

The Beauty of Cabrillo Music Theatre

By Julio Martinez

AS HE JUGGLES INCOMING PHONE CALLS regarding auditions for *Beauty and the Beast*, Artistic Director Lewis Wilkenfeld adamantly proclaims, through much of its existence, Cabrillo Music Theatre may have been one of the least known theatrical gems in the Southern California area.

"We've been in existence for 33 years" he says, "the last 12 in the 1800-seat Kavli Theatre at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza. For years we have flown under the radar but I think we are beginning to get the critical and public support our productions deserve. A good deal of the credit for our upsurge is due to the leadership of Carole W. Nussbaum, Cabrillo Music Theatre's President and Chief Executive Officer."

CMT is concluding its 2006-2007 three-show season with the stage version of the Oscar-nominated Disney animated film, with music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Howard Ashman and Tim Rice, and book by Linda Woolverton. Wilkenfeld directs with musical direction by Tom Griffin and choreography by Peggy Hickey

Coincidentally, Cabrillo's *Beauty and the Beast* opens as the Broadway production concludes its 13-year run of over 5,000 performances. "The sets and costumes for our production honor the film and Broadway designs without slavishly copying them," he says. "They were created by one of our sister companies, Music Theatre Wichita, and are being shipped to us in three huge trucks. They are spectacular."

Nussbaum affirms, "The public won't be able to go to Broadway to see *Beauty and the Beast* but they can come here and see 'Broadway in Your Own Backyard.' That is our company theme."

Wilkenfeld, born in Houston, became enamored with live theatre in LA while a film student at USC. He celebrates the end of his first year as Artistic Director and his 11th CMT directorial effort since 1996. These include *The Music Man*, *Annie*, *West Side Story*, *Carousel* and *The Secret Garden*. His production of *Bye Bye Birdie* was named Ventura County's Production of the Year.

The director is proud of the talent that has graced the Cabrillo stage over the years. "We operate under an Actors Equity Guest Artist contract," he says. "For *Beauty and the Beast* we have three Equity performers in a cast of 45. But there is no drop off in talent. We have about a

dozen talented and professional Thousand Oaks-area performers who have recurred in our productions over the years. We also have outstanding non-Equity dancers from the LA area. In fact, many of the dancers from this season's opener, *A Chorus Line*, are coming back for *Beauty*."

The leads are Equity actors Chris Warren Gilbert (*Beast*), whose latest CMT credit is *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, Matt Merchant (*Gaston*), last seen as Fonzie's arch nemesis Jacques Malachi in *Happy Days: the Family Musical* at the Falcon, and a non-union performer (not yet cast at press time) to play Belle.

"Of course, there are many layers of work to be done," says Wilkenfeld. "Aside from getting this show going, Carole and I are deeply involved in Cabrillo's first four-show season, beginning with *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* in September. The fact we feel the community's ready to accept and support four shows is a testament to how far CMT has come."

Nussbaum, who has enjoyed a successful career in law and business, having worked with leaders of Fortune 500 and large corporations including Revlon and Pepsico, has held her CMT title since May 2005. She says, "I believe my strongest qualification for my position with Cabrillo is my great passion for musical theatre, and I have been quite impressed with the growth of interest in live theatre

within the community." During a production season, CMT averages 30,000 patrons but Nussbaum oversees a program designed to increase this interest even further.

"To this end, Cabrillo Music Theatre has established the Adopt-a-School program which has proven to be a successful outreach program for underserved schools," she says. "Through this program, Cabrillo makes live theatre accessible to children who otherwise may never have the opportunity to experience a musical theatre performance."

"We are instilling a love for musicals in a whole new generation of theatre patrons," adds Wilkenfeld. "And we fully expect CMT to be offering the Adopt-a-School program to future generations." ■



CMT's Wilkenfeld and Nussbaum

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—CAROLE W. NUSSBAUM

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Opens July 27;
plays Thurs.-Fri., 8 pm;
Sat., 2 and 8 pm;
Sun., 2 and 7 pm;
through Aug. 5
Tickets: \$22-\$51
Kavli Theatre
Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza
Countrywide Performing
Arts Center
2100 Thousand Oaks Blvd.,
Thousand Oaks
805.449.2787 or
www.cabrillosmusictheatre.com