



'PETER AND THE STARCATCHER' TO LAND AT VEXLER THEATRE

By Susan A. Merkner
Photography Greg Harrison

With the slogan, "Think Inside the Box," the Sheldon Vexler Theatre at the Barshop Jewish Community Center of San Antonio was established in 1999 as the city's first permanent black box community theater.

The Vex, as the theater is known, has had only one artistic director since its inception: Ken Frazier, who also opened the North East School of the Arts, an arts magnet school in the North East Independent School District, 20 years ago.

As proof that community theater often is a family affair, Frazier's wife, Tami Kai, a theater teacher at Garner Middle School, frequently volunteers at the Vex and is co-director with Frazier of the next Vex production, "Peter and the Starcatcher," which runs May 4 through June 4.

The husband and wife team, with assistance from their sons, have acted, directed, designed and built sets, created costumes, written scripts and scores, and handled technical aspects such as lights and sound for dozens of Vex plays.

"Our family is kind of nerdy; we like pirate-themed stories," Frazier said with a laugh. "What better way to include villains and murderers in a play than on a ship?"

Kai chimed in. "We love building ships as sets. 'Peter and the Starcatcher' allowed us to do so."

In addition to Frazier, the theater's paid staff includes Dylan Bralnard, who says she was named for "both poets," Dylan Thomas and Bob Dylan. Bralnard, the theater's production manager, became a staff member in July 2010 after three years of volunteer work there.

Other crucial volunteers are the actors and technicians who donate their time and energy for the opportunity to participate in one of the theater's four plays each season. The cast and crew are local volunteers "with a common vision: to produce compelling, thought-provoking plays and musicals that engage, entice and excite patrons," according to the Vex website.

Vex auditions are open to the entire community. Some 60 people auditioned for the 14 roles in "Peter and the Starcatcher."

Black box theater is presented on a large, square set with black walls and a flat floor -- more about the floor later. Typically there are multipurpose sets and flats, and few props or decorations. Audience seating can be configured in multiple arrangements, such as in the round or a more traditional tiered setting. The maximum audience size at the Vex is 170.

Previous shows have included "Fiddler on the Roof," "Into the Woods," "Jungle Book" and "Chicago: The Musical."

For their production of "The Metamorphosis," the Vex staff and volunteers built a 3-foot-deep, 2,500-gallon swimming pool, with two levels and a deck.

"It was beautiful and the perfect setting for the play, which combines stories from Greek and Roman mythology," Kai said. The play is based on a novella by Franz Kafka.

Kai said one of her favorite Vex shows was "Female Transport" which follows female prisoners taken from England to Australia by ship. "It was very well acted with a great ensemble; very impactful and theatrical."



Kan and Terri Kai Frazier

In addition to staging four shows per season, the Vex also runs a youth program producing musicals, such as "Singing in the Rain," "The Little Mermaid" and "Mulan."

The Tony Award-winning "Peter and the Starcatcher" features a cast of 14 actors portraying more than a hundred characters, all on a journey to answer the century-old question: How did Peter Pan become "the boy who never grew up?"

Frazier said the play is an origin story for adults and allows audiences to use their imaginations. "Technology is taking that away from us," he said. "Peter" is aimed at adults because of some clever lines and innuendo that would be lost on children.

Kal, who is handling costumes for "Peter," said the actors use numerous hats, aprons, scarves and other accessories to make quick changes for their characters. They also must vary their voices and body language to project different characters. "It's nonstop," she said.

"We call it locomotive theater," Frazier said, "because

it chugs along and never stops."

The play is based on the 2004 best-selling children's novel, "Peter and the Starcatchers," by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson. Barry is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and columnist, who wrote a nationally syndicated humor column for the Miami Herald from 1983 to 2005. Pearson is an American author of adult suspense and thriller novels and adventure books for children. The story was adapted for the stage by writer and former stage actor Rick Ellice, who co-authored the book for the stage musical of "Jersey Boys" and the screenplay for the "Jersey Boys" film.

"The San Antonio JCC was founded 120 years ago and plays a vital role in the community," Frazier said. "They have always been supportive of the arts."

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