

Entertainment Fantastic stage set plays a crucial role in SCVT's 'Willy Wonka' musical

Family-friendly play performances begin June 23

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By Marty Cheek



Maya King, left, and Tegan Leong, work on the set for the upcoming shows of "Willy Wonka."
Photo by Marty Cheek

Maya King got herself stuck in a corner three times this month. Rolling violet-colored paint for the upcoming South Valley Civic Theatre show "Willy Wonka," the girl became so engaged in the set-building that she forgot to leave herself an exit path where she didn't have to step on a wet stage floor.

"I've learned not to paint myself into a corner," she said with a laugh. "I've done that a few times. I really like painting the floor."

She showed her sneakers. The spots of violet paint on the bottom serve as a lesson to choose her footwear more carefully next time she works on the set. A St. Mary School student going into seventh grade this fall, King plays the role of "Charlie Bucket" in the beloved classic story about five children who take a tour of a chocolate factory owned by a mischievous man.

"I play Charlie as sort of as a depressed, poor person, but at the same time he's positive," she said.

The stage set the SVCT volunteers are building plays an important role in telling the story, and King enjoys helping out with its construction.

“I like knowing that I contributed,” she said. “I also like coming here on the weekends because usually I don’t have anything to do. It’s cool to be at the theater. It’s fun painting.”

The set has several pieces that are favorites for King. The gumball machine that produces the sweets that turns Violet Beauregarde, a gum-chewing American girl, into a giant blueberry is one of them. And the colorfully designed Candy Man Cart where Charlie purchases the chocolate bar with a winning golden ticket to get him entry into the factory is another set piece that strikes her fancy.

The spectacle of the set — along with colorful lighting and theatrical effects — makes it a good show for families. The story’s message of perseverance and treating other people nicely is also inspiring, King said.

“It sort of shows kids to always think on the bright side and not be depressed because of how you are in life,” she said. “It’s not boring at all because it’s a very fast-paced show.”

Jason Leong worked with producer Robin Bezanson and Carol Harris in creating the ingenious “Willy Wonka” set.

“This has been an evolving design, as these things usually are, and that’s really cool because you can always get the best of what’s possible,” he said.

Giving a tour of the set, he showed off various components still being built. A canvas pulled over a frame will serve as boat for the children and their parents to be taken by Wonka on a wild ride down a chocolate river. A set piece being painted by Harris will serve as the backdrop for the various news interviews the five golden ticket-winning children give in the musical play.

“With each interview, you flip the stage and it’s another backdrop, as if they have moved to the next location,” he said. “It makes it easy for us to change scenes and not have to move a lot of things at once. It’s an efficient way to move the story along.”

Jason Harris plays the title role of Willy Wonka. The look of the set helps create the fairy tale-like world of the story, he said. There’s a contrast between the bleakness of Bucket’s shack with the color and motion of Willy Wonka factory. He sees the play as a morality tale with a comic twist, with Willy Wonka serving as a “puppet-master” manipulating the families who win the tour of his chocolate factory.

“Willy Wonka is not really a paragon of morality. It’s obviously a set-up, which is a bit persevere in itself. He’s invited five children to come to his factory. He knows from the start he’s going to eliminate four of them because they’re brats,” he said. “So why does he do it? Why does he go to all this trouble to victimize all the children? He’s sadistic.”

As producer, Bezanson encourages families to enjoy the play, especially if they want to introduce their children to the imaginative world of theater.

“It’s a very colorful and exciting show for kids. It’ll keep parents laughing because there are a lot of jokes that are funny for adults more so than children,” she said. “The fast pace of it will make it a very enjoyable show. And it has a good message. It’s a message of do right and be right and you’ll get rewards in the end. And Charlie gets a big reward at the end for being good and being honest.”

South Valley Magazine

Chocolate with a twist

South Valley Civic Theater presents Roald Dahl's Willy Wonka

June 23, 2017 by [Susan Rife](#)



STAGE MAGIC Janelle Cummings painting lollipops for the chocolate smelting room in South Valley Civic Theater's production of Willy Wonka, opening June 23, 2017. Photo: Jason Leong

It's hard to imagine a more perfect show for community theater groups than *Roald Dahl's Willy Wonka*, with a cast that can be expanded to accommodate any number of aspiring and experienced actors, and of all ages from little kids to grandparents.

And imagination is the key word for a show that lets the cast, production crew and audience members of any age let their creative imaginations run free.

"The whole idea of our set is very imaginative, and of course the music adds to that," said Carol Harris, who is directing the musical for South Valley Civic Theatre. At a rehearsal 10 days before the June 23 opening night, the cast was still in street clothes, the set was still under construction, and only lights dancing across the curtain and stage hinted at something magical in the works.

The story, based on Dahl's 1964 children's book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, follows young Charlie Bucket, who is among five winners of a tour of Willy Wonka's magnificent

chocolate factory. Earlier film and stage versions have starred Johnny Depp and Gene Wilder in the role of the chocolate magnate.

“We approached, in a way, of going off the book idea,” said producer Robin Bezanson. “Roald Dahl was an author; he traded in written words. One of our set pieces mimics the book in a lot of ways, more of a tribute to him.”

Trap doors, special effects and a huge painted backdrop to represent the chocolate factory are all part of the show’s imaginary verisimilitude, said Harris. Bubbles are painted on the backdrop using paint that shows only under black light.

“It’s all very colorful and imaginative,” she said.

