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# A Director Who Relishes What-Ifs

Michael Michetti aims for the magical, from Shakespeare to a musical about famous painters.

By DARYL H. MILLER



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At an impressionable age, Michael Michetti's parents took him to see a show at the Old Globe Theatre, near his home in San Diego County. It was a Shakespeare play with scenes in a forest, and as the action shifted to that setting, actors holding branches became the trees.

Young Michetti was delighted by that little bit of stage magic.

Today, at 42, he is a Los Angeles-area stage director, and in much of his work, from an award-winning production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" set in colonial India to a recent staging of Bertolt Brecht's "Edward II" in a giant container of earth, he attempts to relive that sense of delight.

"It's still the sort of thing that attracts me—things that are nonliteral, that encourage the audience to engage their imaginations," Michetti says, "and make it magic."

In a rare moment of calm, the lanky, 6-foot-3 director is at home in Los Angeles' West Adams area, curled into a corner of his living-room couch.

He has been working nonstop since Thanksgiving, the busiest period in his 10-year-old directing career. The back-to-back projects began with "Oliver!" for Santa Barbara Civic Light Opera and continued in Los Angeles with "Edward II" for Circle X and "Titanic" for Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities.

Now he is staging "Poet's Garden," a new musical about Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and a woman who became their model in Arles, France, in the late 1880s. The show, which opens Thursday, is written by local actor-writers John Allee and Gary Matanky, who are renting the Matrix Theatre on Melrose Avenue for the production.

"Poet's Garden" imagines how the overlapping visits of Van Gogh and Gauguin might have altered life in sleepy Arles. Drawn to the Provençal village for the extraordinary quality of its light, the artists set about painting the town red (not to mention yellow and blue) in vividly colored canvases of its people, streets and outlying countryside.

Yet the musical focuses not so much on the artists as on the people they met and painted. In particular, Allee and Matanky were inspired by paintings of cafe owner Marie Ginoux, who became the subject of Van Gogh's "The Arlesienne" as well as Gauguin's "The Night Cafe." Her husband, Joseph-Michel, also ended up in Van Gogh's canvases, as did postman Joseph Roulin and his wife, Augustine—all of whom are characters in the show. But as envisioned here, it is Marie who is most altered by the experience.

The character (played by Fiama Fricano) yearns for something more in life. "She's questioning," Michetti says. "One of the central metaphors is about choices—and is it too late to make new ones?"

Then the artists stumble into her life, and "they see her in a way that allows her to see herself in a different way."



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Beginning as "a neutral canvas of possibilities," she gradually comes to "full color," Michetti says. So, the gradual addition of color, literally as well as figuratively, will be a key to his staging.

The act of painting is also handled figuratively. Michetti and his creative team realized that if the actors (Bjorn Johnson as Van Gogh and Steven Memel as Gauguin) worked at painted canvases, viewers would get caught up in thoughts of how fake or real the paintings looked, rather than focusing on the show. So the audience will see empty stretchers on easels, leaving the paintings to their imaginations.

"It's very much like the ..."-Michetti raises his arms, as if holding those long-ago branches in the Shakespeare play.

Michetti's artistic sense was instilled early on by his family.

He grew up in farm-and-horse country east of San Diego, in the community of Spring Valley. His father, Mario, ran an ad agency and was an avid amateur painter and photographer, while his mother, Toni, introduced him and younger brother Peter to music. She played the four-stringed tenor guitar and taught the boys to sing along in harmony.

Family outings often involved shows at the Old Globe and Starlight Musical Theatre. It was on one of these excursions that the human trees turned Michetti's thoughts to directing. He pursued this interest at USC, where he earned a bachelor of fine arts in theater, with an emphasis on directing, in 1980.

While still at USC, he and classmate Dan Knowles began creating live industrial shows for corporate clients. Soon, their business was also supplying musical entertainment for conventions and caroling quartets for the holidays. In his free time, Michetti occasionally directed for the theater, but it was a singer hired for the company who led him to the show that would begin to root his stage reputation.

The singer was Brian Shucker, who with Bill Sawyer had written a musical called "Babes," about a group of fictional young screen stars in 1940s Hollywood. Presented, eventually, in a 1990 co-production with the Cast Theatre in Hollywood, the show earned critical praise and a lot of notice.

Its success helped to persuade Michetti to make the leap into full-time stage work-the first of many risks he would take. The most daring of these was his 1997 production of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Captivated by the idea of setting the play in colonial India, he spent about three years researching the idea, finding ever more parallels between the Bard's fish-out-of-water story and life during the British Raj. When he couldn't find a theater company willing to get behind the idea, he and another producer pulled together about \$40,000 to present it at the Stella Adler Theatre in Hollywood.

The production re-envisioned the warring fairy king and queen as the Hindu gods Rama and Sita, and Puck as Rama's pranksterish half-human, half-monkey henchman, Hanuman. The queen's fairy attendants were portrayed by Indian rod puppets. In the mortal world, the young lovers and their stuffy fathers became British colonists; the stage-struck mechanicals were Indian tradesmen.

The show lost all of its investment but paid off in positive reviews. "This is a rich, multilayered production," wrote Times reviewer Jana J. Monji, while Richard Scaffidi, writing for Drama-Logue, called it "a rare sensory treat, completely memorable in its original choices and an awful lot of fun."

The show went on to win four Ovation Awards, including production and direction honors.

Last year was Michetti's busiest yet, beginning with an acclaimed production of Stephen Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" that prompted its co-star-Amanda McBroom, a songwriter ("The Rose"), singer and actress-to declare Michetti a director of "very unique vision." Other highlights included "What's Wrong With Angry?" for the Celebration Theatre in Hollywood and "Bent to the Flame," a one-man show about Tennessee Williams presented off-off-Broadway.

So far, 2001 has been even busier, especially during the

overlap of "Edward II" and the musical "Titanic." "All I did was work on those shows," he says, "sleep when I could, and take care of the bare minimum of doing my laundry and paying my bills'-the latter of which, he joked, tended to arrive with "pink things inside them."

"Edward II'-Brecht's adaptation of Christopher Marlowe's drama about the doomed 14th century English king-was a pet project that Michetti proposed to the Circle X company, of which he is a member.

He staged the play in a huge box filled with ground-up bits of tire, to simulate soil, as a means of symbolizing the many trials that King Edward wades through and to allow for Edward's male lover, Gaveston, to dig his own grave, as called for in the text.

Michetti's next show, "Titanic," took him from the earth to the sea in the biggest production of his or Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities' careers. The \$750,000 production of the 1997 Broadway musical involved a cast of 37 and a set that soared more than two stories to replicate the ill-fated ocean liner.

Coming projects include a semi-staged concert of "Porgy and Bess" for the Pasadena Pops orchestra, June 29-30, and a production of Mark St. Germain's 1993 play "Camping With Henry and Tom" for McCoy Rigby Entertainment at La Mirada Theatre, Oct. 12-28.

In "Poet's Garden," the yearning Marie must make choices and take chances before her life can change. The same has been true for Michetti, particularly when he gambled on that breakthrough production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"We're always faced with that other path and 'what if?' " Michetti says. "Some people take the leap, and others don't."

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"POET'S GARDEN," Matrix Theatre, 7657 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles. Dates: Previews Tuesday and Wednesday, 8 p.m. Opens Thursday at 8 p.m. Regular schedule: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. Ends June 3. Prices: Previews, \$12.50; regular run, \$25. Phone: (310) 289-2999.

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Daryl H. Miller Is a Regular Contributor to Calendar

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