



TIPSY TRIO...Left to right, Linda Giuditta, Lona Alpert and Naomi Yablonsky, as Lucille, Doris and Ida, reminisce in Westfield Community Players' season opener, a comedy by Ivan Menchell, *The Cemetery Club*, which runs weekends through the end of October.

TAKE THE STAGE

Who Knew a Cemetery Could Be Uproariously Funny?



By **SUSAN M. DOUGHERTY**
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD – When Westfield Community Players (WCP) announced that its 73rd season opener was the unfamiliar play *Cemetery Club* by Ivan Menchell, I was hoping it might be a Stephen King-type Halloween thriller.

The two-act play's synopsis read, "Doris, Ida and Lucille are Jewish widows who meet once a month for tea before visiting their husbands' graves." Oh, boy, I thought, where can this go but six feet under?

What I wasn't expecting was comedy with a capital "C." This play's a howl, and I don't mean werewolf style.

Two of the funniest scenes are bookends before and after the wedding of the three women's friends. The first scene could be a flashback to these senior citizens as 17-year-olds getting ready for a prom.

Giddy, nervous, tittering about their accessories and hair leads them to try turquoise eye shadow to match their bridesmaid dresses and speculate as to who will ask them to dance.

The après wedding scene in which the tipsy gals go back to Ida's house for a senior citizens' slumber party offers surprises.

The gals cha-cha rambunctiously around the living room in their turquoise floor-length chiffon and beaded gowns and bare feet. With the help of stolen liquor, they reminisce about youth, romance and their marital relationships.

More than just juicy gossip spills as the ladies munch on leftover wedding cake, chicken wings and fruit.

The show has tender and poignant moments as the widows lament the

dilemma of dating again and question whether they are being unfaithful to their deceased husbands if they move on in life.

The talented Naomi Yablonsky is not only WCP's current president but also the actress who plays Ida, the senior citizen whose character develops most in the play. Ida is described in the playbill as "sweet tempered and ready to begin a new life" and that's what Ms. Yablonsky delivers — sincerity and verisimilitude that ring true in the role.

Linda Giuditta, as Lucille, is a scene-stealer with great timing. Her man-hungry character is filled with bravado and, like Blanche of the "Golden Girls" TV fame, thinks that all men are attracted to her.

The third lead is Doris, played convincingly by Lona Alpert, who uses her razor-edge tongue and deadpan delivery to manipulate and meddle in everyone's business.

In Act I, Lucille and Doris have an adorable bit about which husband died first. Their dialogue, structured like the Abbott and Costello classic "Who's on First?" is a hoot.

Sam the Butcher, played tenderly by veteran Stan Kaplan, provides Ida's love interest. "One day you're on your knee proposing, the next day you are kneeling at her grave," he sighs longingly of his departed wife.

Jo Ann Lemenille, who gives just the right playfulness and zest as a counterpoint for the more sedate Ida, plays Mildred, the glamorous, sexy vamp.

Producer Cynthia Smyth, directors Joann Lopresti Scanlon and Susan Pyle Smith have assembled a cadre of actors, designers, artists and committee members to carry this *Cemetery* to a place, like most cemeteries, of smiles, tears and memories.

Arts & Entertainment

Puccini's Turandot Opens Westfield Symphony Orchestra's Season

By **BRAD TINFOW**
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — The Westfield Symphony Orchestra (WSO) inaugurated its 2006-2007 season of Oriental themes with a concert performance of Puccini's *Turandot* at the First Presbyterian Church on September 30.

Music Director David Wroe led the orchestra, soloists from the New York City Opera and the Monmouth City Chorus (MCC) in the concert, which was scheduled for 8 p.m.

With paid customers still arriving after the stroke of the hour, Board of Trustees President Mark Fleder held up his four-minute remarks until 8:06 p.m. After the appearance and seating of the concertmaster, nearly a full minute of dead time transpired before Mr. Wroe's entrance with the cast.

After the "Star-Spangled Banner," the opera began in earnest a full 13 minutes into the hour.

A substantial number of small cuts instituted for this performance reduced the opera to a more manageable length. Many of the eliminated passages would have been sung by the chorus, which was, incidentally, quite good.

The absence of many of the choral crowd responses left characters talking essentially to themselves and reacting to words never sung.

The most obvious omission was that of the Emperor, who, though absent from this performance, was still addressed directly by his daughter, Turandot, and sung to by a reverent crowd.

The text provided with the program was "a reduced essence of each musical number," and was rendered only in English.

