

# **The Little Theater that Could - And Does!**

## **Log Cabin Venue Offers Award-Wining Productions**

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While many think of Broadway or major cities as the only place to see quality theater, this is totally untrue. In towns throughout the United States, small community theaters put on plays that are high-quality productions, very entertaining and generally have low prices for tickets.

Such a theater is Groves Cabin Theatre in Morongo Valley, Calif. The town is located in the high desert, about a 30-minute drive from Palm Springs, Calif. Many of the actors who appear in this theater live in Palm Springs.

Groves Cabin Theatre was started years ago by Bill Groves, with productions of plays about Abraham Lincoln. It later evolved into a theater that produces known and unknown dramatic plays.

Each year the Desert Theatre League presents awards for the best plays and performances in the greater Palm Springs area. While Groves is the smallest venue in the area (only 23 seats), it regularly grabs a large number of these awards. Why?--Because Groves picks its plays carefully, demands long rehearsals and directors cast the plays based on who is best for the part (not necessarily the best-known or most popular actor around).

Ever since Bill Groves passed away, his wife Joy Groves and her friend Vicki Montgomery (both longtime actors) have run this theater as a labor of love. It's a nonprofit operation, and it's a struggle for them to keep the theater running. There are constant repairs needed on the old log cabin structure (once a home), and the electric bill can be high in the cold winter months.

One production that garnered praise from theatergoers at Groves was the Tony award-winning black comedy titled "Art." The play by Yasmina Reza and translated by Christopher Hampton, was the second show of its 2003-2004 season.

The comedy, winner of the Moliere award in France, the Olivier award in England, and the Tony Award in the U.S., came to Groves under the direction of the late Jim R. Warner, director of the theater's acclaimed "Visiting Mr. Green" a year earlier.

"Art" featured actors John Corley, Andrew Hamling and Timothy Kroe. The play asks the question: "Are you who you think you are or are you who your friends think you are?" Serge (Hamling) bought a modern white, 4-foot by 5-foot painting for a huge price. But where Serge finds beauty in the basically white-on-white canvas, his oldest friend Marc dismisses the painting with contempt and sees its purchase as an affront to their friendship.

Their close friend Yvan has problems of his own, but finds himself in the eye of a hurricane that could destroy the trio's long friendship and the pricey painting too.

"Proof" by David Auburn, which opened on Broadway in 2000 and went on to win the year's top prizes—the Tony Award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama—had its debut in the desert at the award-winning Groves. "Proof" has since become a motion picture starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Anthony Hopkins.

"Proof" is a heart-warming drama veiled in a thin gauze of mathematical theory. Catherine is a sarcastic, insecure math prodigy who gave up undergraduate life at Northwestern to care for her mentally ill father, a revered University of Chicago mathematician.

The centerpiece of the play is Catherine's knowledge that she inherited her father's brilliance, and her fear she will be overcome by the mental illness he began to exhibit in his 20s. The title refers to a mathematical proof (comparable to Einstein's theory of relativity). Catherine gives to Hal, which may or may not have been written by her.

As framed in the play, the playwright poses the question: How close is genius to insanity and do they really exist independently of each other? Insanity can certainly exist without genius, but can genius really exist without insanity?

"Proof" was directed by Jim R. Warner, who won the Desert Theatre League's award for Outstanding Director of a Drama for "Visiting Mr. Green" at Groves. The cast featured Margie Murray as Catherine, Matthew Shaker as Hal, Louise Ross as Claire, and John Corley as Robert.

Before his death this year, Warner was interviewed about directing at Groves. "Directing at Groves is both a thrill and a challenge", Warner said. On the plus side Groves is wonderfully intimate; the audience is right at the edge of the acting area, much like theater-in-the-half-round. In "Proof" the audience is right in the backyard of a Chicago house where the play is set." He added: "Sitting in the audience at Groves is like being a fly on the wall."

Warner discussed another attribute of directing at the Cabin: "It's the type of productions that can be done. Many community theaters aren't in a position to take chances on doing dramas or dramadies that lean toward the serious side," Warner added. "At Groves a director has the option of doing serious theater. Don't get me wrong," he said. "I love musicals, comedies and farces, but I also enjoy doing a play that has something significant to say."

The small stage area allows only so much stage set and a small cast of characters. "Hello Dolly" or "Man And Superman" just won't fit in the space. Warner said that "it takes a great deal of ingenuity and a squeeze to get plays done there."

Groves Cabin Theatre outperformed every theater in the high desert and Coachella Valley, when it captured 14 Desert Theatre Leagues awards in 2003.

In the category of Drama, the play "Visiting Mr. Green" won four awards: Outstanding Drama, Outstanding Director (Jim R. Warner), Outstanding Actor (John Corley) and Outstanding Supporting Actor (Michael Pasby).

For Special Productions, "Reflections of Life" won two awards for Groves: Outstanding Lead Actor and Outstanding Supporting Actress.

For One-Act Plays, "People in the Wind" won for Outstanding Overall Production. The play also won for Outstanding Director. "Family Secrets" won three awards: Outstanding Lead Actor, Outstanding Lead Actress and Outstanding Supporting Actor.

"To Bobolink for Her Spirit," another one-act play, was honored for Outstanding Director and Outstanding Supporting Actress (Donette Swain). "A Social Event" also won for Outstanding Director.

Groves relies on contributions from audience members, and also has fund-raisers. When "Art" was being presented, a local art gallery displayed the paintings used in the play, and collected contributions. More recently, local actors put a tribute show together to honor the deceased Warner, and raised about \$500 for the theater. That money went toward repairing the theater's roof.

Groves productions run on various schedules. It's best to call the theater about upcoming productions. General admission is \$10, \$8 for seniors. Groves Cabin Theatre is at 8758 Desert Willow Trail in Morongo Valley, Calif. Reservations are requested: (760) 363-6126.