

Players piece it together

Songs and scenes from the Old West | BY CARLEY DRYDEN

“PAPA ASKED where my new baby brother was and Mama replied, ‘I’m so tired and sickly I left him back in the bushes.’ Papa went back and got him. He turned out just fine.”

Laughter erupts from the crowd gathered in the Torrance Memorial Hospital conference room as the five women on stage, dressed in prairie dresses and bonnets, act out a scene of a family traveling along the Oregon Trail.

For the past five years, The Pennyroyal Players have brought audiences stories of humor and hardships from the American West, intermixed with songs and hand-held displays of colorful quilts. The cast includes creator Anne Destabelle, Gay Durward, Ann Ehrenclou and Faye Schwartz, all Palos Verdes residents, and Joan Perkins from Torrance.

The Old West scenes cover topics as light as children goofing around in a needlework class and as heavy as a woman’s desperate attempt at abortion and a group of women listing off the names of their miscarried children.

Don’t miss it!

The Pennyroyal Players will have their 100th **“Piecin’ It Together”** performance on November 1 at the benefit fundraiser for City of Hope at Giorgio’s Restaurant in Rolling Hills Estates.

The Players’ performance was inspired by the musical, *“Quilters,”* a story of pioneer women by Molly Newman and Barbara Damashek.

But now, 60-70 percent of the Players’ performance is derived from their own humor and stories, they said. On stage with them are dozens of family heirlooms and historic instruments, including Perkins’ auto-harp and Destabelle’s 1952 Martin guitar.

“It’s an engineering feat but we can fit all of our gear in one car,” Durward joked.

Though most of their outfits are custom-made, Destabelle wears her mother’s hats and jewelry and Ehrenclou dons her grandmother’s brooch.

“When I put on the dress and look in the mirror I’m shocked because I see my grandmother, a no-nonsense woman,” Schwartz said.

The cast members aren’t the only ones who feel a strong connection



Gay Durward, Ann Ehrenclou, Joan Perkins, Faye Schwartz and Anne Destabelle make up the Pennyroyal Players.

to their family’s own past when they perform.

The Players say it’s touching to see audience members who can’t remember their children’s names mouthing words to the old folk songs. After many of the shows, audience members will come up and tell the cast their own family stories, which the Players later incorporate into the script. Others donate quilts that they have sitting in their garage. One woman donated a quilt with her family’s names threaded in.

“She wanted it to have a life and it travels with us,” Durward said.

The Cast

Anne Destabelle came up with the idea for the *“Piecin’ It Together”* performance in 2003 and began writing the script. Perkins was the second cast member followed by Durward, who had filled in for Perkins while she was in India. Ehrenclou was in the audience at one performance and later they brought her aboard too. Schwartz came on as the quilt bearer, but now acts as well.

“I had the least experience as an actor,” Schwartz said. “It’s very satisfying for me, doing real things, honoring real people.”

All of the cast members have musical backgrounds.

“I like to think of us as the aging divas,” Destabelle joked.

Durward has been performing on stage and television since childhood and graduated from UCLA with a degree in Theatre Arts. Currently, she is a featured soloist with Los Cancioneros Master Chorale.

“You don’t have to ask me twice to perform,” she joked.

Ehrenclou obtained her bachelor’s degree in music education from the University of Colorado, Boulder and is the music coordinator for the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District. She has been active in various music groups, including the Los Cancioneros Master Chorale and the Peninsula Committee for the Los Angeles Philharmonic and presents workshops for the Orange County Philharmonic Society.

Perkins’ theatrical ventures include acting, singing and dancing with Prime Time Players, Cup of Water and the Downey Civic Light Opera. She has sung with choral groups at Carnegie Hall twice.

Schwartz grew up on the Midwestern prairies that act as the setting for the Players’ scenes. She has sung with the Los Cancioneros Master Chorale for over 30 years.

Destabelle plays piano and guitar for friends, family and even at weddings,

including her own to husband, Ray. She sings soprano with the Los Cancioneros Master Chorale, with the LC Ensemble Singers and performs with American Association of University Women’s Readers Theatre.

“Piecin’ It Together”

The Players have performed across Southern California, from the Cheesecake Factory in Redondo Beach to the Calabasas Garden Club and of course, numerous Palos Verdes locations, including the Wayfarers Chapel and the Palos Verdes library.

“We don’t turn anybody down,” Destabelle said. They already have bookings into 2011.

Aside from providing South Bay residents comic relief, the Pennyroyal Players contribute all of the donations they receive to local Palos Verdes school programs, Los Cancioneros Master Chorale and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Palos Verdes Chapter. They have collected \$20,000 to help provide music and science scholarships.

The Players have sponsored four girls at \$1,000, for each of the last four years to attend the AAUW’s Tech Trek, a science camp for girls entering 8th grade to encourage them to explore the fields of math and science.

Their performance, *“Piecin’ It Together,”* stems from the idea that quilting is like life. Everyone can be given the same material and end up with different quilts.

“One will make a butterfly and one will make a wild goose chase,” Destabelle said.

While some women have photo books and some have diaries, other women memorialize their history through quilts. When they spread them out, it’s like they are looking back over their life, the Players said.

“It all started with, ‘Could you fill in for an afternoon?’ Now I don’t see an end,” Durward said. *PEN*

Dancing with the Stars cont. from page 19

room champion.

He retired from competition in 2006.

Born to Dance

Anna’s first childhood memories were from backstage watching her mother dance. She remembers the assortment of dance outfits sprawled across the kitchen table, ready to be adorned with rhinestones by her mother, who still makes her outfits.

With dancing, “I sort of had no choice,” Anna said. Her mother owned one of the top dance studios in the Ural Mountain region of Russia, where Anna grew up.

Anna started dancing at 6, began competing at 7, won her first competition and was hooked.

“At 12 or 13 I actually started enjoying it,” she said. “I started developing good friends and started getting really competitive.”

In Russia, ballroom and Latin dancing are like a professional sport to most kids, she said. Competitions are held in arenas.

Teaching dance is also very different. In studios, the 20 year olds teach the 16 year olds, the 16 year olds teach the 12 year olds and the 12 year olds teach the 6 year olds.

“I’ve been teaching since I was 12,” she said. “It’s cool because I always had pocket money.”

Anna won the US Amateur Standard under 21 when she was 17. In the 2008 U.S. National Dancesport Latin competition she placed third.

“He’s a champion,” she said, joking, “I’m only third.”

You Can Dance

Earlier this year, Anna, Irina and Roberts opened the You Can Dance

Dancing with the Stars cont. on page 36

Advertisement