

Entertainment – South Valley Civic Theatre’s ‘Act One’ brings to stage the story of Hart-Kaufman collaboration

Eighteen actors play 55 characters in tribute to theater creative process

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by Marty Cheek | Nov 3, 2017

The creative bromance between acclaimed playwright Moss Hart and his mentor George Kaufman turns into a story of tears and cheers in “Act One,” a South Valley Civic Theatre drama opening at the Morgan Hill Playhouse Nov. 17.

Based on Hart’s best-selling autobiography “Act One,” the play is a backstage tour of the creative process, focusing on the humorous and stressful relationship of the two writers working on the comedy play “Once in a Lifetime,” their first of eight collaborations. James Lapine transformed Hart’s memoir into a play which premiered on Broadway in 2014. San Jose State University theater professor Buddy Butler directed the SVCT version.

Hart is played by three actors during various stages of his career. Sobrato High School graduate Zack Goller plays the young version. An overwhelming need to succeed in the theater world is the key to playing the role, he said.

“My character is really ambitious and driven in this show,” he said. “(Hart) comes from a poor upbringing and he has his aspirations and he knows where he wants to be in life and he doesn’t want to have his background hold him back.”

Goller got his start on the stage in 2010 in the SVCT children’s show “Robin Hood & Friends,” playing the hero from Sherwood Forest. The experience was so fun that he continued performing in SVCT shows, including the musical “Next to Normal.” He is now studies theater at SJSU.

Playing Hart proved to be a challenge in that Goller wanted to present him authentically.

“I’ve never done a show before that is based on real people and real events,” he said. “This is something I’ve needed to research and see who Moss Hart was as opposed to someone fictional ... I would encourage audiences to come and learn about Hart’s life and see that anything is possible really and, if you put your mind to it, you can achieve your dreams.”



Zack Goller, right, playing the young Moss Hart, gets playwriting advice from Rob Christopher who plays George Kaufman during a Nov. 2 rehearsal. The show dates for “Act One” are 8 p.m. Nov. 17, 18, 24, 25, Dec. 1, 2, 8, 9, and 2:30 p.m. Nov. 26 and Dec. 3. For more information, visit www.svct.org.

Photo by Marty Cheek

Gilroy resident Rob Christopher plays dual roles as Kaufman and also Hart's father, Barnett, a cigar-maker from London who hits hard times as an immigrant in the Bronx. Kaufman was an eccentric, which makes him a fun character for Christopher to develop some strange mannerisms to accent the writer's odd behavior.

"I think George Kaufman is a fascinating person to play because he's very quirky and he's a germaphobe," Christopher said. "He wanders around doing weird things."

As a writing mentor, Kaufman serves as a father figure for the young version of Hart, he said.

"The play is really about how they came together, how Moss Hart came from across the tracks to Manhattan and met Kaufman. They were a very odd couple who turned out to be great collaborators.... This play is for an audience who likes a good story based on true events where the humor comes sort of naturally as part of the comedy of life."

Eighteen actors play 55 characters in "Act One" to reveal the process of crafting a story for the stage, producer Rebecca Garcia said. The two-story set is on a motorized turntable that allows the show to flow without extensive scene changes. Garcia contacted Beowulf Boritt, the set designer of the original Broadway version of the show, and asked for his advice for the SVCT version. Boritt sent her the design of his set and she and her husband, Javier Garcia, used it to build their own version depicting the various locations of New York City in the 1930s.

The production of "Act One" has been a team effort all the way around and the show stretches the theater group both technically and artistically, the producer said.

"What I like best about SVCT is that they're not just following the norm of small theater companies," she said. "They're expanding and showing how diverse and amazing it is and bringing in all kinds of fresh talent."



South Valley

Making it in America

SVCT's 'Act One' tale of Broadway success

By Debra Eskinazi, Editor, South Valley magazine

<http://southvalley.com/making-it-in-america-scvct-act-one/>



LIFELONG TALE 'Act One' stars—the young Moss Hart (Austin Vandecoevering) and Aunt Kate (Adrienne Wilkinson) on SVCT stage. Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

Nearly every American has one—a story of coming to America, a story of survival, a story of defeating the odds—a story of achieving the American Dream.

