when Hollywood was churning out movies and script writers were used up and spit out like stale chewing gum. (A typical line from that era.) Here we have the time frame and plot for “*City of Angels*.” Producer Peter Mandel brings this inventive and complicated musical to Morgan Hill’s South Valley Civic Theater.

Larry Gelbart, who gave us the TV series “*Mash*” and the screen play for “*Tootsie*,” wrote this Tony award-winning book with music by Cy Colman that debuted on Broadway in 1990.

It is an intricate plot, which enters the caverns of the mind of New York novelist Stine (well-played and sung by Rob Christopher), hired as a Hollywood script writer. This is a detective story, murder mystery and movie being produced within a play. You can feel the flavor and dialogue of Mickey Spillane and Raymond Chandler in the black and white segments of this film-noire.

The real characters appear in Stein’s pressurized world in color, while the counterparts of his life appear as characters of his imagination—in black, white and gray—as he writes about them. The staging is tricky and it moves very fast. There are more than 40 characters and the audience must pay attention or the plots can become confusing. The most engaging element of the production is when Stine decides to rewrite a scene by tapping on his typewriter to change his copy—the characters reverse their action and words as if in a rewind mode.

The sets are original and retain attention. They change with a quick staccato momentum and fit the mood. There are about 40 scenes in this show—at least double the number for the average production. Director Myra Kaelin moves the cast and crew with a strong, controlling hand. Cindy Powell as the other woman, the loyal, but taken for granted secretary, plays the role with believable resignation and delivers “*You Can Count On Me*” in the second act, and it’s one of the most entertaining numbers of the show.



From left, Elizabeth Calisi, playing the role of Alaura Kingsley, Bud Biafore, playing the role of Luther Kingsley, and Aaron Weisberg, playing the role of Stone, perform during dress rehearsals for the South Valley Civic Theater production of City of Angels.



Rob Christopher, playing the role of Stine, performs with Suzanne Guzzetta, playing the role of Gabby, during dress rehearsals for the South Valley Civic Theater production of *City of Angels*.

Aaron Weisberg, as Stone, handles one of the most difficult sustaining roles in the production and comes through with warmth and humor.

The Angel City Four—Rachel Abbey, Roberta Vinkhuyzen, Sven Schutz and Michael Carey—belt out a jazzy type of harmony that is pleasant to the ear and brings in some smooth scene transitions. The cast is energetic and deliver Cy Coleman's music with first-rate voices.

"*City of Angels*" isn't the run of the mill, happy go-lucky musical. You won't leave the theater humming any of the songs or remember any glitzy production numbers, but you will think about it and realize that it was a very different and special experience.



Kel Whisner, playing the role of Jimmy Powers, performs during dress rehearsals for the South Valley Civic Theater production of City of Angels.

‘City of Angels’

Through: June 14

Running time: Two hours and 45 minutes.

Tickets: \$18 - \$22

Details: (408) 842-7469 or visit SVCT.org.



Rob Christopher, playing the role of Stine, performs with John Reed, playing the role of Buddy Fidler, during dress rehearsals for the South Valley Civic Theater production of City of Angels.



Rob Christopher, playing the role of Stine, performs with Cindy Powell, playing the role of Donna, during dress rehearsals for the South Valley Civic Theater production of *City of Angels*.