

What they do for love

By Joanne Engelhardt

For The Daily News

'What I Did for Love,' one of the most popular songs from "A Chorus Line," is a recurring statement made by seven busy Peninsula actors who receive little or no pay for the hours and hours of time they spend learning lines, rehearsing and performing in the many live theater productions offered from Mountain View to Foster City.

Explains Mike Rhone, who starred last year in Palo Alto Players' production of "Boeing, Boeing," and is now in rehearsals for "Company" at Los Altos Stage Company, "I can't imagine not performing. I love being on stage. I love everything about putting a show together."

Ray Renati, a frequent actor and director at The Pear Avenue Theatre, is even more succinct: "It's my passion, my bliss." For Pat Tyler, performing is how she identifies herself: "I'm an actor. It's always a challenge, which I enjoy, and I love the story-telling aspect of it." Echoes another actor, Monica Cappuccini, "On stage is where I love to be. Acting defines me."

These actors, one of whom is a member of Actors' Equity (Renati) and another who is "close" to turning professional (Cappuccini) are just a few of the prodigious number of performers who audition for roles many times a year -- and frequently are cast in five or six productions every year. Several single out Evan Michael Schumacher and Rhone as two of the busiest actors around.

Schumacher, who moved to the Bay Area three years ago, doesn't dispute that statement. "I've been in shows almost since moving to the Bay Area in 2011, although I took the first year to get settled." Over the past year, he's appeared in "Boeing, Boeing" at Palo Alto Players, "Les Liaisons Dangereuses," "Rx," "Some Girls" and the recently opened "Smash," all at Redwood City's Dragon Productions Theatre.

Besides "Boeing, Boeing," Rhone has been seen recently in Foothill Music Theatre

productions ("How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," "Curtains") several at 42nd Street Moon in San Francisco, three shows at The Pear, a starring role as Javert in the sold-out run of "Les Miserables" at South Bay Music Theatre in Saratoga, and recently finished "Amadeus" at City Lights' Theater Company in San Jose. "Company" is his first production at Los Altos.

But other actors, such as Bill C. Jones, Nicole Martin and Tyler, find they have to fit theater into lives already packed with jobs and busy lives. Jones, a painting contractor, says it's sometimes difficult to find the time to perform, "but I make sure it happens, because I love to act." Tyler, who runs her own business as a freelance prop and costume designer for theater, finds that acting and theater design fit well together, occasionally overlapping when she is both in a play and doing props, as she did for "Moon Over Buffalo" and "House of Blue Leaves" at Los Altos Stage Co.

As a third-grade teacher at White Oaks School in San Carlos, Martin says she finds teaching and acting "somewhat symbiotic." She explains, "As a teacher, I'm free most nights, but because I have a lot of homework to correct, when I'm at not working at a rehearsal, I correct homework and tests. My cast members get a kick out of seeing the cute drawings and written work of my students. Likewise, when I'm at school, I'm able to try out different accents when I read aloud from a book, and I sometimes become ultra-dramatic for comic effect."

Most of these actors have been performing for many years. Martin says she started acting in elementary school and was a theater major in college, but she took a 10-year hiatus, starting up again in 2002 in "The Sound of Music" at Broadway by the Bay. Jones has been a Bay Area actor for 20 years, 10 of them in the East Bay. Since moving to Palo Alto, he does most of his shows on the Peninsula.

Renati's acting tenure is the longest: 26 years, nearly all of it in the Bay Area (with a stint in London in a Shakespearean production, five years ago). Tyler's acting tenure is second longest: 22 years. Rhone has been at it for nine years, while Cappuccini started her Bay Area acting six years ago, after a 17-year-hiatus. Close to a non-stop actor now, Schumacher is making up for lost time, because he only started his Bay Area acting career two years ago.

All seven say they would definitely not be able to live on the money they make as actors. Some theaters, like Dragon, The Pear, Los Altos stage Co. and Palo Alto Players, offer actors a stipend. Others, like Hillbarn Theatre, Foothill Music Theatre, Coastal Repertory Theatre and South Bay Musical Theatre, do not. But stipends typically run between \$100 and \$300, which might cover the cost of gas over the course of the weeks of rehearsals and performances.

As an Equity actor, Renati is the exception. He receives a weekly salary, "unless I work on a waiver, which is given to small theaters on a limited basis."

That means having a regular job to pay the bills. Renati is a free-lance photographer, which gives him the freedom to work around his acting (and directing) activities. Tyler belongs to SAG/AFTRA for her theater design business, so "I don't audition at theaters that don't pay a stipend, due to my union status." Cappuccini says she doesn't have any other paid job -- "not that I could live off my earnings in theater! I'm lucky to have somewhat the means to sustain myself."

Both Rhone and Schumacher work in high tech, Rhone with Gardner, a technology research and consulting company, and Schumacher at Apple as a trainer for both employees and consumers. And both say they are fortunate to have jobs that allow them some flexibility. "Sometimes this means replying to emails or managing quick tasks during rehearsal breaks or late at night," Rhone adds.

Schumacher credits both his bosses and co-workers as being "extremely supportive of me in my moonlighting. A lot of them even come to my shows when they get a chance."

Asked to name their favorite role, several, including Tyler, Rhone and Jones, say it's usually the one they're currently in or have just finished.

"Two that stick out are 'The Nerd,' which I did in 1988, and when I played Brady in 'Inherit the Wind,'" says Jones. Renati singles out the 2005 American Musical Theatre of San Jose production of "West Side Story," because most of the company was from New York, and "I felt like I was in a Broadway show."

Cappuccini says it's difficult to list one or two, so her five favorite roles are Maria Callas

in "Master Class," Lettice in "Lettice & Lovage," Claire in "A Delicate Balance," Julia in "Lend Me a Tenor" -- and the evil stepmother in "Cinderella." Martin also picks "Lend Me a Tenor" -- a different production from Cappuccini's -- but adds, "I have favorite parts of every play I've ever done." Schumacher narrows it down to "Boeing, Boeing" and the recent "Some Girls."

To a person, all seven of these popular actors have similar advice to give anyone starting out in theater: Learn your craft, network and audition.

"When you audition," says Renati, "do the best you can and then walk away. Don't fret over a part you didn't get or why. There are so many factors that are out of your control as a performer. It took me years to figure that out." Martin agrees: "Audition a lot -- it's an eye opener. You can learn from your fellow actors' mistakes and successes simply by being a fly on the wall." Adds Tyler, "Audition as much as you can. You'll always learn something from it."

Both Rhone and Jones lament that it took them years to overcome uncertainties about being able to do theater while working full-time or conquering fragility about performing on stage.

Schumacher's advice is succinct: "Stop waiting for something to happen. Find a monologue, get a friend to take a photo of you, make copies, then get out there and audition. There's so much variety in the Bay Area, you'll find something that fits you."

Spoken like someone who's been there and done that.

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