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'Elf Jr.' brings holiday cheer to region

BY KATY SPRINGER
Tribune Contributor

A young Mesa thespian plays a key role in a Scottsdale youth theater company's presentation of "Elf Jr." The family musical, adapted from the hit 2003 film, runs through Dec. 14 at Greasepaint Youtheatre and promises a playful mix of comedy, heart and high-energy song-and-dance for all ages.

"At its core, 'Elf Jr.' celebrates what makes the season meaningful—showing up for each other with kindness, hope and heart," said director Jordan Cline.

"It's playful and funny, and it also carries a message families can feel long after the curtain falls."

The production includes Mesa thespian Cadell Red as Walter Hobbs.

"Elf Jr." follows Buddy, a human raised by elves at the North Pole, who heads to New York City to find his father and spread some Christmas spirit along the way. Beyond Buddy's Christmas optimism, the story zeroes in on the Hobbs family – Walter, his wife, Emily, and their son, Michael – —who aren't exactly brimming with holiday spirit.

Meanwhile, Buddy falls for Jovie, a

sharp, weary New Yorker who needs a reason to believe again. Their connection becomes the spark that powers the show's big emotional turn: Walter must choose between appeasing his boss or showing up for his family.

Walter finds his backbone, Jovie finds her voice and the Hobbs family rediscovers why believing, and belonging, still matter.

Musical moments like "There is a Santa Claus," "A Christmas Song" and "I'll Believe in You" drive home "Elf Jr.'s" sparkle and heart.

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Mesa thespian Cadell Red plays Walter Hobbs in the Greasepaint Youtheatre presentation of "Elf Jr." (Katy Springer/Contributor)

German Christmas service a popular tradition

BY ANNELISE MAKIN
Tribune Contributor

Nothing moves a bunch of stoic Germans like Christmas.

Best if there is snow. Forget about that in Phoenix, but there better be church.

Now in its 16th year, the annual German-language Weihnachtsgottesdienst, or Christmas Service, always draws a large crowd to Mountain View Lutheran Church, 11002 S. 48th St., Ahwatukee.

This year, the service will begin at 4:30 p.m. Dec. 14, preceded by carols at 4:10 p.m. A collection will be taken to support ELCA World Hunger Relief. Cookie donations for the community celebration are appreciated.

Germans head early to the church for the only German-speaking Christmas service in the Valley to browse the book market, silent auction, and craft sales.

Then they engage in a heart-warming "Krippenspiel" (children's Nativity pageant) with carols, choir, and wind ensemble before gathering for cookies and coffee in the community room.

Planning the service goes on all year



Pastor Patricia Giannelia explains the symbolism of candles to the children's group at last year's German-speaking Christmas service, which will be held for the 16th year next Sunday. (AnnElise Makin)

round.

"Heike Davis and I started the German Christmas Service 16 years ago," Ingeborg Mack recalled at the committee's spring review and planning meeting.

"There once was a German service in North Phoenix, but then we started our own in Ahwatukee since we had so many families with small children down here," she said.

Ingeborg's children Hanna, Tobias, and Annika, now all adults, have grown up volunteering in the German service. Annika still drives up from Tucson to help

out, Hanna sings in the choir, and dad Walter lends a hand wherever needed.

"Without my husband's support, I would not be able to handle this task," Ingeborg said

Ingeborg, a former electrotechnical assistant and Lutheran deacon, was more than suitable to keep the Christmas service going. She also volunteers at Mountain View's ministry.

A few years into the service, she realized she needed helpers.

"Since 2016 we have a team to bring it

all together," Ingeborg said, adding there is a lot to do.

Birgit Zimmermann, a retired Mountain Pointe High Spanish and German teacher and a founding member of the service, works on content planning.

Evi Dachs Ellsworth and Barbara Dunford organize the handmade crafts sale. Bettina Munn wraps the children's gifts.

Christine Colley, who met Ingeborg several years ago at the Fountain Hills Oktoberfest, co-chairs the German Christmas service. She updates the webpage and subs for Ingeborg when she is absent.

Gilbert educator Daniela Yuenyongsgool directs the children's pageant and the children's choir.

Her daughters, Tara and Ananda, have participated in the play since infancy and often have German-speaking roles, wearing costumes from Ingeborg's closet.

"Ingeborg is so skillful at making alterations," Yuenyongsgool said.

Ingeborg often has to craft adjustments on the fly at the grand rehearsal while parents stand by.

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Gene Adele Hoge, originally from Brooklyn, has been operating the audiovisual panel and videography. She makes the song texts fly by on dynamic PowerPoint slides.

One of the most involved people with the Christmas service is Dr. Petra Schmid-Riggins, who teaches German at Cesar Chavez High School in Laveen and brings 10 students from her Germanic Language and Culture Club to help.

Her crew sets up tables, decorates the hall, and serves cookies and coffee.

"My students are usually all fired up," said Schmid-Riggins. "A couple of months ahead of time, we craft Christmas cards. Some have turned out so pretty that I might get them printed."

The central control of all the departments belongs to Ingeborg. She relishes organizing, recruiting people, and making everybody feel welcome and useful.

Just recently, Ingeborg sent out dozens of music sheets and videos to all choir members. The singers practice their scores in front of the computer, hoping the tunes

will work out at the grand rehearsal with musical director Patrick Williams.

One of Ingeborg's grandest tasks is finding a German-speaking minister.

Last year, Pastor Patricia Giannelia flew in from Kelowna, Canada. This year, Pastor Waldemar Meyer will travel from Tampa, Florida. Sometimes, the pastors

have come from Germany.

To make non-German speakers welcome, the sermon summary and some song verses are in English.

"I think it keeps going because it is all volunteer and unwahrscheinlich schön," said Schmid-Riggins, using the German for "improbably beautiful." ■



The planning committee for the service includes, from left, Standing: Bettina Munn, Ingeborg Mack, Dr. Petra Schmid-Riggins, Barbara Dunford, and Evi Dachs Ellsworth; Seater: Gene Adele Hoge, Daniela Yuenyongsgool, and Christine Colley. Not pictured: Birgit Zimmermann. (AnnElise Makin)

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The creative team includes Cline as director, Elise Kurbat as music director, Tawny Audi as choreographer and Taylor Penn as stage manager. Together, they guide a large youth cast through brisk choreography, tight harmonies and a storyline that swings from North Pole whimsy to Midtown mayhem.

Cline said the cast's enthusiasm is contagious.

"What I love about 'Elf Jr.' is how the comedy sits on top of real craftsmanship," Cline said.

"These young artists are tackling tight harmonies, fast choreography and honest storytelling—and the payoff is a show that's joyful, polished and genuinely

moving about what it means to belong."

As part of Greasepaint's commitment to inclusion and accessibility, the company will offer a sensory-friendly performance at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Dec. 6. Admission is free for qualifying families, and tickets may be requested by emailing Moe Dias-Watson at Moe.Dias@greasepaint.org.

The sensory-friendly performance is made possible through a grant from APS. An ASL-interpreted performance will be presented at 7 p.m. Dec. 13, with interpretation provided by ASL Impact.

Performances of "Elf Jr." take place at Greasepaint Youtheatre, 7020 E. 2nd St. in Scottsdale.

Tickets are \$25 at greasepaint.org. ■




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