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SCV Trio Has a Passion for Playwriting

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If the Energizer Bunny and Cindy Marcus were ever paired up in "Celebrity Deathmatch," I'd put money on Marcus to take that bunny apart. Marcus has an infectious enthusiasm that perfectly meshes with her avocation - working with teens.

"I'm the fire, I keep the passion behind this project burning," she said.

Marcus - with husband Flip Kobler and partner Dennis Poore - are the principals behind the Showdown Stage Company that offers theater training and workshops geared specifically for teens. They are also the authors of several plays geared for children and teens. In the space of only four years the trio has written and staged numerous performances of nearly a dozen of their original plays and musicals - with more shows on the way.

Their work, "The Brothers Grimm: Out of Order," is now available nationwide from Pioneer Drama Service. The play was submitted to the publishing house 10 months ago and recently became available in the spring catalog.

"The catalog came out in February and as of early May they had 16 schools from across the country that had already performed the show," Flip Kobler said.

"The Brothers Grimm: Out of Order" is a comedy farce about a high school theater production that gets completely off track and ends up with a production of the entire fairy tale works of the Brothers Grimm in six minutes and 12 seconds.

"Everything that we do, we try to have some kind of higher moral meaning. 'Brothers Grimm' is much more farce than anything else that we have done, but there is still a message," Kobler said. "The message is about teamwork and the importance of teamwork. You are important. Individuals and your individual spirit is incredibly important - but it is not the most important thing in the universe. Staying true to yourself and contributing to something greater than yourself puts you on a higher plane."

At first Kobler and Marcus thought they wanted publishing powerhouse Samuel French to publish their teen shows. French had previously published "Ghost of a Chance," (written by Kobler and Marcus) a comedy to be performed by adults. However, Marcus decided to research alternative publishing houses and discovered Pioneer.

Marcus said she had a good feeling about Pioneer from her first dealings with the company.

"After Pioneer picked up 'Brothers Grimm' we have heard that they are - at least for young people's theater - the 'go-to' house. I've talked to high school teachers and they'll say, 'Pioneer is the first place I go to look for shows,'" she said. "We were actually invited to one production - I think in Colorado. The kids said, 'Would you come and see the show?' I thought, 'Oh honey, if I had the money I'd go in a heartbeat.' I just think that would be wonderful."

Flip Kobler has hung a map of the United States on a wall in their Valencia home and stuck colored pins in the towns where "Brothers Grimm" has been produced.

"It's very cute - you see where all the shows have been done," said Marcus.

After Marcus and Kobler finished a stint writing direct-to-video sequels for Disney - known to anyone with small children which included "Lion King: Simba's Pride," "Beauty and the Beast: Enchanted Christmas," "Pocahontas, Journey to a New World" and "Hunchback of Notre Dame II" - Marcus felt strongly about working with children and teens.

"We went to Florida to do theater - where Flip is from - and did a production of "Wild Dust: The Musical," which is one of our adult shows. The dream was we were going to own a little theater company. I met this teen who was sort of lost and she didn't have any kind of drama classes available to her," said Marcus. "I had been greatly changed by the teenage

drama workshop at California State University, Northridge, and there was nothing like that for her and I said, 'That's it, that's what we're going to do.' We had a great experience, loved the theater, loved the people we worked with, and wanted to be back in Florida, and I didn't know how to get us back there, we had no other shows. Within 24 hours, I had a deal with the theater, I had a choreographer, I had everything I needed - but no show. So in true Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney fashion, Flip said, 'We'll write one!' And I said, OK!' And we did - and it was that fast, and then we did the program in Florida for teens. That's how we started."

Since Marcus' epiphany, the trio has staged teen drama camps in the Santa Clarita Valley and in North Hollywood. This summer Showdown returns to Florida to do its annual summer camp and has added another summer camp in Jefferson City, Mo.

Showdown Theatre Academy is now based out of The Hub Theatre in the Noho Arts District in North Hollywood and attracts teens from the SCV as well as teens from the San Fernando Valley and throughout Los Angeles. They have joined forces with Donnajeanne Goheen and the Young Performers Studio, which has brought young professional actors currently working in the business to perform in Showdown productions - most recently the musical "Quixote," a retelling of the Don Quixote story, and "Nottingham," a musical retelling of the Robin Hood fable with a high school setting.

The group's second show to be published by Pioneer Drama will be "Usher" - a comic look at the works of Edgar Allan Poe.

What is unique about Showdown's plays and musicals is that they are written to be performed by teens - and the characters are all teens.

"Part of our mandate, part of what we want to do is, is to be 'totally teen,' which means no adult roles. Teens get to play teenagers. They're not playing, you know, a 65-year-old man," Kobler said.

Because the shows are geared to teens, the themes often addressed in the shows are those that resonant with teens - including feelings of isolation, being different, fitting in and peer pressure.

Kobler said another positive outcome of teens performing in Showdown productions - in addition to increased self-esteem and improved presentation skills - is the shows all revolved around classic literature to some degree.

"We also want to reinvigorate the classics. I personally did not read for pleasure until I was 22 years old. I never read a book. I hated reading, because in high school, you are forced to read," Kobler said. "For me, the message I got out of that is that reading is work. Reading is homework, and I was never taken to any of those wonderful magical places of escape that a great book can take you. So a lot of today's teens don't know the classics. I mean they don't know who David Bowie is, they've never heard of Humphrey Bogart. So, if you don't know the icons of my lifetime, how in the world are you going to know the icons of 100 years ago or 200 years ago? So part of our mandate is to reinvigorate the classics, and to show that those stories are not dead, dusty, awful things. The things those characters are going through, are the exact same things that the characters go through today."