Bezanson said it was limitations only of the space itself, time and money that curtailed her creative team.

“Our brainstorming sessions for our production team were always, ‘we could do this, we could do that,’” she said. “When you get a show with so many options and color, it’s so off the wall that anything goes.”

Bezanson said she wanted the production to focus on the humor of the original story. “We wanted it to be an endearing, loving kind of Wonka.”

SVCT found that in Jason Harris, who stars at Wonka opposite 11-year-old Maya King as Charlie.

“He’s pulled it off really well,” said Bezanson. “He takes a scene and puts a twist of his own on it. He has a knack of doing that.”

“There’s a lot of humor in the show that adults will relate to,” she said. “We’ve seen the show thousands of times, it seems like, and it’s still funny. That’s a good sign if your production team is still laughing during rehearsals.”

The show’s run includes a July 15 matinee that is “sensory/young child friendly.”

‘Roald Dahl’s Willy Wonka’ June 23-July 15 at South Valley Civic Theatre, 17090 Monterey

Like most actors and performers in our South Bay Area theater circles, Jason Harris started acting when he was in school. But unlike his peers, Jason's first performance was in a 5th grade production of "A Christmas Carol" put on at WirraBirra primary school in Perth, Western Australia in 1979.

"I played the ghost of Christmas Present," said Harris. "None of us could really project, so they pre-recorded us and we mimed it while we did the performance. This was easy in my case because I had a hood made from a sheet over my head. Nobody could see my face. All I had to do was walk about and gesture at Tiny Tim."

Other than that his earlier thespian performances mostly involved him dressing up in drag and singing John Denver songs for the family. Several of his relatives performed in one way or another so he feels that he had a natural genetic predisposition towards performing.

When Harris moved, by himself, to the US in the early '90s, he felt that he was not a very social person, but acting was one of things he liked doing that involved being with other people. So he started performing in theater because he liked it, and it provided a social outlet. Harris added, "That's a long winded way of saying I did it to meet women. Hey it worked! I met my wife in a show."

Over the years Harris has performed in approximately 23 different plays and has performed on the stages of San Jose City College, Stage One in Newark, Lyric Theater San Jose, San Benito Stage Company, Limelight Actors Theater and Pintello Comedy Theater in Gilroy, as well as South Valley Civic Theater in Morgan Hill.

Among his favorite roles he includes Fagin in "Oliver!" He enjoyed the role because as he described Fagin "He's not a nice person, but he's not mean. He's kind in his own self-serving way. The audience loves him, and is ultimately sympathetic towards his pathetic fate."

Another enjoyable role was as Applegate (A.K.A. the Devil) in "Damn Yankees." "It's the old old story of the Devil being beaten at his own game by a good man. It's Faust with baseball, and who doesn't dream of inflicting mass misery on the world?"

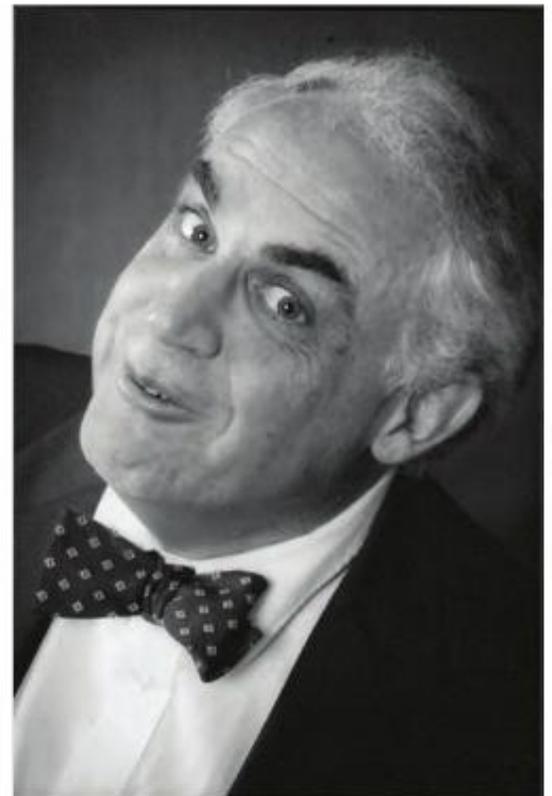
Recently at Limelight Actors Theater he played Saunders in "Lend Me a Tenor." "That man is an over-caffeinated manic depressive nut job. You can cry, scream and laugh manically in that role. It's very therapeutic."

I asked him what it was he liked best about being on stage in front of an audience. His reply was that they say runners run because their brains produce natural drugs and they have become addicted to them and that it could well be the same for actors — adrenalin produced from stage fright, followed by the warm endorphins released by a sympathetic audience response.

But it was this quote of his that sums it up quite nicely: "Stage performance offers a psychological catharsis, both for the actor and the audience. Done well, acting becomes its own unique flow of performance and transcends a mere set of actions. It's fun and satisfying when the people on stage manage to get that flow going. It's hard to understand, but there is obviously something to it. Why else would people dedicate so much unpaid spare time and run the risk of public embarrassment? Anyway, it's cheaper than therapy."

You can catch Jason, as well as his charming wife Robin, on stage as Willy Wonka in the upcoming production of "Willy Wonka" at South Valley Civic Theater in Morgan Hill which runs in June and July. Show times and tickets available at svct.org.

Jason Harris Putting the Wonka in Willy Wonka



Written By

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