

Community and Culture Center Grand Opening

New playhouse waiting in the wings

By **CAROL HOLZGRAFE**

Sitting just north of the brand, spanking new community center and Gavilan College building is an old church being transformed into the 193-seat Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

The structure first saw the light of day, in 1924, as a Christian Science church. In 2000 the city bought the church from Temple Emmanuel, the current owner, for \$900,000. The building was then moved a few feet north to make room for the college building and has spent much of the past year undergoing renovation by Kent Construction of Gilroy.

First it was shrink-wrapped to keep its lead paint from flaking off into the atmosphere; then it was lowered onto a new foundation and damaged boards and the roof stripped off. An addition expanded the 3,000 square-foot building to 7,000 square-feet. By the time of the first rains in October, the playhouse-to-be was water tight with a new roof and windows, closely following the original window design.

A "bubbly" laminate in the windows makes them slightly opaque and appear old.

The City Council chose colors for the interior and exterior, lobby and restrooms from suggestions by Architect Kurt Schindler of ELS Architecture and Urban Design.

What they finally decided upon was an exterior color of green-tinged beige with greenish window trim and a brownish window grid. The

building began life painted beige, according to John Moreno, a former mayor and chief of police.

The interior colors are not yet determined but are expected to be earth tones of tans and greens; the lobby will be an olive green. Mission-style upholstered benches will furnish the lobby, as will a will call table of similar design. The table will convert into a display area for cassettes or T-shirts related to playhouse events.

The lobby will also boast a food service cart and the plan is to dispense fabulous desserts during intermissions.

Besides the sound and lighting systems - promised to be of high quality - a most important part of theater/concert going is the seat.

The new playhouse will sport art deco theater seats with cast iron standards (side supports) and wooden backs from the Campbell High School auditorium - from the same period as the playhouse building. Campbell was willing to let them go at no cost except for renovation and re-upholstering.

They will be upholstered and the wooden backs stained cherry.

The playhouse is expected to be completed on Jan. 14 and will open with South Valley Civic Theatre's production of

"The 1940s Radio Hour."

The play is often performed at Christmastime and was originally planned to be part the community and cultural center's grand opening celebration week in December. However, the renovation took longer than expected so the playhouse opening was pushed forward to January.

Morgan Hill and area residents have an opportunity to be a permanent part of the new playhouse. For a \$300 fee, a brass plaque will be attached to one of the 193 refurbished art deco seats. The plaque sale is part of South Valley Civic Theater's fundraising program to do its part since the theater will be SVCT's new home. Call 842-SHOW. \$50 goes to SVCT and \$250 to the city to help recoup expenses. The earlier you apply, the better seat selection you will have. NOTE: \$300 is only for the plaque on your chosen seat. It does not automatically reserve the seat for performances.

A grand playhouse

Gilroy Dispatch

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MORGAN HILL – The final piece is about to be put in place. The third leg of the tripartite community and cultural center is about to spread its refurbished wings.

The Morgan Hill Community Playhouse – once an old, white church in need of attention – will open to the public Friday night in its new guise as town playhouse.

Beginning at 6:30 p.m. Mayor Dennis Kennedy and most of the City Council will cut the ribbon and give the speeches expected at such events. Then the doors will be thrown open and the public can get its first view of what \$2.5 million and a year of construction has wrought, followed by coffee and cookies – all enhanced by the music of harpist Jennifer Cass.

City Council members had a tour last Wednesday and said they were impressed.

"I was very pleased," said Councilwoman Hedy Chang. "There is a sense of surprise."

For those lucky enough to get tickets, a performance sampler will begin at 7:30 p.m. – a second show at 9 p.m. was added because of the demand. Music, dance and drama by Mes Amis String Trio, Alisa Fineman and Kimball Hurd (folk music), Opera San José, Ballet San José Silicon Valley and South Valley Civic Theatre will put the stage, its lighting and sound systems through their paces.

Rock musician and graphic artist Bob Snow, who is experienced with the intricacies of sound systems, said Thursday that the \$35,000 system is a good one.

"There are two sound set ups," he said. "One for speakers that can be turned on near the stage (for lectures, meetings and church events) – and can handle two to four microphones. There is also a 16-channel mixing system for music and drama, controlled from the booth" at the top of the house. The control booth also handles the stage lights.

Commenting on Chang's sense of surprise with the theater, Greg True of ELS Architecture and Urban Design, said it was planned.

"I had a professor who said a building should give a hint of what's inside, outside," he said, "and there should be a little moment of delight inside." True was principally responsible for turning the 4,000-square-foot, 1924 church building into a 7,000-square-foot, 2003 theater/concert hall.

"I wanted to create a new environment with an emphasis on historical quality," he said. "We created a new identity."

The church was fairly modest when built, he said, "and the tower was fairly homely."

What to save and what to alter were considerations. The lobby (in the entry tower), True said, had been remodeled with a second story of offices.

"There was a clumsy floor right through the arch-topped window," he said. "We tore it all out and returned the lobby to its original function – restoring its vertical spatial quality."

"We kept the strong parts as cues and generators for the new parts," True said.

"If we had had the money, everything now painted brown would have been (quality) wood," he said. Council insisted on squeezing as much out of its \$2.5 million as possible.

"It is always more expensive (to renovate) than if we had started from scratch," he said, "but the project went really well. Glenn (Ritter, project manager from Public Works) and Joyce (Maskell, project manager from Business Assistance and Housing Dept.) were great to work with."

True and Ritter both praised Kent Construction of Gilroy, the company that did the actual hands-on work.

"They made construction go smoothly," Ritter said.

