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A HIDDEN GEM

'Fantastic' revue livens things up in Fredericksburg

FREDERICKSBURG — From the outside, the Rockbox Theater seems like just another storefront a block off the main drag.

From the low-key look, potential patrons could be forgiven for expecting to find “two guys and a ukulele,” jokes co-owner Mike Kinchen.

Step through the glass doors, though, and it's one surprise after another. (And not a ukulele in sight, for the record, though a rubber chicken did pop up on a recent Saturday afternoon.) There's a roomy lobby with signage promising a “funtabulous” time; and, just down a narrow turquoise-colored hallway, there's a 400-seat theater decked out with state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems.

Looks aren't the only thing the space has going for it. The show itself is pretty far from “two guys and a ukulele.” It's a thoroughly entertaining revue, with a tight band, family-friendly comedy that leans toward the goofy, and a moving finale that pays tribute to the armed forces.

“It's the kind of thing that has to grow by word of mouth, because it's hard to describe,” Kinchen said. “But people come in all the time and say, ‘That was a blast; it exceeded what I thought it would be.’”

Kinchen knows that experience firsthand. He caught most of the Rockbox cast for the first time about four years ago in Granbury, southwest of Fort Worth, where they performed as a show band in “Granbury Live.”

He was struck by “how professional it was; I was just blown away, seeing that kind of show in a small town like that ... In Fredericksburg, we didn't have anything like that, in terms of live entertainment.”

He set about changing that. He met with Russ Hearn, who was one of the lead performers and had helped create “Granbury Live,” and started trying to lure him and several of his cast mates to Fredericksburg.

It took a while, but Hearn and company fell hard for the Hill Country: “We really like it here,” he said. “It's a beautiful place to live.”

Prepping for the move included lots of market research to see if the town was ripe for the kind of revue the Granbury crew had spent years honing. Hearn was encouraged by what he saw.

“This is a mature tourism market, and people do tend to take in live entertainment when they're on vacation,” he said. “They tend to be more receptive and more willing to try a new experience. We felt that that, together with the reputation that the Hill Country has for great music, (made Fredericksburg) a good move for us.”

“Us” included his wife, Wendy, and cast mates Linda Morgan and Cass Moore. The foursome have performed together for more than 20 years, starting with the Really Big Show, a band that played mostly corporate events, and continuing in Granbury. Carey and Dena Dyer, husband-and-wife performers who teamed up with the quartet in Granbury, also made the move.



At left: Rockbox Theater lobby

They all sing, and most of them play instruments, as well. All that time spent onstage together and in other ventures pays off in crack timing and sharp musicianship, Hearn said: “You can’t replace experience onstage.”

Since they opened the Rockbox just over a year ago, they’ve added to their ranks. The cast now includes drummer Jacob Longoria; T.J. Smith, who plays several instruments and also weaves some of his vocal impressions into each show; and Mark Best, who sings and also plays several instruments, including fiddle and bass.

They click neatly into place onstage, performing well-crafted revues built around pop tunes from the ‘40s to the ‘80s. Deftly performed comedy bits are woven between the songs, including crowd-pleasing sketches featuring “Mo and Bro,” a Blues Brothers-inspired comedy act dreamed up by Hearn and Carey Dyer.

All of the material is family-friendly, a point Hearn emphasizes in his pre-show patter: “You’ll never be embarrassed by anything here at the Rockbox Theater.”

Though they’re aggressively courting the tourism market — room keys at most of the Fredericksburg hotels are adorned with an ad for the theater, Kinchen said, and brochures can be found in most of the shops — the Rockbox folks like to bring in the locals, too. To try to make that more likely, the show changes every week.

“We’ve got four shots at getting it right (each weekend),” Hearn said. “Then we start over. We have yet to repeat a show.”

That’s not to say that individual songs aren’t repeated. Hearn maintains a spreadsheet on his computer that lists every number that has been performed to make sure none of them pops up so often that they get stale.

The songs aren’t always played straight. A recent audience favorite is a spoof of “Bohemian Rhapsody” inspired by a run-in that Morgan had with a deer within days of buying a brand-new car. It is titled — what else? — “Doehemian Rhapsody.”

Michael Berlet, who frequently performs on stages in San Antonio and helps his wife, Missy Miller, run the

Josephine Theatre, caught a Rockbox show built around Beatles numbers and was impressed by what he saw.

“I think it’s worth it for San Antonians to drive up to Fredericksburg to see the show,” he said. “I thought it was wonderful.”

“You have this void up there; they have community theater, but there’s this big void of professional theater in the Hill Country. All of a sudden, they have a place where everyone can go and see some fantastic shows.”

It also gives shop owners an answer to one of the most frequently asked questions in town, said Kinchen, who has owned and run several shops there: “We spent many years hearing ‘What do we do tonight, when you guys roll up the streets at 5:30?’”

Now, he said, they can point visitors to the Rockbox Theater.

ROCKBOX THEATER

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by Deborah Martin

WHERE: 109 N. Llano St. in Fredericksburg

WHEN: Shows are at 8 p.m. Fridays, 4:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 1:30 p.m. Sundays.

TICKETS: \$28-\$40 for adults and \$15 for those 17 and younger. Group rates of \$25 plus tax are available for groups of 25 or more.

Information, (866) 349-6688 or www.rockboxtheater.com