

L.A. Stage Magazine

January/February issue

Musical Theatre Guild turns 11

By David C. Nichols.

Musical Theatre Guild has become a revered local fixture even though its beginning was humble when on January 1, 1995, Jeff Rizzo and Eric Andrist contacted working actors about starting a membership company of musical theatre talent.

Beginning as a series of living room readings, “with meetings in a Burbank church basement,” as founding member Marsha Kramer recalls, MTG has grown into the West Coast equivalent of New York’s Encores! From one-night concerts at the Pasadena Playhouse – Rizzo and Andrist’s inaugural *A Christmas Carol: The Musical*, played to about 40 people – the organization now brings a five-show season to Glendale’s Alex Theatre. Some shows repeat at the Scherr Forum in Thousand Oaks and Long Beach’s Carpenter Center, and Glendale alone has a subscription base of around 700 people.

Stephen Sondheim’s *Saturday Night and Passion*; Adam Guettel’s *Floyd Collins*; Andrew Lippa’s *The Wild Party*; Jason Robert Brown’s *Parade*; and Ahrens and Flaherty’s *A Man of No Importance* had their L.A. premieres via MTG. *Redhead*, *Allegro*, *Here’s Love* and *Plain and Fancy* are but four of the lesser-known shows the company has unearthed. This season has already seen Sondheim’s *Merrily We Roll Along* and Strouse and Adams’ *It’s a Bird, It’s a Plane...It’s Superman!* Kurt Weill’s operatic *Street Scene*, a much-anticipated undertaking, arrives in February, followed by Rodgers and Hart’s *A Connecticut Yankee* and Willy Russell’s *Blood Brothers*.

The typical MTG season is set as the calendar year begins, to start the following September. Auditions occur a month before opening, with usually only two group rehearsals for music two

weeks before a show. That comes together during a weekend push, from the Friday before to the Monday night performance.

“That’s what I like about it,” says Kramer, fondly remembered as Wendy to Sandy Duncan’s Peter Pan. “That adrenaline gets going, and sometimes you think, ‘I’ll never survive this,’ but somehow, you do. That’s the magic of the theatre.”

Another plus: seasoned pros get to play “all kinds of roles,” as Kramer notes. Founding member Susan Watson agrees. “Where else could you see Teri Bibb, a *Phantom* Christine, playing a chorus member? We all get to stretch and grow.”

And connect with musical theater history. In MTG’s 2005 *No, No Nanette*, Watson, who originated the title ingénue in the 1971 Broadway smash, took on the Ruby Keeler role of Sue Smith. “That was a joyous experience,” Watson recalls, “I can hoof a little, but not like Ruby.” She called choreographer Gwen Hillier, “and we’d meet like twice a week. I bought a piece of lumber, a little flat board, and tapped away. My grandchildren had never seen me in a show before. They sat there and ate it up. Now, when I’m coming to their house, they ask if Grandma will bring her tap board with her.”

Alan Weston, the Board of Directors chair, notes a steady evolution over 11 years. “When we first began the readings at the Pasadena Playhouse, actors sat around the stage, with a piano, maybe drums, and that was it,” Weston recalls. “Gradually, over time, we have evolved into a complete staged reading, with costumes and minimal props, bigger orchestras. However, under Equity’s staged reading contract, the actors still have to carry scripts. That has almost become an art form of its own.”

Jennifer Shelton, who joined MTG in 2004, and has played roles ranging from virtual cameo Winnie in *No, No, Nanette* to a hilarious Lois Lane in *Superman*, agrees. “This style certainly exercises different muscles. The best thing you can do is to come into the process prepared: scripts highlighted, music learned, and mind focused. It’s one of those things that the more you do it, the better you get.”

Kevin McMahon, publicist for the company and driving force behind the educational programs, was Shelton's sponsor for membership. (MTG recruits its roster of first-rate talent by invitation from within the group). McMahon, a memorable Cocky in last season's *Roar of the Greasepaint*, notes, "You have to prioritize where to spend your 25 hours of rehearsal and where you can do work on your own. You need to find ways to take the pressure off."

