

1940s Radio Hour



Kory W. Hansen/Chief photographer

Tom Hepner, Gary Caswell, Eric Hilding (back row, l. to r.); Peter Mandel, Steve Filice, Mike Perry (middle row, l. to r.); and Ruth E. Mullins, Cheryl Wilmer, Whitney Pintello and Maureen Sandhu Imagawa (front row, l. to r.) star in "1940s Radio Hour." See story on page 3.

'1940s Radio Hour' is shaping up

And now the news... South Valley Civic Theatre opens their latest, "The 1940s Radio Hour" and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival is coming to Gilroy!

First, "Radio Hour..." SVCT's dinner show this season is one of my personal favorites, which tells you something about my age. The music in "Radio Hour" is the first pop music I ever heard as a child. It's the story of a variety show, set on a radio sound stage, Christmas Eve, 1942. Even the commercial jingles have a forever familiar tone. I noticed one pretty, gray-haired lady singing along with me as the company sang, "Pepsi Cola hits the spot..."

A loose plot is woven through the fabric of the great hits of the early '40s. However tunes like "Blue Moon," "You Go To My Head" and "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" are the real foundation of the show.

I enjoyed Saturday night's performance, though with some reservations. (The audience loved it.) My reservations were based on the miscasting of a couple of parts, a couple of very average singing voices and a band that, though composed of excellent musicians, is not quite there... yet.

The show does succeed on several levels, however. The whole cast is constantly on, and displays high levels of energy. The costumes and set are wonderful, though a bit more "Christmas" might have added to the necessary nostalgia. The "company" songs are done very well... Director Russ Hendrickson moves the show right along.

And then there are Ruth E. Mullins and Maureen Imagawa. Both were simply fabulous. Though I was under the weather and tempted to leave early, I was not going to miss Ruth E's "Merry Little Christmas." It was the musical and emotional highlight of the evening for me.

Despite my reservations, "Radio Hour" is fine community theatre, with great songs and a strong cast of local actors like Rod and Whitney Pintello, Bill Corneth, Mike Perry, Cheryl Witruer, Gary Caswell, Steve Filice, Tom Hepner, Eric Hilding, Duggan McDonnell and Peter



**JIM
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IN MAYA 'PINION

Mandel. Faye Pettner is musical director. The show continues December 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19 and 31.

I saw a bit of the final dress rehearsal, and it has improved. With the quality of the cast, and with more time for the band to work together, it will continue to get better. Call 842-SHOW for reservations.

Now for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival news... OK, the whole Oregon Shakespeare Festival company is not coming to Gilroy, but part of this "finest repertory theatre in the nation" will perform at the Gilroy High School Theatre on Monday, Dec. 7, at 7:30 p.m.

Two members of the professional company will be performing an evening of scenes and monologues, some Shakespearian, others modern. If history holds true, the evening will be excellent, entertaining and thoroughly professional.

I have seen several of these presentations over the last 15 years, both at Gavilan and at Gilroy High School, and the unanimous request is to have them back again next year.

The evening is sponsored by the Gilroy High School Drama Club, and is a fund-raising event for them.

Tickets are \$4 for adults, and \$2 for children and senior citizens or, get this — since the presentation is fine for anyone over 10 years of age, \$10 for the whole family.

The two actors, Kelly AuCoin and Debra Funkhouser, will be giving assemblies and working with Gilroy High drama students during the day, then they will perform at night in the theatre. Call 847-2424, ext. 285 for reservations.

Journeying back to days of love and war

MORGAN HILL — The South Valley Civic Theatre plans to open a time capsule of sorts.

November 27 is opening night for "The 1940s Radio Hour," a fictionalized recreation of a big-time radio show, complete with an orchestra and upbeat popular tunes of the time.

Set in the winter of 1942, the show juxtaposes the naivete and earnestness of bygone days with the specter of World War II, which touches each character in a different way.

"Some people would like to go back to that time," said Grace Brawn, the show's producer. "I don't think I would so much. The play's light-hearted, but even in the comedy of the commercials, there's a bittersweet sense of the people's 'make-the-best-of-it' attitude."

As if to underscore the tendency to put a bright face on bad times, the artificial nature of the radio show itself is emphasized by the staging.

"It's staged as if people are being let into a studio before the broadcast," Brawn said. "The actors, in character, are up on stage preparing for the radio show."

The break between the "real-life" backstage action and the vaudeville-style radio show gives some of the actors an opportunity to play two subtly different roles, but the actions of the backstage characters struck a chord with Brawn.

"The stage doorman, Pops, has a son fighting overseas," Brawn said, "and he keeps a huge stack of magazines, with anything that has to do with the war. The odd thing is that my mother did the exact same thing."

To guarantee the show would ring true — even to those who may have experienced a 1940s radio show in person — the crew, headed by Carol Harris, arranged a loan of vintage '40s costumes from the drama department at San Jose State University, and has even gone so far as to print two programs — one for the play and another, designed to resemble a 1940s-vintage playbill, for the radio show within the play.

"We've dug up a lot of books on the subject of radio in the '40s," Brawn said. "One of the guys doing the props used to listen avidly to these shows. The sense of nostalgia is very strong."

There's another reason for nostalgia in this production. Director Russ Hendrickson helmed a 1986 production of "The 1940s Radio Hour" at his now-defunct Center Stage, and Bill Corneth, Rod Pintello and Tom Hepner are reprising their roles in this production.

"We fantasized about getting the original cast back together," joked Hendrickson. "We'd had such a good time doing it back then, I had a sort of proprietary feeling about the play. I hadn't planned on directing another show this year after 'South Pacific' this summer, but when Grace told me they were doing this show, I felt in a way that I had to do it."

Also teaming with Hendrickson is musical director Fay Pettner, who worked with Hendrickson on "South Pacific" this year and has collaborated on several Center Stage productions.

"She's getting a seven-piece orchestra together," Brawn said. "We're definitely going to get that big band sound."

While she said the songs and inherent humor are the highlights of the production, Brawn's favorite element of the play is something even the youngest audience member will recognize — the commercials.

"The commercials were soappy — no, that's a bad way of putting it," said Brawn, fighting back laughter. "They were just so sincere and so serious. Here's one that has this romantic couple at the beach, and he's going off to war, and she pulls off her bathing cap and promises that she'll wait forever. Then the announcer says that this bathing cap is made by the American Rubber Company, the same company whose products are being distributed to the troops. It's so ludicrous, they could never get away with it now. It was just a different time."

"The 1940s Radio Hour" is South Valley Civic Theatre's dinner show. Performances are Nov. 27 and 28, Dec. 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 13, 18 and 19. On Fridays and Saturdays, dinner is at 7 p.m. and the show starts at 8 p.m. On Sundays, dinner is at 6 p.m. and the show starts at 7 p.m. Tickets: \$25, including full dinner with choice of prime rib or chicken cordon bleu. Also, a gala New Year's Eve performance. Details and reservations: 842-SHOW. Performances are at The South Valley Playhouse, 235 Tennant Station, Morgan Hill.