

# Everything Old is New Again: A History of San Diego Junior Theatre, 1948-2008

Darlene Gould Davies and Lizbeth Persons Price

San Diego Junior Theatre (SDJT) is no longer a youngster. In fact, it has passed through middle age and now is in its mature years. Yet the vibrancy of what is regarded as the oldest continually operating children's theatre in the United States remains strong. It retains the zest of a kid, a SDJT kid! In its first sixty years of operation, Junior Theatre touched the lives of over a million young people. Myriad classes were conducted and sizeable audiences were reached. The San Diego Commission for Arts & Culture gave SDJT the coveted ranking of four, the highest ranking achievable. Its alumni include Tony Award-winners Brian Stokes Mitchell, Christian Hoff,<sup>1</sup> and Tony Award-nominee Casey Nicholaw.<sup>2</sup>

SDJT has been represented on Broadway by alumni Mylinda Hull, Jessica Sheridan, Jennifer Allen, Jamie Torcellini, Ric Oquita, Kirby Ward and Beverly Ward, to name only a few. Some of its young actors, such as Dennis Hopper, Victor Buono, and Raquel Tejada Welch became noted film actors, while Gore Verbinski directed three *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Not all alums have gone into theatre or film, however. Former SDJT kids have assumed leadership roles in numerous areas of civic and business endeavors. Some have become educators who train students



*Tony Award-winning actor Brian Stokes Mitchell made his theatrical debut at age 14, playing Conrad Birdie in the San Diego Junior Theatre's production of Bye Bye Birdie. Courtesy of San Diego Junior Theatre.*

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not only for theatrical life, but also for life itself. Ole Kittleson, Jack Montgomery, Bill Virchis and Teri Ang, who direct, teach and perform, come to mind. The results of sixty years of activity have been stunning.<sup>3</sup>

The path SDJT has followed over six decades has been full of surprises, with leaps forward and some setbacks. One consistent thread, however, runs through its history—excellence. There has been a steady progression of artistic merit during its astonishingly rich sixty years. Now, into its sixty-first year, even greater SDJT achievement is likely.

## The Youthful Years

It all began with Craig Noel. In 1947, artistic director Noel was persuaded by Old Globe board member Delza Martin to return to the Globe (then also known as the San Diego Community Theatre) from his position as a film test director in Hollywood.<sup>4</sup> Noel immediately asked Irma Fraser Macpherson, who had studied drama seriously, to form a children's theatre component at the Globe.<sup>5</sup> After moving to San Diego, she married Dr. Fraser Macpherson, who was supportive of her involvement in theatre, even going so far as to build a small theatre in their home for local readings and performances. Noel attended and participated in those meetings. So it was a logical step for Irma to form a junior wing, called the Community Theatre's



*Craig Noel (b. 1915), "the father of San Diego theatre," has been associated with the Old Globe Theatre since 1937. He asked Irma Macpherson to organize the first children's theatre component at the Globe in 1948. Courtesy of San Diego Junior Theatre.*

Junior Theatre Workshop in 1948. It was renamed the San Diego Junior Theatre Wing of the Old Globe Theatre in 1951.

There was a need for this kind of theatre activity in San Diego. Between 1945 and 1948, a smattering of children's plays had been produced and directed by Lois De Lannoy and Beth Masterson under the auspices of the San Diego Park and Recreation Department. But there was no unifying arrangement. It is interesting to note that in 1946 *The Wizard of Oz*, a play that was to be repeatedly performed over the coming years, was closed midway through production due to a polio epidemic.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of a junior wing of the Old Globe in 1948 gave form and structure to children's theatre in San Diego. *Cinderella in Loveland* (1949) was the inaugural production. In 1950, the theatre offered



*Raquel Tejada, who later gained fame in Hollywood as Raquel Welch, appeared with Gary Riggs in SDJT's Caribbean Holiday during the 1954-55 season. Photo by Henry Kierstead ©SDHS, UT #84:23957, Union-Tribune Collection*

more adventurous shows: *Mary Poppins* and *Black Bart & Olio*. The latter, based on the life of a California robber-poet, was written by Melcena Burns Denny.<sup>7</sup> By 1951, the season had expanded to four shows. Succeeding seasons were more ambitious, paving the way for phenomenal growth in the decades ahead.

Plays were performed in different venues in Balboa Park since SDJT had no home or identity of its own. It owed its existence to the generosity and vision of the Old Globe and the Park and Recreation Department. That remained true until the 1971-72 season when SDJT moved into Casa del Prado. SDJT has shared this venue with other groups. The arrangement worked well, attested to by the substantial growth in attendance and participation, a steady climb in yearly budget, and a clear trajectory upward in the area of artistic standards.

