

# THE MAN WHO BROUGHT the Movies to the STAGE

by Noell Wolfgram Evans



*Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*

It's date night in Fullerton. You want to see a movie; your significant other would like to see a play. What do you do? Fortunately, Brian Newell has come up with an answer for you – Maverick Theatre – whose stock in trade is the movie-play.

While always having an interest in the theatre, Newell wanted to make it in the movie business. He jumped into some production work, but grew increasingly “frustrated” over the process hurdles continually placed before him. He decided to take his creativity to the theatre, which he calls “a phenomenal canvas.” In 2002, he founded Maverick Theatre primarily as a space to produce *The King*, an Elvis Presley musical. The show was a huge success and Newell realized then that he had found the creative outlet and career opportunity he had been looking for.

As he plotted his next production he came to a stark realization: while theatre as an institution generally reveres the wonderful works of the past, such as Ibsen, Miller, and Wilde, the public usually is not interested. There is a “been there, seen that” mentality that has formed with the public. For many who were just beginning a theatrical career, this revelation would have been disastrous. For Newell, though, it brought a moment of show-business genius – he would bring people into the

theatre under what were, for them, conditions of security. He knew that for this to work he would need a common cultural touchpoint such as the movies had.

And so it was that the next two productions were screen-to-stage translations of *Amadeus* and *The Rocky Horror Show*. As Newell says, “I was looking for a way to build a new audience and then get that audience to ‘stick’ to the theatre.” So, to do that, he picked titles that were familiar but were rarely seen on stage. His gamble paid off in a big way. After a spy-themed burlesque series, *OC Weekly* proclaimed: “If there is a theatrical heaven, then it’s just south of the tracks of downtown Fullerton’s transportation center...”

Despite their initial successes, in 2004 the troupe was forced to find a new performance space. They took this as an opportunity to solidify the brand of the troupe and create a space that would help that brand grow – artistically and commercially. To do this they hired Joseph Musil, a noted theatre architect responsible for, among other venues, the El Capitan in Hollywood, to design a space. The new theatre, located at 110 East Walnut Avenue in Fullerton, boasts an Art Deco look and two theatrical spaces – a black box and a more traditional proscenium-style stage. While both are perfect stand-alone performance areas, they have been used in conjunction during particular productions. It’s an artistic form of audience participation as, instead of changing static sets, the performers change environments and move from one space to the other with an anxious audience in tow. (Seasoned theatre-goers will notice a similarity, in artistic concept, to Alan Ayckbourn’s work *House & Garden*.) As with everything at the Maverick, though, this is not theatre for the sake of being theat-

rical, but a calculated plan to gain an audience and help that audience understand the language of the stage.

Having two spaces under one roof also provides the theatre with an economic advantage. As Newell states, "The two spaces help us to never have a dark weekend. We never have to close completely to build sets or prepare a show." With more and more entertainment outlets competing for the public's shrinking leisure-time dollar, this facet is an important one.

