

Calendar

Innocence Device

A Traditional Holiday Play

As Paula Kalustian drove to an appointment in Mission Hills one day last week, she chatted on her cell phone about her upcoming production of *La Pastorela*. After her meeting, she was going to pick up lanterns to use as props for the show. "They're battery-lit but look real," she said. "We're trying to keep it authentic. So we're also doing it acoustically" — without mikes — "by speaking loudly and bringing the chairs close."

La Pastorela is an old Spanish church play that the Franciscans brought to Mexico in the 16th Century. It's a Christmas story about the shepherds who want to bring gifts to the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Along the way,

LOCAL EVENTS

Luzbel (Lucifer) tries to divert them. St. Michael

the Archangel fights Luzbel, and good triumphs over evil.

"Some *pastorelas* are big and fancy," said Kalustian. "Ours is not. It's more like the sort of *La Pastorela* that the people of Old Town themselves would have come together and presented."

Evidence shows that some well-known Old Town residents played in 19th-century *pastorelas*. Kalustian named "one of the Whaley daughters, Pio Pico, and, of course, the Bandinis" as having taken part. The script being used for this production, adapted by Rose-Yvonne Urias, was based on one written by a Bandini family member.

Grad students from Kalustian's masters of fine arts program in musical theater at SDSU will play the roles this year. The script calls for uncomplicated "stock characters," Kalustian said. "There's a foolish shepherd, a lazy shepherd, a devout shepherdess, a saucy shepherdess. They're one-dimensional, and that's exactly what you need in a short piece like this." At 20 or 25 minutes, there's no time for development. "The audience needs to understand the characters from the first time they open their mouths."

Or even before they do so. St. Michael, traditionally played by a woman (and a woman plays the role in



La Pastorela

this production), is immediately obvious in armor and helmet. So is Luzbel in his big black cape.

There is also an old hermit, a wise sage, who is the voice of reason, said Kalustian. Former SDSU grad student Chris Moad played the hermit a couple of years ago; now he is the production's director and designer. On a break from work at the Old Globe Theater, Moad said, "*La Pastorela* is a peasant play, so

although 'designer' may be my title, basically all we've done is to come up with clothing that looks appropriate for the vintage of Old Town. It's not a Biblical approach. We asked ourselves, 'What would a lower-class person from the parish think a peasant shepherd from the Bible might have looked like?'"

So what will these characters wear? "Rags! Lots of homespun. We've done a lot of pulling and piecing together. We

wanted it to look as if these people had made their own costumes."

The colors are all earth tones. The shoes are essentially sandals. "It's a 'from-the-mission' situation. So it's theatrical in one sense, but it's very simple and unpretentious at the same time. This is not a gimmicky *pastorela*."

All the characters are comic, said Moad, even the hermit, who tries to keep the group from being distracted from its goal. "*Pastorelas* were written by peasants to be performed for peasants." They wanted these productions to be fun. "They would get plenty of preaching and moralizing at church. So they didn't need any here. But the payoff is that, at the end, their faith, their piety, and their devotion are demonstrated." They arrive at the crèche.

Will characters be playing the Holy Family? "No," said Moad. In the final scene, St. Michael walks onstage with a wooden crate. She puts the crate down and indicates that it is the manger. "And then in an aside to the audience, she says, 'Oh. The Holy Family is not visible, just in case you were wondering where they were.'"

The device is in keeping with the spirit of the production, said Moad. "Amateur" isn't the right word to describe the double layers of the conceit — a play about Christmas 2002 years ago being performed by people who lived a century and a half ago. "We're trying to preserve the naïveté and the innocence without making it seem amateurish."

Probably a lot of rehearsing wouldn't be in the spirit of it, either? "It's not," said Moad. "The play goes together pretty quickly, and because we're using the outdoor stage, we really won't have a chance to do it there" — he laughed a pretend kind of nervous laugh — "until the first performance."

— Jeanne Schinto

**"La Pastorela:
A Traditional Holiday Play"
Friday and Saturday,
December 13 and 14, 8:00 p.m.
Outdoor stage in the Plaza,
Old Town
Free
Info: 619-220-5422**

Local Events
page 91

Classical Music
page 104

**Art Museums
& Galleries**
page 107

Theater
page 108

Pop Music
page 118

Restaurants
page 145

Movies
page 157