

Back in the Limelight



JOINING FORCES *Limelight* Managing Director Robin Bezanson (from left), Gilroy Arts Alliance President Marianne Eichenbaum and *Limelight* Executive Director Peter Mandel.

South Valley Civic Theatre takes over management of theater company, presents first show in spring

By SUSAN L. RIFE

When word started going around last summer that Kevin Heath was shutting down his 10-year resident theater company at the Gilroy Center for the Arts, the theatrical community and audience let out a collective gasp of dismay.

While there's no shortage of community theater in the South Valley, Heath had carved out a specific niche of tightly-focused productions of family dramas and comedies that used small casts and simple sets to great effect. Heath built up a stable of solid, reliable actors from the area who were as devoted to the craft as he himself was.

Heath's decision to retire as

executive director of the Gilroy Arts Alliance and its resident theater company and relocate with his husband Alan Obata to the Sierra foothills at the end of November unleashed a torrent of well-wishes and tearful hugs from patrons.

But by the time *Limelight's* final production, "The Hallelujah Girls," opened in November, Heath was thrilled to be announcing from the stage at each performance that *Limelight* would continue on, under the auspices of South Valley Civic Theatre. It will be called *Limelight Presented by SVCT* in Gilroy.

"It was a very personal and effective way to get the word out," said Robin Bezanson, the new managing director for *Limelight*. "The audience reaction was sheer delight."

SVCT is a long-operating community theater organization about to enter its 52nd season at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. Its board of directors saw an opportunity in Gilroy.

The move has two dimensions, said Bezanson.

"When people in the theater community heard *Limelight* was shutting down, they were so sad," she said. "We were looking for a way to stop that. They had a formula that works. And at SVCT, we only get the flexibility to do one non-musical show a year."

SVCT's roster each season includes a children's musical, a teen musical, two mainstream family or adult musicals and one straight stage play.

"The playhouse is a little too big



TIGERS BE STILL *South Valley Civic Theatre's first production as manager of Limelight is advertised on the Gilroy Center for the Arts' marquee on Monterey Street.*

for a six-person show," Bezanson said. "So for South Valley to have a second venue that is better sized for non-musicals and comedies" made sense for the organization. The playhouse, in a renovated church building in downtown Morgan Hill, seats 172 in a traditional auditorium of stadium seating and a proscenium stage.

By contrast, Limelight, in a loose black-box space carved out of an old Salvation Army store, seats just 49. During Heath's tenure, the audience members were invited to order in or carry in dinner picnics, and were seated at long tables perpendicular to the stage, which was raised just a foot above the main floor, or at bar-height tables at the rear of the seating area. A small bar at the

back of the house sold wine and soft drinks along with killer rocky road candy made by actress Rosalind Parotte.

In its new iteration, Limelight will extend the stage area out into a thrust formation, with the audience seated cabaret-style at small tables on three sides of the action.

"This way you'll never be more than two rows away" from the actors, said Peter Mandel, executive director and liaison to SVCT. Mandel has frequently appeared on the SVCT stage and in other regional productions as an actor. Working in such close proximity to the audience "is a different style of acting, a much more realistic style of acting."

And while actors can be more distracted by the closeness of the

audience, "as a performer you endeavor not to be affected," he said.

"The actors like it because they feel like they're pushing their acting skills a little bit broader," Bezanson said.

And the organization has acquired a special liquor license to serve beer, wine and a selection of specialty cocktails. Each show will have a signature drink.

In turn, Limelight directors and actors will be able to tap into SVCT's enormous warehouse of costumes, props and sets.

"We can scale it up," Mandel said.

Limelight's first show under the new organization will be "Tigers Be Still," a comedy by Kim Rosenstock. Andrew Cummings, who

holds a theater degree from UC Berkeley and has directed multiple SVCT shows, will direct. "Tigers Be Still" will open March 20 for 10 performances. Also on the calendar is "Ripcord," a comedy by David Lindsay-Abaire, Aug. 14-Sept. 5, and "A Nice Family Christmas" by Phil Olson Nov. 23-Dec. 20.

"We made an intentional decision to figure out how to run this for a year, and then we'll assess," Mandel said.

Limelight Presented by South Valley Civic Theatre in Gilroy will open with "Tigers Be Still" by Kim Rosenstock March 20-April 11 at the Gilroy Center for the Arts, 7341 Monterey St., Gilroy. For ticket information, visit www.svct.org.