If not their own, then it's the story of their parent or grandparent they carry with them—each generation more successful than the last.

That's the story of Moss Hart—son of impoverished English-born Jewish immigrants living the dark tenements of New York.

Adapted from a 1959 biography, "Act One" features an older Moss Hart reflecting back on his life from his poor upbringing in the Bronx to his rise to fame on Broadway.

Even with a life of poverty as new immigrants in a new country, young Hart (Austin Vandecoevering) was exposed, through his aunt Kate (Adrienne Wilkinson), to plays and

theater. Aunt Kate was dumped on the family and left with a little money. But, Aunt Kate only opened her coin purse for theater outings, to which she used to take young Hart.

The play is a bit of a time travel with more than four dozen characters in a range of ages.

“What I was looking for this year was just a play that had visual interest in how we had to present the play,” says executive board president Peter Mandel. “Doing a play with over 50 characters with well over 30 different scenes and we wanted to step up to that challenge.” Mandel, who also plays an older Hart in the performance says they developed a multi-story turntable set to make this play come alive.

Like the elaborate and engaging set design at South Valley Civic Theatre, Moss Hart’s life was varied in application, but held one direction—to be part of the theater.

“He always had a love for the theater,” says producer Rebecca Garcia. “You know how young kids always go and play games. After the aunt would tell them about a play. Moss would take those to the schoolyard.”

Like many stories of immigrants searching for success in America, Hart’s determination to create a better life is what motivates his success.

“We have a lot of the same issues today with immigrants coming into this country,” she says. “It’s what drives immigrants and brings them to this country is the desire to do better and to have a better life.”

Garcia says this story resonated with her. “I’m a wife of an immigrant and I’ve seen his hunger and his drive and what it’s gotten him,” says Garcia.

Mandel says it’s particularly timely now given all of the controversy with Trump and the government. “The United States is a nation of immigrants and Moss Hart is a version of that story,” says Mandel. “Most of us living in the U.S. come from immigrants and all of us want each generation to do better than the previous. Moss Hart is probably a story that is vivid to just about everyone in this country. And of course if you enjoy the theater you’ll enjoy seeing how a new production happens.”

South Valley Civic Theater presents ‘Act One’ based on the story of Moss Hart. Performances run Nov. 19-Dec. 9. For more information, visit svct.org.

Morgan Hill Life

Eighteen actors play 50 roles on custom build two-story revolving stage

<http://morganhilllife.com/2017/11/23/curtains-up-theater-review-by-camille-bounds-svcts-act-one-depicts-playwright-in-three-stages-of-his-life/>

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By Camille Bounds - Photos by Marty Cheek

In "Act One," South Valley Civic Theatre performers tell the story of how a Bronx boy named Moss Hart's deep desire to be a successful playwright led him to fame and fortune on Broadway.

The play is based on Hart's 1959 best-selling memoir, now a canon of theater literature. Written by James Lapine, "Act One" opened on Broadway in April 2014 and came to the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse Nov. 17 with a stellar cast of 18 actors who come to life in at least 50 roles.



Hart's talent at crafting comedy plays helps him get out of the poor tenement where he had been raised. His English immigrant parents barely survive, take in boarders to make ends meet. His Aunt Kate (portrayed by a comically eccentric Adrienne Wilkinson) introduces him to the New York City theater world, spending the little money she has to go to see Broadway shows. From this introduction to Broadway, Moss develops a hunger to write stories for the stage.

The young man struggles at the writing craft until he is introduced to the successful, neurotic, germophobic George S. Kaufman (a superb Rob Christopher of Gilroy, who also plays Moss's angry frustrated father). The unlikely team bond and through Kaufman's mentorship, Hart grows into the successful playwright he has long dreamed to become. "Act One" has three Moss Harts. We see him as a child, then as a growing adult (a fine Zack Goller), and an older man performed by a believable Peter Mandel recollecting his ups and downs by narrating to the audience the different levels of the story.

