

# SVCT opens 2016-'17 season with Disney's 'The Little Mermaid Jr.' musical

Play performed by 46 children and teens from Gilroy and Morgan Hill

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By Staff Report



Catherine Drayton, as Scuttle, and Emily Pember, as Ariel, perform during dress rehearsals prior to "The Little Mermaid Jr." opening. Photo by Jason Leong



Emily Pember as Ariel "swims" during rehearsal. Photo by Jason Leong

At a dress rehearsal last week, Emily Pember said she felt excited starring as the lead character Ariel in South Valley Civic Theatre's production of "The Little Mermaid," which opened Sept. 30 for a four weekend run. The role involves putting on a flying harness and soaring with other actors across the stage as they simulate swimming in Neptune's kingdom.

"It's my first time being in a sweet role. I get to try something new and, of course, I'm a Disney princess," said the Live Oak High School freshman. "It's really fun. While

you're performing or singing, you don't really notice that you're in the air, so it's not very nerve-racking. And it's cool that you get to say that you've gotten to fly as a kid, because most actors don't get to do that."

The stage musical, performed at the Morgan Hill Playhouse until Oct. 22, is based on the animated 1989 Disney film of the classic story by Hans Christian Andersen about a mermaid who dreams of the human world above the sea and gives up her voice to find love with a young prince.

The character of Ariel is one Pember finds intriguing because of the wide range of feelings the part requires.

"She shows a lot of emotion, but she has a lot of trouble controlling what she says," she said. "She's very sweet and she's always excited. But when she's upset you can tell she's upset. She's very passionate."

The musical's producers are Kathy Tom, Pam Drayton and Jason Leong. It is directed by Colleen Blanchard. The show kicks off the 2016-2017 SVCT season, with the other shows being "The 1940's Radio Hour," (starting Nov. 18), "Footloose," (starting Feb. 24), "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" (starting April 21), and "Willy Wonka" (starting June 23).

“The Little Mermaid” has a cast of 46 child and teenage performers, Drayton said.



“It’s about half and half from Morgan Hill and Gilroy, which is really nice because we’re getting kids from the Gilroy Children’s Theater,” she said. “We’re getting kids from Children’s Musical Theater San Jose. We’re getting kids who have done other SVCT productions. We’re getting a lot of youth talent who have done previous shows who are well versed.”

The show is a shorter version of the 2008 Broadway version and lasts about

an hour and a half, making it age-appropriate for families with young kids and toddlers to experience live musical theater for the first time.

Many children in the audience will be thrilled to watch the actors “fly” across the stage using special harnesses attached to rigs that hold them safely above the stage, creating the illusion of swimming underwater, Drayton said. The effect was popular in SVCT’s production of “Mary Poppins” in August.

“It makes for great theater. It’s a fun experience for adults and it’s going to be a really fun experience for children,” she said. “We look forward to bringing another great family experience to Morgan Hill.”

# 'Little Mermaid Jr.' Live

## Gilroy Dispatch

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Susan L. Rife



There's nothing quite like a stage full of kids dressed as starfish, sea anemones and seagulls singing and dancing their little hearts out to lift one's spirits these days. And the cast and crew of South Valley Civic Theatre do a charming job of it in their current children's musical production of *The Little Mermaid Jr.* in Morgan Hill through Oct. 22.

The story, loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's Danish fairy tale and adapted into a Disney movie and then a musical, involves a young mermaid,

Ariel (Emily Pember) who falls in love with a human prince (Gannon Janisch) and is tricked into giving up her lovely singing voice to an evil sea witch (Jenna Hernandez) in exchange for legs so she can walk on land. She is surrounded by a cast of hilarious characters including the woebegone crab Sebastian (Tegan Leong) charged by Ariel's father (Paul Maack) with keeping her safe.

As the little mermaid of the title, Pember does fine work singing while managing the tricky aspects of swimming gracefully through the air (with flight direction by Jason Chamberlain). Unfortunately, her voice is sometimes overwhelmed by the recorded soundtrack on "Part of Your World."

As Ursula, the sea witch—in a wonderful costume of purple velvet and satin with sequined octopus's tentacles—Hernandez has no such problems. She's got a big voice and knows how to use it to best effect on "Poor Unfortunate Souls."

Stealing the show every which way is the spark plug Tegan Leong as the crab Sebastian, who knocks everyone out with a fish ensemble in "Under the Sea" and really tears things up in the sassy calypso "Kiss the Girl," well supported by an undersea cast of seemingly thousands.

Among the numerous other characters, well directed by Colleen Blanchard, Catherine Drayton stands out as the lead seagull, Scuttle (in a terrific costume, designed by Alice Gracey). Set designers Blanchard, Larry Tom and Jason Leong have created a wondrous undersea world, all wavering watercolors studded with bubbles and seaweed.

*The Little Mermaid Jr.* Music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Howard Ashman and Glenn Slater, book by Doug Wright. Directed by Colleen Blanchard at South Valley Civic Theatre, Morgan Hill. Final performance is Oct. 22. For tickets call (408) 842-SHOW or visit [www.svct.org](http://www.svct.org).