

## Theater productions halted during COVID-19 shelter in place



Appearing in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's 2016 production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were Clint Blakely as Robin Starveling, Christian Strange as Tom Snout, Kate Eastwood Norris as Penny Quince, Daniel Fenton Anderson as Snug, and Bernard K. Addison as Nick Bottom. (Contributed — RR Jones)

By **JOANNE ENGELHARDT** | joanneengelhardt@comcast.net | Santa Cruz Sentinel

April 15, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.

Just a few weeks ago Santa Cruz area theatergoers crowded together in public spaces to enjoy the creativity of actors, while directors were in the midst of opening up their spring productions or getting ready to start rehearsals on upcoming ones.

What a difference a month makes.

It was an unfortunate coincidence that Gov. Gavin Newsom's announcement to shelter in place came just a few days after "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" was scheduled to open at Mountain Community Theatre in Ben Lomond. Reluctantly, MCT canceled the entire run on March 13.

Likewise, Santa Cruz's Jewel Theatre was in the process of previewing its production of "Heisenberg" on March 18 when theaters went dark. Jewel Artistic Director Julie James first hoped "Heisenberg" could be moved to June but now is working to find a place for it in Jewel's 2020-21 season beginning in September.

Local theater took another big hit April 7 when Santa Cruz Shakespeare Artistic Director Mike Ryan made a proactive announcement that SCS is postponing its entire 2020 summer season of three plays to 2021.

"The plays I selected for this summer all examine how we find our way past disaster – but never did I imagine the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic when I contemplated the nature of this adversity," Ryan said via video and email to the SCS community. Ryan said he and his staff feel this is the right decision "in the interest of public health and the well-being of the festival."

Likewise, on March 30 Cabrillo Stage Artistic Director Jon Nordgren announced that Cabrillo's two summer musicals, "Kinky Boots" and "Candide," have been axed "in accordance with guidance received from the Chancellor's Office, state, and local healthcare officials."

Nordgren lamented that the cancellations mean many actors and production people "will not be able to learn and work at their chosen craft this summer. We're always indebted to these theater 'gypsies' who will give all they can to make Cabrillo Stage the best show in town."

Likely the first local theater company to switch dates for an upcoming production was Actors' Theatre which was scheduled to open "Claybourne Park" in May at Center Stage Theater. It's now been postponed to Sept. 25.

But canceling or postponing productions is only half the equation. Empty theater seats mean empty pockets for theater companies. Theater companies also have fixed costs like rent, utilities and staff employees who still need to be paid.

That's why most announcements about shuttering productions are coupled with a plea for donations. Ryan's letter to subscribers includes the request that "...if you can give to help mitigate the significant loss of ticket income, we'd sure be grateful."

Peter Gelblum, MCT's board president, says his organization has offered refunds to people who bought tickets to "Cuckoo's Nest" or to future productions. "We're still deciding how to handle season subscriptions depending on what happens with the rest of the 2020 season, but almost no one has asked for a refund and many are donating the price of their tickets to MCT," he said.

Likewise, Actors' Theatre is offering ticket holders three choices: A refund, exchange for a future performance or donating the ticket cost to the theater as a tax-deductible donation.

James says Jewel's monthly fixed costs run close to \$40,000. That figure covers payroll for the core staff (including taxes, workers' comp and health insurance) plus occupancy costs at Colligan Theater at the Tannery Arts Center (rent, utilities, a portion of the common area, taxes, etc.).

"Many of our ticket holders told us to hold their tickets for the rescheduled performances, some want their tickets credited to next season, and some have asked for refunds," she explained and added, "Several of our patrons have been very generous and made monetary donations to help us keep going."

Ryan promises that SCS will be rolling out a series of "behind-the-scenes" video interviews with theater artists that explore what goes into creating a season at SCS. He also hopes to offer educational videos and even virtual community play readings during the current medical crisis.

He wants the community to provide feedback "...for making your festival the best it can be. If there is programming you'd like to see online, or beyond the summer, share those ideas with us."

Obviously the current "shelter-at-home" situation has created financial difficulties and uncertainty for everyone, but local theater groups are focused on the future. Actors' Theatre's website now includes a call for entries for its annual "8Tens@8 Festival" next January:

In light of the current (coronavirus) pandemic, Actors' Theatre would like to support and encourage writers who submit to the International Short Play Contest by waiving the usual submission fee of \$10 for 2020. Submissions will only be accepted via email at [www.sccactorstheatre@gmail.com](mailto:www.sccactorstheatre@gmail.com). Play submission deadline is July 1.

Ryan promises his subscribers that SCS will "explore new programming in the winter or spring." As for Cabrillo Stage, Nordgren says he's hopeful there will be "a new Renaissance of creativity, and an appreciation and commitment to the Arts and to our Festival of Musical Theater."

James, who uses many Equity actors in Jewel productions, says there are difficulties with putting together videos of their past performances because it requires union waivers and authorizations, as well as payments to the actors and restricted access to the video.

"We're spending a lot of time figuring out what is best for the upcoming season, along with alternate plans as we see what happens with the virus," she adds.

Contact Joanne Engelhardt at [features@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:features@santacruzsentinel.com).