

Cultivating Artists

Storied outdoor theater celebrating its 50th year

By Bridgette M. Redman
Argonaut Contributing Writer

Planted as a seed during the McCarthy era and nurtured by artists blackballed from the stage by red-fearing executives, Theatricum Botanicum grew from a refuge in secluded Topanga into a world-class theatrical organization.

It's celebrating 50 years of outdoor Shakespeare, folk concerts and drama school education.

It started with Will Geer. A botanist born in Indiana, he came to Los Angeles where he launched a successful career as an actor, musician and social activist. When summoned to testify before McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities because of his labor organizing, he refused to name people who joined the Communist Party, which got him banished from his work in Hollywood.

Needing a place for his young family, he retreated to Topanga with wife, Herta Ware, and their three children, settling in acreage in the mountains where Geer could garden and they could provide a haven for other ostracized performers including Arlo Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Della Reese and Burl Ives.

They sold vegetables, herbs and fruit to make enough money to live while developing a space for theater that would eventually become the professional repertory company that it is today.

"My mother was very smart," said Ellen Geer, the youngest of the couple's children. "We moved up out of the sight of Hollywood and everybody's fingers pointing at us. She found this beautiful, beautiful place. She just knew that he had to have a place where he could garden because he was a horticulturist who graduated from Chicago University and his second love was plants."

She said many other blacklisted artists began to gather and work there, actors who needed to keep up their skills while banished from the screen. Even today, there remains the small cabin where Woody Guthrie lived.

Geer said her earliest memories were watching her parents and their friends work. It later inspired her to become an actor and to take on her current role as artistic director of Theatricum Botanicum.

"There was a lot of folk material being done," Geer said. "A lot of Americana like Huck Finn on the riverboat. I knew a lot of folk singers like Seeger and Woody Guthrie, who stayed there for quite a while and then Virginia Farmer, she was more of a theater person, so they started to do plays."



IAN FLANDERS/SUBMITTED

Actors perform on a stage made from Santa Monica pier salvaged wood.

She said they did a lot of Shakespeare and a lot of American folk material, which, she believes, was a desire to ground blacklisted people in what had become an artist colony.

In 1973, it was organized as a nonprofit and Ware took the theater to the next step, organizing it as a professional rep organization that performed Shakespeare under the stars, provided theater education and hosted musical events.

Soon, they subsequently built a 299-seat amphitheater with salvaged planks from the Santa Monica pier after a storm destroyed it. That same year, they started offering Equity contracts.

Half a century since their founding, they have garnered international recognition for their interpretation of Shakespeare's work. They produce five plays each summer in rep, offer year-round acting classes, host live music concerts and perform outreach to schools in the greater Los Angeles area. In 2016, they became a member of the Folger Shakespeare Library Theatre Partnership Program.

Geer said there was a time when they all scattered to try to find a way to make a living, but then they all returned.

"It was a healing place," Geer said. "Topanga — not only the community, but the theater — gave us how to work and we learned how to pass on what we know. We learned all the techniques that are needed to be a classical actor and then we started a school, an academy to go along with it. To this day, it is an important place to the family, but it's grown. So many wonderful artists have come to our place and one of the most exciting things

for me now is that our teaching artists now work all over LA."

While she lived through a lot of frightening times — she recalls before moving out to Topanga having to switch schools several times because kids would harass her and call her a commie — she says we need theater now more than ever before.

"It's been a fearful time," Geer said. "And it's different. A lot of people say, 'oh, this happened in the '30s.' No, this is a very, very powerful time for human beings. You hope that it will swing the right way, swinging toward caring and loving and that's what theater can do."

This summer they will celebrate their 50th season with two traditional Shakespeares — "Macbeth" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream," a Shakespearean work directed and compiled by Ellen Geer that tells the bard's War of the Roses plays through the eyes of Queen Margaret and the other women, Terrence McNally's "A Perfect Ganesh" and a reprise of "The Woody Guthrie Story."

They'll also host an Elizabethan Faire, a 50th Anniversary Weekend Gala and an Americana Harvest Festival. They'll end each month with a comedy improv performance and then host a salon series on Fridays in September.

When audiences come out, Geer suggests they prepare for a time of great art experienced in nature.

"They really will love it," Geer said. "We're not high priced. We're very simplistic. Don't wear your high heels because you'll be walking on dirt."

Through the years, Geer said they've had many magical moments, the types of moments that can only happen when you

are doing theater outdoors in a place as wild and undeveloped as Topanga. She described an unforgettable moment when they were performing the final act of "Our Town" and the young Emily comes back from the dead to revisit her home one last time.

"She came running in and suddenly on the corner of the stage was this quite large owl," Geer said. "He was just staring and everyone stopped. The audience stopped. Nobody moved. It was as if suddenly we'd all been turned into statues. It looked around for a while and there was this wonderful pause and then the bird flew off. We continued, but it was a very magical moment for us."

Bats have flown through their productions of "Dracula."

Another time they were doing "The Merchant of Venice" and Portia was appealing for mercy to Shylock. A dove flew down and landed in front of her, again creating a magical moment of silence before it flew off. In a moment of less beauty, but no less appropriateness, they were in the middle of a scene in "Tartuffe" between the title impostor character and the saucy maid when a rat dropped on the stage from a nearby oak tree. The actor picked it up by its tail, swung it around and threw it far from the audience and the stage.

The 50th Anniversary Gala Celebration from Friday, Aug. 4, to Sunday, Aug. 6, will include the granting of the Will Geer Humanitarian Award. This year's recipient is Debbie Allen, an actor, singer, choreographer and teacher. In 2001, she opened the Debbie Allen Dance Academy in Koreatown helping to launch young dancers.

With its golden anniversary season underway, Theatricum Botanicum is preparing for another evolution. The reins are about to be passed to the third generation with Ellen Geer's daughter, Willow Geer, primed to take over as the new artistic director.

"It's a wondrous thing," Ellen Geer said. "I'm just going to evolve my way out of it because she's strong enough. She's got the smarts. The company is all very strong. Our staff is strong. I hope that it will continue along in its wonderful, unique way, but it will be theirs. Theater is of the moment and what's happening." ■

Theatricum Botanicum
1419 N. Topanga Canyon Boulevard,
Topanga
310-455-2322
theatricum.com