Pressure is a given. Michael G. Hawkins, another founding member, recalls, "I was playing the Sewer Man in *Dear World*. I got a job on *Frasier* that taped the Monday of the concert...and was told I'd be out of the taping in plenty of time." Hawkins wasn't released from *Frasier* until 7:15, with a 7:30 curtain. "You have no idea what kind of reaction you get from a TV producer when you tell them you need to get to curtain at a theatre job," he notes. "The stage manager was preparing to go on in my place. But member producer Karen Culliver announced that the curtain would be a bit late, as one of the actors was speeding his way from the Paramount lot to Glendale. No one in the audience seemed to care. Don't think that would be the response at the Ahmanson or the Taper!"

One aspect that has redoubled since Rizzo and Andrist departed in 1999 is that the actors produce everything. Weston explains: "Every show has two company members as producers. We hire out the directors, choreographers, musical directors and such. But, by and large, the organization now runs itself."

Weston adds, "We have gotten to the point, between subscribers and grants, where we are self-financing. The money we raise in tickets and grants pays for the shows, the royalties, the cast salaries. We have no paid staff, except for one part-time administrative employee. MTG is financially solvent, and it will remain so as long as I'm on the board.'

Hawkins elaborates. "Like most musical theatre companies on the West Coast, we are nonprofit with a Board of Directors. We work under a union contract. That's where the similarities end. We, the membership, make all artistic decisions, choose the shows for each season, hire the creative people we want to work with and cast/produce our own shows. We do elect a committee of five

MTG members each year to work as a team and handle most of the day-to-day business of running a theatre, the Executive Committee. With our Board of Directors, they make all the decisions for the company.”

Shelton, the current Executive Committee chair, says, “As an actor, you have no idea how much work actually goes into producing a show. Every actor should produce at some point in his or her career.” In steady demand as a performer, Shelton adds, “it has been a challenge trying to balance my work as chair with my own performing schedule. But my job is made a whole lot easier by the fact that I have an incredible support system.” She refers to fellow Executive Committee members S. Marc Jordan, Jenny Gordon, Gordon Goodman and Reece Holland (Goodman, pictured in this issue, was not interviewed due to schedule conflicts, a prime example of the time constraints that MTG members juggle.)

Rizzo and Andrist hoped for eventual full productions. Hawkins says, “I would love to see this happen,” and McMahon believes that “it would be wonderful if something like *Man of No Importance* or *Wild Party* could have had a life after our few performances. The response was so great and the shows themselves so special.”

Conversely, Kramer would “like to see *more* concert staging, even just costumed in basic black. It puts the emphasis on the material.” Watson also advocates “simplicity. I’d like to see us try some of the Jerome Kern Princess Theatre shows.” Shelton envisions more diversity. “It would be wonderful to cast essentially traditional shows multi-culturally, as well as taking on more unconventional pieces. Bigger and better is nice, but our real aim is to provide quality productions that draw in and reflect the interests of the next theatre-going generation, showing them where theatre has been and where it can go when there’s a place for everyone in it.”

To that end, the educational programs, funded by grants and by member Carol Kline’s “Broadway Babies” greeting card series, are of paramount importance. Two shows devised by McMahon -- “History of the Musical Theatre in 42 Minutes and 28 Seconds” and “From Page to Stage” – travel around Southern California schools every spring and fall for two to four weeks.

“Since we were chosen by the Music Center Foundation to represent them in L.A.U.S.D.,” says Weston, “these programs have been seen by 50 to 60 thousand students. Some of our student audiences have never seen anything but a rock video.” Recent grants from the L.A. County and L.A. City Arts Commissions have enabled MTG to bring 50 to 100 students from schools and colleges around the area to attend the regular performances free of charge.

McMahon says, “I always see a kid or two who gets that spark in their eye, and you know you have changed a life, and these are the only the ones that I see. I remember a program I saw when I was in school and thinking, ‘I could do that.’ The programs are integral to the overall mission, because we are creating a new audience and artistic base by exposing so many to this wonderful art form.”