Kobler said "Quixote" and "Usher" have important messages for today's teens.

"Quixote was an old man, but still had feelings of isolation and oppression - it's the exact same thing that kids in high school are going through. It's important that they know that it is a universal thing and to know how other people have dealt with it," Kobler said. "In Usher, what we wanted to do, is we wanted to take Edgar Allan Poe and we couldn't decide on a particular Poe classic. We decided to use "The Fall of the House of Usher" so we set everything in the House of Usher and then we just went through and found as many stories, ideas, plots, characters, themes, as we could. I think we ended up with like 18 different books and poems that we just all kind of threw together to see what would happen. Thematically 'Usher' is about living life - cherishing life and cherishing every moment of life."

The third member of Showdown's creative triad is Dennis Poore, the gifted musical director, who composes all the music. Currently, Showdown's catalog includes four musicals "The Argonauts," "Nottingham," "Quixote" and "Monte Cristo."

"Quixote" was recently produced at The Hub at the end of April and "Monte Cristo" will have its first performances at the group's summer Florida camp.

"We look for the shows to have positive life lessons," Poore said. "'Quixote' is about finding who you are, finding your place, and realizing that everybody has a place and sometimes you have to go on a journey to find it, but eventually you

do find your own voice. The message is that no matter how difficult the journey you can be OK - you don't have to give up."

Poore said "Nottingham" is about separation.

"It's about figuring out that people don't understand each other, and, it's about solving problems in a nonviolent way. It's about trying to understand the other person before you, basically, try to invade them and change them. You have to understand them first," Poore said. "'The Argonauts' is a little simpler, it's how kids who get picked on are often the ones - at the end of the road - who control everything. Like a Bill Gates."

Poore, Canyon Country, said the newest musical "Monte Cristo" is about how life often turns out differently than you think it will.

"Life never goes where you think it's going to go, you think, 'It's going to go this way,' and it never does. You think you're going down this one road and all of a sudden, you're on another road. So it's about life lessons. But we try to always put a positive spin on them, in one way or another you can work things out. And not all of them are happy endings, because life is not always happy endings, but there's a way that you can look at things and talk your way through things, as opposed to doing anything drastic, like reacting violently," Poore said.

The other new show having its debut in Florida this summer is "Jekyll & Hydes." It is, as you would expect based on the classic "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson - but with the classic Showdown Stage Company twist.

"We wanted a large cast and we thought, 'Boy, Dr. Jekyll just turning into one person isn't too much fun. Wouldn't it be great every time he turns into somebody else, to have a different actor come out, wearing the exact same costume, in the exact same size. So we have a large range of physical sizes from the teeny-tiny 11-year-olds to some of the big guy 18-year-olds, each stepping out as various incarnations of Hydes. I think we have seven different Hydes that Jekyll will turn into. Each denotes a different part of his personality. The universal thing with this one is that none of us are just one thing. We are all many things and just because someone pigeonholes you, you don't have to deal with that - you are the jock and you are the smart one and you are all those things," said Kobler.

Marcus said among the goals of Showdown is to take a scaled down "Quioxe" on the road to Southland high schools. "Quioxe" deals with the classic high school themes of peer pressure, bullies, loneliness, parental pressure, fitting in and being different.

"The challenge will be cutting 'Quioxe' down to a condensed 45-minute version because there needs to be discussions about it," Marcus said. "I don't want to take that show and not give the kids a forum to talk about it. When we performed the show at The Hub in North Hollywood, Virginia Tech had just happened."

Marcus said coincidentally "Quixote" was Showdown's answer to Columbine.

"It didn't start that way, but Flip and I were both very upset about what happened at Columbine," she said. "So when Virginia Tech happened, I wanted the kids to address how they felt about it - because it's terrifying to a parent - but I can just imagine how it is to a teenager. It brought up a lot of very powerful feelings and issues - things that teens are dealing with and fears and doubts. Just to have an opportunity to talk about those subjects was wonderful, but the thing that I loved the most is that they realized they're not alone, that the feelings that are going on inside of them - first of all, getting them out means they're no longer poison and second by verbalizing them, other kids are going, 'Yeah, that's how I feel. That's how I feel!' And then suddenly it becomes this opportunity for kids to connect with each other and that to me, is the solution to Virginia Tech. That kid was isolated. That kid felt alone, I don't know that we would have solved his problems, but in my 'dreamy princess world,' maybe it could have made a difference."

However, even if "Quioxe" doesn't make it on the road the Showdown artists have submitted the play to Pioneer Drama in the hope it will be published and its message that reflects an understanding of the pressures on today's teens will be performed across the country.

Marcus said working with teens can be frustrating - as well as rewarding.

"Some days I walk away and I feel that I didn't enrich the kids, and it was a struggle, and then I step back and Flip will say, 'Well did you reach one kid today?' It's one more kid that maybe won't go 'Virginia Tech.' It's one more kid that

knows they belong to something, they're part of something, and that's wonderful," she said.

For more information on the Showdown Stage Company and their teen theater academy visit www.showdownstageco.com.

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