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LONG JOHN SILVER TAKES TOPANGA

DAN MARCUS

My first encounter with the peg-legged, parrot-shouldered pirate took place at an earlier port of call, the Torrance Cultural Arts Center, where a children’s theater version of *Treasure Island* was being rehearsed. I walked into one of the facility’s community rooms and there he stood—Long John Silver in the person of actor Jeff Bergquist. True, he was wearing modern street clothes and both of his legs were intact, but there could be no doubt about his identity as he bellowed commands at a ship’s crew of trembling young thespians.

Now, more than two decades later, Bergquist is appearing in a new production of *Treasure Island*, this time as a different character—the haunted pirate Billy Bones, whose mysterious appearance on the windswept coast of England gets the story rolling. Long John Silver will be played by award-winning actor Gerald C. Rivers. The setting could not be more perfect—Theatricum Botanicum, an open-air amphitheater nestled in Topanga Canyon with a stage spacious enough to accommodate a full-sized pirate ship and a rustic, eighteenth century inn.

First published in the late nineteenth century, *Treasure Island* in its day was regarded as the essential boys’ book—a coming-of-age tale that contains all the elements—captains and cutthroats, mutiny at sea, and buried treasure. But one of its readers happened to be a young girl named Ellen, the daughter of the late actor and activist, Will Geer, best known in popular culture as Grandpa Walton on the long-running TV series about a close-knit family living on a mountain during the Great Depression.

Today, Ellen Geer is the artistic director of Theatricum and she’s created a new adaptation of the adventure classic for the stage. Recently, between sessions in preparation for the show’s opening, she was kind enough to answer my questions about the project.

Can you describe your discovery of *Treasure Island*?

We were on the road a lot when I was young. My goal was to read all the books in the library by the time I got to the East Coast and the West Coast and then back to the East Coast [laughs]. So I banged into Robert Louis Stevenson. I was enamored with the book immediately. “Precious” is the word

It’s] a coming-of-age tale that contains all the elements—captains and cutthroats, mutiny at sea, and buried treasure.

– Dan Marcus

I use for it.

What would you like audiences to take away from your version of the story?

Well, people are going to get from it what they’re going to get, but I’m really true to Stevenson. We Disney things in America. We make them not what they are. We Disney pirates. People love pirates and love to see them. But true piracy back when it was going on...it wasn’t that nice [laughs]. Thieves, murderers.

Have you seen the film versions?

No, I’m an innocent on the film stuff. I’m all into literature. When I was kid growing up, we

didn’t go to movies that much. We were traveling and trying to keep our heads above water during a poverty time. So, that was not part of my life. It’s the books; it’s the stories.

Robert Louis Stevenson would be pleased. But are there any changes you can mention?

I’ve turned Ben Gunn into Jen Gunn.

Really?

Yes. There were many, many, many women pirates. Look it up. Oh, they’re marvelous. It’s just wild. I think it helps the balance of the piece.

Can you say something about the physical production?

We’re going to build a theater boat—our man has already made a wonderful mast. And the barrels at the inn become the barrels on the boat. And the rope and the ladder. The whole stage left will be the boat from just before the second act on. We’re working very hard on it. The actors will create that boat while singing a pirate song.

Will you be using yo-ho-ho?

No, no, not yo-yo-ho-ho. We have a wonderful man, Marc Pritchett, who’s going to be working with me on collecting old pirate songs. I have three wonderful ensemble players. I think there’ll be a mandolin and we’ll have the accordion and I’ll see if I can get somebody to learn how to play the harmonica. So, we can have moments of the kind of thing that kept the pirates going...besides rum, of course.

Treasure Island will run at Will Geer’s Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga Canyon from June 20 through October 3. Details can be found at theatricum.com.

Dan Marcus is a literary editor, playwright, and curator of the Dan Marcus Gallery (YouTube). He’s also written the music and lyrics for six stage musicals produced in the Philippines and Los Angeles.

