

Nonprofit profile: SVCT's 'The Producers' proves theater group likes to take risks

Nonprofit began in 1969 as Gilroy Community Theatre

Published in the July 8-21, 2015 issue of Morgan Hill Life

By Marty Cheek



Photo by Marty Cheek

"The Producers" directors watch during a rehearsal South Valley Civic Theatre actor Steven Zbin (as "Leo Bloom") jump on the couch as he and Peter Mandel (as "Max Bialystock") practice a scene.

As the South Valley Civic Theatre launches its musical comedy "The Producers" at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse Friday July 10, no doubt the founders of the South Valley's longest running theatrical group would be impressed by how far the nonprofit has come in entertaining audiences for nearly half a century.

Bringing to a close the 2014-2015 theatrical season, "The Producers" is Mel Brooks' masterpiece comedy about a down-on-his-luck Broadway show producer named Max Bialystock who meets a mousy accountant named Leo Bloom and together they come up with a scheme to con elderly women into investing their life savings in a sure-fire flop of a musical called "Springtime for Hitler."

"I think we have gotten a little bit more outside of the box when it comes to our productions," said "The Producers" real producer Robin Bezanson. "We're choosing more contemporary pieces as well as the classics ... 'The Producers,' is definitely not on the conservative side of theater. We have a risqué story.

But I think we're drawing audiences who understand that our group is not just doing the classics but also broadening our base and exploring new avenues which are bringing new audiences of people who love theater."

SVCT was initially called Gilroy Community Theatre when it was founded in 1969 by Gilroy residents Al and Frances "Pinky" Bloom and a group of dedicated volunteers. Its first show was Neil Simon's "Come Blow Your Horn" performed at Gavilan College in September of that year.

In time, the nonprofit group changed its name to reflect that it represents the entire South Valley region for community theater performances. Over the decades, SVCT shows have been held in diverse locations including Gilroy High School, San Benito High School, Live Oak High School, the Old Gilroy Hotel, the Pumpkin Patch in San Martin, Gavilan College Theatre, and even Morgan Hill's Rosso's Furniture store. Rehearsal space has ranged from the warehouse of a Gilroy paint store to the community room in a Morgan Hill mobile home park. In 2001, SVCT partnered with the city to have a 1920s church on the Morgan Hill Community and Cultural Center site moved to the corner of Monterey Road and Fifth Street and refurbished as a modern playhouse. The 186-seat Morgan Hill Community Playhouse became the permanent home to SVCT, which opened its first show there with "Lend Me A Tenor" in February 2003.

Each annual season features five productions. They include a large musical with an all-age cast, a smaller or more modern or less well-known musical, a teen musical, a children's musical, and a non-musical comedy or drama. SVCT's play selection committee seeks each season to create a balance of classic and contemporary theater that showcases the talents of the region. The volunteer performers often come from Morgan Hill, Gilroy, San Martin, south San Jose and Hollister. Some have come from as far away as Hayward and Santa Cruz.

Many of the people who try out for plays have never acted on stage before, but they soon fall in love with the limelight as they learn to get into character, sing and dance, Bezanson said.



Photo by Marty Cheek

South Valley Civic Theatre performers, from left, Rebecca Little, Steven Zbin, Jamie Gussman, Hayleelynn Merrill, and Nikki Cendreda rehearse a dance number for the theater group's upcoming musical comedy show "The Producers."

“I think we’re a very accepting group of people and we do have the regulars who are in almost every show or at least one show a year,” she said. “But when someone who is new to South Valley Civic Theatre walks in, we’re very encouraging. We really get excited about new talent coming in. And I think as a whole it’s helped our theater group grow because we get new people coming to us with new ideas. It’s been neat to see those people come in who are new to theater learning a little bit more about how we do things, which is sometimes a bit different compared to other theater groups.”

Bezanson described how she had a chat with one of the actresses in “The Producers” recently who was at first apprehensive about getting into a SVCT production. “She loved it and wants to come back and do other shows because she had such a great experience,” she said. “That’s one of the things that’s unique about SVCT — we’re so embracing and accepting in every which way, and I think that’s why people return back to the theater here.”

Bezanson got involved in SVCT when her two children, Chris and Hannah, auditioned for roles in a children’s shows about six years ago. Both of them now have each performed in about a dozen productions. SVCT has grown its children’s show program since moving to The Community Playhouse, and seeks to open a world of stage camaraderie to young people. The children not only learn self-confidence by singing, dancing and acting on stage in front of an audience, they learn the responsibility of commitment in working with other people to create a performance.

“A show is about being dependent on each other,” Bezanson said. “If you don’t make your cue, that impacts someone else’s cue and their part. So it becomes about accountability and learning responsibility and how to work with one another in sometimes stressful circumstances. We do have a lot of children in our cast for our children’s programs who maybe are special needs or maybe are shy – and it’s amazing to see how much they grow.”

