

San Jose Mercury News

Gunn Choir will be 'Totally Gone With The Wind'

By John Orr
Daily News Arts and Entertainment Editor
jorr@dailynewsgroup.com

Posted: 02/03/2016
Updated: 02/09/2016



Don Anderson photo A small portion of the cast of "Totally Gone with the Wind," which will be performed at Gunn High's Spangenberg Theatre on Feb. 9 and 10, 2016. From left are Jim Shelby, Liz Matchett, Rawlins Echeverria, Paul Dunlap and Todd Summers. The goofy musical raises money for Gunn Choir's travel fund. (Don Anderson)

William Liberatore was standing outside the St. James Theatre in New York in 2001, handing out tickets for a show still in previews to the students in his Gunn High Choir.

"People were trying to knock me down and take the tickets from me, as I was passing them out to the children," Liberatore said in a recent interview. "That's how I knew it must be the greatest show ever."

And when he saw "The Producers," starring Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick, he liked the show's energy and humor, and decided to "rip it off" some day for the annual Gunn Choir/Staff Musical.

That day has arrived, with hundreds of Gunn students and teachers, and hundreds of students from Palo Alto middle schools converging on Spangenberg Theatre on Tuesday and Wednesday nights for "Totally Gone With the Wind," which will raise money for the Gunn Choir Tour Scholarship Fund.

What does "Totally Gone With the Wind" have to do with "The Producers"?

Well, as Liberatore said, the Gunn show rips off the Mel Brooks comedy, which is about two scoundrels who try to make a killing by over-selling ownership in a show, planning to make it such a bad show that it will close on opening night. When the show is a success, they are in big trouble.

Here's the plot for "Totally Gone With the Wind," from the press release: "Designed to out-produce 'The Producers,' 'Totally Gone with the Wind' is the story of two loveable scoundrels who set out to create a Broadway flop by turning an American literary classic into a 1970s musical disaster. ... It seems like a fool-proof plan, especially when the actor playing Scarlett turns out to be a man."

"It's very very crazy, and all in great fun," said Liberatore. "Just a lot of kookiness."

Gunn Choir/Staff Musical "grew out of a bunch of different things," Liberatore said. "About 20 years ago, I had taken a leave from teaching. I was burned out. I walked away, but it didn't take long before I realized that I missed it."

Not that he didn't stay busy. Liberatore is one of the most respected and sought-after musicians in the Bay Area, and has served as music director for the American Musical Theatre of San Jose, has conducted Symphony Silicon Valley, and is resident music director at TheatreWorks.

But when he came back to Gunn High, he said, he needed to build the program, so he mounted a show with choir and teachers.

"That was 19 years ago," he said. "This is the 20th time."

Over the years, the programs have become hugely popular, with students, teachers, parents and alumni crowding in for the shows, and raising money for the school's choirs.

"Once it became profitable," Liberatore said, "we offered tour scholarships. We've taken bigger and bigger trips, and we've been able to offer money to the families that can't afford the trips."

We've taken some pretty amazing singing tours. Anybody who wants to go can go. Last year, we went to Italy. In April this year, we are taking 128 kids to sing at Carnegie Hall.

"It's kind of neat the way it works."

Nancy Hersage wrote the book for the show, and Liberatore, in addition to directing, oversees the music. He doesn't want to ruin the surprises, but says the audience can expect to hear things that will remind of '70s disco music.

Yes, the audience may end up in "Funky Town." But, "I Will Survive."

Email John Orr at jorr@dailynewsgroup.com.

Theater

What: "Totally Gone with the Wind"

Presented by: The Gunn Choir

Written by: Nancy Hersage

Directed by: William Liberatore

Choreographed by: Gay Richard

Costumed by: Susan Ellis

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday

Where: Spangenberg Theatre, Gunn High School, 780 Arastradero Road, Palo Alto

Tickets: \$10 students, \$20 adults; www.gunnchoir.org