

Arts in Mind

Thriving Theater in Mill Valley's Hub

By Suz Lipman

142 Throckmorton Theatre, in the heart of Mill Valley's downtown, continues an artistic history that goes back almost 100 years, to when the building was called the Hub Theater. The Hub featured Charlie Chaplin movies and live vaudeville acts. The building has since housed the Odd Fellows Lodge and, in the 1970s, was home to the "Saturday Nite Movies", the precursor to the Mill Valley Film Festival. The building was little used and falling into disrepair when, in the early 2000s, Mill Valley resident Lucy Mercer purchased it and brought her vision of revitalizing the downtown theater.

Today, 142 Throckmorton Theatre presents a wide variety of theater, film, dance, music, fine art, and educational programs. In addition to big-name music acts and Mark Pitta's popular Tuesday night comedy programs, 142 features open readings, rehearsals and dialogs in a continuing effort to involve the community as artists and audience members. Lucy Mercer writes: "142 Throckmorton Theatre is founded on the philosophy that (the arts) are essential components of a rich and rewarding life, and an indispensable part of human inspiration and education. They expand our horizons, challenge our beliefs, and surround us with passion and beauty. They also foster a sense of community by bringing together diverse populations, young and old, artist and audience. Our goal is to use the transformative power of the arts to stimulate and enrich us as individuals, while simultaneously promoting the community solidarity upon which we all ultimately depend."

Lucy Mercer received a 2008 Milley Award for Creative Achievement, presented by the Mill Valley Art Commission.

According to 142 resident artist and scenic designer Steve Coleman, "The person I respect the most in this world, for creating daily wonder, is Lucy Mercer. Her imagination and vision made this theater space out of nothing. Every day Lucy puts herself out on a limb in incredible ways to find the performers and the funds to sustain the enterprise." Resident artists are another part of Mercer's community vision. Cartoonist "Lippy" creates the Herald's "Fault Lines" comic strip upstairs at "The Hub".

Youth Theater Program

A new program within the theater is Adam Saville's Marin Youth Performers. Saville, a former Mill Valley teacher and youth theater camp director, recently decided to bring his passion for children's theater to 142, with a program that includes classes in acting, expression, improvisation, and backstage work for children in grades K-8. Some of his fall classes will culminate in a production of Roald Dahl's "Willy Wonka Junior", in which students will act in the cast as well as perform backstage roles. "We have a complete student crew working behind the scenes -- from backstage to the lighting booth

-- so every aspect of the production is student-driven," Saville says. He adds that all children are welcome to participate. The cast of "Willy Wonka" includes children from throughout Marin.

Saville adds, "The capacity that the performing arts have to bring diverse groups together in a collaborative and supportive way in order to build and create is deeply profound. This particular creative process is something that cannot happen in isolation, but only through coming together as a community. In many ways, young people are much more open to this unique way of sharing and creating with each other. And when is there a better time for people to begin making these connections to themselves, to each other, and to their community, than when they're young?"

Craig Reiss and the EOS Ensemble

On November 23rd, local violinist Craig Reiss will bring his EOS Ensemble to 142 Throckmorton for the third time. Reiss, who has played in both the San Francisco Ballet and San Francisco Opera Orchestras for 16 years, founded the EOS Chamber Music Ensemble in 2003. "I play with such talented colleagues, I wanted the chance to perform more intimate chamber music with them," Reiss said, "to focus on music that's not typically performed, with a mix of different instruments and voices."

Reiss' November 23rd program emphasizes clarinet and strings. It will begin with Mozart's "Clarinet Quintet", which Reiss called, "one of the two great chamber music masterpieces for clarinet and strings." The second piece on the program is a fascinating work, according to Reiss, "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind", by Osvaldo Golijov. Golijov is a contemporary Argentinean/Jewish composer whose parents escaped Eastern Europe ahead of the Holocaust. The piece, Reiss said, takes the writings of a 12th century rabbi and sets them to klezmer and prayer melodies. The middle section is frenzied and joyous, typical of a Jewish wedding dance. "It's an emotional, moving work," Reiss said. "A lot of contemporary music goes over peoples' heads, but this goes right to the heart. It's also a difficult piece to perform and I'm looking forward to it.

The last piece on the program is Bedrich Smetana's "String Quartet No. 1 ("From My Life)". "It's a fascinating work," Reiss said. The Czech composer's life parallels Beethoven's, in that he became deaf toward the end of his life. The quartet's movements delineate some of Smetana's life passages, including a high note that signifies the moment of going deaf. "It's a dramatic work," Reiss said. "It's uplifting, filled with different moods, very intense and very moving."

"142 Throckmorton Theatre is a wonderful, intimate venue," Reiss said. The EOS Ensemble has also recently played on many other stages. Reiss does everything from finding performers and space, scheduling rehearsals, programming the music, and promoting the shows. In addition to his work with EOS and the two orchestras, he is a parent of two children at Edna Maguire School, where he gave a concert last year featuring mezzo soprano Katharine Tier.

“Many of the kids had never heard that kind of amazing trained voice up close,” Reiss said. “They were blown away. There was a tremendous response from the kids that showed how dramatic opera can be. We also introduced music concepts like harmony, melody, and rhythm.” Reiss added that he is in the process of seeking funding to take similar concerts to all the Mill Valley elementary schools. His EOS Chamber Ensemble concert in November will be a benefit concert for Kiddo!, the Mill Valley Schools Community Foundation.

“I’m passionate supporter of Kiddo! and of music in the schools,” Reiss said. His own violin training began at age 8. “I’ve always felt that learning about music from a young age was beneficial in many ways, supporting development in math and science as well as teaching discipline and performance skills that last a lifetime,” he said. Joining him in the EOS ensemble performance will be string players Mariya Borozina, Caroline Lee and Thalia Moore, and clarinetist Jerry Simas. “The musicians I work with are enthusiastic and of the highest caliber,” Reiss said. “And we seem to be getting more of a following at 142, where people come to hear interesting, different programming.” He added, “I love playing in the pits of the opera and ballet. When I’m on the stage, I connect in a different way with the audience, and that’s also very gratifying.”

Craig Reiss and the EOS Ensemble will perform “Dreams and Prayers: Music for Clarinet and String Quartet” at 142 Throckmorton Theatre Sunday, November 23rd, 8:00 p.m. “Willy Wonka Jr.” will be performed Friday, November 7th, 8:00 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday, November 8th and 9th, 2:00 p.m. Call 383-9600 for info on both. More information on EOS can be found at www.eosensemble.com.

Suz Lipman is a writer and parent. Teacher and parent Annette Venables helped on the article. “Arts in Mind” is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education.