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Camps

Front and Center: Aptos High Grad Wins First Leading Role at Cabrillo Stage

Upcoming Season Swings and Sings with Returning Successes and New Shows

By Linda Fridy

Don't be surprised if the actress singing the title song for this summer's Cabrillo Stage production of "Cabaret" looks familiar. Not only is Brie Michaud recognizable to Cabrillo Stage theatergoers who have watched her work her way through the ranks, but also to the community in general.

Michaud was raised in Mid-County and is a 2003 graduate of Aptos High School. She'll be playing nightclub performer Sally Bowles in the dark tale of pre-war Germany, the third show in the musical theater company's largest season to date. Cabrillo Stage is settling into its home in the new performing arts complex with an encore production of "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," the high-energy "Swing" and "Cabaret."

Michaud made her Cabrillo Stage debut in a happier story set before war erupted in Europe. She played one of the von Trapp children in the 1996 production of "The Sound of Music."

"They cast colorblind. I was the only black von Trapp kid, and it was totally comfortable. It was a great experience," she recalled. She returned in 2003's "West Side Story" and has been a regular since 2007, when she was in the ensemble for "Little Shop of Horrors."

When she learned that "Cabaret" would be presented this summer, she remembered thinking, "Ooo, this could be my chance." She said she did research on Sally Bowles before trying out for the part, which obviously paid off. "She blew us away with her audition," said Jon Nordgren, the producing artistic director.

Michaud is finishing her final semester at Cabrillo College this June and will enter UC Santa Cruz as a theater arts major in the fall. Yet she has no intention of leaving Cabrillo behind, and wouldn't mind at all following the path of her "Cabaret" co-star, Cabrillo faculty member

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Kathryn Adkins who plays Frau Schneider.

"I'd love to one day teach at Cabrillo as a theater instructor," said Michaud. She's excited to return to the Crocker Theater after participating in Cabrillo Stage's first show there, the winter production of "Scrooge." "It's so magical  it's such a wonderful space," she said, explaining that as a performer she enjoys drawing energy from the many possibilities the new theater inspires in the production staff as well as the cast.

Making the Most of a New Home

She's not the only person excited about the new performing space. Nordgren has been anticipating it for years.

The addition of a third summer show was made possible by the layout of the theater complex, which has huge fly space above the stage and the set construction facility literally steps away from backstage.

"The Crocker Theater is much more user-friendly for musicals," said Norgren. "We can design our shows so that 'Swing' closes on July 18 and 'Cabaret' opens July 23. 'Cabaret' can hold rehearsals all dark nights, when there isn't a performance of 'Swing.' We can have both sets moving on and off. You couldn't do that in the old theater — you could barely store one show."

Nordgren will get the chance to monitor how well that works as a performer: he's playing flute, clarinet and sax in the onstage bands for both "Swing" and "Cabaret." He laughed as he noted that neither show makes use of the theater's state-of-the-art orchestra pit.

A third production allowed him to mount two adult-audience shows, with "Swing" as the family-friendly performance.

Set in Harlem, the musical features big band standards performed by eight musicians, six pairs of dancers and five singers. Cabrillo Stage regular Janie Scott will direct.

The season opens in June with last year's hit "I Love You  " in the adjacent black box theater. While the original cast is returning, director Andrew Ceglia said the flexible space will add to the intimacy and give the show a new feel.

"The new black box theater provides me and the set designer the opportunity to showcase the show in the kind of space it was meant to be in. We can take the staging and tweak it to involve the audience a little bit more.  The action is happening all around you in this space," he said.

Professional Theater in a Supportive Community

Cabrillo Stage bills itself as a professional musical theater company, but according to Michaud and Ceglia, the drama sometimes associated with competing performers is reserved for the stage. They both found the group to be a place to work at a professional level and in a supportive environment.

"Cabrillo Stage offered me a lot of firsts in my career," said Ceglia, who started as a performer and got his first shot as a director with "Forever Plaid" a few years back. He has continued to work in both roles, and will once again direct "Scrooge" this winter as the final show of the 2010 season.

"It's like they're saying 'Let's see how far he can go.' They keep throwing wonderful

opportunities at me and welcoming my input," he said.

The San Jose native was so taken with the community that he and his girlfriend relocated to this side of the hill. "This is a county that really appreciates the arts," he said. Nordgren said he looks for shows that match the talents in what has become a repertory company. "Sometimes I'm looking for a show for a particular person. I thought Joe Ribeiro would be a terrific Scrooge," he said. However, going through the audition process means there are some who don't get a part.

"We've got quite a company now. There are a lot of people who audition every time and understand if they are not chosen it's not because they aren't talented, it's because they aren't right for the show." And sometimes he is surprised at who is right for a role, for which Michaud is grateful.

"For someone who wants to stay in Santa Cruz, this is the best theater company I could hope to work with," said Michaud. "The environment is really respectful and it's a family. You see the same faces year after year and then there are new ones we get to welcome into the family."

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