

F12 **OnStage** Spotlight on theater and dance

An ambitious production

Star of Opera San Luis Obispo's 'Show Boat' has a family link to the musical

By SARAH LINN
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When Kristin Towers-Rowles steps onstage in Opera San Luis Obispo's production of "Show Boat," she'll be forging a bridge to her family's past.

Towers-Rowles stars as Magnolia, the same role her grandmother, Kathryn Grayson, played in the 1951 film version of "Show Boat."

"It's such a neat opportunity," she said. "It's really special to me."

"Show Boat," playing this Mother's Day weekend at the Performing Arts Center in San Luis Obispo, holds magical memories for many — thanks to its sweeping storyline and lush songs such as "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "Make Believe" and "Ol' Man River."

Based on Edna Ferber's best-selling novel of the same name, "Show Boat" follows the performers, stagehands and dockworkers who live and work aboard the Mississippi River showboat Cotton Blossom — including Capt. Andy Hawks (Larry Kami), his wife Parthy Ann (Sandy Schwarer) and their daughter Magnolia. Husband-and-wife team Steve (Michael Tevlin) and Julie (Katie Guick) lead the Cotton Blossom's acting troupe, while Joe (Dan Tullis) serves as stevedore and his wife Queenie (Erika Bowman) runs the kitchen.

When riverboat gambler Gaylord Ravenal (Craig



Kristin Towers-Rowles and Brian Asher Alhadeff during an Opera San Luis Obispo rehearsal for 'Show Boat.'

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

McEldowney) meets Magnolia — or "Nola," as she's known — it's love at first sight. However, her parents disapprove of Ravenal's shadowy past.

"She brings out something in him (through) her naivete and her lack of bitterness," Towers-Rowles explained. "She's just this open, honest, lovely young woman ... and he sees all the things in her that he isn't."

"Show Boat" follows Nola and Ravenal over the next 40 years through romance, ruin and redemption. Even through the couple parts at

one point in the story, Towers-Rowles said, "(Nola) never becomes bitter toward him because the love she has for him transcends circumstances."

Towers-Rowles said she relates to Nola's journey from innocent ingénue to seasoned performer and parent.

"I understand the young, naïve girl because part of me will always be that," she said, "and I understand the woman who has to put her child first and work because I am that woman."

The daughter of actors Robert Towers ("The Curi-

'SHOW BOAT'

7 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Cohan Center, Cal Poly

\$10 to \$75

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ous Case of Benjamin Button") and Patricia Towers ("The Squid and the Whale"), Towers-Rowles has been a musical theater aficionado from the start.

"My passion (was) really to be on Broadway," she said. "That was my goal."

Towers-Rowles started taking voice lessons from her grandmother, whose film credits included "Anchors Aweigh" and "Kiss Me Kate," at age 16. The Woodland Hills native also spent holidays and summer vacations at Grayson's Santa Monica home.

After training at the Performing Arts Magnet program at Hollywood High School and The American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York — she attended the latter alongside Kelrik Produc-

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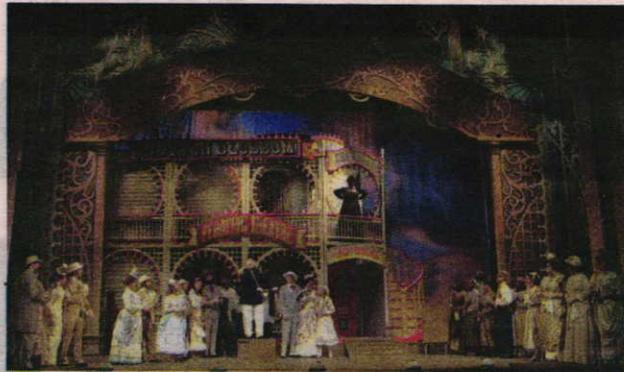
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tions co-founder Erik Austin — Towers-Rowles returned to Los Angeles to work in theater. She toured nationally with shows including “H.M.S. Pinafore” and “The Mikado,” and sang in concert versions of “Les Miserables” and “The Phantom of the Opera” in Europe and Taiwan.

