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'Morning Star' sparkles with brilliant stagecraft

By Jud Snyder

The first impulse is to call "Morning Star" an allegory. You know, a story in which people, things and happenings have a hidden or symbolic meaning. Nick Alva's play begins wispily, almost like a fairy tale. But as events accumulate like pennies in a mayonnaise jar, solidity develops. It doesn't make much sense to load up Alva's creation with cobwebby furniture. It stands out all by itself.

The Cotati playwright, scholar, musician and library toiler has created a marvelous chunk of stagecraft unlike anything else thrust out to an audience in the small Condiotti experimental theater in Spreckels. They showered it with a standing ovation opening night.

The story of Lou Gottlieb's experiment in communal living on 30 acres east of Occidental in Sonoma County in the late 1960s and early 1970s made headlines in Bay Area dailies. News clippings are thrown up on screens on three sides of the action. Alva wrote most of the songs and lyrics and the book that holds it all together. Six other musicians and lyricists are also credited. The list of credits would fill a column of space on this page.

It's a sprawling production loaded with characters handling multiple roles. So sprawling it sometimes threatens to flow over the edges like a too-full bucket. "Morning Star" takes over the whole area except for the audience; characters enter from all four sides, talking, dancing, singing and often sprawling all over the floor. A small orchestra (mainly guitars, including Alva) in a dimly-lit corner, backs up the songs in a delicate, non-obtrusive style.

The whole Alva family pitched in on this show. Tanya Boone Alva did the choral direction and some of the songs, the Alva kids were among the collection of agile, dancing youngsters living on the Gottlieb ranch.

Pulling this entire melange together must have been a tremendous task. Luckily, Alva got the services of director Michael Fontaine, well-known to Spreckels and Cinnabar Theater audiences. Reining in this multi-talented cast must have been an extremely complicated chore.

Knitting the production together is the invisible, yet vital cord created by Dave

Struffles as Gottlieb, former bassist with legendary Limelighters trio; and Claudia Larson as the Divine Mother. Struffles, earthy, down home and driven to create what he wants as a new way of living on this planet, provides the anchor.

It's Ms. Larson's clear, shimmering soprano that lifts the play into an ethereal level, producing an almost allegorical, eyeball misting patina to the action beneath her platform. Without her, the play could have slid into a musical good vs. evil set of circumstances.

In truth, "Morning Star" is a little-known slice of Sonoma County history that's slowly sliding into obscurity. When Gottlieb transfers title to his property to God, the county bureaucracy, health, building, zoning and all the other governmental trappings are baffled and grope numbingly to fall back on legal documents. They call it an illegal "hippie commune" to set their machinery in motion.

Gottlieb's inspirational mentor, Ramon Sender, is played by Jonathan Van Nuys, who grew up in Rohnert Park. The real Ramon Sender, now white-haired, was in the audience opening night.

It's painfully obvious echoes of Gottlieb's travails are still with us. But it takes someone like Alva, who grasped the theatrical message of Gottlieb's mission, to put it into song and give it a humanistic aura.

"Morning Star" is a unique and gripping performance for Spreckels. It quietly opened May 3 and every seat was occupied. Seats are unreserved and it plays Fridays and Saturday nights at 8, May 9 and 16; Saturdays May 10 and 17, and Sunday 2:30 matinees May 11 and 18. Tickets are \$16 at the box office, 588-3400, Tuesday through Saturday afternoons or one hour before curtain times, if they're available.

Let me toss in a cliché: It's a "Must See" production.