

An encore 'Encore' for St. Joseph High School

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO - Sight & Sound Editor | Posted: Thursday, August 18, 2016 6:00 am

ST. JOSEPH — When Janene Bock Bergen first heard Kristin Chenoweth perform “The Girl in 14G,” it immediately transported her back to her apartment-living days in Vienna, Austria.

The cabaret song, written for Chenoweth by Jeanine Tesori and Dick Scanlan with elements from the opera “Tristan und Isolde,” the aria “Queen of the Night” from “The Magic Flute,” as well as “Swan Lake,” centers on a quiet girl living with loud and noisy performing artist neighbors below and above.

“It cracked me up when I first heard it because I lived in lots of apartments, which was the only place I had to sing,”

Bergen says by phone from her home in Chicago. “I

remember one time trying to warm up in my apartment building for a performance I had coming up, and there was this gentleman who lived below me who just hated it when I sang. He would take a broomstick and just pound his ceiling, my floor, with his broomstick and shout in German, ‘Be quiet!’”

Fortunately, Bergen, who has made a career out of singing opera and cabaret, never took the Austrian neighbor’s not-so-subtle advice. Instead, she is one of about 165 St. Joseph High School alumni from the 1950s through present day returning Friday and Saturday to perform 27 acts as part of “Encore 2016: St. Joseph High School Variety Show Reunion” at the school’s John and Dede Howard Auditorium.

The success and interest generated from the first “Encore” performance, held in 2014 as a fundraiser for the St. Joseph Public School Foundation, compelled the foundation, led by board secretary Dennis Bowen, to assemble this encore to “Encore.” Not coincidentally, it was Bowen who directed the school’s “Showtime” variety show for 25 years, including 22 straight from 1965-87 before retiring.

“We brought back kids from 40 years apart and pulled it all together, and they left with a commonality that was just incredible,” Bowen says of the 2014 show. “I think they came to the realization that they had all stood on the same wood 20 years apart, and that’s when it all sort of came home to them. And some things hadn’t changed, like the rules that I made, which they remembered to a tee. They didn’t like them any better, but they remembered them.”

What began as themed showcases pulled together by students in the 1950s evolved into the annual variety show simply known as “Showtime.” In its earliest incarnation, there was no organized dance line or stage band. It was just a talent show that happened to feature dancers and instrumental groups. But it was under



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Betsy Baker Newell is shown during the 2014 production of “Encore.”

the fine arts department that the show thrived, thanks to the direction of speech and drama teacher Betty Theisen, band director Bob Brown and choral director Bowen.

Although Bowen took the reins in 1965, Theisen, better known by students as Miss T, worked on the variety show for more than 45 years, and Brown worked with the instrumental acts for 15 years. While “Encore” is dedicated to the memories of the late Theisen and Brown, for many alumni set to return this week, it’s Bowen, the living member of that trio, whom they credit as not only the reason they are returning, but the reason they have had success in their current careers.

“Dennis Bowen is one of my favorite people in the world,” says Bergen, a 1979 SJHS graduate. “I remember idolizing him in my teen years at St. Joe High in the chorus. He was just funny, and intelligent and made everything a pleasure. He was a large influence on me pursuing music as a profession both performing and teaching. He’s just this larger than life person who just exudes love and passion for what he does. Dennis loves music and students and bringing the best out of each students. He loved watching them grow and nurturing them and leading them out. He’s an educator in the best sense of the word. He cared that we found our voices.”

Bergen, a classically trained soprano, says her interest in her own voice was piqued under Bowen’s tutelage. As a student at the University of Montana, she studied opera and pursued that path. Through college, she went to Vienna, Austria, on what she calls her “Gilligan’s Island” tour.

“It was supposed to last three months, but it turned into 12 years,” Bergen says, laughing.

She earned a master’s degree in vocal music performance from the Vienna Academy in Austria, and performed the lead role of Fiordiligi in Mozart’s “Cosi fan tutte” on tour throughout Europe before eventually returning to the United States to be closer to family. In that time, she has discovered a penchant for cabaret performance, and currently performs alongside Ryan Eikmeier in the duo, Treble in a Red Dress.

Because the 2014 edition of “Encore” specifically required participants to perform the actual acts they presented on the stage in high school, Bergen and a trio of classmates performed a number on kazoos.

“We did broaden the scope of it this year,” Bowen says. “The concept last time was to repeat your variety show act. We are keeping that, but we also have broadened it to include students who appeared in the musicals that St. Joe High had done. For some of these kids, showbiz became their careers and so those people are coming back with material that hasn’t been performed here before.”

The show, which will be hosted by 1971 alumni Bob Ehrenberg – who also wrote the scripts for returning emcees – will again feature the opening song-and-dance number written by Brown and Bowen that became a staple of “Showtime.” It features a who’s who of alumni in the The Jazz Ensemble, assembled by Steven L. Reed, the Encore Chorus, and The Showtime Dancers, the always-competitive chorus line.

“There were years where more than a hundred girls tried out for the 12 spots in the opening chorus line,” says Ehrenberg, a St. Joseph trial lawyer who performed in the variety show for three of his four years. “What made the show so special is that it was an all-school event. People who didn’t participate in theater still tried out their acts.”

A spot in the reunion show is becoming equally competitive. This year, the interest was so great that auditions were held. Forty-eight acts auditioned in all. Among those who made the cut are Dave Carlock (1987) performing “Leave It” and “Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word”; pianist Louise Fiore Lambdin (’67) playing “Rhapsody in Blue”; Susan Waymire Manke and Donna Nelli Metz (’80) reprising “Kid’s Stuff”; and Betsy Baker Newell (’73) performing “The Stage” from her one-woman cabaret show.

“It’s a song that I chose from a cabaret act that I have done before in both Los Angeles and New York, but I don’t want to give it all away,” says Newell, an actor who has been seen in episodes of “True Blood,” “The Last Ship,” “New Girl,” “The Young and The Restless” and most recently in the Peter Pan “Geico” commercial, although she may still be best known for her role as Linda in Sam Raimi’s 1981 cult classic “Evil Dead.”

“I am excited that Dennis Bowen will be accompanying me on piano,” she said. “He was a mentor to so many people, including me. I looked up to him. I adored him. I respected him. That’s when I was a student. I think that has all tripled now as an older person even though I still call him Mr. Bowen. It doesn’t matter if we are coming from Los Angeles or the suburbs of Chicago we are all doing it because we love it and it’s a great and fun way to give back.”

Another new addition this year is the inclusion of a current student to connect past and present. Lauren Kunkel, who will be performing “Let It Be,” was chosen to represent the cast of this year’s variety show.

“We wanted to encourage young people to keep these traditions and energy up,” Bowen says.

He admits, however, that he remains amazed and grateful at the outpouring of support this event continues to generate.

“It’s extremely flattering that they care enough about their school to come back and do this,” Bowen says. “I hadn’t seen some of them for 30 or 40 years, and it actually picked up about where it left off. They are all still kids to me, and I guess in some ways I’m still a teacher to them. It’s extremely emotional, and if I stop long enough to think about it, it gets even more so. So I don’t stop that long. There’s still a show to put on.”

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If you go

What: “Encore 2016: St. Joseph High School Variety Show Reunion”

When: 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Where: John and Dede Howard Auditorium, St. Joseph High School, 2521 Stadium Drive, St. Joseph

How much: \$10 (Blue Tier), \$25 (Maize Tier) and \$100 (White Tier)

Contact: www.sjhscore.org