Her career came to an abrupt halt at age 27 when she injured her back while playing Junior Asparagus in a national touring production of “Veggie Tales Live!”

Even after two years of physical therapy, “I was told I wouldn’t be onstage again,” Towers-Rowles recalled. “It was devastating.”

The actress took a seven-year break from performing, wedding husband Ryan Rowles and giving birth to three daughters,



COURTESY PHOTO

The production’s sets, above, are on loan from Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre.

Ryanna, Makayla and Amelya. She returned to the stage in January 2009.

“I’m a theater person through and through,” said Towers-Rowles, who is currently starring as Jane in Kelrik Productions’ “Tarzan: The Stage Musical” at El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood. “When I went back to performing, it was like the lights just turned on.”

The actress is especially excited to be making her “Show Boat” debut.

“If they’re going to choose to do a musical, they could not do a better one,” said Towers-Rowles, praising the “glorious” score created by composer Jerome Kern and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. “That’s one of the reasons this musical has stood the test of time for 80 years.”

'Show Boat' a story of America's past

By SARAH LINN
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Imagine the audience's reaction when the musical "Show Boat" premiered on Broadway in 1927.

"Instead of a line of chorus girls showing their legs in the opening number singing that they were happy, happy, happy, the curtain rose on black dockhands lifting bales of cotton, and singing about the hardness of their lives," theater critics Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright wrote in "Changing Stages: A View of British and American Theatre in the Twentieth Century." "Here was a musical that showed poverty, suffering, bitterness, racial prejudice ... and of course show business."

In short, Eyre and Wright wrote, audience members were witnessing the birth of a new genre: the Broadway musical.

"It's a story about America. It's a story about where we were," said Brian Asher Alhadeff, Opera San Luis Obispo's general and artistic director. "It really is an amazing time machine."

But "Show Boat" can be a challenging story to tell, Alhadeff added, both in terms of its scale and its subject matter.

Like Opera San Luis Obispo's October 2013 production of Georges Bizet's "Carmen," "Show Boat" finds the company teaming up with community groups. They include Civic Ballet of San Luis Obispo and the Morro Bay High Choral Ensemble.

Civic Ballet artistic director Drew Silvaggio will serve as choreographer,

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while Erik Austin, co-founder and artistic director of San Luis Obispo's Kelrik Productions, is directing the show.

"This is the biggest thing the opera has ever done," Austin said, from the sizable cast to the massive sets, on loan from Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre. "Their shows have kept getting bigger, but this is on such a grander scale."

One of the aspects that makes "Show Boat" so formidable is its time frame, Alhadeff said. The musical takes place between 1887 and 1927, a time of cultural and artistic upheaval.

"It really is a musical history course in all styles of dance and music" from these eras, he said. "You've got vaudeville, swing, stride

piano, early jazz, and all this is lushly framed in a brilliant golden-era symphonic orchestration."

Silvaggio said he's used both music and costumes to inform his directions to dancers.

"I really just like to come up with a natural, original voice in choreography," he said. "But the music produces a type of movement. ... That's inevitably going to bleed in."

"Show Boat's" historical setting also influences its depiction of African-Americans, which many consider offensive. Black characters speak in an outdated Deep South dialect and use terms that today would be considered racial epithets.

Opera San Luis Obispo's production preserves that language in some cases for the sake of context and discards it in others, Alhadeff said.

Before deciding to pro-

duce "Show Boat," Alhadeff said he consulted with San Luis Obispo County's African American community, including the predominantly black congregation of House of Prayer Church of God in Christ in San Luis Obispo.

"Respect and sensitivity is the key to doing this piece," Alhadeff said, noting that the musical is often credited with opening up public discourse in the arts about racism.

At the same time, he said, race relations aren't necessarily the central focus of "Show Boat."

He compared the show to "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly," "a great cowboy story that just happens to be set during the Civil War."

"'Show Boat' is a wonderful romance and life drama" that just happens to be set during the Reconstruction era, he said.