

Performing Arts Monterey Bay

The Listening Place's trials and triumphs

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By Philip Pearce

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE LISTENING PLACE, Monterey Peninsula's popular readers' theater company. They provided local audiences with a fast, funny and entertaining version of Mary Chase's *Harvey* at La Mirada Art gallery last weekend and managed it in the face of some daunting political skirmishes and financial challenges.

There's been a fourteen year relationship between Listening Place producer Linda Hancock and the Monterey Museum of Art. Over those years, Hancock and fellow founders Marlie Avant and Iby Murphy have built up an impressive enough senior fan base to provide the art gallery over two performance weekends with a healthy crowd of extra visitors at \$10 apiece and free admission for gallery members. The all volunteer readers' theater company gained a rent-free venue, and a well-advertised donations basket at the door sometimes covered Listening Place expenses like royalties and refreshments. It looked like a continuing plus for both local art and local theater. But look again.

If you've been awake, you'll know full well that print news, symphonic music, visual arts and theatrical performances are all battling the crippling effects of cable news, YouTube home viewing and Netflix streaming service.

The Salinas Californian, no longer a local print daily, has had to abandon its Salinas office, which used to provide a well-equipped performance space for Listening Place Saturday matinees. A new high-profit management approach at the Steinbeck Center decrees that they will no longer provide performance space for Listening Place shows. The Monterey Museum of Art says gallery deficits and overhead mean even full members must pay up for shows by Listening Place, which in turn must pay rent for use and maintenance of museum space.

Not a happy picture. But nearby Monterey Peninsula College theatre has shown a feisty optimism in spite of cruel financial cuts and a kit of anti-arts bureaucracy from Sacramento. A notable example was Gary Bolen's brilliant one-man show last December of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as an MPC Performing Arts benefit.

Listening Place, at least for the moment, moves on with bright products like *Harvey* and a version of *Arsenic and Old Lace* this coming May to be directed by Maryann Rousseau.



And the cast of *Harvey* included some new top local acting talents along with regular company performers. Jeffrey T Heyer (pictured) reprised his excellent Western Stage performance in the classic American acting role of Elwood P Dowd (“Let me offer you one of my cards”) still accompanied, after all these years by his amiable six-foot rabbit Harvey. Susan Keenan was fidgety and funny as Dowd’s distracted social climbing sister Veta. There were Listening Place regulars on hand like Richard Boynton juggling farce and love-interest as a junior grade psychiatrist at a local insane asylum. The ever-resourceful Bob Colter did irate wonders as a snorting small town judge and doubled hilariously in high couture feathered hat and diamond earrings as a shrill Southern California matron. Western Stage favorite Kathy Cunningham (nee Cusson) was a ditsy delight as Boynton’s pretty nurse assistant. Listening Place newcomer Brittney Buffo couldn’t help being a bit too good looking as Dowd’s not very marriageable worrywart daughter Myrtle Mae. Then there was the versatile Carl Twisselman, all chewing gum-cynicism as a guy who drives and grapples with rebellious patients for the psychiatric clinic. Cindy Womack and Nancy Bernhard took turns at the two matinees in the dual roles of a taxi driver and of the confused but accommodating wife of the asylum’s chief medical officer, played with explosive hilarity first by Scott Harrison and then by D Scott McQuiston when Harrison was taken ill between performances.

Although last Sunday’s performance overlapped with the Super Bowl kick-off it still attracted a near full house. And it all happened at the La Mirada second gallery, which is better lit, and has much better acoustics than the big echoing hall at the Museum’s main branch on Pacific Street.

And when I last looked a lot of senior spectators seemed to be dropping big bills into the donations basket.