

# Miryam's Theater Musings

Theater articles of all sorts, from previews and interviews to reviews of productions, and occasional musings about more meta aspects of theater production or administration.

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## Seattle Musical Theater Starts New Season Liberated From Ugly Past



The cast of *Man of La Mancha* rehearsing at Seattle Musical Theatre (Photo: Roy Arauz)

(As printed in [Seattle Gay News](#))

[Seattle Musical Theatre](#) is launching their 37<sup>th</sup> season in a few weeks. They're starting with *Man of La Mancha* and the lead role of Cervantes/Don Quixote is being played by Jeff Church. In many ways, that signifies enormous change for the somewhere-between-high-school-and-community-and-professional theater company.

SMT, renamed from the long-known CLO (Civic Light Opera), has been a very important presence in the Seattle musical community. Many of our veteran musical theater performers got their first out-of-school productions at this company. Many performers who went on to gain their Equity cards and perform at Village Theatre and the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Theatre trod the boards at SMT first.

SMT has had a lot of struggles over the years, but last year's credibility fiasco nearly succeeded in destroying the company altogether. Some of you who love musical theater might know what happened, but it is worth discussing what happened because the aftermath has produced some very very good changes. However, they are by no means out of the woods financially, so it's important that

you know you should definitely now start supporting this company. That's especially true if you felt like you should *stop* supporting it last year.

SMT has not only had a checkered financial career. The company has, at times in the recent past, going back even four and five years at least (I don't know all of the histories), acted in less than appropriate ways with cast members. Cast members have gotten summarily "fired" (it's not a good word for what is essentially a volunteer effort for actors) for inappropriate reasons. Somehow, the administrations felt that they could take these actions with impunity.

In April/May of 2013, SMT produced *Gypsy*. I was going to review and saw the production on an evening when Mama Rose, Vanessa Miller, lost her voice. She began terrifically but as the first act went on, her singing voice failed more and more noticeably, and by *Everything's Coming Up Roses*, she was acting her guts out, but no music could come out.

The production was directed by Jeff Church. He came on stage and sadly announced that the second act was called. Well, folks, it's live theater and people get sick. Anything can happen and it's a wonder, sometimes, that more shows don't get cancelled! We understand, right? And of course, I couldn't review half a show. No problem.

The Sunday matinee went on with Vanessa on stage, but her singing voice was still missing, so another singer sang from offstage and Vanessa lipsync'd. It was one way of handling it. And then there were several days Vanessa could rest for the next weekend's performances.

The "executive director" Janet Pope, however, took some actions, including "firing" Vanessa (that word again). She said SMT never "fires" anyone for getting sick. So why did she do that when there were only two more weekends left of the production? "Quality control" was her answer. In essence, she didn't like the show as directed by Jeff Church, didn't like Vanessa in the role, and rather than let the show finish and deal with how all that happened later, she took the opportunity to try to insert a different actress into the middle of the run.

How do I know? I spoke to Janet directly the following Monday, when I heard that Vanessa was not going to be allowed to continue. Vanessa Miller is a very well-known performer/director around town. She has directed and taught for years and worked with Village Theatre and Wooden O. Her professionalism is untarnished and she is thought to give 150% to everything. I tried to let Janet know that if she continued to pursue this action, a shit storm was going to come her way. Her answer to me was, "Oh, we've fired actors before." It was very nonchalant.

The shit storm commenced. Hundreds of people, theater performers and theater lovers, all over the country, who heard some of what was happening started facebooking and emailing and talking about it. The board was inundated, the cast was in an uproar (some wanted to quit which would have certainly shut down the show), and emergencies were called.

It became clear to the board, perhaps even to Janet Pope, that major mistakes were being made and needed to be dealt with. Vanessa was invited to meet and discuss things with the board and she was invited to finish the run of the show. She made what was probably an excruciating decision to do so. Her reinstatement was essentially what most people were demanding, including cast members. But she had been humiliated and probably never wanted to step foot in the building again.