Like Bezanson, Greg Colbert got involved in SVCT through the children’s show program. His daughter Melinda was cast as a monkey in “The Jungle Book Kids.”

Colbert had never been involved in community theater performances before, but he quickly saw the value of it for young people and how SVCT is “the pride of Morgan Hill in terms of performing arts.” He now serves as the president of the SVCT’s board of directors.

“It’s always been a company that really strives to provide a venue or platform for our youth of the area,” he said. “As you know, a lot of schools are cutting back on their theater arts programs, so there really isn’t as much opportunity to perform in school any more. So this is an opportunity for kids to continue to pursue the theater.”

In recent years, SVCT has repositioned itself to choose not just popular plays but plays that can challenge the performers and the audience alike, he said.

“We’re trying to find shows that are a little bit of a stretch and not necessarily the same shows that everyone else is doing,” Colbert said. “We’re trying to find something that’s a little bit outside of the box or a show that was popular but that we haven’t done for a while. This year ‘The Producers’ was a little bit outside of the box. This will be a big musical that will draw some very nice-sized crowds. We’re always looking for something new or fresh that will draw or expand our audience.”

Blessed with a resident location to stage its shows for the past dozen years, SVCT volunteers have also spent much of their time and energy to enhance the quality of the shows. Much of this also has to do with the group’s rising reputation in the Bay Area’s theatrical community, helping it to raise the bar in the level of its talent by drawing trained actors and performers to auditions.

The SVCT's reputation for high quality performances has encouraged many local residents to purchase tickets – or become season ticket members — for shows instead of traveling to San Jose, Palo Alto or San Francisco for theatrical entertainment, Colbert said. The benefit is that they don't have to deal with a long drive and the challenge of parking — and instead they can spend their time and money enjoying one of downtown Morgan Hill's many fine restaurants prior to the curtain opening, he said.



Photo by Marty Cheek

SVCT cast members work out the steps of the dance number “Make It Gay” on the stage of the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse during a rehearsal for the upcoming show “The Producers.”

Colbert encourages everyone who might be interested in exploring the world of dramatic or musical theater to find a way to participate as a crew member or by auditioning for a play. The best way to connect with SVCT is to send them an email by going to the contacts page through the website www.svct.org and request to get put on the group's audition announcement list, he said.

“So then when audition calls go out for various shows — such as a children's show or a teen show or a musical or drama — they can go to our website and see more details on the audition process — the materials they need to bring and so forth,” he said. “It's an open audition so we don't pre-cast people for a certain role. All roles are open. We try to include as many people as we can.”

Gilroy Dispatch: Dedicated thespians, patrons keep theater vibrant

Posted: Monday, July 20, 2015 9:36 am

Valerie L. Valdez Contributor | Photos by Robert Eliason

What motivates groups of people to spend their free time memorizing lines and building sets and rehearsing for hours—for no pay?

“It’s for the love of theater,” said Scott Lynch, a board member, producer and vice president of publicity for the South Valley Civic Theater.

That love is shared by others at the Limelight Actors Theater and the newly restructured Odyssey Theater Company. Maybe it’s something in the air, water or the wine, but the pulse of these dedicated thespians beats steady as local productions continue to attract larger crowds each season. The grand dame of local theater, South Valley Civic Theater started in 1969 as the Gilroy Community Theater. Lynch credits a unique formula as the key to the theater’s success.

“We produce five shows—one for children, one for teens and

one family show and then two adult shows—so we attract all ages,” Lynch said.

The other driving force, according to Lynch, is the active and demanding theater board that pushes the envelope for more progressive, challenging plays ... such as the 2014 production of “Proof,” which is about mental illness. Besides his publicity work, Lynch is also producing the provocative Mel Brook’s comedy musical, “The Producers” running through Aug 8. The show fits into the theater’s philosophy of service.

“We are a service to the community because our shows appeal to very different crowds, and South Valley continues to gain a reputation based on the quality of our shows,” Lynch said.











Theater with a twist is a great way to describe the Limelight Actors Theater in Gilroy, the brainchild of Kevin Heath, owner, founder and artistic director. He opened the theater in 2011 in collaboration with the Gilroy Arts Alliance. According to Heath, the “twist” is that the theater produces a variety of high quality shows for patrons and challenging roles for actors. Housed at the Gilroy Center for the Arts, Limelight is a small cabaret-style theater where patrons are welcome to bring their own dinner and wine. In fact, Limelight was the first theater south of San Jose to offer wine to patrons, Heath said. But besides the vino, Limelight filled a niche that wasn’t represented in the area.

