

THEATRE OF THE BIG BEND NEARS 50TH BIRTHDAY

by Steve Lang

From ancient Greece to modern West Texas, outdoor theatre has transfixed audiences for thousands of years, including the past half-century in Alpine.

Since its formation in 1966, the Theatre of the Big Bend has filled a summer entertainment niche for the vast tri-county region of Brewster, Jeff Davis and Presidio and beyond. The theatre provides a summer repertory experience for community actors and musicians, artists and students to work with professionals from Sul Ross State University and elsewhere.

This year's production is the critically acclaimed "Into The Woods," book by James Lapine with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Performances will be held each Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 8:15 p.m. from June 20 - July 6 at the Kokernot Outdoor Theatre.

Planning for a gala 50th year celebration in 2015 is well underway, featuring a full season of three shows.

"Fifty years of providing summer theatrical entertainment is a significant achievement," said Dona Roman, Sul Ross professor of Theatre, who has acted in, directed and produced ToBB productions for the past 16 years.

"The longevity of the Theatre of the Big Bend is a credit to the countless performers, volunteers and an appreciative audience," said Roman. "We are blessed with very hardy West Texas ranching patrons and a frontier spirit that also describes the tenacity of the Sul Ross theatre and music faculty. It continues to be a really incredible experience."

Despite a sparse population density of 1.6 people per square mile in a territory (over 12,300 square miles) larger than nine U.S. states, the Theatre of the Big Bend has entertained close to half a million people while performing more than 130 productions.

With amphitheater seating constructed on a rocky hillside dotted with native vegetation, the theatre's physical aspects conform with the West Texas environment, and occasionally, involve wildlife in the performances.

The deer and the antelope do not play roles, but three of the former once stood a few feet from director Gregory Schwab, just outside the seating area, intently watching a performance of "Cinderella."

A scorpion and a tarantula comprised "The (arachnid) Odd Couple," but appeared – only briefly before being stomped – on stage in separate shows. The scorpion's presence attracted notice in *The Wall Street Journal*, but far less than Andy Warhol's allotted 15 minutes of fame locally.

And, during a performance of Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," shortly before the murderer's identity was to be revealed, a duck left a nearby pond and waddled across the stage.

"Fabian Marquez (playing Giles Ralston) never broke character," recalled Dr. George Bradley, retired Sul Ross professor of Communication and Theatre, who directed the play. "He grabbed the duck, turned to his on-stage wife (Mollie, played by Kathleen Bowe), and said, 'A duck! What's a duck doing here? I told you to lock the gate!'," then tossed the duck through the gate." Climate and terrain also has human audience appeal.

"I really feel the best thing we have going is our topography," said Roman. "On many performance nights, you need a sweater, and here it is July. One year, we used this as our advertising theme – 'the coolest place in Texas; bring a sweater.'"

In the beginning

Theatre in Alpine traces its roots to 1921 with the opening of Sul Ross. In 1934, Kokernot Lodge, a WPA-constructed amphitheater and the surrounding 35 acres (donated by Herbert L. Kokernot, Sr.), were dedicated for the recreational use of Sul Ross students and faculty. Shakespearean plays were frequently staged at the amphitheater during the academic years.

Featured Sul Ross performers over the years included Allen Ludden, who would gain fame as the host of "Password," and Dan Blocker, who portrayed Hoss Cartwright on the long-running TV series "Bonanza."

In the fall of 1965, E. Clayton McCarty joined the Sul Ross Speech and Drama Department, and

with the urging of President Norman McNeil, organized the Theatre of the Big Bend with a repertory schedule the following summer. Financial support was shared by Sul Ross and the Alpine Chamber of Commerce, and the City of Alpine has been an investor ever since.

Plays were performed in the old amphitheater until 1970, when the present Kokernot Outdoor Theater was constructed.

Attendance increased steadily from 800 persons the initial summer to more than 10,000 annually from 1970-72. By 1970, the theatre rotated eight plays throughout the summer, playing four nights weekly from mid-June to the end of August.

Bradley joined the Sul Ross faculty in 1975 and was heavily involved in the summer theatre program for about 20 years, including serving as managing director for a number of years. He actually agreed to start work at Sul Ross in late May instead of September, and in the process, likely kept the Theatre of the Big Bend afloat, filling the vacant director's position.

Bradley praised the community involvement.

