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Loretta Kenney

director of Christian Brothers High School's production of "Fiddler on the Roof"



Sacramento Bee/Florence Low

Christian Brothers High School students rehearse a dance for "Fiddler on the Roof," opening tonight at the Guild Theatre. The school's theater is too small for the production.

THE PERFECT MATCH

Local and school productions join to keep the Guild Theatre alive by solving its stage plight

PLAY DETAILS

Christian Brothers High School's production of "Fiddler on the Roof" opens tonight at 7:30 at the Guild Theatre, 2828 35th St. The next seven showings are: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. April 6, 7, 8, and 2 p.m. April 9. Tickets are \$7 for adults and \$5 for students and seniors. Buy tickets at the school's main office at 4315 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. For details, call (916) 733-3600.

By Ralph Montaña
BEE STAFF WRITER

When Ryan Ritter entered the stage of the Guild Theatre last week, he had a few butterflies in his stomach.

The 18-year-old senior is playing the lead role in Christian Brothers High School's production of "Fiddler on the Roof," which debuts tonight.

"Yeah, I was a little nervous," said the tall, blond student, who sports a beard that's starting to fill in. He and other classmates were given permission to go unshaved for the production.

"I love it," Ritter said of the beard. "I don't want to get rid of it - ever."

He was growing into his character, Tevye, in other ways.

"I identify with his reluctance to change. He's reluctant to go along with it, even though it is inevitable," Ritter said. "I kind of feel the same way to a smaller extent because this is my last year in high school."

In a way, the high school production is symbolic of what has happened to the 91-year-old brick theater.

A dramatic change came in 2003 with a \$1 million renovation. Despite the change, the challenge remains to fill the 200 seats regularly.

This year will be the second that Christian Brothers enters into a partner-



Adam Boles, 17, one of the students taking the lead role of Tevye, sings with one of the musical's two casts.

ship with St. HOPE Academy, which manages the theater, for musical and theatrical productions.

Lori Mills, director of special projects with St. HOPE Academy, said relationships with area groups are growing at the Guild and are helping the landmark at 2828 35th St. - and community theater - stay alive.

The theater currently plays host to a variety of regular groups - everything from artists' receptions to screening films from India (known as "Bollywood" films) to a local dance troupe.

"It is definitely not dormant," Mills said.

But there also is room for growth, Mills said. "We are doing rentals to a lot of groups in the community, (but) there is the potential for it to be even busier."

This year, St. HOPE plans to hire a director to maintain and manage the facility.

"Everyone who goes to the venue enjoys it," Mills said. "From the front row to the last row in the balcony - every seat is great."

Kevin Haag, director of visual and



performing arts at Christian Brothers High School, said the school rents the theater at a reasonable rate from St. HOPE.

The Christian Brothers campus is about 50 years old, and its theater is too small to support the students' needs, Haag said.

"Sixty-five percent of our students

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Julian Castano, 17, runs through a dance routine during rehearsal. The California Musical Theatre has provided costumes and choreography for "Fiddler."

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Lori Mills, director of special projects with St. HOPE Academy

Theatre: Site has a history of struggles

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are part of the visual and performing arts program,” Haag said.

When the school started looking for somewhere else to host events, the Guild Theatre sprang to mind.

The school has had a long-standing partnership with Oak Park and St. HOPE Academy. Christian Brothers students tutor at the academy and also hold annual street cleanups in Oak Park.

Haag said having such a grand venue is “inspiring,” much more grand than performing in a school gymnasium.

Briana Wilborn, a 16-year-old sophomore, agreed. “It kind of gives us a professional feeling,” she said. “We’re not at school in class, anymore. We’re in the Guild.”

According to the Web site Cinema Treasures (www.cinematreasures.org), theaters have been struggling to survive at the 35th Street site since 1903. The Oak Park Theatre was the first to open and lasted only four years.

In 1915, the site was either redesigned or rebuilt entirely to open as the Victor Theatre. That lasted 11 years. In 1931, the New Oak Park Theatre opened and operated until 1947.

It was first called the Guild Theatre in 1952. It again fell into a state of disrepair until being rescued by St. HOPE.

Christian Brothers’ first musical production at the theater was the musical “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.”

That was followed by Agatha Christie’s “The Hollow.”

But neither production compares to “Fiddler on the Roof,” director Loretta Kenney said.

The musical has been double cast because so many students wanted to take part in the production. The students will take turns performing during the “Fiddler” run.

Having a double cast means the musical will not be eligible for regional theater awards, Kenney said.

“But we made the decision that our goal is education. We wanted to give a lot of kids a chance to sing some solos.”

Students will not only be on the stage but also will provide the music. For this project, the school found support from the California Musical Theatre, which provided costumes and choreography.

Kenney said working inside the Guild presents some set design and building challenges.

“There’s no wing space, and your entire set basically has to be broken down to fit through double doors,” Kenney said.

Kenney said large audiences would be a boost for students.

“We like it when people from the neighborhood come out and watch us,” Kenney said. “We hope more people will come here and see that Oak Park is a good neighborhood, and it has a great theater.”

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