

'Greatest show' now onstage in Moorpark

By Rita Moran, Arts writer
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Sometimes it takes a village to produce a successful musical.

Moorpark's High Street Arts Center demonstrates that level of teamwork in "Barnum," the first production of its new life, with energizing support from the city of Moorpark and an extended theater community.

Backers, technicians and actors for the musical about promoter P.T. Barnum and his big ideas include people from most areas of Ventura County and beyond.

The result is a show that makes impressive use of good singers and dancers and surprisingly proficient "circus" performers.

Bolstering the skills onstage are producer L.J. Stevens; director James Castle Stevens; musical director Paul Taylor and a tight-knit band; choreographer Catrina Quintanilla; costume designers Randon Pool and Jan Carr; set designer Will Shupe; lighting designer John J. Grant; technical director Mike Haskins; and more, including the especially appropriate skills of circus consultant Madeleine Falk and aerial consultant Ray Pierce.

Many have solid credentials from community theater stages throughout the area, and others have substantial professional credits.

The challenges of a show that stacks circus skill on top of the usual acting-singing-dancing talent have to be exceptional, but High Street rises to the occasion.

Carlos Martin may not come across as charismatic as the fabled Barnum, a man who memorably proclaimed that a sucker was born every minute, but he projects an agreeable presence, sings quite well, dances a bit and is athletic enough to virtually leap from the stage up to the balcony, with a little help from staging boxes and other performers. Top that off with a continuing display of now-you-see-it, now-you-don't magic, a stilt-walking scene and, late in the show, an even more surprising ball-walking moment, all accomplished while delivering lines or lyrics.

Rena Petrello, as Barnum's wife, Charity, is serenely attractive and also vocally skilled. She does the most she can with a rather underwritten role and ably contributes to one of the show's best songs, "Colors of My Life," in which Barnum describes his need for a life

beyond the routine, and she responds with a thoughtful meditation on the stability she prizes.

Early on, when Barnum first gets the showmanship bug, one of the best all-around performers on local stages gets to strut her stuff and does it to show-stopping effect. Quintanilla, also the choreographer, appears in her most conspicuous of several roles, that of Joice Heth, whom Barnum touted as 160 years old and a former nursemaid to George Washington.

Quintanilla arrives onstage bent and shaky, but then when Barnum describes her age and history, straightens up and flies right into a strong, saucy song and dance, "Thank God I'm Old."

Later, she lays down another winner, "Black and White," as a blues singer.

The indefatigable Quintanilla also appears throughout as a zesty member of the chorus.

Others add to the show's positive impression in featured roles, including Matt Howell, in five transformations culminating in fast-talking James A. Bailey, who eventually teamed with Barnum for The Greatest Show on Earth; Jill Jacobs as a fetching Jenny Lind, the opera singer who conquered America and for a time Barnum; and Christopher Fielder as the little Gen. Tom Thumb, along with many others.

But "Barnum" would not be as entertaining without the skills of the entire ensemble, who sing and dance with considerable expertise, while also whirling plates and ribbons, tumbling, climbing Cirque-like on hanging strips of cloth and even twirling fire through the air.

The band is supportive without drawing attention to itself — as if it was perched high on a side balcony and hidden behind dabs of scenery.

"Barnum," with music by Cy Coleman, some very clever lyrics by Michael Stewart and a slim book by Mark Bramble, needs showmanship to make it sing, and High Street has added that winning ingredient.

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