The opera requires powerful voices, especially for the two romantic leads, Turandot and Calaf, sung by soprano Othalie Graham and tenor Carlo Scibelli, respectively. Ms. Graham, who did not appear until the second scene of Act II (listed as Act III in the program), had plenty of power and presence, but her voice in the mid to upper range could be shrill.

I wondered whether this was intended, but the stridency did not wane when Turandot finally broke down and confessed her love to Calaf. It sounded as if she were pushing her voice too hard.

Mr. Scibelli's singing was full-bodied (one could see that he supported his sound all the way down to his feet) and magnificent to listen to. Calaf's part, written for a dramatic voice, requires the tenor to sing through a full orchestra from the bottom to top of the tenor range.

This was not a problem for Mr.

Scibelli, whose glorious instrument and solid technique allowed him to express the text with great emotion to the back row without strain.

Lyric soprano Julianne Borg, as the slave girl Liu, imbued the role with heart-wrenching pathos. The sound and color of her voice were sweet and beautiful without sacrificing size or depth. Her phrasing was exquisite and tremendously expressive. Her *pianissimo* high B's and C's left the audience breathless.

The darkness and heft of Kevin Maynor's rich bass voice belied the frailness of the dethroned Tartar king, Timur. His interpretation gave the role unmistakable inner strength and forthrightness. The timbre of his voice would make him a regal presence in any opera.

The roles of Ping, Pang and Pong, filled by baritone Michael Chioldi and tenors Gregory Mercer and Joel Sorenson, respectively, were well done. Mr. Chioldi, with marvelous command of his rich, classic Verdi baritone, gave the role of Ping a great reading. He was comical (as were the other two), but portrayed the character as a man of many sides.

Aside from his wonderful characterization, the sheer sound of his voice and fluidity in singing were a pleasure to listen to. I would be interested to hear him in a more substantial Puccini role, such as Marcello or Scarpia. Oddly, Mr. Chioldi was the only singer whose résumé was not included in the program.

Mr. Mercer and Mr. Sorenson were very good in their character roles, which required a lot of singing together, also in tandem with Mr.

Chioldi. Both tenors are more on the lyric side, and they came across very well as the bureaucrats they were portraying.

Brett Colby, whose part of the Mandarin is listed for a baritone, sang the small role well, even though, as the program notes attest, he is a tenor. In the church, he recited his proclamations from the pulpit.

The MCC, though utilized less than the full opera allowed, sang superbly from the choir loft behind the orchestra.

The orchestral score of the opera, in its attempt to portray its imperial Chinese subject matter, makes ample use of the full complement of brass and percussion.

This orchestra, which to my knowledge, does not rehearse in the church, has always been a victim of its overly live acoustics. At times, the brass and percussion (gong included) were overpowering even from the balcony. Friends told me on the ground floor that the volume from there was nearly deafening.

No performance is ever perfect, but the quality of playing and singing on this night was very near that level, even though at times it may have been ear-splitting. After the final chords ended the opera, the audience rose to its feet almost immediately. The singers returned one by one for their bows, and they were cheered like heroes returning from a victorious campaign.



—Photographer Andrea Ewald

WF Photographer

To Exhibit in Rahway

WESTFIELD — Westfield photographer Andrea Ewald is among the artists whose work was selected to be part of "Celebrating Excellence: The Merck 2006 Juried Union County Art Show" at the Arts Guild of Rahway.

The show runs from October 15 through November 10, and an opening reception will be held on Sunday, October 15, from 1 to 4 p.m. The Arts Guild of Rahway is located at 1670 Irving Street. Gallery hours are Wednesday, Friday and Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m. and Thursday from 1 to 3 p.m. and 5 to 7 p.m. or by appointment. For directions call (732) 381-7511 or visit www.rahwayartsguild.org.

A native of Germany, Ms. Ewald, who holds a degree in English linguistics, has lived in Westfield for the past five-and-a-half years. Her interest in photography goes back a long time, but she did not get serious about doing something with her talent until last summer.

Lawrence Cappiello, executive director of The Arts Guild of Rahway, curates the show.



Vic's Picks
Vaco - Color Coordinated

By **VICTORIA McCABE**
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Some bands have an uncanny ability to convey fun. Somewhere between the actual notes of the songs, an intangible element of sheer joy jumps out of the album — it's hard to explain, but as you listen you know that the musicians making that record were having a blast.

The Alexandria, Va.-based Virginia Coalition — affectionately known to fans as Vaco — know how to revel in the fun of playing music. The band's spring 1998 independent debut, *The Colors of the Sound*, is a delightful success. The then-quintet gleefully delivers genre-crossing folk-rock, with its little-bit-country, little-bit-funk-and-soul flavors keeping the music fresh and always dynamic.