Stage presence

Black curtains now flank the sides of the stage and a red/orange velvet stage front curtain is in place. Proscenium doors have been installed on walls just off the stage and, according to Ritter, can be swung open to narrow the stage opening. A single pianist or vocalist, for example, rarely needs the full stage width.

Back drops for theatrical performances will be hung from a grid of piping on the ceiling and anchored to the masonite floor. A flying prop tower common in most theaters, was not used because the area is formally called a "platform" not a "stage" – to satisfy building code restrictions.

Gender-specific dressing rooms have five makeup stations each plus a closet for storage and a bathroom.

True colors

True also helped choose the color scheme.

"Color is one minor development of the architectural design," he said. He chose natural and saturated colors – greens, golds and browns based on nature, primarily, because they harkened back to the Craftsman style of the period. Morgan Hill has many bungalow-style homes and, in fact, True believes the church was built by someone who normally did residential construction.

"The colors are decorative and celebratory," he said. Darker colors coat the walls in the auditorium so, True said, there would be no reflections when the house lights are down.

Light fixtures were a problem, though. True said most historical fixtures are "residential and funky – or really expensive." Instead of trying to find the unfindable, he installed modern fixtures, including a large, wiry structure in the main lobby area.

Windows of soul

A "bubbly" laminate in the center window panes makes the arch-topped windows appear slightly opaque and old.

True said certain panes in the building's designer-window shapes were laminated with a double glass to catch light differently.

"There is a (historical) reference that the glass in the original building was inexpensive but was a rippled yellow glass, and somewhat obscured," he said. "We kept the ornamental quality." The beaded glass is in the center panes, allowing a clear view through surrounding panes.

"It gives it a little sparkle," True said.

Seats of glory

When playgoers claim their seats for the first performances, (SVCT's "Lend Me a Tenor" opening Feb. 7) they will be sitting on history. The 186 Art Deco seats are originally from the Campbell High School auditorium and from the same period as the playhouse building. Each seat has cast iron standards (side supports) given a custom powder coat in bronze with green trim. The design elements are common to the 1920s; the wooden backs are stained cherry to coordinate with green upholstery.

The seats cost the city nothing except for the renovation and re-upholstering, according to Maskell.

Besides their critical function during performances, the chairs have been put to work to pay for their restoration and to bring in funds for South Valley Civic Theatre as well. For \$300, 186 lucky theater supporters will have their name or their business name engraved on brass plaques attached permanently to the chairs' arms. \$250 will go to recoup refurbishing expenses and \$50 to SVCT.

Visit www.svct.org or call 842-SHOW to inquire after plaques or SVCT tickets. Some \$5 (donation) tickets to Friday's 9 p.m. grand opening performance remain. Details: 782-0008.

City playhouse opens to praise

Tuesday, February 04, 2003

The Morgan Hill Community Playhouse Friday night was as busy as London's Piccadilly Circus - stay long enough and everybody you ever knew will pass by. The 187-seat theater and its lobby, on public view for the first time, were filled with the curious, the delighted and the exceedingly pleased.

The playhouse welcomed all comers for the first hour, served them pastries and punch and allowed sneak previews into the theater's interior.

"This playhouse allows us to renew our pride in our community," said City Manager Ed Tewes before he introduced the council. Tewes said he was one of the extremely pleased.

Mayor Dennis Kennedy and Council members Larry Carr, Greg Sellers and Hedy Chang cut a real ribbon, color-coordinated green with the new seats, and declared the place "a jewel in Morgan Hill's crown."

Kennedy mentioned how much this playhouse resembles a medieval theater in Morgan Hill's Sister City of San Casciano, Italy.

"That theater is small and intimate, too," he said. Kennedy pointed to the upper left side of the house, where, in San Casciano, the mayor's balcony is located.

"I'm waiting," he said to laughs.

Kennedy then reeled off the long list of businesses and people - professional, volunteer and city workers - who were responsible for the theater's successful renovation: the architects, designers, construction and landscaping teams, Tewes, project construction manager Glenn Ritter of the Public Works department, project design manager Joyce Maskell of the Business Assistance and Housing department, the recreation and community development departments. Most of them were in the audience; all listened with looks of satisfaction.

Steve McShane, representing State Sen. Bruce McPherson, D-Santa Cruz, complimented the city at large.

"Few cities have made progress like Morgan Hill," he said. McShane also referred to the playhouse as the city's crown jewel.

Chang, rising to applause, had the job of listing details of the building and its renovation built in the early 1920s, it cost \$3.5 million - including \$900,000 to buy the church and land from Temple Emmanuel church.

Chang was followed by Sellers who said he hoped his wife, Suzie, would find her way back to the stage, now that the playhouse was so convenient to their downtown home.

"This (the playhouse) is the best of a downtown," he said, "some old, some new."

Councilman Steve Tate was out of town and was not present.

Carr, a theater enthusiast and sometime actor, praised the house design.

"There's not a bad seat in the house," he said. "Though the tech crew (in the control booth high up behind the audience) may have the best."

Carr introduced - to more applause - the South Valley Civic Theatre, about to begin its 31st season, which will be the playhouse's resident acting troupe. SVCT is planning a variety of shows from the adult through musicals to shows by and for children.

After the hour-long public ceremonies, those with tickets to the 7:30 performance trooped back inside; those with tickets to the 9 p.m. performance went off to have dinner first. The second performance was added because of overwhelming requests to attend.

Three by five inch notes engraved with "intrigue, passion, mystery, music and comedy" were the hottest ticket in town. Those without them trolled the crowd for anyone with a loose ticket or visited the SVCT table to buy passes to its opening act, "Lend Me a Tenor."