

# South Valley audiences delight to SVCT's 'The 1940's Radio Hour'

Play takes audience back to a more nostalgic era

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Photos by Marty Cheek



Players in the South Valley Civic Theatre's current production of "The 1940's Radio Hour" will take South Valley audiences back to an old-time Christmas during World War II in a drama with musical performances that touch the hearts of young and old alike.

The play is set on Dec. 21, 1942, during the final holiday broadcast of the Mutual Manhattan Variety Cavalcade on a New York radio station. It is full of period music, dancing and old-time sound effects in a story that portrays the intertwined lives of colorful characters.

Jenafer Thompson plays Geneva Lee Brown as a "spicy and sassy mix" of jazz singers Lena Horne and Billie Holiday.



“She just has attitude, but she still loves everybody. She doesn’t care what anybody thinks,” Thompson said. “There’s a point in the show where she’s not ready to perform, so she says, ‘Oh, no,’ and leaves. She’s a firecracker, but she loves the Cavalcade.”

Tom Hepner plays the Frank Sinatra-like washed-up crooner Johnny Cantone. This is his third time performing the role for SVCT’s production of “The 1940’s Radio Hour.”

“It’s my favorite show. It’s so nostalgic,” he said. “Very often, normal guys like us don’t get to play the guy that all the women fall all over, or think they fall over. It’s a different role from reality.”

In the Golden Age of radio, Hepner said, many American families gathered around their radio set on evening for news and entertainment. Live performances where performers sang and told corny jokes as part of a radio theater group was a way for people to connect across the country and deal with the anxiety of a war-torn world.

“It’s kind of the opposite to today where we have so much news coming at us 24/7,” he said. “Back then, it was immediate because it was live. Now, Twitter is immediate, but it’s re-tweeted and re-tweeted and who knows where it came from. And so now the world is a little bit fuzzier than it was then. It was a much more simpler time.”

Producer Elizabeth Mandel said “The 1940’s Radio Hour” is one of SVCT’s favorites and this is the third time the show has been performed by the local group, a record in terms of revivals. Because the entire show is set on one stage representing a seedy New York radio station, it is easy to contain the flow of action, she said.



“It’s a show that a lot of people never have heard of, but then you talk to people who saw it and they go, ‘Oh, wow, it’s special,’” she said.

San Jose State University theater professor Buddy Butler directed the show, the first time he has worked with SVCT. Mandel asked him to do the play because she thought SVCT needed a fresh perspective, he said. “I’m very impressed with the quality and the maturity of the group,” he said.

Butler grew up in Cleveland and one of the things he misses is his roots of non-professional actors coming together to create a show for their community, he said. SVCT helps him reconnect to those memories.

“I grew up in this community theater atmosphere, it’s where I had my beginning,” he said. “I want to give back because I like the vibes and there’s not the pressure of doing professional theater. A lot of people here could perform professionally if they wanted to, but they do it because it’s fun.”

The magic of the show is that it takes the audience back in time to a more nostalgic era where Americans living during World War II connected together to hope through the medium of radio theater, Butler said.

“For younger people, they can look back and see a time of innocence where the country was torn apart by war and pretty much the thing that brought us together was the industry of entertainment — that thrived during the war years because people were looking for hope,” he said. “That’s prevalent today. We’re still looking for hope because there’s a lot of division and we need to find ways to pull ourselves together.”

# Variety show

Reminiscing with songs from the 1940s  
The Morgan Hill Times  
Posted: Sunday, December 4, 2016 7:19 am |  
Susan Rife



**OLD-TIME COMMERCIAL** Steven Zbin, Lindsay Sommers, Megan Griffin, Rob Christopher perform “Pepsi-Cola” in South Valley Civic Theater’s production of ‘1940s Radio Hour.’  
Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

Step back a few decades to a time perhaps just as complicated as our own, when war raged in Europe and uncertainty was around every turn, in *The 1940s Radio Hour*, the holiday musical production of the South Valley Civic Theater.

Directed by Buddy Butler with musical and vocal direction by Carol Harris, the show, written by Walton Jones, recreates the Dec. 21, 1942 broadcast of “The Mutual Manhattan Variety Cavalcade,” a live radio show (think precursor to “*Prairie Home Companion*”), complete with those funny advertisements for soap, Eskimo Pies and other necessities of life, albeit constrained by wartime availability.

Led by Peter Mandel as nervous station manager and host Clifton Feddington, the musical ensemble revolves around Johnny Cantone (Tom Hepner), a somewhat loutish lounge singer in the style of Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin, complete with white jacket and martini glass. But despite the screaming girls outside the radio station door, Hepner fails to truly strike the right notes on such standards as “Love is Here to Stay,” leaving the women and younger men to carry the vocal load.

Lindsay Sommers is a delight as bobbysoxer Connie Miller, swigging Coca-Colas and flirting up a storm with B.J. Gibson on “How About You” and “The Five O’Clock Whistle,” where they also do a stylish lindy hop (Jyovonne Montosa choreographed the show).

Jenafer Thompson as sultry jazz songstress Geneva Lee Brown and Joy Reynolds as statuesque and elegant Ann Collier do fine work on “I Got It Bad (and That Ain’t Good),” “That Old Black Magic” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” Comic relief comes in the form of Megan Griffin as gum-popping Ginger Brooks, who also gets the sexiest evening gown of the night and puts a double entendre spin on an ad for Eskimo Pies.

A bittersweet wartime theme runs around Biff Baker (Zack Goller), a trumpet player in the orchestra who’s about to be shipped overseas for war service. Goller is an excellent addition to the men’s ensemble, adding nice harmonies to “Ain’t She Sweet” and “Jingle Bells.”

Rob Christopher sports an almost lurid orange windowpane check suit as Neal Tilden, who hopes to inherit Johnny Cantone’s central role.

Carol Harris leads a capable onstage orchestra with such great stage names as Ladyfingers, Snookie, Pieface, Toots and Flap.

The show is a mostly light holiday treat, with just enough uncertainty and moodiness to keep from being saccharine.

*South Valley Civic Theatre presents “The 1940’s Radio Hour,” by Walton Jones. Performances run through Dec. 10 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. Visit or call [svct.org](http://svct.org) or (408) 842-SHOW.*