

arts & culture

Resident Makes Debut As Writer And Director For Musical

The Off Broadway Players will present Marcel Hogue’s script April 20 at La Hacienda Recreation.

By MICHAEL FORTUNA
Daily Sun Staff Writer

In the midst of the pandemic shutdown four years ago, Marcel Hogue found himself inspired to write a musical. The result is Off Broadway Players’ production of “Way Back When: The Musical,” which will be Hogue’s debut as a writer and as a director. “It happened that the club was asking for submissions,” Hogue said. “On a whim, I gave it a shot.” The group accepted his script, and away Hogue went. He said he’s felt a mixture of emotions along the way. “It’s been an excitement inside,” said Hogue, of the Village Mira Mesa. “We’re getting close to show time; I’m terrified at the same time.” The troupe of 24 actors and 10 dancers will put on the show at 3 and 6:30 p.m. April 20 at La Hacienda Recreation. Tickets for Villages residents and their guests with proper ID are \$23 and are available at offbroadwayplayers.thundertix.com Throughout the process, Hogue sought out pointers



Michael Fortuna | Daily Sun

Marcel Hogue, center, of the Village Mira Mesa, and the Off Broadway Dancers run through a routine of “Way Back When: The Musical” during a rehearsal.

from other members with directing experience. “It’s definitely been a learning curve for me,” Hogue said. “I’ve gotten a lot of great advice. I appreciate it.” The show takes place in a neighborhood bar. It’s July 3, and numerous people enter and exit the establishment, including a dance troupe whose bus has broken down. Throughout the show, the dancers, who are on their way to a rehearsal for a Fourth of July celebration, make their way back to the bar because the bus keeps breaking down. The show features a host of popular songs, mainly from the 1950s and 1960s, that are tied to the dialogue. “I hope they have a good time and the show helps bring back memories,” Hogue said. “I’m excited about the reaction from the audience.” Hogue performed in high school and college productions, but he didn’t step on stage until arriving in The Villages around 2019. He joined the Off Broadway Players about four years ago. “I decided to give it a shot,” Hogue said. “I got a part, and I’ve been in their shows ever since.” Joe DiLeo plays a Fuller Brush salesman, complete with a suitcase of his wares,

who stops at the bar for a drink. He sings Ricky Nelson’s version of “Travelin’ Man.” DiLeo worked throughout his life in a billing and collection agency, singing some when he was a teen. He started doing musicals in The Villages, joining the Off Broadway Players three years ago. “It’s such a great group,” said DiLeo, of the Village of Hillsborough. “Everybody gets along. The dancers are fabulous, and the singers are excellent.” Shirley Keith handles some of the choreography for the Off Broadway Dancers, including tap and jazz routines, as well as a production number. She wanted to use uptempo songs for the dance numbers. During one tune featuring four states, the dancers wear hats representing each state. Keith has choreographed routines all her life, and she’s developed a system for coming up with new routines for shows. “Each writer and director has their own style,” said Keith, of the Village of Gilchrist. “Over time, we get in a groove.” Keith started creating dance routines in 2012 and has contributed to the group’s biannual programs since then. “That’s a lot of shows,” she said.

Alfreda Gerald Returns to Sing a Tribute to Aretha

She will perform with members of The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra on Tuesday at The Sharon.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

While sailing through the British Virgin Islands with Princess Cruises last week, Alfreda Gerald took a break between performances to discuss her upcoming show in The Villages. “I’m so excited,” she said. “I’ve sang with The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra many times and have done several shows with them.” Alfreda Gerald, who is better known simply as Alfreda, has performed with such stars as Cher, Celine Dion, Sir Elton John, Whitney Houston and many others. She’s graced the stages at Royal Albert Hall, Madison Square Garden, Sydney Opera House, The Acropolis and Wembley Stadium. Her current project is an Aretha Franklin tribute show, “Alfreda Sings Aretha.” Alfreda credits Aretha Franklin as one of her greatest musical influences. She was first introduced to the artist through her mother, who also was a singer. “I learned to sing from my mother,” Alfreda said. “When

I was a child, my mother would open shows for many small acts in North Carolina.” Much to her mother’s delight, Alfreda’s voice developed the same warm raspy timbre as Aretha’s as she matured. Coupled with the similarity of their voices and her mother’s enthusiasm, Alfreda said Aretha’s music and legacy deeply resonated with her through her career. In “Alfreda Sings Aretha,” Alfreda has painstakingly recreated the look, feel and sound of an Aretha Franklin concert. She is joined on stage by more than 20 other performers, including backup singers and a rhythm and horn section. Many are previous bandmates of Aretha and are, according to Alfreda, some of the toughest Aretha tribute critics around. Thankfully, they have long ago given Alfreda their seal of approval. Alfreda said she believes her attention to detail and commitment to delivering the best show possible sets her apart from other tribute acts — as does the addition of the VPO’s string section. “I feel like my show is bigger and more like (Aretha’s) show than others I’ve seen,” Alfreda said. “Some others are doing something similar, but not everyone has the VPO string section on stage.” Using a mixture of singing,

lighting and video technology, Alfreda recreates the atmosphere of watching Aretha Franklin perform that she remembers from childhood. The show is a big hit on Princess Cruises, where she regularly performs. “For this last show, there was not a dry eye in the house,” Alfreda said. “Many people said they can feel her presence in the room.” In addition to the VPO’s string section, other local performers are joining Alfreda on stage as backup singers. Among them is singer Marcella Richardson, a regular guest vocalist with VPO. “She is absolutely fantastic,” Richardson said. Richardson first met Alfreda through mutual friend and fellow former TORCH member, Shari Beshers, many years ago. Now, the trio is dear friends, and Alfreda often stays with Richardson when visiting The Villages. During Alfreda’s last visit at the end of March, she asked Beshers and Richardson to do the show with her. Richardson said she was fully intending to attend the show as a spectator, but could not resist the opportunity on stage. “I feel very assured that when people have a better understanding of her talent, the joy she brings and how infectious her personality is, they will appreciate how amazing she is,” Richardson said. “She just has a phenomenal voice.” Catch Alfreda, Beshers and Richardson in “Alfreda Sings Aretha” at 7 p.m. Tuesday at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$30 and up. Go to thevillagesentertainment.com.



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