

Main story – South Valley Civic Theatre celebrates 50 years of producing exciting local theater

by Marty Cheek | Jun 1, 2018 |

Group brings back its first musical production from 1970 — “Guys and Dolls”

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Photo courtesy Portraits by Rebecca

Hilary Little as Miss Adelaide and Michael Kaelin as Nathan Detroit in the SVCT production of “Guys and Dolls.”

Closing the 49th season with “Guys and Dolls” provides a salute to the Gilroy Community Theatre established in 1969 by Gilroy residents Al and Frances “Pinky” Bloom. The dedicated couple saw a need for a theater group in Gilroy to showcase the talent of people who wanted to step on stage and perform for local audiences. GCT’s first show was the Neil Simon comedy “Come Blow Your Horn,” which was produced at Gavilan Community College in September 1969. A year later, the actors put a spotlight on their singing and dancing talent with the Runyonesque comedy musical “Guys and Dolls.” GCT became a nonprofit organization in 1974. The “Theater Angels Art League” (precursor to today’s “Gilroy Arts Alliance”) initially served to raise funds for shows.

In 1985, the GCT board voted to expand performance locations to include San Benito County and Morgan Hill. To reflect the broadened coverage, they changed their name to South Valley Civic Theatre. The Morgan Hill Community Playhouse with 186 seats became SVCT’s permanent home with the show “Lend Me A Tenor” in February 2003. The group performs five shows a year — a children’s show, a teen show, a holiday show, a musical and a drama.

The South Valley Civic Theatre’s production of “Guys and Dolls” opening June 1 serves as a nod to nostalgia. Nearly 50 years ago, the classic show about an innocent missionary falling in love with a con man gambler was the first musical the group performed.

With SVCT’s Golden Jubilee season starting in September, the nonprofit dramatic arts group decided to celebrate with plenty of pizzazz. Special events include a group travel tour of New York City in July in which travelers will attend Broadway shows. SVCT will hold a big gala in January. It will also launch the Half-Century Club where theater fans receive special incentives such as discounts on tickets.



Photo courtesy Portraits by Rebecca

“It’s an honor to be part of an organization that has such staying power as this,” said Joe Hartwell who plays the leading “Guys and Dolls” role of the gambler Sky Masterson. “It’s great to see the Bay Area embraces its artistic side in the theater.”

Megan Griffin, who plays missionary Sarah Brown, started with SVCT in “The Music Man” as a child. She also performed in several teen shows over the years. The group’s lasting half a century is an indicator of how audiences have stayed loyal through the years, including times when the SVCT had financial difficulties. “The community values the arts,” she said.



Photo courtesy Portraits by Rebecca

Current SVCT Board President Peter Mandel imagined how the founders might see their passion for the theater arts continuing over the decades.

“When SVCT first started, the people who launched it the most were Al and Pinky Bloom,” he said. “For them to start up this little group and think it was going to last 50 years doing significant business, putting on five different productions every year — and it’s scaled up so dramatically and it’s been so successful. To have a nonprofit be accepted by its community for so many years, it’s an amazing accomplishment.”



Photo courtesy Portraits by Rebecca

It’s important to keep the arts alive with stage entertainment in the South Valley region that gives local people a place to express their artistic side not just onstage but backstage as well, Mandel said. Another benefit SVCT provides is getting children and teens involved in the shows, he said, listing such qualities as gaining self-respect, learning to work as a team, and building public speaking skills.

“Theater provides a lot to the community in terms of entertainment,” he said. “And, it provides a tremendous growth opportunity for the youth of the community.”

Scott Lynch, who will serve as the SVCT board president in the 50th-year season, described how the group has grown over the years in building its programs and workshops for youth and children.

“I think it’s such a benefit to them and their development and their poise and confidence,” he said. “This institution has been around 50 years. I think community theater is an important asset for the community and we’re looking at the 50th anniversary to continue to build on what we’ve been doing.”

The Half-Century Club will provide an opportunity for members of the community to help enhance the theater arts by becoming members of SVCT and helping to fund the group’s projects, he said. People can join by going to www.svct.org where they can join online. Memberships range from \$50 to \$5,000 and various levels provide more incentives to join.

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- Joe Hartwell,
plays Sky Masterson

"We look to grow a base of folks who are connected to the theater and trying to get them more significantly invested in what we do," he said. "We challenged the board to increase membership more significantly. The goal is to bring in 500 people at \$50 or more — and that's a significant number for us."

