

Limelight Theater finds new home

By [Calvin Nuttall](#) August 25, 2025



Limelight Theater's new venue in Morgan Hill maintains the group's focus on providing an intimate dinner theater experience. Contributed photo.

Local theater group retains its unique identity after merging with SVCT

After losing their original Gilroy venue, Limelight Theater found an unlikely new home in a building the city acquired for the Panthers indoor football team, creating a unique space-sharing arrangement that allows the dinner theater to continue operations.

South Valley Civic Theatre purchased Limelight's name and assets from founder Kevin Heath in 2019. Heath had operated the unique dinner theater for nine years at the Gilroy Center for the Arts before relocating out of town. At the time, many local theaters were shutting down.

“We didn’t want yet another theater company to close,” said Peter Mandel, president of SVCT’s board of directors. “It was one of many little theater companies in the Bay Area with a pretty good reputation, doing smaller shows, but high quality.”

Limelight’s winning formula was a departure from the traditional theater experience. Rather than the usual proscenium seating, small audiences of up to 50 people sat at tables arranged around the stage, bringing their own meals or ordering catered food, creating a social atmosphere that extended well before and after performances.

“Instead of the usual experience of going to a play, where you walk in, stand in the lobby, then go sit in your seat and watch your show, most of the people came early, they sat around, they brought snacks, and they would have it as a social event,” said board member Elizabeth Mandel.

The timing proved challenging. Shortly after taking over operations, COVID-19 shutdowns forced the cancellation of their first planned production, “Tigers Be Still.”

“We were about to open the show a week after COVID hit,” Elizabeth Mandel said. “We couldn’t do it, we had to close down.”

During the pandemic closure, the couple used the downtime productively, creating a thrust stage configuration that pushed the performance area into the audience, with patrons seated only two rows deep around the stage’s edges. This innovation brought audiences within five to ten feet of the actors, creating an immersive and intimate theater experience.

However, the organization faced another setback when they were forced to leave their Gilroy venue. Determined to maintain Limelight’s signature dinner theater experience, Peter Mandel searched throughout Morgan Hill and Gilroy for alternative spaces.

The solution came from an unexpected source. The City of Morgan Hill had acquired a building next to the Aquatics Center as part of an agreement with the Bay Area Panthers indoor football team, who use it as practice space during their five-to-six-month season, leaving it empty the remainder of the year.

“The city essentially said, ‘Well we do have this other thing, I’m not sure if it would work because it’s not a theater,’” Peter Mandel recalled. “Well, you can make a theater out of almost anything, and when everything came together and penciled out, it seemed to work.”

Converting the empty shell required extensive work. To improve the plain building’s exterior, the company covered it with banners, constructed new stairs for patron safety and accessibility, installed interior walls to create dressing rooms, and brought in portable bathrooms. They also loaded in a complete bar setup, tables, chairs and all theatrical equipment for each production.

“All of this was stuff we had to create to make this triple-wide trailer into a theater,” Peter Mandel said.

Incredibly, at the end of each performance season before the Panthers move back in for their turn with the space, the company has to undo all of that, moving out completely and beginning anew every season.

The effort proved worthwhile. Their first production in the new space, “Dear Jack, Dear Louise,” sold out its initial run, prompting the addition of another performance that also sold out.

“We probably had the best feedback from the audiences that we’ve ever had,” Elizabeth Mandel said, comparing the response only to their post-COVID reopening with “Ripcord.”

The new venue’s flexibility allows the company to reconfigure the space for each production. “Dear Jack, Dear Louise” used a promenade stage with actors positioned at opposite ends of the room, performing along pathways through the audience. Their upcoming production, “Kimberly Akimbo,” will return to the thrust stage configuration when it opens Aug. 29.

“We now have three separate rooms, where we can, for each show, reconfigure it however works best to get the best interactive experience for the plot,” Elizabeth Mandel said.

The venue arrangement requires careful scheduling. The company operates on six-month windows when the Panthers aren’t using the facility, allowing for two Limelight productions per window. Shows that don’t fit the intimate venue’s timeline are produced at SVCT’s main location, the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse.

The unique casting requirements for Limelight shows attract actors from throughout the Bay Area, drawn to dramatic roles that don’t require singing or dancing abilities. The intimate setting demands exceptional performances, as every gesture and expression is visible to the close-seated audience.

“Every character counts so much, because you’re seeing everything they’re doing,” Elizabeth Mandel said.

Despite the logistical challenges of rebuilding the theater configuration every six months, the Mandels remain committed to preserving Limelight’s distinctive audience experience.

“It’s a lot of work to reimagine it with every show,” Elizabeth Mandel acknowledged, “but it was magical again to get back to the Limelight up-close-and-personal experience.”

Emily Shem-Tov, Limelight’s Managing Director, said the company is excited about the flexibility their new venue provides.

“We get to reinvent it for the new season, and we’re really excited,” she said. “It was magical again to get back to the Limelight up-close-and-personal [experience], and seeing people come and bring their dinners, and having really good up-close dramatic theater.”

With the option to set their shows in either location, the arrangement creates an opportunity for SVCT’s organizers to strategically pick the right venue to tell a particular story.

“It also opens up opportunities to pick small plays with small casts that are suited for that intimate venue, and then a larger play like last year’s farce that has a lot of doors and a bigger cast,” Shem-Tov explained.

The success has validated their decision to preserve what Kevin Heath created, maintaining the social, intimate theatrical experience that has built a loyal following in the South Valley.

“We tried to continue the things in the formula that Kevin had that were successful,” Peter Mandel said.

Limelight’s new season begins with “Kimberly Akimbo,” a play about a teenager with a rare aging condition that makes her appear to be in her 60s, opening Aug. 29. The second show of the season at the Limelight venue is called “The Other Place,” opening in January.

In the meantime, SVCT will present two musicals at their Playhouse venue, creating an intense season of overlapping rehearsals and performances.

“We’re really happy with this balance, but it’s a lot of work,” Elizabeth Mandel said. “Peter and Emily do these two shows almost singlehandedly.”

Shem-Tov admitted the need for additional volunteers, saying, “It is a tough time for arts organizations, but we are very lucky that we have this amazing, supportive base, and this platform to build on. We want more community involvement, but we are meeting the need.”

To learn more about Limelight and SVCT’s upcoming season schedule, and to find out how to get involved by auditioning or volunteering, visit svct.org.