

The Conforth sisters' theatrical reign at The Shedd began in 2013, when all three of them were cast in a production of *The Music Man*. Since then, the young women have been in a slew of Shedd performances as individuals, but as a group, they were also cast in last year's *Annie Get Your Gun* and this year's *Gypsy*.

Along with spending hours upon hours rehearsing together, in the theater and at home, the Conforths also homeschool together. Surprisingly, though, the sisters say all the intense time spent together is a benefit, not a burden.

"It's great," oldest sister, Cyra, says. "I think we're closer as siblings than a lot of people are."

Amanda also enjoys that her daughters work together in Shedd productions. She says it encourages collaboration.

"When you're in a production and you have to come home and work on your lines and work on your vocals, you're doing it by yourself," Amanda says. "But they're not doing it by themselves. So they can play vocally, they can take ideas from each other, ask questions."

Cyra has plans to move to California to pursue acting and Kenady has dreams of one day being on Broadway — youngest sister, Campbell, is too young to stress out about any of that yet — but in the meantime, the sisters have thrived in the local scene.

Performing in Shedd productions led Cyra and Kenady to get involved with The Shedd's Musical Theatre Training Academy (MTTA).

MTTA itself, much like the Conforth family, is built on a basis of collaboration and teamwork. It's led by director Vicki Brabham, who has been involved with The Shedd off-and-on over the past 20 years.

"Right now we do two programs per year," Brabham says. MTTA is open to students in grades 9 through 12 and has a 10-week winter program that runs for a few hours every Saturday morning, so as to not interfere with school schedules, and a three-week summer program that functions more intensely and "more like a day camp," she says.

MTTA teaches the building blocks of musical theater, Brabham says. The program builds acting, singing and dancing skills with the use of older, classic repertoire sometimes from as far back as the 1930s.

This summer, the program focused on mid-century Broadway, which included a selection of pieces from musicals such as *My Fair Lady* and *Fiddler on the Roof*.

"As enamored as high school students can be with contemporary musical theater, let's show them what the influences were that acted upon people who write contemporary," Brabham says.

Brabham says she knew the Conforth sisters would make a great addition to the program.

"I first saw them as performers in Shedd productions and then just kind of inquired if they would be interested," she says. "I knew it would be another commitment for them, but I felt that it was a mutually beneficial relationship — that I had something to offer them as well as their talent giving back to our program, and not just talent for the sake of at show time."

She says of the trio, "They're great models for the other ensemble members for how hard they work and how respectful and professional they are."

Although the Conforths are involved in other theatrical endeavors — voice lessons, dance lessons (middle sister Kenady actually teaches five dance classes a week) — the trio still found the MTTA program rewarding on top of their already busy schedules.

Both Cyra and Kenady say a big part of their appreciation for the program was working with people their own age who are just as passionate as they are.

"It's awesome to be in a situation where you're with a whole bunch of people your own age who are so talented and also love the same thing that you love," Kenady says, "because we live in a small town where not a lot of people do theatre, so it's good to be surrounded by people who love the same thing you do."

MTTA as a program is pretty unique too, Brabham says. "In certain ways it does stand alone," she says. "Certainly the type of material or the repertoire is not an attempt to do the flashy new musicals."

Brabham adds that the program is also unique in the way it brings high schoolers from different backgrounds into an arena where they can collaborate.

"That stretches them to work alongside other people who are very talented as well, and then they see that there's a bigger world out there than their one place, where they might be the star — very well could be," she says.

Brabham puts extra effort in attempting to recruit young people from various high schools, as well as home schoolers, reaching out to various theater directors in the Eugene-Springfield area. "I try to get two students from every school in the Eugene and Springfield districts," she says.

MTTA's eventual goal is to become a destination camp for young people outside of the Eugene area. "Thanks to people like the Conforths," she says, "it's starting to feel like it's a destination camp."

But, Brabham stresses, one of the most important parts of MTTA is that it shows young adults in the area that they

can find valuable artistic experiences in their own town.

"I would like students to know that they don't have to leave the area to get a quality musical theater experience," she says. "Often when they think about being pushed to the next level, they want to go to Interlochen [Center for the Arts in Michigan] or an arts program in a big city like L.A. or New York. But maybe what they're ready for is right here in their backyard." ■

CYRA
CONFORTH



Theater lost one of its greatest playwrights this year when Sam Shepard died in July at the age of 73. Shepard's uncompromising work — giving voice to an aggrieved, brutalized masculinity driven inward until it implodes in moments of raw vulnerability and unappeasable loss — has left an indelible mark on American theater, and his 1979 off-Broadway play, the Pulitzer-winning *Buried Child*, will be mounted April 6-28 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre under the direction of Joseph Gilg. One of Shepard's most powerful and moving plays, it's a fitting tribute to a legendary talent.

It's not surprising, in this nightmare Age of Trump, that someone is trotting out a work by Bertolt Brecht, one of several writers who escaped Nazi Germany to land in the U.S., where he did most of his best writing. The UO's University Theatre produces Brecht's greatest play, *Mother Courage*, March 2-17. Other productions of a distinctly political and timely nature include *Frost/Nixon* at Very Little Theatre (Aug. 10-25) as well as *The Crucible*, the late Arthur Miller's historicized fable about the evils of McCarthyism, running June 8-24 at Cottage Theatre.

Cut to those world premieres. OCT is bringing us Andrea Stolowitz' *Successful Strategies* Feb. 23-March 11. Stolowitz, a Portland playwright, sets her contemporary version of the 18th-century Pierre de Marivaux farce of the same name in a Willamette Valley vineyard.

Meanwhile, Cottage Theatre is one of six community theaters nationwide selected to take part in the American Association of Community Theatre's 2018 NewPlayFest, which premieres new work in multiple venues around the country. CT will be running Alabama playwright Joe Musso's *Treehouse* Aug. 10-26; it's a drama that grows out of a line from Shakespeare, "To be or not to be."

Sadly, that's it for new work in the coming season.

Yes, Very Little Theatre is doing another *Little Shop of Horrors* (June 1-23) for you Audrey II fans out there. More substantial material comes to VLT with Matthew Lopez' *The Whipping Man* (Jan. 19-Feb. 3), which looks weirdly pertinent to today's political climate: It's the tale of a Jewish Confederate soldier who returns home after the Civil War to be greeted by two former family slaves, raised as Jews.

Actors Cabaret, Eugene's little dinner/musical

community theatre that could, offers its usual light musical fare; our favorites might be the Queen jukebox musical *Will Rock You*, June 29-July 28, and *Reefer Madness*, Oct. 26-Nov. 3.

Finally, for the holiday season, it seems that *A Christmas Carol* has finally lost its horrifying cachet. (As recently as 2015 you could see *five* different December productions here in town.)

Instead, Radio Redux, which does live portrayals of classic radio comedy and drama, will stage an abbreviated version of *The Shop Around the Corner* (whose story was turned into the movie *You've Got Mail*) as part of its Christmas program, which also includes music and story telling (Dec. 8-10).

Cottage Theatre is doing *Seussical* (Dec. 1-23). VLT's December show will be *The Christmas Foundling* (Dec. 1-10), about miners in the Sierra raising a baby boy; Actors Cabaret will mount *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* Nov. 17-Dec. 16; The Shedd's feel-good December show will be *Singin' in The Rain*, Dec. 1-17; and OCT has no holiday show scheduled. ■