

Mountain Community Theater looks back at the miraculous ups and downs of 30 years



The Mountain Community Theater, located on 9400 Mill St., will be turning 30 shortly

By WALLACE BAINE

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A list of all the productions staged by Mountain Community Theater over its 30-year history runs to well over 130 titles. Among those plays are many of the old standards of the American theatrical canon: "The Music Man," "Bye Bye Birdie," "West Side Story" and "Grease." Along with the splashy musicals were high-minded serious theater as well, such as "Inherit the Wind," "Uncle Vanya" and "A Streetcar Named Desire."

It's a deep and dazzling list and forgive those who have been involved with MCT during its years as the cultural nexus of the San Lorenzo Valley if they are feeling nostalgic and are mining that long list for memories. After all, on Saturday, MCT will present a one-night-only revue looking back on its 30 years titled "Miracle on Mill Street."

Still, there is one play among all the Gilbert & Sullivans, Cole Porters and Stephen Sondheim's that stands out, and it's referenced right there in the title of Saturday night's performance.

It is the Christmas chestnut "Miracle on 34th Street," a stage adaptation of the beloved 1947 film starring the then-6-year-old Natalie Wood. "Miracle" is certainly a linchpin of MCT's long and colorful past. But it also may be the key to its future.

On Saturday, the theater company pays homage to its past with a three-act production divided between its three decades at the group's home base of Park Hall in Ben Lomond. Act One looks back at the first 10 years of MCT's life; Act Two its second and Act Three its most recent. It's kind of a time-capsule walk-through with songs, laughs and memories.

Check out photos of Mountain Community Theater productions [here](#).

Also part of the evening will be a re-creation of one of the lively board meetings the group held in its early years.

"We want to re-create the vibe of it," said the scene's writer Rita Wadsworth, one of MCT's co-founders and a stalwart presence in the group both on stage and off. "We would argue because everyone had very passionate beliefs. But in the end, everyone agreed."

"Miracle on 34th Street" was not MCT's first production, but its second. The first production was a pairing of Neil Simon's "Suite" comedies, performed in Boulder Creek. In December of 1982, the fledgling theater group tackled "Miracle" for the first time.

Lyle Troxell was 6 years old then. He was an elf in that first "Miracle."

"I remembered being bored at rehearsals," he said. Troxell grew up in what turned out to be the First Family of MCT. His father Peter and mother Diana were among those who got the company off the ground, including Wadsworth, Kathie Kratochvil, Randy Birch, Marj Young, Mac McElwain and others.

At the time, "Miracle" was not even a play, but a film and a novel. It was Wadsworth and Peter Troxell -- also the longtime station manager at KUSP [88.9 FM] who died in 2004 -- who sat down with the book and hammered out a stage script from it. That turned out to be a fateful decision.

Peter Troxell did some directing and a bit of acting, but mostly, said Kyle, he was the group's accountant. Diana was a director and producer. Kyle acted but eventually moved into the tech side, lighting and sound. Older sister Adriana was a big participant, and younger sister Marina was MCT's resident musical prodigy in her youth.

"I've called it a church," said Lyle of MCT. "I can't think of a time in my life -- graduation from high school, my first girlfriend, any of it -- that isn't connected to MCT in some way."

Lyle's story isn't unique. MCT became a kind of community academy for kids during its first two decades.

"The kids were there with us in the theater," said longtime director Kathie Kratochvil. "They were usually backstage with someone they hired playing games, so our kids really grew up in the theater."

Lyle Troxell works at UC Santa Cruz's Digital Arts & New Media program in lighting, sound and projection, so, he said, his years with MCT amounted to a professional apprenticeship.

It wasn't until the late 1990s that MCT moved to publish its own adaptation of "Miracle on 34th Street," striking a deal with the estate of Valentine Davies who wrote the novel. Over the course of six years, rights

to the play earned MCT more than \$76,000 with almost 200 productions taking place of the play in 41 states and Canada.

In 2003, however, 20th Century Fox, the studio behind the movie, successfully made the legal claim that neither MCT nor the Davies estate were the legal rights holder of the play. The royalties stopped coming in. The company also lost a major foundation grant and the next winter, Peter Troxell died. The company, said Wadsworth, almost went under, producing only one show per year.

In 2006, MCT produced the cult classic "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," which again jump-started the company by bringing in fresh energy from a new younger demographic. Since then the company has produced ever more risky and intriguing material, including "Breakfast of Champions" and "I Hate Hamlet."

Then, in 2010, came a miracle about "Miracle." Director Peter Gelblum, an attorney by day, negotiated an agreement with Fox through his brother, an intellectual rights attorney, and MCT was back in the royalties game.

Many in Mountain Community Theater feel that the theater company ""-- which has for years worked as a kind of beacon for performance throughout the San Lorenzo Valley from Boulder Creek to Felton -- is on its way back to prominence. In 2011, the group presented five productions. This year, the group has remounted some of its past productions as part of its 30th anniversary, including "Crimes of the Heart" and "Harvey." In October, "Rocky Horror," directed by Kathie Kratochvil, returns and, in December, "Miracle" makes another appearance at Park Hall, as the royalties for the sale of the play are expected to come back.

"We look at it as an endowment for MCT," said Rita Wadsworth. "We are on the brink of our fourth decade. There are so many possibilities. What direction we go to really has to do with the energy coming in."

{ SATURDAY 7:30 p.m. Park Hall, 9370 Mill St., Ben Lomond. \$20 general; \$15 for subscribers, seniors and MCT alumni. www.mctshows.org. }