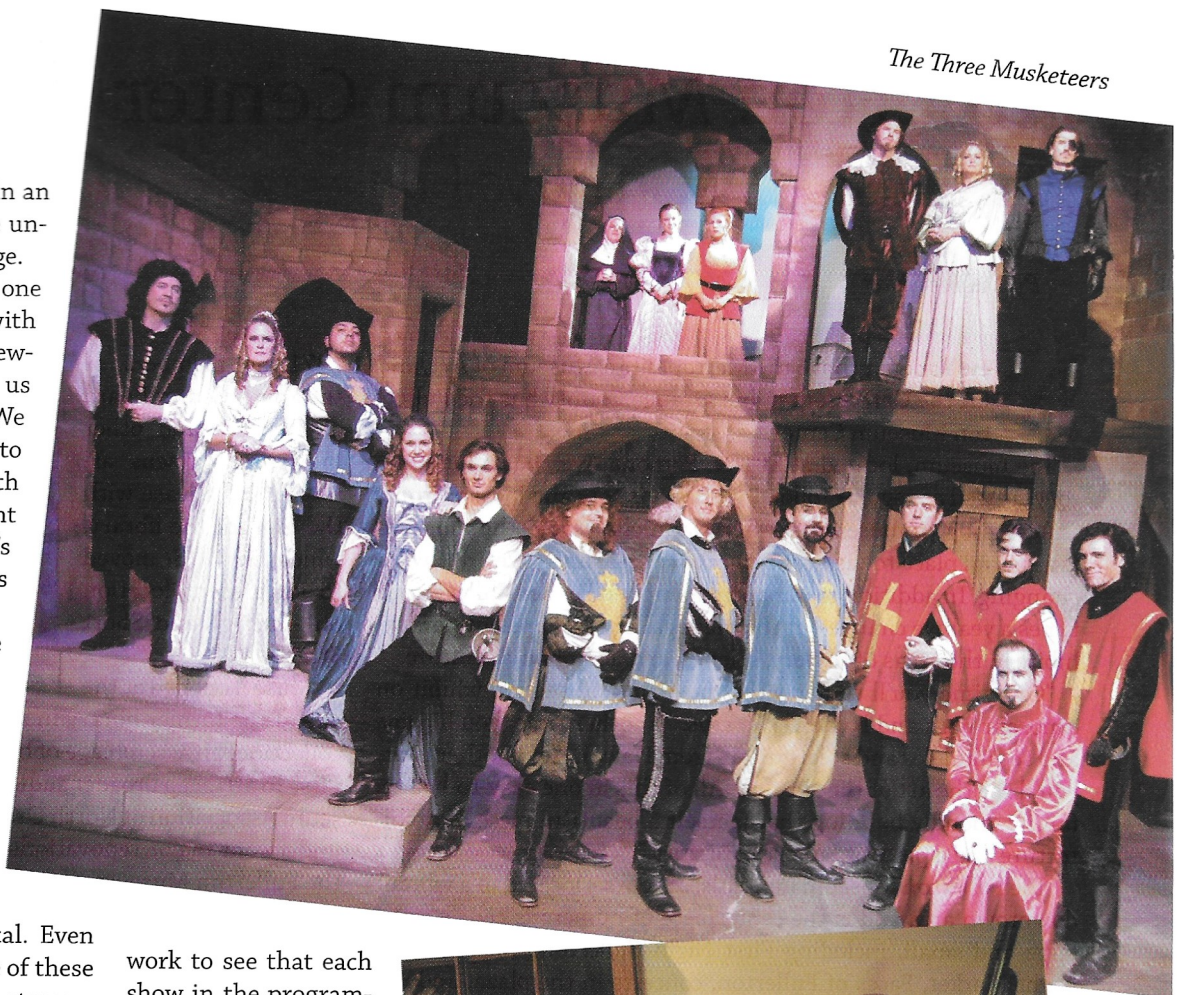
Among the films that have played the Maverick stages are such cinematic "classics" as *Night of the Living Dead* and *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*, alongside more serious fare such as *Stalag 17* and *The Graduate*. There was also the opus to Japanese monster movies of the 1950s

– *Giant Green Lizard! The Musical*. Even with the campy undertones some of these titles imply, Newell continually stresses that the movie-play is not just a gimmick; and while the programming may seem a little scattershot, there is a definite plan in place. Newell explains that each play with a basis in film is chosen for its rights availability, audience accessibility, and for the opportunity it can help create for other shows in a season. For example, 2007 ended with *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*, which will be followed by *Father of the Bride* (another film property) in early 2008. The hope is that people who enjoyed *Santa* will come back to see *Father*, which will be a more "traditional" theatrical event. Jumping ahead, later in the 2008 season will be an original production focusing on events surrounding Hurricane Katrina. While this is in stark contrast to the early shows on the schedule, the "link" is that the two leads from *Father* will be in the Katrina story. They will be that link to the earlier (hopefully) positive patron experience, while providing that sense of security so vital to the theatre's plans. While the Maverick doesn't hold to any particular "theme" for a season, they do

work to see that each show in the programming slate in some way complements the next, while at the same time laying some foundation for a future production.

It should be noted that the Maverick does produce a wide slate of traditional theatre – Shakespeare, classic musicals, and the like. They also are host to local comedy troupes, including Improv Shmimprov. One of their more popular comedy offerings is *Skippers Stand Up* which is a "contest" of sorts featuring past and present skippers of Disneyland's famed Jungle Cruise. It's just one more way that the theatre can celebrate the community and provide an artistic out-point in a wholly original way. For a complete show schedule, visit the theatre at <http://www.mavericktheater.com/>.

On first glance, The Maverick Theatre may seem to be that quirky little theatre



*Night of the Living Dead*

company that permeates American stages – the group that creates odd, inaccessible art only for the sake of creating art. The Maverick exists for the opposite purpose, though – to engage and widen the pool of theatre-going patrons while introducing them to the wonders, challenges, and entertainment opportunities that theatre can offer – not all at once, though, but one original step at a time. While larger theatres in the area may get the press and the accolades, the Maverick might just be making the greatest difference.