

# No one-night wonder

Adrienne Bischoff | Posted: Monday, June 11, 2012 12:00 am

A nonprofit community theater will celebrate its “miracle” 30-year run in the Santa Cruz Mountains with a one-evening show.

On June 16, at Ben Lomond’s Park Hall, Mountain Community Theater will host “Miracle on Mill Street,” a one-night-only revue celebrating its 30th anniversary.

With “Miracle,” MCT aims to entertain audiences while honoring its members, an ever-changing nearly all-volunteer cast, crew and board.

Co-producer Rita Wadsworth said she wanted the evening to recognize that MCT has been a family.

“And, like in a family, we fight, we debate, we party, and we laugh, but we stay connected,” Wadsworth said.

She and co-producer Ann McCormick plan a three-act show, with each act paying homage to a decade of MCT. The result will be an eclectic mix in a wide variety of styles reflecting both MCT’s willingness to experiment and the changing tastes of the theater’s membership.

But it was one particular “miracle” that’s helped keep the theater vital.

Inspired along with the other founders to create a family-oriented theater, Wadsworth and Peter Troxell early on wrote a stage adaptation of “Miracle on 34th Street.”

The work was published, bringing royalty income to MCT.

For the next 20 years, those royalties, supplemented by grant funding, enabled MCT to finance large-scale productions, purchase equipment and build a subscriber base more than 1,000 strong.

The group also hired a general manager to assume much of the work previously done by volunteers.

But upon entering its third decade, MCT suffered critical setbacks that nearly shut its doors.

For one, its volunteer base had diminished, an unintended consequence of hiring a general manager.

Then, in 2003, 20th Century Fox Film Corp., which owned the rights to the film version of “Miracle on 34th Street,” threatened to sue MCT if it continued to collect royalties on the stage adaptation.

MCT eventually worked out an arrangement with Fox, but during the intervening nine years, it received no royalties.



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Acacia Bowers, Scott Westberg, Roy Wittrup and Rita Wadsworth (Left to right) perform in the Neil Simon Comedy Suites, one of Mountain Community Theater's first productions.

That financial blow, coupled with the dissolution of certain grant programs, forced MCT to cut expenses, including its general manager. By then, many onetime volunteers had moved on to other priorities, leaving a skeleton crew to keep the theater afloat.

Richard Gaughan, the group's president from 2005 to 2008, remembers those years well.

"There were times when the theater's monthly meeting would consist of two people wondering what to do next," he said.

But MCT kept the doors open with at least one show a year, earning it the distinction of being Santa Cruz County's longest-running community theater.

The silver lining to this period was the opportunity for new members to make their mark.

In 2006, in an artistic departure from family-oriented productions, MCT put on "The Rocky Horror Show"—a hit with audiences.

And from those audiences sprang a new base of volunteers, including current president Mark Hoagland and Miguel Reyna, who later directed stage adaptations of the TV series "The Twilight Zone."

"I saw MCT as an open canvas to edgier shows I wanted to direct," Reyna said. "They gave me a start and supported me through better or worse."

With its new membership, MCT earned a reputation as an edgy theater, producing shows like Edward Albee's "The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?" and "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

MCT continues to give newcomers a platform. Its next production, a soon-to-be named reading of an original noir comedy written by two young adults, opens Aug. 11.

But more significant, its participants say, is that the theater was able to right itself.

"Even without the 'Miracle' money, we still managed to hang in there, and that's because of our volunteers," Hoagland said.

Many of MCT's founding members have returned in recent years. And for the first time since 2003, MCT this year will again receive "Miracle on 34th Street" royalties.

Even as it acknowledges the creative differences between returning and newer members, "Miracle on Mill Street" will show the group's shared love of the theater and the open-door policy that makes this community theater a small-town success.

*Adrienne Bischoff is a community theater advocate.*

### **"Miracle on Mill Street"**

When: 7:30 p.m. June 16

Where: Park Hall, 9370 Mill St., in Ben Lomond

Cost: \$20 general admission, \$15 seniors and Mountain Community Theater alumni

Info: [www.mctshows.org](http://www.mctshows.org) or 336-4777