

Calendar

Silence Disciple

Cabrillo's Story

'We were his first students in the United States," says Abel Silvas, speaking about his teacher, the esteemed French mime, who is perhaps the only mime that many of us, if asked, could name: Marcel Marceau. Silvas, who lives in Pacific Beach, studied with him in the 1980s at the University of Michigan, where a short-lived American school of mime was established by the master.

"And he said to us that first morning, 'Okay, get up and do your stuff.' And one guy from New York started doing a mime and it was awesome. But Marcel stopped him in the middle of it.

"This is not mime," he said. 'This is clown.' He taught

us mime's whole history. He broke it all down. From him we learned that a clown performs from the outside; a mime performs from the inside. Now we are his disciples all over this country."

Silvas, a South Bay native who teaches mime to both children and adults, says his earliest ambition was to use language to tell stories, funny ones. As a fifth-grader at Lauderbach Elementary School, he was the designated class clown. ("I had good timing.") His reputation for clowning grew at Castle Park High School. When he got to Southwestern College, he says his "ultimate goal" was to become a stand-up comedian, and his theater-arts professor, William Virchis, encouraged him to try. "He would give me five minutes on Fridays to do my stand-up and would grade me on it." Eventually, thanks in part to Virchis's critiques, Silvas was hired to do his routine at the Comedy Store in La Jolla.

What were the subjects of his routines? "They were bland; nothing interesting," says Silvas, who credits Marceau with helping him to develop his true talent, which is to tell stories using both words and gestures. Marceau helped him choose his rightful subject matter, too. "It was Marcel who encouraged me to look into my Native-American ancestry for my material. I've lived in New York and L.A., but Marcel

was the one who told me to go back to my roots. That's when I came back home and started to do research."

Combining the research results with what he had long been told by his parents, Silvas determined that he was descended from members of five tribes of "Mission Indians" who intermarried with Europeans, including Spaniards, Portuguese, and Germans. Records show that his relatives were among the first families to settle in Old Town.

Silvas felt vindicated by these facts. His peers had doubted his claims to a

Native-American heritage when he was growing up. "When I was a little kid, anyone who believed the stereotypes used to say to me, 'Hey, you're not an Indian. You don't hunt buffalo. You don't live in a teepee.' I was kind of bummed by that. When I was developing my material, Marcel asked me, 'What did your ancestors hunt? What did your dad show you to hunt when you were small?' I told him that when I was five years old, my dad took me out to the Silver Strand and showed me how to catch a grunion. The

grunion is our buffalo."

And a character named "Running Grunion" is Silvas's "Bip" — Bip being the name of the signature Marceau character whose face is painted white and whose costume is a striped shirt, short jacket, and stovepipe hat topped by a flower.

"Marcel compared Running Grunion to Bip. Bip goes traveling by train; Bip goes to a party. Running Grunion goes hunting; Running Grunion goes fishing. It's the same thing."

Well, analogously speaking, it is. Running Grunion wears no white face paint. "I wear my regular brown skin," says Silvas. As for his costume, it's Native-American clothing consisting of a "shell" made from the fur of a rabbit indigenous to the region.

This weekend and next, at the Cabrillo National Monument, Running Grunion narrates the story of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo's landing in 1542 at what was later named San Diego Bay. The production was directed by Silvas's former professor, Virchis, of Southwestern.

Running Grunion offers a present-day perspective on the event and acts as a mediator between a fictional Native-American woman who was living in the area when the expedition arrived and a fictional priest and sailor who accompanied Cabrillo.

Asked if it's difficult to play a role that requires him to alternate between two worlds — ours in the 21st Century and Cabrillo's in the 16th Century — Silvas says, "Being half European and half Native-American, I already am in two worlds. That's how it always is for me. That's what it means to be *mestizo*. People have been taught that the two sides are supposed to be separate. I'm trying to bring them together."