The infant years, particularly 1950-1952, were full of energetic endeavors. Some SDJT performers also trod the stage of Starlight Opera. Dennis Hopper performed in the San Diego National Shakespeare Festival at the Globe before commencing a brilliant film career. In the early 1950s, costumes, props, and scenery were definitely amateur, but the results were charming. SDJT kids performed in the Puppet Theatre, Recital Hall, and Roosevelt Junior High School auditorium. Rehearsals were held wherever space could be found—in the Federal Building, an outside patio, or on park lawn. Fortunate young performers were cast as jugglers,



*Cinderella in Loveland was the Junior Theatre's first production in 1949. Photo by Wally Hawtree. Courtesy of San Diego Junior Theatre.*



*Irma Fraser Macpherson formed the San Diego Junior Theatre and served on the Board of Directors of the Old Globe Theatre. Courtesy of Marillynn Thompson.*

dancers, and singers on the lawn as part of the entertaining festivities on the green that preceded the annual Shakespeare Festival at the Globe in 1949, 1950, 1951, and 1952. The Shakespeare Festival was briefly suspended in 1953 and replaced that summer with the enormously popular *Mr. Roberts*.<sup>8</sup>

In 1952, the Globe incorporated many Junior Theatre Wing youngsters into the large cast of its first main stage Christmas musical, *William Makepeace*



*The Junior Theatre's 1953 production of The Wizard of Oz with Sharon Barcom Hoffer in the role of Dorothy. Courtesy of San Diego Junior Theatre.*

Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring*. The alliance of the children's theatre wing with the Old Globe itself had been part of the original vision of Craig Noel, who served as supervising director of the production.<sup>9</sup> The actual director was Jackson Woolley, a member of the original 1935 Globe Theatre Players featured in the 1935 exposition in Balboa Park. How fitting! Double casting children's roles allowed youngsters to rest and provided opportunities for additional children to perform. One young cast member in *The Rose & the Ring* was Dennis Hopper, who would subsequently act at the Globe in other productions. Soon, however, the association between the Old Globe and the children's wing would end.

By late 1953, the Junior Theatre Wing had outgrown its birthplace and had left the nurturing space of the Globe to operate under the auspices of the San Diego Park and Recreation Department. It was given storage space and offices on the lower level of the Balboa Park Club. It also got a new name—San Diego Junior Theatre. Irma Macpherson, while serving on the Board of Directors of the Globe, followed her flock to its new base of operation where she loyally monitored all aspects of theatrical activity. She rehearsed lines with the children, applied their makeup, combed their hair, sewed costumes, and lovingly supplied large doses of encouragement to everyone involved. She also served as the first President of the Board of Trustees. The decade of the 1950s ended with the five productions of the 1959-60 season: *Rumpelstiltskin*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Arthur and the Magic Sword*, and *Circus Days*.<sup>10</sup>

## Adolescence

The 1960s offered continued support by the city Department of Park and Recreation but finances were always tight. Park and Recreation found it an increasingly expensive item in its budget. From the beginning, classes and participation in productions had been free of charge to all young people. San Diego's population was growing, however, and SDJT's popularity continued to increase. The young performers were so adept in their singing, dancing, and acting skills that they also joined casts of Starlight Opera. Alumni began teaching theatre in the schools.



*Tony Award-nominee Casey Nicholaw starred in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1979). Courtesy of San Diego Junior Theatre.*

In 1968, bonds for restoration of the old Food and Beverage Building were supported.

The "committee," which became the Committee of One Hundred, raised additional funds, completing the project in 1971 and changing the name to Casa del Prado.<sup>11</sup> Under special arrangements, the Casa del Prado was provided as a home to SDJT during the 1971-72 season. SDJT has remained there.

In 1984, due to budgetary challenges, the City of San Diego Park and Recreation Department severed its official ties to SDJT. Finances had always been worrisome, but, after separation from Park and Recreation, money became a major concern. There had been public discussion about the proposed change in affiliation but, in the end, the theatre group lost the debate. At least, it thought it had lost. Over time, the separation would prove fortuitous. Now, SDJT was all grown up and on its own.



