

Monkeyin' around

Gilroy Dispatch

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Marilyn Dubil



Jaime Walling, playing the role of Mowgli, center, talks with Jacob Garcia, playing the role of King Louie, during dress rehearsals for Disney's the Jungle Book at the South Valley Civic Theater Tuesday night.

With monkeys, snakes, vultures, a tiger and other jungle denizens, the South Valley Civic Theatre opens its 40th year of entertaining South County residents as a cast of 43 children puts on Disney's "Jungle Book."

The musical is directed by Dave Leon, a longtime theater buff and SVCT member.

"The cast is fantastic, we're all having a wonderful time with this show," he said. "I guarantee any audience member will get their money's worth. The children are going to be delighted, the parents will have the double joy of introducing their kids to Mowgli and the gang plus remembering the songs from when they saw the movie as kids."

The curtain opened at 8 p.m. Friday, and runs weekends through Sept. 20.

South Valley Civic Theatre, a nonprofit organization, started in Gilroy. Originally a nomadic group of theater lovers called The Gilroy Community Theatre, the organization produced two or three shows a year and performed in various venues in and around Gilroy. As it grew in popularity and drew new

members in the 1980s the group decided to change the name to South Valley Civic Theatre in order to encourage participants in South County and beyond.

Cast member Hannah Hudson, who plays an elephant, said this is not her first experience with SVCT.

"I just really like acting," she said, "and this is a really fun show. I think people are going to like all the singing and dancing."

The group typically puts on five plays a year, a children's production and a teen production, a large family musical and two adult plays. Membership is not necessary to audition for any of the productions, Leon said.

"Anyone can show up and audition," he said. "If you are a member, the cast fee is reduced, but the auditions are open. When you consider all the family members involved in the productions, particularly with the larger casts of 60 or more, you have hundreds of people involved in the organization."

Leon said though he has worked with teenagers before, during the SVCT's production of "High School Musical" last year, this is his first experience working with younger children. He is having fun, he said.

"I was a little intimidated at first, thinking about working with 43 kids, but it has been great, they have been great," he said. "What is so wonderful about the children's productions is that it's a great way to make new friends and a great way for an otherwise shy kid to come out of their shell. Sometimes they show up at auditions really scared, and once they get the part and go through the process, they've got a little bit of confidence in them, it could be just the boost that they need."

Leon, 34, said any opportunity for children to become involved in the arts is, in his opinion, a good thing.

"We're not changing lives here, but if we can plant a seed for a child, that's great," he said. "With arts funding being cut in schools, this is another option for a child to stretch his or her creative wings. I am a product of arts education, it kept me out of trouble and gave me a lot, and now I have the opportunity to pass on to a younger generation."

Involved with the SVCT since 2001, Leon has been an actor, a producer and now a director.

"I had never done a show before, and I was a little worried about working with all the kids, but one thing I do know is that it has to be fun," he said. "If a kid does a show with a tyrant of a director yelling at everyone all the time, he's not going to come back. We want to keep them coming back, having fun."

Many in the group have been involved for decades, he said, and in many cases, the group is a really family affair, with children acting or helping with the sets and mom and dad working with costumes, sets or just whatever needs to be done.

The youngest cast member of "Jungle Book," 6-year-old Mary Foster, who plays the sixth and last coil on the snake Kaa's tail, describes the whole experience very succinctly.

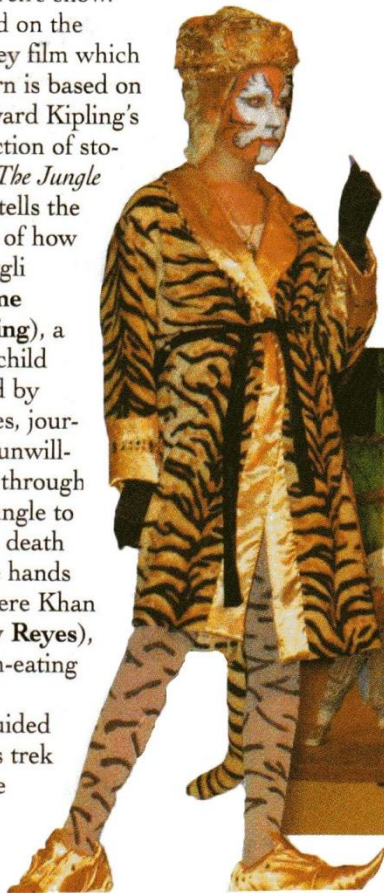
"It's just fun," she said.