The plot goes in many directions and will keep the audience's attention with a cast that is strong and credible in their performances. Director Buddy Butler has a talented group to work with to develop a gripping transition from book to stage. And SVCT's team of set designers just about reproduced the New York City of the 1930s with a revolving two-story set that continually moves from tenement to luxury apartments to offices and keeps the story moving from scene to scene without a break. It's impressive to see this set based on the original Broadway production's concepts by "Beowulf Boritt. SVCT's set designer, Javier Garcia, deserves a set designer's award for all community theatre productions everywhere.

Michelle Griffin's exceptional costumes as usual blend with the times and places. Lighting and sound are exceptionally done and pianist Mark Gaetano, famous locally for tinkling the ivories at Morgan Hill's 88 Keys Café, adds just the right amount of tune to each scene.

For a special holiday theater memory, treat yourself and your friends and family to a SVCT performance of "Act One" and be inspired by the life of playwright Moss Hart.

Act One - A tribute to Moss Hart

by C. Michael Traw

In 1959, Moss Hart wrote his autobiography and called it *Act One*. For those of you who are not familiar with Mr. Hart, he is one of America's beloved playwrights and, along with George S. Kaufman, wrote *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and *You Can't Take It with You*, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1937. He later directed the original stage productions of *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*.

In 2014, James Lapine adapted Hart's book into a play, premiering it on Broadway on April 17. The cast included Santino Fontana, Tony Shalhoub (Monk) and Andrea Martin, who was awarded the Tony Award for best featured actress in a musical.

The play is narrated by the older Moss Hart and traces his life from being poor in the Bronx to becoming famous and successful as a Broadway writer and director. The play depicts Hart's meeting and collaboration with George S. Kaufman and ends with the production of the first Hart-Kaufman success, *Once in a Lifetime*, in 1930.

South Valley Civic Theater in Morgan Hill is the first group to present the comedy. They certainly have given their all to present a "not so good" play. Many books adapt easily to the stage, but this is not one of them. There

are many scenes in the three hour play that do not move the action, and carefully editing the dialogue a bit more would have helped this production. It is very slow moving and lots of dialogue made the first act eternally long. The second act was much faster and included a dance and song which broke up the dialogue, which was a nice surprise

There were three actors playing Moss Hart - one young, one middle and one older. The middle Moss carries the majority of the play and director Buddy Butler was lucky to have San Jose State student Zack Goller for the part. He was very convincing and works hard to move the plot along. He is much more successful in the second act when he actually meets George S. Kaufman. He is played by Rob Christopher, who is probably the best actor in the play. In the first act, he plays Hart's father, switching to Kaufman in the second act. He is so convincing as both characters and is so different in each characterization that a fellow audience member didn't realize it was the same actor.

Also notable in the acting category was Anrienne Wilkingson, who also played two rolls: Aunt Kate and Frieda Fishbein. She has a lot of fun with her characters and shows strong commit-

ment to her roles. She has able support from Megan Griffin, who shined as Mrs. Kaufman, and Ingrid Rottman as Moss Hart's mother.

The set was outstanding and was a two level set on a turntable. It was certainly a challenge to build and then make it work. Director Butler could have helped the show move faster if he would have started the scenes before the set was in place. When he did do that, the play moved along better. There were a lot of starts and endings, which made for a jerky play.

The costumes, of which there were many, were excellent - lots of sparkle in the 1920's style dresses and very fancy shoes. Kudos to costumer Michelle Griffin for finding them.

A special shout out to Mark Gaetano who accompanied the show on the piano with 20's music, which really helped preserve the time period in which the play is set. Additionally, he supplied the scene change music and the dance and song accompaniment.

As a theater geek, I enjoyed the history behind Hart's journey to Broadway. I just wished it would have happened a little faster. The play performs weekends through December 9. For tickets, call 408-842-SHOW.