

MCT ready to 'play ball' with 'Damn Yankees'



Alie Mac plays the reporter interviewing Joe Hardy, played by David Jackson in Mountain Community theater's *Damn Yankees* opening Friday in Ben Lomond. Dan Coyro — Santa Cruz Sentinel

By **Wallace Baine**, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*

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For those who consider baseball's opening day to be a semi-sacred holiday, there is this bad news: We are still more than a week away from the first pitch of the new baseball season.

But there's also this good news: To fill that yawning chasm of bleak nothingness, Mountain Community Theatre is opening its new season on Friday – and, with an eye firmly planted in the season, MCT is presenting the most baseball-friendly musical in the theater tradition, "Damn Yankees."

For the record, the show's director Peter Gelblum is a Philadelphia Phillies fan, and a life-long New York Yankees hater. He said that however much the Tony-Award-winning musical is steeped in baseball, it's just as much for the baseball-indifferent.

"You don't have to be a baseball nerd to enjoy this play," said Gelblum. "It really appeals to everybody, whether you're a baseball fan or not. At its root, it's about what's important to you. What would you sell your soul for?"

If you haven't seen "Damn Yankees," it doesn't actually have any Yankees in it. It's the story of Joe Boyd, a fan who loves the Washington Senators just as he loathes the Yanks.

'Damn Yankees'

Produced by: Mountain Community Theater

When: Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through April 19. Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m. No performance Sunday, March 29.

Where: Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond

Tickets: \$25 general; \$20 seniors and students; \$15 for children 12 and under.

Details: www.mctshows.org.

Joe runs into a character named Mr. Applegate, who turns out to be the Devil, who offers him a deal, a chance to become a star ballplayer and lead the Senators to a championship in exchange for his soul. Part of the deal is the attentions of Applegate's lovely assistant Lola. Spoiler alert: Joe takes the deal.

If you recognize the plot, yes "Damn Yankees" is a true-blue American take on the old German folk tale "Faust." The musical, written by George Abbott and Douglass Wallop, with music by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, debuted on Broadway almost exactly 60 years ago, famously starring Gwen Verdon in the role of Lola. The next year, the production won six Tony Awards, including one for Verdon's performance, and another for the choreography of the fabled Bob Fosse. It won yet another Tony 40 years later when it was revived in 1994.

In MCT's production – which features a cast of 19, including six in Washington Senators uniforms – Gelblum shares his creative leadership with choreographer Shannon Marie Kerr (who also plays Lola), and musical director Steve Abrams. Gelblum is most known as a director of staged dramas, including last year's "August Osage County" at MCT. "Damn Yankees" is his first go-round with a musical.

"I wanted a challenge," he said. "It's a different job. I'm not part of the choreography or the music, so there are very large segments of the play that was not up to me at all. If I didn't like what was going, it would be a problem. But Shannon and Steve are great, and we're all on the same page."

One interesting element to this production is its set design. Instead of traditional sets, Gelblum has brought in several screen projections to suggest settings such as baseball dugouts. "I'm doing something I've never done before," he said.

Gelblum said his background as a dramatic director has carried over in directing "Damn Yankees," as he elected to bring a sense of naturalism to the zany musical. "No matter how bizarre or over-the-top the story is," he said, "you still have to make it real. You still have to bring a depth of emotion to it. That's true for all theater."

"Damn Yankees" opens Friday at Park Hall in Ben Lomond.