

# SVCT matinee modified for children with autism

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Melissa McKenzie | Photos by Robert Eliason

Last month, a Broadway actor made headlines for coming to the defense of an audience member and her child. In a matinee performance of “The King and I,” actor Kelvin Moon Loh heard a child screaming during an intense moment of the play’s second act.

He was disheartened when, from the stage, he heard the audience lambaste the mother for bringing her autistic child to see a family-friendly show in the middle of the day. He took to social media to express his dismay and has received an outpouring of support, according to several online news reports.



Incidents like the one in New York are not uncommon as parents who have children with special needs often feel discriminated against in public. So afraid are they of any public scrutiny that they often avoid attending the theater, going to the movies, eating out or other pleasures most families enjoy.

Luckily, some performances on Broadway offer “special needs” shows where the house caters to people with disabilities. And right here in Morgan Hill, South Valley Civic Theatre is doing the same.

When the curtain opens on SVCT’s matinee performance of Disney’s “Mulan Jr.” this Saturday, Oct. 10, the audience will see the show in a slightly different way than other performances. The house lights will remain up, lighting and sound will be toned down, and scenes throughout the show will have been slightly modified to not startle the audience.





The performance is specifically designed for people with special needs, an idea that can be credited to SVCT Board Member Tiffany Goller. Her 14-year-old son Max, who is cast in the “Mulan Jr.” ensemble, has autism and was unable to watch his two older brothers perform as they went through the SVCT program. Although Goller wanted to give Max that opportunity, she didn’t want to risk him having an outburst and upsetting other members of the audience.

But after studying the Broadway model of special needs performances, Goller approached the SVCT board about producing a similar show. They agreed to try it with a performance of “Shrek” earlier this year.

“[The performance] was awesome ... it was the first time Max sat through an entire show,” Goller said. “He sat there the whole time and watched the whole thing. Part of that was that he had his iPad and headphones on and it didn’t distract other people.”



Goller was stunned to see the theater almost completely sold out for the special “Shrek” performance. The show drew an almost full house with people of all ages and disabilities, from young children to two complete rows of adults.

There were kids in the audience singing, and it wasn’t just kids,” Goller said. “I would say some of them were at least 50 years old, and they were all people with disabilities. They were thrilled.”

The show's success encouraged SVCT to do a similar performance for "Mulan Jr." Goller believes the theater will continue to provide special needs performance for shows that can be easily modified.

"We just let the actors know that there may be shouting and dancing and just to keep going and let the audience enjoy the show," Goller said. "For 'Shrek' it was a huge, amazing and wonderful show. I'm hoping that there will be the same excitement (for Mulan Jr.)"

Scott Lynch, an SVCT board member, producer and vice president of publicity, agrees with Goller.

"It is gratifying on both sides of the 'magic curtain,'" he said. "The audience experiences theater when they otherwise may not, and the actors and stage crews are blessed by being able to share their talents with people who especially appreciate their performance."



*South Valley Civic Theatre presents "Mulan Jr." at 8 p.m. Oct. 9-10, 16-17; noon Oct. 10; and 2:30 p.m. Oct. 11 at Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, 17090 Monterey St. Tickets \$15-\$22. For information go to [svct.org](http://svct.org). The special needs performance of 'Mulan Jr.' is at noon on Saturday, Oct. 10 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, 17090 Monterey Rd. Tickets (\$15-\$22) are available through [brownpapertickets.com/event/2294062](http://brownpapertickets.com/event/2294062).*