“We do multiple genres including comedy, drama and dramedy, cabaret musicals and more,” Heath said. “Even the comedies attract crowds looking for something a little deeper and meatier.”

Along with the variety of shows, Heath said an abundance of talented performers play a huge part in keeping the theater scene vibrant.

“There is so much talent that fits perfectly with each type of theater calling the area home,” he said. “Some of us draw talent from San Jose and the coast, based on our reputation and commitment to doing good theater.”

Odyssey Theatre Company is currently readying its first “Shakespeare Under the Stars” production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at the amphitheater at Christopher High School

The production is a 20-year dream come true for Jim McCann, Odyssey’s board chairman, and Dr. Kate Booth, artistic director.

“This is the kind of show we want

to present to the local communities, so they don’t have to travel elsewhere,” McCann said.

The classic tale of love, mischief and magic features a cast of about 15, including actors from Morgan Hill, Gilroy, Hollister and Carmel. To McCann’s knowledge, the amphitheater has never been used for a theatrical production.

“It has great acoustics, sightlines and can seat about 300-people,” he said.

Newly restructured and incorporated as a nonprofit regional theater in 2014, Odyssey has an almost 15-year history of providing quality theatrical productions in Gilroy. It began in 1996 with its first outdoor production of “Romeo and Juliet” in Christmas Hill Park.

McCann said the company will focus on Shakespeare and the classics in summer productions with several smaller productions throughout the year. Future plans call for an annual new play festival and a show performed in a local winery. But those plans will take money and support. “We’ve taken the steps necessary to get the Shakespeare project going, but we could really use the help and support of others in the community who would like to get in on the ground floor of this adventure,” McCann said.

Other community theater groups in the area include Pintello Comedy Theater, which presents shows at the Grange Hall in Gilroy, and STAR Arts Education, which hosts a summer theater camp for kids.

After performing on Broadway and traveling the world, theater columnist Camille Bounds knows good theater when she sees it. She credits theater arts lovers for delivering the shows in the South Valley.

“Dedicated people who love the theater will produce, direct and act in these local productions mostly as volunteers,” Bounds said. “For the most part, they are entertaining and enjoyable and you can often get super productions.”

Gilroy Dispatch

SVCT's 'The Producers' most wildly outrageous

Posted: Monday, July 20, 2015 10:39 am

by Camille Bounds

The long awaited Mel Brooks zany, over the top, wonderfully tasteless comedy "The Producers" has arrived at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse courtesy of the South Valley Civic Theater. This is the most irreverent tribute to musical theatre ever produced. Just when you think it can't get any more outrageous ... it gets more outrageous. It hits on every race, creed, ethnic group and gender and no one is left out. You find yourself laughing hysterically at material you would never consider laughing at or even thinking about.

This production on Broadway broke records by winning 12 Tony Awards in just about every category offered.

Based on the original 1968 Brooks movie starring Zero Mostel and Gene Hackman, "The Producers" must be made up of all the censored outtakes Brooks couldn't use in the movie. Somehow it works.

From Myra Kaelin's fast moving direction and Jyovonne Montosa's wild choreography, this show moves at an amazing pace. With a backup group of Nazi cooing pigeons to little old ladies tap dancing with walkers and stealing the show, the shtick never stops until the final curtain.

The Max Bialystock role (Peter Mandel) is demanding and physical. He is in just about every scene and gives the part a grating edge and energy.

Steven Zbin gives the Bloom role a bump in the right direction and gives the mousy bookkeeper trying to turn producer a heads up with good timing.

Bialystock and Bloom decide to produce a flop so they won't have to pay off backers—little old ladies whom Bialystock woos out of their life savings. They find "Springtime for Hitler," the most offensive play possible, and hire the worst director possible played by Chris Sousa. He plays the drag queen director Roger De Bris to its campy hilt. Blake Dieda comes across as his assistant, and Carmen Ghia with the persistence of a runaway train turned gay.

Krista Warner makes Ulla hers alone. She is the Swedish, extremely well built sexy blonde secretary. Chris Goller as Franz Liebkind the German playwright and pigeon keeper delivers some of the best scenes.

The "Springtime for Hitler" extravaganza production number gathers every piece of politically incorrect camp that can be found and unabashedly flings it at you with glittered swastika armbands, showgirls in costumes decorated with everything from beer steins, pretzels and wieners to a take off of Judy Garland. Nothing is left out that will insult or make for cringing, but somehow, as I said, it works. This is one of the most outrageously entertaining musical numbers that is completely off the wall.

"The Producers" is a hoot. Musical Director Carol Harris keeps everyone on cue with her reliable conducting. The show is guaranteed to make you laugh.

By the way, this is definitely an adult friendly show. Don't bring the kids.