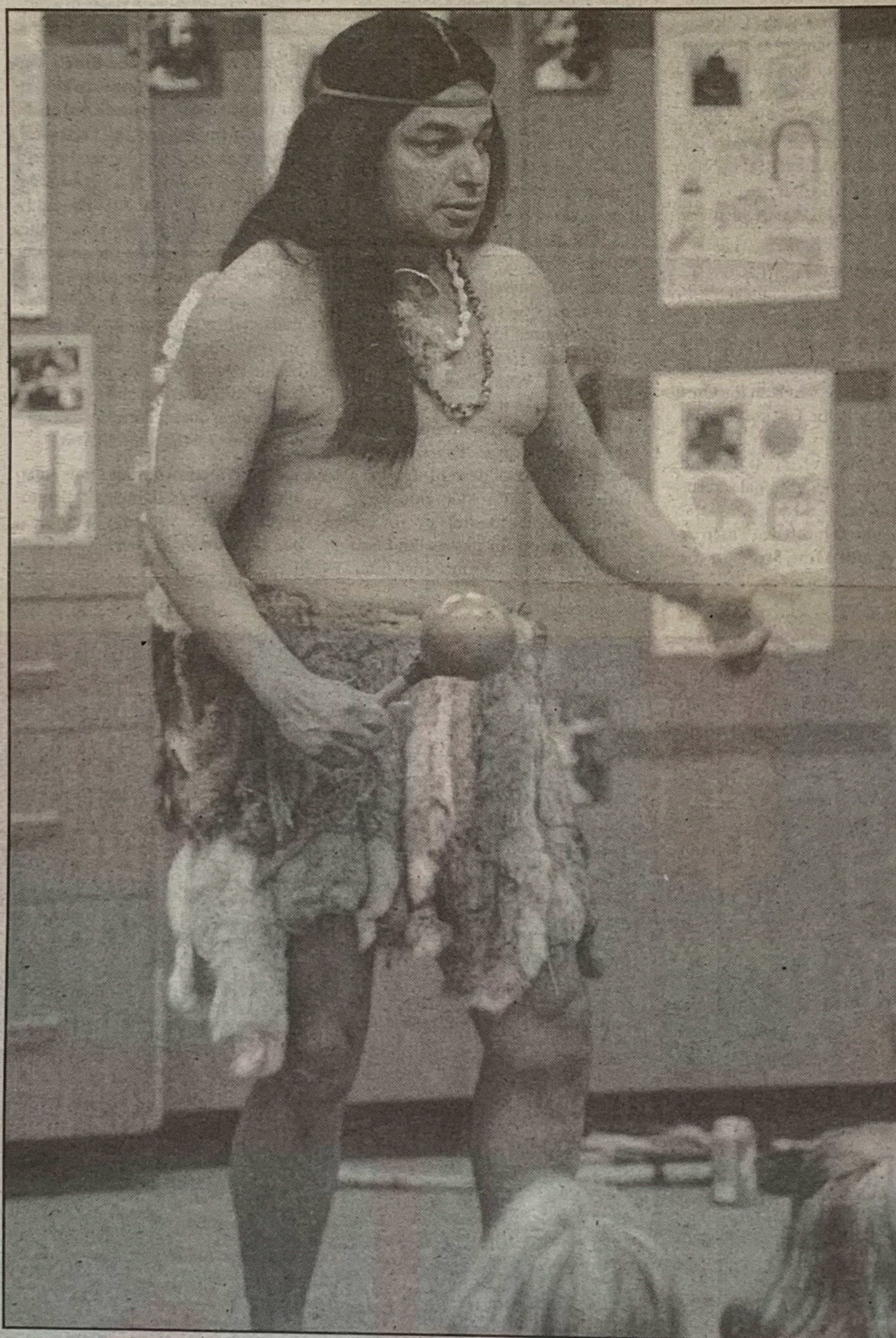
— Jeanne Schinto

"The Voyage of Cabrillo"
Sunday, September 23,
2:45 p.m.

Sunday, September 30,
12:30 and 2:00 p.m.
Cabrillo National Monument
(in the auditorium)

1800 Cabrillo Memorial Drive,
Point Loma

\$5 park-entrance fee per vehicle
Info: 619-557-5450



Abel Silvas

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Local Events
page 69

Classical Music
page 83

**Art Museums
& Galleries**
page 85

Theater
page 86

Pop Music
page 92

Restaurants
page 122

Movies
page 133