

Music, Murder & Mastery at North Coast Rep

by Makayla Hoppe

BELOW Jefferson McDonald and Matthew McGloin in “2 Pianos, 4 Hands.”

OPPOSITE Cast of “Into the Breeches!,” the second show of the current season.

In a quiet corner of Solana Beach there sits an unassuming building that has contributed arts and culture to San Diego for 40 years. North Coast Repertory Theatre has been a pillar of the theater community since 1982, and they show no signs of slowing down.

Having only recently begun the theater’s 41st season, Artistic Director David Ellenstein has an array of different

genres for the year. “I do stick to my mantra which is: I like to do seven plays in the season that are all different from one another. So I try to do different genres, different styles and different periods...comedies, tragedies and musicals. I try to mix it up so every time the subscriber, somebody who comes to all our plays, comes they see something different. I like to surprise them as much as I can,” Ellenstein said.

2 Pianos, 4 Hands DEC. 7–JAN. 1

North Coast Rep’s production for December isn’t part of the season, but rather a special engagement. Written by Ted Dykstra & Richard Greenblatt, “2 Pianos, 4 Hands” follows performers Jefferson McDonald and Matthew McGloin as they show us their “would-be careers as concert pianists.” “‘Two Pianos, Four Hands’ is our holiday show that we did at North Coast Rep twelve years ago really successfully – everybody loved it. We’re bringing it back since it’s musical, it’s funny, it’s very engaging and good for families... My kids are now in college but when I took them to see it they loved it. So, kids will love it, too,” Ellenstein said. “I was looking for something that wasn’t necessarily holiday-themed but would work in that slot and give people an option to go to.”



PHOTO BY MIKKI SCHAFFNER



PHOTO BY AARON RUMLEY

Blues In the Night JAN. 11–FEB. 5
 This aptly-titled musical features 26 classic blues numbers. “‘Blues In the Night’ is a revue show of the great blues songs of the 30s and 40s; it’s been done a lot all over the country,” said Ellenstein. The show features no dialogue, only music. “We’ve got a great cast; it’s going to be a swinging musical night at the theater.”

The Cherry Orchard MARCH 1–26
 Written in 1903, “The Cherry Orchard” was the last play Anton Chekhov ever wrote. Ellenstein will be directing North Coast Rep’s production. “It’s one of my all-time favorite plays and one of the great plays of literature. It’s, in my opinion, Chekhov’s greatest play. It’s heartfelt, it’s funny, it’s tragic with great characters about a changing world. I love it and I’m really excited about it. I’ve got some amazing actors that are going to be in it,” he said. When asked about his interpretation of the play, Ellenstein was very clear about his desire to stay true to the text. “The way I feel about great plays is that you want to do them great. In other words, I’m not interested in reinterpreting ‘The Cherry Orchard.’ I believe its message is universal, I believe in what it’s about, that the world is constantly changing. As the world changes, people have to figure out how to move on. ‘The Cherry

Orchard’ happened as Russia was changing. It was going from the oligarch system and wealthy people running things to the Russian revolution which was pending. Society was not going to be how it was before. And I think that’s true, always.”

Murder On the Links

APRIL 19–MAY 14

Based on the classic novel, “Murder On the Links” brings some murder and mystery to the season. “...That’s an adaptation of the Agatha Christie story with Hercule Poirot, her detective that’s in so many of her books and this is an earlier book that she wrote. It was adapted by a well-known playwright named Steven Dietz who is also going to direct it,” said Ellenstein. This production is a world premiere. “...It will transfer to Laguna Playhouse, and I believe there are already three other theaters around the country lined up to do it later,” he said.

Eleanor JUNE 7–JULY 2

Starring award-winning actress Kandis Chappell, “Eleanor” is a one-person play about the famous first lady. “This is a west coast premiere of this new play,” said Ellenstein. The show takes place with Eleanor Roosevelt sitting on her favorite bench in Washington, D.C. while telling us stories of her amazing life.

Pippin JULY 19–AUG. 13

“In the summer we’re doing ‘Pippin,’ the musical from the 70s that launched Ben Vereen’s career among other things. It’s got great music from Steven Schwartz, who also wrote ‘Godspell’ and ‘Wicked.’ This was his big giant hit that really launched his career. ‘Pippin’ hasn’t been done for a while in San Diego, so it’ll be really fun to do that,” said Ellenstein. The musical won five Tony Awards and was directed by Bob Fosse during its Broadway run.

North Coast Rep even has events going on outside of the theater’s season. “We do variety nights at NCR on Mondays and Tuesdays often. We always do a thing called Tuesday Night Comics, that’s about six times a year. Mark Christopher Lawrence gets us four really good comedians, that’s always really popular,” said Ellenstein. The theater also features play readings and special engagements. In May James Sutorius will take to the stage. “He’s doing a show called ‘My Life With Will,’ which is about him being influenced by William Shakespeare and how it’s changed his life,” Ellenstein said.

In addition to yearly seasons and events, North Coast Rep offers a theater school for kids. The school features both classes and summer camps for children as young as four and young adults as old as 19. For the month of February, the theater school’s students will present “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged),” a silly slapstick take on all of Shakespeare’s plays in the span of a couple hours.

Whether it’s mystery, comedy, a musical or one of the greats, North Coast Repertory Theatre offers anything and everything a theater-goer could hope for. Season 42 won’t begin until September 2023, but the San Diego theater community is eagerly awaiting for what North Coast Rep has in store. One thing is for certain: Ellenstein is determined to stick to the heart of what makes a show great. “I am that way because I think it’s more powerful. It actually inspires thought, change and new thinking,” he said. ◊