For tickets and more information on show times, visit the theater group's Web site at www.svct.org.

With a twenty-minute first act, a twenty-minute intermission, a twenty-minute second act, a stage filled with enthusiastic, well-rehearsed child performers singing and dancing and never a dull moment, South Valley Civic Theatre's *The Jungle Book* may well be the ideal children's show.

Based on the Disney film which in turn is based on Rudyard Kipling's collection of stories, *The Jungle Book* tells the story of how Mowgli (**Jaime Walling**), a wild child raised by wolves, journeys unwillingly through the jungle to avoid death at the hands of Shere Khan (**Amy Reyes**), a man-eating tiger.

Guided on his trek by the



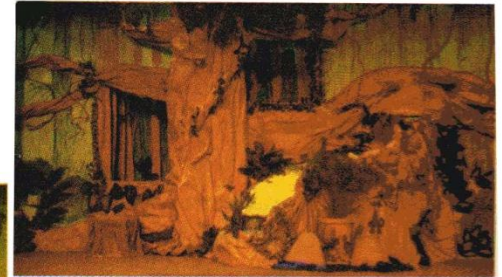
benevolent panther Bagheera (**Samantha Birtola**) and the bear Baloo (**Dominick Lucido**), Mowgli barely avoids the crushing grip of hypnotic snake Kaa (delightfully played by six actresses – **Kelsey Griffin**, **Haley Brogan**, **Emily Carrillo**, **Rachel Foster**, **Emily Sherratt** and **Mary Foster** – yoked together in descending order of height and linked by a coils of springy plastic). Farther along, he encounters a herd of military elephants led by Colonel Hathi (**Alyssa Nowlen**) and meets up with a tribe of dancing monkeys ruled by King Louie (**Jacob Philip Garcia**). The cast includes a coconut tree (**Bridget Harnett**), wolves, bees, flowers and a quartet of vultures who resemble the Beatles circa 1965.

All are clad in fanciful costumes designed by the multi-talented **Carol Harris** who also serves as vocal

THEATRE NOTES

An Ideal *Jungle Book*

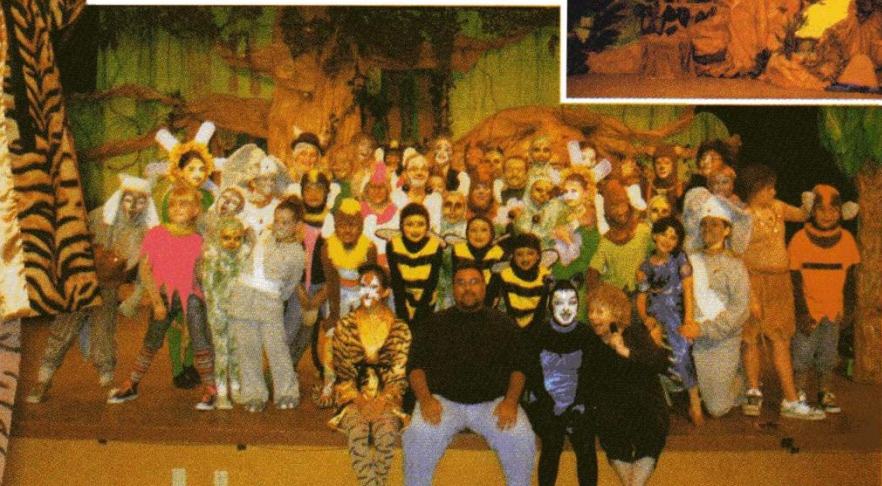
by Paul Myrvold



TOP: SET BY LANCE LASHELLE.

FAR LEFT: AMY REYES AS SHERE KHAN.

LEFT: DAVE LEON, CAROL HARRIS AND THE CAST OF THE JUNGLE BOOK.



director. **Alika Spencer** designed wonderful animal make-up, which the cast learned to apply themselves.

Director **Dave Leon** keeps the action flowing and choreographer **Misty Reese** has given the cast of 45 steps and routines that look good when done by a crowd of kids and are within their varied abilities.

Lance LaShelle's set is a superb whimsy, well illuminated by **Beric Dunn's** lighting which also includes leafy projections on the walls of the house that brings the audience into the imaginary jungle.

The children have a ball doing this show obviously surrounded by loving adults who help them learn the art of the theatre. Kudos SVCT!