

South Valley

A half-century on stage

South Valley Civic Theatre's 50th season

By Susan Rife

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SVCT's 1986 production of the *Music Man*. Featuring Chuck Meyer, Frank Pattie, David Drom, Charles Krahenbuhl. Photo: Eugene's Salon of Photography

It's anyone's guess which is more numerous along the crowded sidewalks of Manhattan, actor/performers or tourists. But earlier this summer, one group arrived in New York City checking both boxes.

They numbered about 30, all from Gilroy, Morgan Hill or the surrounding area and all representing South Valley Civic Theatre. They saw three different Broadway shows, including the Tony Award-winning *The Band's Visit* and a new revival of the timeless *My Fair Lady*. They attended a Broadway workshop. And they came back home with a new spring in their step, ready to take on a special season.

On Sept. 21, SVCT will bring to the stage Disney's *Aladdin Jr.*, starring about four dozen local kids. The family-oriented production opens up SVCT's 50th season, which will include five productions and a special golden-anniversary gala dinner early in 2019.

"Because this is our 50th anniversary, this season is slightly different," said Peter Mandel, former president of the SVCT board, who was one of the lucky travelers to New York. "It's sort of a greatest hits season. We went

to our audiences, our members and our board and we did some polling to see what shows that we haven't done in a while, but are thought of as particularly memorable in our history."

That means after *Aladdin Jr.*, the company will gear up for its holiday production, *It's a Wonderful Life*, based on the beloved movie. Then in 2019 comes the teen musical production of the Jesus Christ saga *Godspell*, followed by the founding-fathers musical *1776* and, finally, by the classic American musical *Gypsy*, which made Ethel Merman a star.

It's a bit of a curveball from SVCT's seasons of years past. Usually, the company puts together five productions a year (four is more common among community theater groups), including a kids production and a teen production. They will also typically schedule one big musical crowd-pleaser which then allows them to stage something a bit more offbeat or unknown (and non-musical) that's still worthy of an audience's attention. This year, to mark its big anniversary, the schedule is instead going with an all-star line-up of crowd-pleasers, all at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

It's been a long and unlikely journey for the group that staged its first show (Neil Simon's *Come Blow Your Horn*) in September 1969, just a couple of months after the first moon landing. Back then, the company was known as Gilroy Community Theatre, and they staged most of their productions at Gavilan College.

But by the 1980s, the company was nomadic, landing in one venue after another. Carol Harris, one of SVCT's mainstays for 30 years, moved to the area in 1985 from upstate New York where she had been busy working in dinner theater. She was first cast in a role in the chorus in *South Pacific*.

"The first rehearsal, they didn't have a piano player, because their piano player had quit for some reason" she remembers. "So, I offered to play for the rehearsal. At the end of the rehearsal, the director asked me if I would be willing to give up my role in the show to be the piano player. I was, "Sure, why not?"

Thus began a decades-long association with the theater troupe that saw Harris take on every role from actor to dancer to director to costumer to musical director.

Harris, 80, came to town just in time for one of the turning points of the company, then under the direction of San Jose theater veteran George Costa. In an effort to expand its reach north to Morgan Hill and south to San Benito County, Gilroy Community Theatre decided to change its name to South Valley Civic Theatre. The newly renamed group widened its nomadic circle more to include performances in Morgan Hill and Hollister, and strengthened its support in Gilroy, thanks to support from key individuals such as Gilroy High School drama teacher James Maya and Dispatch columnist Chuck Myer.

"There was no still homebase," Harris says. "We built sets wherever we could find a garage or a backyard. We used the warehouse behind the old Sherwin Williams paint store on Monterey (Street) for storage."

In the early 1990s, it looked like SVCT's wandering was over when they moved into a new space in Morgan Hill's Tennant Station shopping center. But that didn't last either. Soon, the company was again on the move, staging productions wherever they could find a stage, high schools in Gilroy, Hollister and Morgan Hill, hotels, restaurants, furniture shops, even the Pumpkin Patch in San Martin.

It wasn't until 2001 that SVCT finally found its permanent home as part of Morgan Hill's redevelopment of an

old church property at Dunne and Monterey. The church was renovated and converted into the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse, and the new era began in February 2003 with a production of the comedy *Lend Me a Tenor*.

Since its beginnings, Gilroy Community Theatre and South Valley Civic Theatre have provided performance opportunities for hundreds of people, many of whom started as child performers.

“We’ve always felt there’s a lot of value in performing arts for kids,” said Peter Mandel who, like Harris, first performed at SVCT in *South Pacific* (albeit a later production).

The company has also been mindful of keeping the interests of both audiences and performers by seeking out unusual material. For every *Mame* or *Music Man*, there’s a production of the oddball Marx Brothers comedy *A Day in Hollywood, a Night in Ukraine*.

“Financially,” says Mandel, “our challenge is that we don’t have to make positive money on every show—though that would be wonderful. But if we’re putting on a show that we don’t think will sell as well but is still an entertaining and important piece of work, then we’ll also schedule *Annie* to pay for it.”

With it all—the cultivation of kids and teens, the mix of material from popular to offbeat, the drive to stay alive through its years-long nomadic moving around—South Valley Civic Theatre has become the center of social life for many people in the region.

“When I found Gilroy Community Theatre,” says Carol Harris, “it was like I found a family.” Two of her children and her husband were also drawn into the theater community.

“We work hard together,” she says. “Generations of people just keep coming back. It’s wonderful to reconnect with people you’ve known from every show, but also to meet new people as they get involved. And even as the times and the technology has changed, the shows have gotten better and better.”

Harris moved away for a couple of years before returning and getting involved again. Then, in 2011, after directing the comedy whodunit *Curtains*, Harris announced that she was tired. It was time for her to retire. She took a bow and considered *Curtains* to be curtains for her as well. “I told everybody this is it. I’m not going to do it anymore.”

The retirement lasted just more than a year. By late 2012, she was involved again. She will, in fact, be in the director’s chair for *Aladdin Jr.* in September.

“I just keep getting pulled back in,” she laughs. “I guess it’s in my blood.”
For more information, visit svct.org.