

## **Curtains Up Theater Review ... with Camille Bounds: Limelight Theater's 'Nice Family Christmas' offers laughter and tears**

**Seven local residents perform in a holiday show full of comedy and pathos**

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By Camille Bounds



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel, South Valley Civic Theatre

Marilyn Pifer as “Grandma” (left) and Jo Anna Evans as “Mom” perform in “A Nice Family Christmas” performing at the Limelight Theater.

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Limelight Theater’s holiday play “A Nice Family Christmas” brings the South Valley a show that is full of laughs along with sentimental moments that will remind audiences our relationship with our family members is enhanced when we love each other despite our flaws.

Playing until Dec. 18 at the Gilroy Center for the Arts, the dramedy features an ensemble cast of seven family members. They put the “fun” in dysfunctional as they learn life lessons while dealing with the challenges of a hilariously unpleasant Yuletide gathering. I found the actors in this bright, fresh production breathe a hilarious reality into a very personal, almost real-life plot for each character. Every actor is on stage for almost the entire production, and everyone delivers a fine caliber performance.

Written by Phil Olson, Allie Bailey directs the play, with Robin Bezanson as managing director. The story takes place one Christmas Eve when a newspaper reporter must write a last-chance story about a typical family Christmas or else get fired. He chooses his own family made up of his widowed mother, his crazy uncle, his eccentric grandmother, and his battling siblings and their neurotic spouses.



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel, South Valley Civic Theatre

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The cast includes Justin Kerekes as “Carl,” Joanna Evans as “Mom,” Marilyn Pifer as “Grandma,” Jerry Rosas as “Michael,” Karyn Morton as “Stacy,” Peter Mandel as “Uncle Bob,” and Caitlin Jachimowicz as “Jill.” The show is set in Mom’s condo in Minnesota.



Photo courtesy Elizabeth Mandel, South Valley Civic Theatre

In directing the play, Bailey has created a tremendously endearing chemistry as the various family members face the challenges of a gathering with a mixture of quirkiness and tenderness. She keeps a complicated, humorous plot moving swiftly.

A Morgan Hill resident, Pifer steals the show as the curmudgeonly “Grandma.” She hits her character with a realism that makes the other family members reach for the truth in themselves. Pifer brings a “tough love” tone to the play as she cuts through the niceties of family gatherings and hits other members of the family with painful reality. She has made this role hers.

Peter Mandel as the confused alcoholic “Uncle Bob” shares a poignant, dramatic moment describing his life that comes across with heart-wrenching honesty.

Jo Anna Evans as “Mom” serves as the glue of the story, connecting all the characters together with her love and honesty

Justin Kerekes as “Carl” the journalist keeps all balanced as best he can by showing love for his family

Karyn Morton shares her private moments with reluctance and wonder with the family’s acceptance.

Jerry Rosas as the competitive brother “Michael,” frustrated by his complicated life, comes across with humor and diligence.

Caitlin Jachimowicz as “Jill,” Michael’s wife, does a well done and believable job.

“A Nice Family Christmas” gives South Valley a gift of an excellent production with a creme de la creme cast that can hold its own anywhere. We are fortunate to have such professional and dedicated actors here.

If you enjoy wonderful theater, spend a fun night at Limelight’s “A Nice Family Christmas.”



## **‘Nice Family Christmas’ leads off full slate of holiday events**

By: Erik Chalhoub    November 24, 2021

<https://morganhilltimes.com/nice-family-christmas-leads-off-full-slate-holiday-events/>

Allie Bailey, director of “A Nice Family Christmas,” faces a tall task: How can she turn seven strangers into a multi-generational family that’s known each other for decades?

The mannerisms, the arguing, the compassion for each other—it’s something that’s nearly impossible to accomplish in a little more than a month’s time.

Yet, with *Limelight* by South Valley Civic Theatre’s holiday performance set to open Nov. 26, Bailey, the cast and crew have achieved such a feat.

Bailey, who has worked as an organizer for corporate events, put her experience to the test. Throughout the rehearsals, which began in mid-October, she organized various team-building exercises and games to build a bond between the actors so they can feel comfortable with one another on stage.

The effectiveness of these exercises is easy to spot. During a recent rehearsal, Bailey chose Justin Kerekes, who plays Carl in the show, to be interviewed by this reporter. As Kerekes broke away from a scene, Karyn Morton, who plays Carl’s sister Stacy, let out a laugh, as if teasing him for being chosen.

In true sibling fashion, Kerekes turned the tide on Morton, and dragged her into the interview as payback for her mockery.

“This is a wholesome dysfunctional family,” Bailey said. “This family cares about each other. They all have their issues, but you really see that they love each other. There’s a lot of sarcasm and ribbing and a lot of growth. There’s no real intent for harm or cruelty.”

Morton said the cast has been “having a lot of fun in rehearsals.”

“Everyone’s been very friendly,” Morton said. “Allie wanted us to feel like a family.”