Mandel recalled "the vagabond years" where the SVCT shows were played throughout the region in unique places before finding a home at the Morgan Hill Playhouse. Shows were done at local high schools as well as store fronts in a shopping center. The musicals "Oklahoma!" and "Gypsy" creatively used the old barn at the Pumpkin Patch in San Martin.

"Finally getting a home with a proper playhouse was a major milestone," he said. "It brought the audience some continuity, they knew where we were."

SVCT has also become more experimental with technology over the years with its sets. For the bio-play of Truman Capote "Tru," it did its first use of rear projection to portray a night-time scene of the New York City skyline. Shows have also used flying rigs, such as "The Little Mermaid, Jr.," and turntables such as the one built for "Guys and Dolls."

The home theater and increasing sophistication of the audience has also given the group the courage for artistic growth. In recent years, the play selection committee have chosen more contemporary dramas such as the Pulitzer-Prize winning "Proof," which are rarely done by most community theaters. This has encouraged skilled actors and directors to come from throughout the Bay Area to audition with SVCT.

"Over time, we usually have one play or one musical that is a little more leading edge or avant-garde," Mandel said. "We've been more confident in our audience of being more accepting of shows that are a little more daring. A lot of the other community theaters do three shows a year. We do five. And they tend to stick to things that are very safe."

For the 50th season, SVCT allowed its members to vote on shows that were favorites of the past. It opens Sept. 21 with "Aladdin Jr." as the children's musical. "It's a Wonderful Life" opens Nov. 6 as the holiday show. Opening Feb. 8, "Godspell" is the teen musical. The musical "1776" opens April 19. And the season ends with "Gypsy" that opens June 14, 2019.

"This next season will be all the shows that were favorites with our audiences," Mandel said. "We encourage people who might not have seen a SVCT show to come to a performance and discover how entertaining local theater can be."



Photo courtesy Portraits by Rebecca

Details	
What:	Guys and Dolls
When:	8 p.m., June 15, 16, 22, 23, 29 & 30; July 6 & 7; and 2:30 p.m. June 24 & July 1
Where:	Community Playhouse
Tickets:	\$16 to \$25, available at www.svct.org

South Valley

Luck be a lady tonight

Broadway musical returns to SVCT

June 5, 2018 Susan Rife



GUYS AND DOLLS Anniversary stars revisit SVCT's first musical. Joe Hartwell (Sky Masterson), Megan Griffin (Sarah Brown), Hilary Little (Miss Adelaide), and Michael Kaelin (Nathan Detroit).

South Valley Civic Theatre wraps up its 49th season with a return to the first musical it presented in 1970 (as Gilroy Community Theatre): Frank Loesser's hit musical "Guys and Dolls."

"This is probably the quintessential American musical," said producer Adrienne Wilkinson. "It's funny and it's got a little bit of something for everyone."

Based on two Damon Runyon short stories, "Guys and Dolls" is the story of gambler Nathan Detroit, who tries to scare up the money for a big craps game while avoiding the cops and simultaneously dodging his fiancée's desire to marry after a 14-year engagement. Detroit bets a fellow gambler, Sky Masterson, that he cannot talk a straight-laced missionary into a date in Havana. The story moves from Times Square to Havana to the sewers of New York City before, as any good musical will do, all turns out well.

The show ran for 1,200 performances after it opened on Broadway in 1950 and won five Tony Awards (it also won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1951 but the selection was vetoed because of House Un-American Activities Committee concerns over the writer, Abe Burrows, alleged communist sympathies). It also was a hit film in 1955 starring Frank Sinatra, Marlon Brando and Jean Simmons, and has been revived on Broadway to much success.

The SVCT production is directed by Myra Kaelin and stars Michael Kaelin as Nathan Detroit, Joe Hartwell as Sky Masterson, Hillary Little as Miss Adelaide and Megan Griffin as Sarah Brown.

Wilkinson said the musical remains timeless in part because of the approachability of the characters, and in part because of the solid songwriting.

"It's just a musical that makes people happy. It's escapism for 2-½ hours," she said. Wilkinson also appears in the show as Agatha, a member of the Save-A-Soul Mission Band.

"It's one of my favorite musicals," she said. "The first time I saw it on stage—WOW!"

Hillary Little, who plays the feisty nightclub singer Adelaide, described her character as "flirty and fun, and you get to use a funny little voice. She's a nice contrast to Sarah, a little more rough around the edges."

