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“Music Man” Highlights the Power of Community

Since its Tony award winning Broadway premiere in 1957, “The Music Man” has remained one of the most enduring musical comedies in American theatre. Over the past 50 years, this wholesome tribute to small town America has enjoyed countless regional theatre productions, a Broadway revival, and two film adaptations.

So what keeps drawing people back to the old chestnut?

“It’s about the power of community,” says local theatre veteran Anne Marie Hunter, who is currently directing “The Music Man” for The Western Stage (TWS). “Its knowing when push comes to shove, people have your back.”

Having directed “The Music Man” for TWS 18 years ago and at a local theatre camp more recently, Hunter should know of what she speaks regarding Meredith Willson’s beloved musical comedy.

Based on his experiences growing up in rural Iowa, Willson’s play tells the story of Harold Hill, a small-time huckster who comes to town promising to save the local boys from a life of depravity by teaching them how to play in a marching band. There’s only one problem: Hill doesn’t know a thing about teaching kids how to play musical instruments, much less how to perform in a marching band. He only knows how to collect money from eager parents for instruments and outfits before disappearing on the next train out of town. Will a budding romance with the town librarian be enough to change this swindler’s ways?

“It’s about the power of goodness,” says Hunter. She says Hill must eventually ask himself if he can really continue to swindle all these people once he gets to know them. It is appropriate that Hunter is directing a play about the power of community right now. This year marks 20 years since she relocated to the Monterey Bay area from Los Angeles, where she enjoyed a successful career as a choreographer in both theatre and the music industry. “My husband came up before me, so he surveyed theatres before I arrived,” she says. “He was a talent agent, and he liked The Western Stage the best.”

Written by Daniel Tarker, TWS Writer
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So Hunter focused her sights on TWS after moving up to the Salinas Valley and joined the company as a choreographer for the production of “Pippin” in 1990. She has since remained an active member of the TWS artistic team, eventually moving from the dance studio to the director’s chair with productions like “Into the Woods” (2004), “Meet Me in St. Louis” (2006), and “Mame” (2009), to name just a few.

What brings her back season after season? Like the play she is directing, it is the sense of community this theatre company brings to her life. “Everyone who comes into this theatre gets an experience that’s just so positive,” she says. “I feel that TWS is a family and everybody collaborates with each other from the administration all the way down the line.”

Hunter’s contribution to the community through theatre does not stop at The Western Stage. She also works on a project funded by the Salinas Waste Authority to bring plays into the classroom to educate local youth about recycling and conservation. Hunter writes the scripts and has actors go into the classrooms to perform them for students. Not only does Hunter believe this project is important because it teaches students how to preserve the environment, but also because it exposes them to the performing arts.

With arts funding always being the first area targeted for elimination when schools try to balance their budgets, many kids are not taught performing arts, and she believes it is having an effect on them. “Many kids don’t have great presentational skills anymore,” say Hunter, who believes the training students receive in performing arts can translate into improved public speaking skills. “That’s not just a theatre skill,” she says. “It’s a life skill.” She hopes her project will go state-wide in the near future.

“The Music Man” plays July 24 to August 14 on the newly renovated main stage in the Hartnell College Performing Arts building. Performances are Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. Season tickets are always the best option. Reserve your seats through The Western Stage ticket office at (831) 755-6816 or online at westernstage.com. For group sales, contact Ron Cacas at (831) 759-6012.