

PRESS-TELEGRAM

AN EDITION OF THE REGISTER

\$2.50 | SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2025 | PRESSTELEGRAM.COM

LONG BEACH

Theater set to begin 40th season



Rich Archbold
COLUMNIST

It's hard for me to believe that Caryn Desai, the gregarious artistic director and producer of the distinguished International City Theatre in Long Beach, used to be shy. But she told me last week

that she was so shy in high school that she made herself take speech and drama classes to overcome her bashfulness. It obviously worked. She has created a great legacy for herself in the theater world as director and producer of ICT, which will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year at the Beverly O'Neill Theatre in downtown Long Beach.

ICT will open its ruby season with "Desperate Measures," a new musical comedy, with preview shows on Wednesday and Thursday and opening night Friday, which will also be "Jane Close Conoley Appreciation Night." Conoley has announced that she will retire as president of Cal State Long Beach in July.

"We wanted to do something to recognize Dr. Conoley's decades of support for the university, education, our youth and our community," Desai said.

Conoley will be recognized

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Students perform during International City Theatre's Summer Youth Conservatory. The Long Beach theater will open its ruby season with "Desperate Measures," a new comedy musical. COURTESY OF CARYN DESAI

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ARCHBOLD

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at the beginning of the show and at intermission with a champagne toast.

"Desperate Measures" will be the first of five shows at ICT this season, with all shows being premieres for the Greater Los Angeles County-Orange County region, Desai said. ICT has always done premieres and new works, but this is the first season in which all shows will be premieres. "It is risky, exciting and a big responsibility," Desai said. "But here's the good news: Our subscription sales are up. Our audiences are adventurous, supportive and trusting. What a way to celebrate our 40th year! See it first at ICT!"

Desai has come a long way since growing up in Camden, New Jersey, a city she called "one of the most dangerous in the nation" at that time.

"I grew up with a big family (five sisters) in the inner city and not much money," she said. "I knew what it is to go to bed hungry."

DRAWN TO THE ARTS

But Desai developed an early interest in music and art in middle school and then made herself take speech and drama in high school to get over her shyness.

"I've always been drawn to the arts even as a little girl," she said. "While other kids were watching TV, I was singing and drawing."

After graduating from high school, she got married and did community theater in New Jersey.

"I didn't get to pursue my formal education, which was my dream, until years later when I moved to California with my two children," she said.

After a divorce, she went to Long Beach City College and studied real estate at first and got her license.

"Then I took an acting class for my humanities requirement," she said, "and I was hooked again on the theater."

From there, Desai went



International City Theatre's artistic director and producer, Caryn Desai, and her husband, Shashin Desai. COURTESY OF CARYN DESAI

to a summer program at London's Royal Academy, graduated from CSULB and earned a master's degree in directing at UC Irvine.

She changed the first letters of her name to lower case, Desai said, when an artist friend created a poster for a show she was directing and put her name in lower case.

"I kept it as a connection to my art and to my friend," she said.

While at LBCC, she met Shashin Desai, who she later married. Shashin Desai was chairman of the theater, dance and film departments at LBCC when he founded ICT in 1985 and held performances at a small theater on campus.

In 1996, ICT moved to the larger Beverly O'Neill Theatre.

producer.

Besides producing five main stage productions each year, Caryn Desai said, ICT has six education programs for every age from 4 to 104.

The third-grade program alone, in every Long Beach school, makes about 480 classroom visits each year, Caryn Desai said, with each class writing and performing its own show.

"My commitment to our education programs goes back to my childhood and knowing what the arts did for me," Caryn Desai said. "I believe everyone needs access, and we must invest in our youth. We need creative minds whether you are an artist, a researcher, a scientist, an entrepreneur, etc. Life is short. We need to follow our passion."

ICT's sixth program is for low-income older adults, through which buses and tickets are provided "to keep them mentally and

socially engaged," she said.

As ICT's 40th anniversary is celebrated all season, Caryn Desai said, they want to recognize others who made the theater's growth possible, like former Long Beach Mayor Beverly O'Neill, former City Manager Jim Hankla, the late City Manager Jerry Miller and other community leaders, like Charles Lane and James Ackerman.

"We want to recognize those who were instrumental in assuring our growth from the college, to downtown, and through challenging times like 9/11, the recession and the pandemic," she said. "My job now is to assure at least the next 40 years!"

SEASON'S MAIN SHOWS

■ Wednesday to March 9: "Desperate Measures," a musical comedy. When the dangerously handsome Johnny Blood's life is on the

line, he must put his fate into the hands of a colorful cast of characters.

■ April 23 to May 11: "The Violin Maker," based on stories from the Violins of Hope. Israeli violin maker Amnon Weinstein, founder of the Violins of Hope collection, restored violins played during the Holocaust. He died at 84, but his story and the true stories of the violins are interwoven with music in this powerful and uplifting play.

■ June 11 to June 29: "Theatre People, or The Angel Next Door," a romantic comedy. Oliver Adams is on the brink of a major success, with his novel, "Angel Next Door," set to be published. Playwrights have adapted his book and have their eye on Margot Bell as leading lady. But she is the person Adams adores and about whom he has written his novel. When they converge for a weekend in Newport, Rhode Island, the

thin walls of the mansion reveal the angel may not be angelic.

■ Aug. 27 to Sept. 14: "Masala Dabba." Secrets, lies and unresolved conflicts play out against a background of familial memories of food and cooking in "Masala Dabba." Long buried truths surface through stories inspired by each of the spices in a grandmother's masala dabba, an Indian spice box.

■ Oct. 15 to Nov. 2: "Ms. Holmes & Ms. Watson — Apt. 2B." An irreverent, darkly comic, modern take on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's famous sleuth and sidekick, this fast-paced romp reexamines the world's most famous detective story with a bold, new feminist lens. This dysfunctional adventure duo solve mysteries until they come face to face with a villain who seems to have all the answers.