

New Artistic Director for Town Hall Theater

By Sophie Braccini



Suzie Shepard has been onstage and behind-the-scenes for Town Hall. Photo Sophie Braccini

It's been only two years since Joel Roster became artistic director at Lafayette's Town Hall Theater. But the young director, actor and educator was given a hard-to-resist opportunity that is taking him further west on a new adventure. To replace him, the theater's board has asked Suzie Shepard to become interim director — at least to lead the coming season.

The shows have already been lined up and the directors chosen, and Shepard says she will focus on getting audiences in the seats and concentrate on fundraising.

Town Hall audiences know Shepard for the many roles she played there, always bringing forth her vivaciousness and delightful positive energy. She was Edwin Drood in the eponymous play, she played Veronica in "God of Carnage," and in "Company" she was Amy — a role for which she received a Shelly Award.

But the most brilliant actors do not necessarily make the cut for theater artistic direction. The reasons why the board asked Shepard to take the helm are to be found off the stage. Besides her acting career, Shepard had a life in academia in the area of recreation. Her undergraduate degree was in theater arts, and she focused her graduate degree on the study of the creative process. She eventually became a lecturer at San Jose State.

"I helped to design a course on how to create a meaningful life by engaging in the creative process throughout one's life span," says Shepard, "When people are engaged in a creative project that inspires them, they derive from it a sense of self-realization and focus less on aging."

Because of her research and interests, when the theater's board of directors went on a retreat a

year ago to focus their strategy and structure, they asked her to facilitate the meeting. Then she also worked with staff during their three-year goal setting and strategic planning session.

"I think that it was then a natural choice for the board to offer me the interim position," says Shepard. The new artistic director is slipping in shoes that have been nicely warmed by Roster: the full 2016-17 season is ready to go.

"They have got the art right," says Shepard. "My job now is to get the people in the door and reignite the fundraising."

Roster will take over as the Conservatory Production Associate at Berkeley Playhouse, "essentially the production manager for their youth theatre program," he said. THT had been a fertile growing ground for Roster who started there as an actor, led the education program, directed many plays before taking over as artistic director. But even if Roster called the Lafayette theater his home for 13 years, even if he met his wife there (Ginny Wehrmeister, who continues as education director), he could not say no to the new opportunity.

He introduces Shepard as a wonderful, dynamic supporter of Town Hall, who has dazzled audiences in a number of plays there. "She is an absolute treasure of a human being, and a brilliant artist," he adds.

The first play of the THT season, opening Oct. 1, is "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." Shepard says that the play, with this very masculine title, is an intriguing and multi-faceted story that speaks of love, literacy and our past history in the western United States.

"It takes place between 1890 and 1910 on the west frontier where old settlers and new people

from the east and their modernistic views are being confronted," she explains with excitement.

She also brags about "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" that will be co-directed by Lynda Divito, an equity actress from the "Rosemary Clooney Musical" at the Center REPeritory Company, coming with a New-York background. She'll co-direct along with THT's Justin Dupuis.

"We will showcase local children in the show. It is very fun, 50 minutes long, a perfect family outing for the holidays," says Shepard.

Later in the season she adds that Liz Curtis, whom she considers to be the most amazing jazz singer in the community, will be the lead of "Smokey Joe's Cafe."

The last show of the season will be Oscar Wilde's "A Woman of No Importance," directed by Susan Hovi, who also directed "God of Carnage" at THT.

As far as continuing with the artistic direction past this first season, Shepard is prudent. She says it is like a marriage. "Both the board and I have to decide if this is a good match for a long term relationship," she says.

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Opening Night Feature Film:

Miles
 USA 2016 - Comedy/Drama - 90 min
 Director: Nathan Adloff

Opening Night Short Film:

The Story of Percival Pilts
 Australia 2015
 Animation 8 min
 Director: John Lewis

Festival Schedule:

Orinda Theatre – Friday September 9
 12:30 PM – Shorts Program A – Make Us Laugh
 2:00 PM – 2016 CAIFF Composer Contest
 4:00 PM – Short and Feature film
 6:30 PM – Short and Feature film
 8:30 PM – Short and Feature Film

Rheem Theatre – Saturday September 10
 10:00 AM – Iron Filmmaker Contest
 11:30 AM – Documentary
 1:30 PM – Shorts Program B – Crimes and Misdemeanors
 3:00 PM – Children's Program
 5:30 PM – Short and Feature Film
 8:00 PM – Short and Feature Film

Castro Theatre – Saturday September 10
 1:00 PM – Short and Feature Film
 3:30 PM – Short and Feature Film
 6:30 PM – Short and Feature Film
 9:00 PM – Feature Film

Orinda Theatre – Sunday September 11
 12:00 PM – Shorts Program C – Love and Friendship
 1:45 PM – Short and Feature Film
 4:00 PM – Short and Feature Film
 6:15 PM – Feature Film
 8:30 PM – Documentary

Rheem Theatre – Monday September 12
 6:30 PM – Bay Area Documentary Program
 7:15 PM – The World We Live In Documentary Program

Rheem Theatre – Tuesday September 13
 6:30 PM – Sapporo Short Fest Showcase
 7:30 PM – CAIFF 2016 Audience Award Winner

Rheem Theatre – Wednesday September 14
 6:30 PM – 2016 Slate Award Best Film Winner's
 7:30 PM – 2016 Slate Award Short Feature Film Winner

Pickup a free guide at the Rheem or Orinda Theatre or at local stores