"It's what kept summer theatre alive," he said. "Everybody in the cast pitched in with painting the sets, striking the sets, setting up what lighting we had and doing what they had to do to get it done.

"In those early years, we strived to do shows that people liked," Bradley said. "We had a hard time generating interest and getting enough people, so often we did plays that required just a few cast members."

Interest grew, though, and by 1978, ToBB began performing larger-cast musicals, including "Godspell" and "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown." Collaboration of community and university propelled the growth of both summer theatre and the Sul Ross theatre program, Bradley said.

"They helped us and we helped them. If it hadn't been for community participation, we wouldn't have a theatre program."

Retired Sul Ross music professors Dr. Rex Wilson and Ellen Boyd spent many years in charge of musical direction, from piano accompaniment to leading the orchestra to working with soloists and ensembles.

Bill Brooks, who has performed in numerous summer productions during his extensive acting avocation, first got involved with Theatre of the Big Bend in the late 1970s as a trombone player in the pit orchestra.

"Rex and Ellen have been truly significant in my summer career," said Brooks, who first performed on stage in the 1990 performance of "Fiddler on the Roof."

"They worked extremely hard in numerous capacities to make the theatre a success, and it was wonderful working with them."

"It's (theatre) something I thoroughly enjoy, and I have especially enjoyed this venue, the intimate setting with the audience and the interaction with the students," said Brooks, who is a retired newspaper editor and most recently, media officer for the U.S. Border Patrol.

Brooks most recently performed in 2009 in "Will Rogers' Follies," portraying the renowned humorist's father, and has thoroughly enjoyed his long-standing association.

"I am a big fan of George Bradley, who is a wonderful theater person and an outstanding leader. I have equally enjoyed working with Greg, Dona and Kendall Craig (who played the lead in "Will Rogers' Follies").

Through the life of the Theatre of the Big Bend, steady evolution has occurred, ranging from improved technology and guest artists programs, to budget constraints reducing the number of productions, to the demographics of cast composition. Yet, the focus of maintaining the traditional smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd has never wavered. Over the years, ToBB has performed numerous Shakespearean plays, most of the ever-popular musicals and works by both globally-acclaimed and lesser-known playwrights.

"The Theatre of the Big Bend morphed from four-five shows a summer in the mid-1980s to two shows for years and years," said Schwab, Sul Ross professor of Theatre and an active participant in ToBB for a quarter-century.

“When Greg came in, he did things the students needed (to further their educational and theatrical experiences),” Bradley said. “Thanks to Greg and Dona, the quality of productions has improved a lot.”

Presently, the Theatre of the Big Bend produces one major show, with this summer’s production Sondheim musical “Into the Woods.”

“Due to budget, we have gone to fewer, but bigger shows,” Schwab said. “However, the talent pool has increased, and the quality, for the budget, is by far the best theatre you are going to see.”

Summer internships and the ToBB guest artist program were established in 2006 with the theatre’s unique rodeo version of “Annie Get Your Gun,” performed at the San Antonio Livestock Exposition Arena at Sul Ross’ Turner Range Animal Science Center.

“Annie Get Your Gun” was the only offering for the 2006 season and allowed the summer theatre to focus all resources onto one blockbuster production. Attendance at the performances broke all previous records.

Productions have evolved to include not only more Sul Ross students, but students from other universities, thanks to the internship program. In addition, children’s theatre and bilingual Latino Theatre programs continue to expand the artistic horizon. The Sul Ross theatre program’s resident playwright, Liz Castillo, directed the well-received Petra Trilogy: three bilingual plays by Rupert Reyes, Jr. over the course of three summers. Additionally, “Alicia in Wonder Tierra” by Silvia Gonzalez S. completed the 2010 season with a children’s festival in the original amphitheatre space.

Subsequent years have featured Pueblo Unido, a Latin festival featuring a series of new plays from Texas playwrights.

“The Theatre of the Big Bend will always be community-oriented,” said Roman, “but we want to continue to grow. We really try to be a part of the community **and** also provide a theatre experience for our students and students from other universities as well.”

“The community involvement has been a real plus,” said Brooks. “There have been so many volunteers as cast members, crew members, the orchestra and elsewhere, and that is an aspect that really brings the community together. This (collaboration) truly elevates the cultural level of our community.”

Roman said that the ToBB continues to play to a wider audience, due to its presence as a major summer tourism attraction.

“We continue to strive to create a broader outreach,” Roman said. “We really believe what we do is pretty magical.”