*Don and Bonnie Ward directed and choreographed numerous productions at the Junior Theatre during the former's tenure as artistic director. Courtesy of Kirby Ward*



*Tony Award-winning actor Christian Hoff began acting at the Junior Theatre at age eight. He is seen here in a production of *Mary Poppins*. Courtesy of San Diego Junior Theatre.*

## Adulthood

SDJT was truly on its own. It became a non-profit business that had to address all kinds of issues that were outside the realm of artistic life. A completely new framework was constructed to ensure survival, including fees for classes, inclusion of families in the quest for donations, and development of skills necessary to pursue grants. SDJT was in the adult phase of its life and some doubted that it could meet the challenges. After all, there was no reservoir of funds. However, the doubters were proven wrong. With initiation of class fees, auxiliary activities, fundraisers, and cultivation of donors, SDJT began to stand on its own feet, though somewhat shakily at times. As the level of support increased, so did the level of the product. Stand-up responsibility was producing results.

For all the growth, SDJT has always been about children and art.<sup>12</sup> Some shows were particularly popular during the long run between 1948 and 2008. These crowd pleasers were inevitably repeated with different directors and new casts. The timeless *Wizard of Oz* had multiple productions as did *The Clown Who Ran Away*. *The Music Man* was performed several times with different directors, all of whom built stellar reputations in musical theatre. New casts, different directors—but not always. John De Puglio directed two different productions of *The Red Shoes*, one in 1964 and another in 1968. DePuglio set something of a record, directing fifteen shows at SDJT between 1960 and 1965. Through the decades, Don Ward and Ole Kittleson directed at similarly frenetic pace.



In 2004, the Junior Theatre produced *42nd Street*. Photo credit: Ken Jacques.

The 1980s produced a steady stream of solid productions. Long-time favorite directors included such familiar names as Don Ward, Kelly Ward, Bill Virchis, Priscilla Allen, Bill Quiet, Ole Kittleson, Dee Ann Johnston, Kirby and Beverly Ward, and many others. Shows ran the gamut, from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Boy Friend* to *Lilies of the Field* and *Oliver*. The crowd-pleasing *Wizard of Oz*



*A Year with Frog & Toad was produced at the La Jolla YMCA Firehouse during the 2005-06 season. Photo credit: Daniel Baird.*

was back again in 1984 and 1987. *Fame* was produced in 1987. *Winnie the Pooh* ended the 1989 season. The 1990s led with productions of *Tales of a 4th Grade Nothing* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, a show that also closed the 1998 season. SDJT reached its half-century milestone in 1998 and a buoyant fifty-year celebration was held.

SDJT was becoming progressively more professional and ambitious in terms of taking on complex scripts, as evidenced by the 1993 summer production of *Into the Woods*, the intricate and multi-layered Stephen Sondheim musical that had originated at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre. The SDJT production was a major achievement, proving that the theatre was up to the task of producing recent Broadway musicals for young people and their families, and showcasing the hits with well-trained voices and strong dancing skills. It produced the hugely popular *The Wiz* in 1996, again not shying away from strong artistic challenges. Directors during the 1990s included Diane Sinor, Patrick Nollet, Bonnie Johnston, Michael Erickson, Lois Wetzell, Priscilla Allen, Will Neblett, and Desha Crowover, all



*The Bridge to Terabithia (2008) was part of the Sixtieth Anniversary Season of Shows, 2007-08. Photo credit: Ken Jacques*

extraordinarily talented and experienced theatre professionals.

In 2001, a second performance venue in Chula Vista was added to the one in Balboa Park. The renovated storefront site has served many children since it opened. In fact, over 7,500 students enjoyed classes (no productions) at this South Bay location. Operation of the Chula Vista satellite marked the beginning of increased outreach efforts to the county population by SDJT. It also acknowledged the fact that parking congestion in Balboa Park discouraged some families from traveling to the Casa del Prado location. With this adventurous addition, further steps were taken to encourage creativity, cooperation, and appreciation of story telling among South Bay residents. In 2005, SDJT, with help from the YMCA, made a foray into La Jolla, converting the firehouse into a theatre.

While juggling many classes, productions, and sites, SDJT remained mindful of the need to raise funds for the upkeep of Casa del Prado. For that purpose, and as a gesture of appreciation to the City of San Diego, it undertook a seat-plaque-naming campaign in 2002. The response has been excellent.

A highlight of the 2007-2008 season was a well-attended benefit by alumni and Broadway celebrated performer Brian Stokes Mitchell. The celebratory evening was a great artistic and financial success. An alumni talent night was equally popular. During that evening, the Casa del Prado stage was "owned" by dancers, singers, musicians, and actors who had created magic for sixty years.