But she finished the run. Vanessa says, "That was a very tough time, and thanks to the incredible outpouring of support from theater artists in Seattle, many of whom I didn't know, I didn't feel alone. A group of actors in the cast documented the inconsistencies in communications, and shared it with the board. And I remember thinking, this isn't about a show anymore, it's about saving a theater. So, I have to give credit to the theater artists of Seattle and the actors in the cast. Their passion, courage and activism ignited the changes that we now see at SMT."

The board knew the theater was in financial trouble, but they began hearing stories from lots of people who were not involved in the *Gypsy* production who wanted to tell stories about Janet's behaviors. My impression is that they even began to think about closing the company down, due to too many problems.

So many people had been alienated, it was clear that Janet's fiefdom had to die. While the board and Janet put out statements that they mutually agreed to part, however that happened, Janet had to leave for SMT to survive. Many actors declared that they would never work with SMT again, if things stayed the same. Trust was completely broken.

I note here that I hoped that Janet would move on, but I feared that the "Seattle way" of doing things would prevail: a lot of talking before any action. I also feared that the board would feel beholden to Janet and shrink from removing her/letting her go. I was greatly relieved that I was wrong. She was gone by the end of June!

Mark Chenovick and Jen Klos accepted an unnerving challenge, to act as administrators for SMT for a few months to help them clean up the mess. This a) while running SecondStory Repertory (their theater) full time and b) for free! SMT was deeply in debt and the board was very young (almost no board members had been members for longer than two years, if any), and a lot had to change in a hurry.

The 2013/14 season was adjusted to slightly cheaper musicals, a bit easier to build, but most everything stayed on track. They had a big drop in audiences, though. This is one of the areas that must recover. Some board members have changed, and all the board members now have specific responsibilities to help run the theater. All previous staffers were let go, due to a lack of budget.

Eventually, Roy Arauz, a long-time associate of SMT, and a veteran of many companies in town, was hired as Artistic Director. Roy has history with both musicals and straight plays and recently formed his own company, Arouet, which has done several straight plays at various venues for the last three years.

The 2014/15 season is: *Man of La Mancha* 9/12-28 (tickets: <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/706894>), *Rocky Horror Show* 10/9-18, *Fiddler on the Roof* 11/7-23, *Sweet Charity* 2/13-3/1/15 and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* 4/10-26/15.

Jeff Church says about starring in *Man of La Mancha*, "I thought long and hard about going back, and I'm very excited to work with them again. After everything that happened, it shows the (rest of the theater) community that I support where SMT is going and I hope everyone gives them the chance. I want to help them and the way I know how is by bringing myself back to them."

Roy says, "Mark and Jen left us with a much better foundation. We're starting our 37th season. By the time we get to Season 40, I want to be financially stable, to have five fantastic shows and people knocking on our doors to be in there.

"My personal focus is to create a positive environment for everyone who comes to work with us. That we treat our actors and production teams well. We talk about community theater, we have to create a community in the theater, in rehearsal, that people can turn to us to help at any time. At the same time, as artistic director, I want to set an artistic level that we meet. I want the show to be finished before we come into tech. I do not want to have a show that has never been run before tech week. Artistically, our shows should be ready and provide a good experience for the audience.

"So many people have reached out to us and given us support. I was afraid that people wanted SMT to die, and people I don't even know have offered any kind of help. There has been some blunt criticism about past behaviors and I definitely want to listen and pay attention to our community. People see the difference.

"We have a great board of directors now. There was almost 100% turnover on the board and one person from a past board came back. The board is working very hard and learning things that they've never done before. We don't have a box office person, we have a board member doing this in spare time.

"What inspires me and makes me want to be here is that we are all working to make SMT come back to what it should be and to continue our growth. Making sure we're not competing with each other, but supporting each other, including other theater companies. We want people who go to other theater companies to also want to come to SMT."

Future plans include looking to start up a way to develop new works, as so many are doing these days. Roy reports that they made a long term plan to pay off old debts and even now are ahead of their schedule. But, now, the theater community and the audiences need to come back and see what they have to offer. It is up to us to make sure they are sustained for the long term.

Miryam Gordon at [8/29/2014 03:21:00 PM](#)

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## ABOUT ME

### **Miryam Gordon**

I've been reviewing theater in the greater Seattle area since 2007! It's been a huge part of my life. I am now a licensed legal technician and hope to help people with their family law issues.

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