Excellent interplay between vocalist/guitarists Andrew Poliakoff and Steve Dawson drives the album; their distinct voices cross and blend, buoying each other and building fantastic vocal textures. Listening to *The Colors of the Sound* in hindsight with the knowledge that in five years' time Steve and his tenor vocals would leave the band, the vocal interaction on *Colors* seems all the more unique.

Album opener "Dalai Lama" settles into a funky groove to kick off the set, and from there, Vaco throw out a wide assortment of musical styles, all wrapped up with tight, memorable tunes.

"Nicole's Song" mesmerizes. Its understated beauty lies in Andrew's smooth vocal delivery; his full-bodied baritone glides over lyrical phrases like "you say your conscience ails you, you say your mind's not clear/ wrap you up in a summer's day, take

your mind straight out of here." "Motown" starts off in a bar — Andrew lays a reflective melody over mellow piano as conversations and the clinking of glasses float around him. Suddenly, organ chords (of the rock music variety) break through the ambient sounds and set a new tone for the latter part of the song, and "Motown" blossoms into a bouncy groove as Andrew adjusts to the new tempo and delivers a catchy new melody.

The whimsical "The Waltz of Roosevelt and The Fat Lady" and the wistful "End of the Road" lead the album to a close as each of the singers takes a turn leading the effort; "74 Colors," the funky hidden outro, ends the set with some extra flair.

At live shows, the group has delivered compelling covers of everything from The Clash's "Rock the Casbah" to Blackstreet's "No Diggity" (check out the Internet Archive — archive.org/ audio — for an extensive catalogue of downloadable Vaco shows). Impressively, the band capably crams all its live energy into its studio releases. And though the *Ghostbusters* theme, which sometimes slips into Vaco's live performances, never worms its way into any studio songs, the spirited playfulness it takes to deliver those little pop-culture shout-outs is everywhere.

Vaco have toured multiple times with O.A.R., and fans of that band will immediately connect with Vaco's laid-back folk rock. Guster lovers will find a familiar kind of intangible quirkiness driving the Virginia band's music, and almost anyone without an aversion to folksy alternative will no doubt feel all the fun the Vaco boys pour into their debut.

Town Book Store Hosts Meet-and-Greet

WESTFIELD — The Town Book Store of Westfield is hosting a meet-and-greet book signing this weekend.

On Saturday, October 14, from 2 to 4 p.m., New Jersey author Dr. Patrice Hannon will be in the store to promote her new book, "Dear Jane Austen: A Heroine's Guide to Life & Love."

Austen answers letters from perplexed modern-day heroines-in-training, supplying her readers with the precepts a true heroine lives by and illustrating them with revealing examples from her novels.

Written with all the charm, wit and wisdom one might expect from the author of "Pride and Prejudice," reading "Dear Jane Austen" is like an afternoon with the novelist herself.

Anyone unable to attend this event can call The Town Book Store at (908) 233-3535 and reserve an autographed copy.



Linda Condrillo for The Westfield Leader and The Times
POLICE FORCE...Officer Michael Perrotta speeds into the finish line, placing 50th overall in the annual Cop Trot. See story on page 23.

See it all on the web in color...
www.goleader.com

Cranford's Comm. Theatre Presents Children of Eden

CRANFORD — Cranford Dramatic Club (CDC) community theatre will present Stephen Schwartz's musical *Children of Eden* for three weekends beginning Friday, October 13. Schwartz, the creator of Broadway's *Wicked*, *Pippin*, and Disney's *Pocahontas*, gives theatergoers a musical for all ages.

Children of Eden tells the story of the Garden of Eden and of Noah and the Ark. In addition to the well-known biblical characters, the show features a large group of storytellers who help to provide the narrative flow of the show with their acting and singing, including portrayal of the animals in the story of creation and the Ark, as well as the snake in the Garden of Eden.

CDC's cast boast some highly regarded performers in area theater, including David Hampson, Eric Harper, Tina Kaye, Ed Egan and George Platis. John Menter will direct the production.

Children of Eden will be presented on Friday and Saturday nights at 8 p.m. from October 13 to 28, as well as on Sunday, October 22 at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$20 on a reserved-seat basis, and can be obtained by calling the box office at (908) 276-7611 or through the theater's website at www.cdctheatre.org.

The CDC Community Theatre is located at 78 Winans Avenue in Cranford, off of Centennial Avenue near exit 136 off of the Garden State Parkway.

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