“A Nice Family Christmas” follows Carl, a young newspaper reporter. On Christmas Eve, Carl, who is on the brink of being fired, has been assigned a story about his family’s Christmas as a last-ditch effort to prove himself.



The cast of "A Nice Family Christmas" includes Justin Kerekes as Carl (clockwise from left), Marilyn Pifer (Grandma), Karyn Morton (Stacy) and Jo Anna Evans (Mom). Limelight by South Valley Civic Theatre's performance opens Nov. 26. Photo: Erik Chalhoub

He goes home to his recently widowed mother, his loopy uncle, his eccentric grandmother and his argumentative siblings. However, when his family learns that he is taking notes on them for his article, "the fruitcake hits the fan," the show's description reads.

Bailey, who is the production manager at Los Altos Stage Company, has been directing in the Bay Area since 2013. This is her first time directing for Limelight.

"This is a fun new theater," Bailey said, noting the thrust stage that was installed inside the Gilroy Center for the Arts recently, where Limelight performs. "The people are great, and there is a very exciting and engaged community aspect."

Indeed, the thrust stage layout, which made its [debut in September with the opening of "Ripcord,"](#) allows the audience to be seated cabaret-style at small tables on three sides of the action. As such, the crowd

can feel like they are in the living room with the family, Bailey said, as the actors engage in rapid-fire dialogue around a food-filled table.

Attendees are invited to bring their own dinner to the show, which is a staple of Limelight performances. All audience members, as well as cast and staff, must be fully vaccinated against Covid-19.

Kerekes, who has worked with Bailey in the past, said this is the first time he's performed with Limelight and the rest of the cast.

"People have been super warm and inviting," he said. "It's a fantastic environment. I love the space. I've never worked in a space that has such a big thrust. I'm interested to see how that dynamic works in a live performance."

Bailey said she is thrilled that live theater is "back with a vengeance" after a year-and-a-half of cancellations and virtual performances due to the pandemic.

"There's nothing like the magic of live theater," she said. "We want to feel connected to one another, and one way to connect is to go to live theater. This is such an intimate venue. You get the opportunity to really connect and celebrate the spirit of the holidays."

"A Nice Family Christmas" runs Fridays through Sundays from Nov. 26-Dec. 18 at the Gilroy Center for the Arts, 7341 Monterey St. Tickets are \$25. For information, visit [svct.org/2021\\_family](https://svct.org/2021_family).

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## A Nice Family Christmas' dramedy will brighten your holiday season Play at Limelight Theater runs through Dec. 18

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<https://morganhilllife.com/2021/11/12/a-nice-family-christmas-dramedy-will-brighten-your-holiday-season/>



By Staff Reports

Limelight Theater's holiday play "A Nice Family Christmas" puts the "fun" in dysfunctional. Opening Nov. 26, the dramedy features an ensemble cast of seven family members who learn life lessons as they face the challenges of a hilariously unpleasant Yuletide gathering.

Written by Phil Olson, the play is directed by Allie Bailey, with Robin Bezanson as managing director. The story takes place one Christmas Eve when a newspaper reporter must write a last-chance story about a

typical family Christmas or else get fired. He chooses his own family made up of his widowed mother, his crazy uncle, his eccentric grandmother, and his battling siblings and their neurotic spouses.

The cast includes Justin Kerekes as “Carl,” Joanna Evans as “Mom,” Marilyn Pifer as “Grandma,” Jerry Rosas as “Michael,” Karyn Morton as “Stacy,” Peter Mandel as “Uncle Bob,” and Caitlin Jachimowicz as “Jill.” The show is set in Mom’s condo in Minnesota.

In directing the play, Bailey said the cast has created a tremendously endearing chemistry as they face the challenges of a difficult family gathering with a mixture of quirkiness and tenderness.

“It’s extremely funny and you might see a bit of yourself in some of these characters,” she said. “I think that’s what art is supposed to display, it’s supposed to be a reflection of the world back to us. This is a Christmas where they talk about all the difficult things and things get revealed to the audience. But they’re wrapped into a nice comical package. If you want a fun evening with your friends, this is the show to go to.”

As the curmudgeonly Grandma, Pifer brings a “tough love” tone to the play as she cuts through the niceties of family gatherings and hits other members of the family with painful reality.

“We all oftentimes feel pressured to behave certain ways when we’re with our families, especially when we haven’t seen some of them,” she said. “Sometimes we tip-toe around. This family doesn’t really tip-toe. They just come right out with it. And they all get through it, and at the end everything gets resolved, and it’s clear that they really are a family.”

Bailey describes the show’s family as “wholesomely dysfunctional.” The characters are not intentionally cruel to each other but are facing emotional challenges under the surface.

“It’s about that ribbing and that loving kind of dynamic,” she said. “And at the end they all love each other and want to support each other, but they all have their personal struggles in what they go against.”