Allen Siverson, who plays Arvide, one of the missionaries, has one song to sing in the show, "More I Cannot Wish You," which he called "a sweet song for an old man. It's a nice role for an old man."

"It's a poignant moment in the show," said Wilkinson.

Joe Hartwell, in his first "Guys and Dolls" performance, said he's enjoying playing Sky Masterson, "the alpha male. It's so much fun to play—just the walk. You have to walk into the room and make your presence known." Wilkinson tweaked Hartwell for his Tennessee accent.

"We have to get the Southern out of him," she said, smiling.

"Guys and Dolls." South Valley Civic Theatre. June 15-July 7 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, 17090 Monterey Road, Morgan Hill. Tickets \$25, \$15 students. 408.842.7463, svct.org.

Theater Scene

Written By MATTHEW RUSSELL HENDRICKSON



Meet Chris Sousa

Chris Sousa has been performing for audiences all over South County for many years. Like most actors involved with community theater he started in high school, but he also was a member of his church choir. He started singing in the choir at the age of 16 and still sings in a church choir to this day. His first performance on stage was in a production of "Guys and Dolls" in 1973 at Live Oak High School in Morgan Hill. Many of his friends were interested and involved in the drama club at Live Oak so he took the leap and got involved as well.

After high school, Chris attended Gavilan College in Gilroy where he started to focus more on singing. He took classes in the music department and performed on campus. But it wasn't until 1985 when he was urged by his friend, Carol Harris, to audition for South Valley Civic Theater's production of "South Pacific" that he got really involved with community theater. This was back in the days when SVCT did not have a permanent home; using local theater spaces throughout Morgan Hill, San Martin and Gilroy instead.

He said his motivation to continue performing in community theater was that "I got noticed when I was in shows! And I liked it!" And although his secret hope of someday making it to Hollywood never occurred, he has also been involved in a few film productions done by local filmmakers. But, performing for an audience either on stage or with the choir is something he truly enjoys.

Chris estimates that he has performed in about 51 shows in the South County Area. He has performed on stage for SVCT, Center Stage, Limelight Actors Theater, Saratoga Drama Group, City Lights, Sunnyvale Players and West Valley Light Opera. Also, he recently started performing with the Silicon Valley Gay Men's Chorus when it does not conflict with his performing schedule.

Now Playing

"Guys and Dolls"

June 15, 16, 22, 23, 24, 29, 30 July 1, 6, 7

Set in Damon Runyon's mythical New York City, *Guys and Dolls* is an oddball romantic comedy. Gambler, Nathan Detroit, tries to find the cash to set up the biggest craps game in town while the authorities breathe down his neck; meanwhile, his girlfriend and nightclub performer, Adelaide, laments that they've been engaged for fourteen years. Nathan turns to fellow gambler, Sky Masterson, for the dough, and Sky ends up chasing the straightlaced missionary, Sarah Brown, as a result. *Guys and Dolls* takes us from the heart of Times Square to the cafes of Havana, Cuba, and even into the sewers of New York City, but eventually everyone ends up right where they belong.

SVCT • 17090 Monterey Road
Morgan Hill • svct.org

"The Last Five Years"

By Jason Robert Brown

June 29, 30 July 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15, 20, 21

An emotionally powerful and intimate musical about two New Yorkers in their twenties who fall in and out of love over the course of five years, the show's unconventional structure consists of Cathy, the woman, telling her story backwards while Jamie, the man, tells his story chronologically; the two characters only meet once, at their wedding in the middle of the show.

Limelight Actors Theater
7341 Monterey Street • Gilroy
limelightactorstheater.com

Among his favorite characters he has portrayed on stage, he notes Mortimer in "The Fantastiks" (SVCT), Christopher Belling in "Curtains" (SVCT), Roger DeBris in "The Producers" (SVCT), and Bobby Hamilton in "Run For Your Wife" (Limelight). But he is also especially proud of his performance as Grandpa Jo in "Willy Wonka" (SVCT), for which he received the award of Best Male Actor in a Supporting Role for the 2016-2017 Member's Choice Awards.

When asked why he enjoys performing on stage in front of an audience he says that it is "the attention, and that I can do something that others enjoy watching. The feeling of confidence of doing something important and enjoyable." I myself have been involved with many community and semi-professional theater companies over the years and have had several occasions to work on productions with Chris. My favorite was when I was the assistant director for "The Producers" at SVCT in 2015.

You can see Chris perform in June in SVCT's upcoming production of "Guys and Dolls" portraying the role of Nicely-Nicely Johnson.