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Theatricum's *Royal Family* Comes Together on Stage

by Steven Sabel

It's a 40th anniversary celebration at the alfresco Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga.

Although the season opened with *The Taming of The Shrew* and Theatricum's annual production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, longtime Theatricum fans might be even more curious about the next production — *The Royal Family*.

Education director Susan Angelo directs the George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber comedy about a family dynasty of actors, featuring a cast composed of the Geer family

and regular Theatricum company members. It'll be a case of one contemporary theatrical family — “all of the names and faces that audiences will recognize,” Angelo says — depicting fictional counterparts who were, in turn, modeled on a real-life acting dynasty from a different era.

Filled with comic situations and wildly eccentric characters, the play is loosely based on the legendary Barrymore family of actors, which Kaufman and Ferber disguised as the Cavendish clan. The original production opened on Broadway in 1927, when allusions to Ethel Barrymore and John Barrymore were received with glee by audiences for more than 340 performances.

The script focuses on the issues that arise when generations of the Cavendish family of actors get older and turn to younger generations to continue their legacy in the theater. A revival of the classic play at the Ahmanson Theatre in 2004 featured Marian Seldes as the grande dame of the family and Kate Mulgrew as her daughter, with Melinda Page Hamilton representing the third generation of actors.



Melora Marshall and Alan Blumenfeld in “The Royal Family.” Photo by Miriam Geer.



Susan Angelo

In the Theatricum production, Ellen Geer, daughter of Theatricum founder Will Geer and artistic director of the organization since his death in 1978, plays the matriarch of the Cavendish clan. She is joined on stage by her sister Melora Marshall, her daughter Willow Geer, and her daughter-in-law Abby Craden, who all portray the female family members in the production.

Part of the Family

Angelo, who is not a member of the Geer clan, has been working with Theatricum for more than 32 years.

“I was pretty much a young ingénue when I started there,” she says. “When I first met Ellen, Willow was still in her womb.”

Through the years, Angelo has served the organization in many capacities, both on and off the stage. She has worked with each of the Geer family members in a variety of ways. This is the first time she is directing them all on stage together, and the first time she has directed a play featuring Ellen Geer.



Ellen Geer, Willow Geer and Melora Marshall

It's a "natural extension of the relationship. I have learned so much from Ellen. We all have. Ellen's training has been passed down to all of us," says Angelo.

That training has come in handy during the rehearsal process for *The Royal Family*, Angelo says. The actors in the company have a "shorthand" — sometimes even finishing each other's sentences — that helps the process run smooth.

"We're having fun discovering the play together. We like to get up and play in rehearsals. We all work in such a similar fashion," says Angelo.

Nonetheless, Angelo says she defined her role as director on the first day of rehearsal.

"I went in that first day and said, 'I'm actually the air traffic controller,'" she says with a chuckle.

"We have such great actors — some of whom have grown up here as actors. That creates a high level of trust and respect that allows the exchange to remain beneficial," she adds.

Planting the Seed

Casting the Theatricum family in a production of *The Royal Family* was originally Willow Geer's idea, says Angelo. "Willow has wanted to do it for a couple of years, now."

The idea was floated again when it was time to select the lineup for the 40th anniversary season, but Angelo pointed out that the play required a staircase.

"A couple of days later, Ellen said, 'We're getting a staircase,' and that solved that," says Angelo.

The themes of the play are in line with the continued mission of the organization and the theme of the 40th anniversary season, she says.

"One of the things I learned from Ellen long ago, is that it's all about passing it on to the next generation," says Angelo. With *The Royal Family*, "all of the aspects are there of a family wanting to continue their commitment to the theater," she says. "They're going to do it, come hell or high water."

The 40th anniversary has also served to mobilize the organization in ways that have been focused on planning for the next 40 years. New executive board members have been recruited to develop a stronger focus on administration, says Angelo.

"We have some great new board members who are lending their expertise to the further success of the organization, while working in conjunction with the 'sounding board' of long-time family members who are reinvigorating the core values and traditional history of the organization," she says.

Many of those long-time members have fueled a campaign to "re-introduce" Theatricum to the community.



Willow Geer, Tim Halligan, Melora Marshall, Ellen Geer and Alan Blumenfeld

"We're saying, 'hey! It has been 40 years, and we're still here. Come be a part of it, or come back to experience more'," declares Angelo.

She likens the organization to a "big, great oak tree — we have a lot of branches, a lot of programming. We have to work over the next few years to strengthen our trunk, the core support," she says.

"Theatricum is such a cultural destination for LA. I want it to be there for other people. I want it to continue," says Angelo.

Rooted in Passion



Jessica Butenshon and Abby Craden

Angelo's resume includes a long list of other companies and venues where she has worked. She co-starred in A Noise Within's *Antony and Cleopatra* last year. But Theatricum is her true bower.

"I've learned a lot through working at other places, and I feel like when I come back to Theatricum, I can celebrate the way we have to work here," says Angelo.

"I don't think we take ourselves too seriously," she says. "(For us), it's about an experience for the audience. The environment is comfortable, and allows us all to let our hair down a bit surrounded by the company, and the audience as part of our community."

Angelo recommends *The Royal Family* as a way for new audiences to discover Theatricum. "For new audiences, it's the great opportunity to meet the family and become a part of the next era of the Theatricum experience," she says. "If you've never been to the venue before, this is the perfect play to come see. It's a great introduction to the venue, the people, and the Theatricum experience."

The play is also a "valentine to the theater, and to the people who continue to make sacrifices in their lives to make theater happen," she says.

Forest Through The Trees

The family affair continues when *Merlin* opens as part of the 40th anniversary season, on July 20. Written and directed by Ellen Geer, the production will feature Melora Marshall as the wizard of Arthurian legend, and Angelo in the dual role of the mothers of Merlin and Arthur.

"This is one of Ellen's many projects that she has been wanting to do. It is so fun to play these roles," says Angelo.

The production features an original score composed by Marshall McDaniel and Kellen McDaniel, also Geer extended family members.

"Every kid loves a wizard. Fantasy and folklore — this is the closest thing we're ever going to get to a blockbuster on Theatricum's stage," Angelo says.

The production is in keeping with the "magical setting" that Theatricum offers, she says.

"It's an organization with its heart in the right place — a deep belief in family," Angelo says. "It's a safe place for families to gather and experience theater together. It truly captures the joy of theater."

***The Royal Family*, Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Rd., Topanga. Opens Saturday 8 pm. June performances: Sat 8 pm, Sun 7:30 pm. Then Sat 8 pm July 6 and 13, Aug 10; Sat 4 pm July 20, Aug 17 and 31, Sept 7, 21 and 28; Sun 7:30 pm July 14, Aug 4 and 18, Sept 8; Sun 3:30 pm Aug 25 and Sept 15. Tickets: \$10-35. www.Theatricum.com. 310-450-3723.**

**** All *The Royal Family* production photos by Miriam Geer.**