## Maturity and Stability

With maturity comes the need for stability. Administrative staff consistency has been a strong element in stabilizing SDJT's presence. Certainly, long time Executive Director Will Neblett has provided needed grounding of the organization, especially in times of unexpected change, whether cultural, fiscal, or political. Community Relations Director Theresa Wulf has been in her position for enough years to provide continuing open communication with all players related to the theatre. She and Neblett are the "glue" holding things together over the long haul. Now the talented Desha Crownover has been added to the mix as Artistic Director.<sup>13</sup>

A modest endowment has been established at SDJT. It's a beginning. An expanding base of alumni will help in appeals to enlarge that endowment, money that will be needed to ensure the future of the organization. Additionally, more than a decade ago the Christian Rowley Memorial Scholarship Fund was created to financially aid young people who could not otherwise afford to attend SDJT.

Throughout its history, SDJT youth groups have played active roles in ongoing activities. Known as the Junior Governing Board and the Youth Board of Governors until 1957, the Youth group was renamed the SDJT Club. That name lasted until 1972 when it, too, changed. For one year, 1972-73, the group was known



*Young students enjoy year-round theatre arts classes and camps. Photo credit: Tim Whitehouse.*





*Innovative acting classes at the Junior Theatre. Photo credit: Tim Whitehouse.*

as the Jr. Board of Governors. In 1973, the name Confetti was adopted and it stuck. Confetti continues to participate in performances, advanced training, and service to SDJT to the present day. Youth participation in theatre governance strongly anchors the organization.

The costumes created for SDJT productions over these many years have been imaginative, joyful, and, at times, seemingly miraculous. Costuming wizards have included Irma Macpherson, Dorothy Steckling, and the well-loved Leason Strong, who worked in costuming at SDJT from 1962 until 1983. Confetti donated a power sewing machine in Strong's name at the time of her retirement. Marilyn Prine and Mibs Somerville, among others, carried on in her absence. Talented costumers and legions of volunteers have helped to create the theatrical illusions audiences have enjoyed over more than sixty years. Now, what to do with all of those wonderful costumes? Where to store them? The large collection of costumes, sets, and memorabilia is an asset, but lack of storage space is a challenge.

Storage space is a perennial problem for SDJT. A makeshift building near Pershing Drive has been generously provided by the City of San Diego for many years. Although very welcome, it is wholly



*Students attending class. Photo credit: Tim Whitehouse.*

inadequate. This challenge will have to be dealt with in the days ahead. The matter of a permanent performance venue will also have to be confronted. It ranks at the top of a list of “to do” priorities.

## Legacy

SDJT has been celebrated by alumni and families from here to Broadway. The San Diego City Council declared October 16, 2007, to be City of San Diego Junior Theatre Day. Alumni have garnered countless awards, and the accolades continue. What SDJT does best, of course, is provide a welcoming and safe haven of creativity for all children in its programs. When alumni speak of the “Junior Theatre family,” they refer to a sense of belonging, of acceptance.<sup>14</sup> That’s because there is a role for everyone, whether as script prompter, property or stage manager, costumer, graphic designer, seamstress, writer, or performer. Every child matters in this company, and that may be the reason San Diego Junior Theatre has achieved longevity. Craig Noel’s vision for a children’s theatre was prescient.<sup>15</sup>



*A young performer, Matt, at the Junior Theatre. Photo credit: Tim Whitehouse.*

## NOTES

1. Christian Hoff, who won a Tony Award in *Jersey Boys*, recently starred in the Roundabout Theatre’s revival of *Pal Joey* with Stockard Channing. “Pal Joey,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 11-12, 2008.
2. Casey Nicholaw directed and choreographed the Broadway production of *The Drowsy Chaperone*. *San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 25, 2008.
3. “San Diego Junior Theatre 60th Anniversary,” VHS, 2008.
4. “Old Globe Theatre 70th Anniversary,” VHS, produced by UCSD TV, 2005; Beth Mohr, “The Old Globe Theatre: Highlights From Fifty Years,” *The Journal of San Diego History* 31, no. 2 (1985): 57-102.
5. “Theatrical Career Inspired Founder of Globe Guilders,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 5, 1982.
6. “50 Years in the Spotlight,” San Diego Junior Theatre publication, 1988.
7. Ibid.
8. “A Theatre Reborn,” KPBS television production, 1984.
9. *The Rose and the Ring*, theatre program, 1952.
10. “50 Years in the Spotlight.”
11. Florence Christman, *The Romance of Balboa Park* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1985), 13.
12. Nellie McCaslin, *Creative Drama in the Classroom* (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1977).
13. “It’s Constant Chaos’—and She’s Thriving,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 24, 2008.
14. Sharon Barcom Hoffer, interviewed by author, 2008; Craig Noel, interviewed by author between 1978 and 2008.
15. “Old Globe’s Craig Noel to Receive National Honor,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 15, 2007.