



# A NEW START FOR THE arts

by DIANA REYNOLDS ROOME

## THREE WOMEN, ONE GOAL: MAKE THE SOUTH BAY A WORLD-CLASS CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

**DRESSED IN A SATINY BEIGE DRESS** with frills and huge fantasy earrings, Angela McConnell gives the impression of being a diminutive butterfly—but don't let that fool you. When it comes to putting arts organizations on a firm footing, what McConnell, the new executive director of the Montalvo Arts Center, most closely resembles is a heavyweight lifter going all out for an Olympic gold medal.

McConnell is one of three dynamic South Bay women who'll need every ounce of strength they can muster to defy the lowered expectations for the arts that naturally come with a tightened economy. In a case of coincidental timing, McConnell, along with Stephanie Ziesel, executive director of Ballet San Jose, and Meredith McDonough, director of New Works at TheatreWorks, started on the job within just a few weeks of each other earlier this year. Already, however, each is poised to usher in some of her organization's most exciting productions.

These leaders combine optimism, energy and savvy—valuable assets when trying to pull expanded arts programs out of reduced budgets. They count on their impressive experience to achieve their ambitious game plans, including making their organizations more visible and working cooperatively with other arts groups. The women also intend to place more emphasis on opening up the creative process—to focus on sharing talent and skill at all levels so that everyone, from company insiders to you, a member of the audience, is inspired by the making of something new.



PHOTO BY CHRIS AYERS

ANGELA McCONNELL



## ANGELA McCONNELL

Anyone who witnessed the expansion of Mountain View's Community School of Music and Arts (CSMA) from its former cramped, messy site to a new airy, efficiently functional campus knows firsthand Angela McConnell's ability to transform a cornucopia of ideas, hopes and plans into a thriving educational reality. Partly in recognition of CSMA's \$12.4 million capital campaign under her tenure as executive director—which established it as one of the nation's 10 largest community schools of its kind—McConnell has racked up awards for fundraising and business leadership.

Despite that validation, McConnell still had to be persuaded to take over at Montalvo. She wanted to spend more time

with her 11-year-old twins and five-year old daughter—and to expand her volunteer work, both at their schools and for other causes, including autism, to which she has been dedicated since being a schoolgirl in Westchester County, New York. McConnell certainly deserved a change. Before heading to CSMA, she served as chief development officer at the San Jose Museum of Art, where she established the museum's first endowment. She holds a master's degree in nonprofit administration from the University of San Francisco.

For McConnell, eventually the allure of Montalvo in Saratoga proved too much to resist: its unique charm, extensive grounds with 175 acres, outdoor theatre, two indoor performing areas and exhibition space. But there was another incentive as well: the need to boost visibility and attendance. "This is an extraordinary place with so many facets. Its his-

torical legacy is profound," says McConnell. Yet despite so many natural advantages, Montalvo was shackled with declining audiences and a shaky financial base. The more McConnell came to understand Montalvo's potential, the more inspired she became to rejuvenate it.

Built in 1912 by Senator James D. Phelan, Montalvo was dedicated in permanent trust in the 1930s as a center for artists, musicians, writers and actors. Its internationally renowned artists' residency program, reborn in 2004 as the Sally and Don Lucas Artists Residency Program, was impressively revamped with newly designed residences for artists, writers, musicians and even a culinary fellow.

"For me it seemed that Montalvo was ready for change," comments McConnell. "I realized I could have an impact that would be significant, and that it did match my experience." One prominent goal: to increase revenues. She plans to approach that objective from various angles, playing on the many art forms that Montalvo celebrates and has at its disposal.

McConnell's ideas range from sculpture gardens, poetry and drama classes to fitness boot camps, yoga and culinary events. She also wants to involve the hundreds of hikers who enjoy Montalvo's trails, perhaps with programs on nature and horticulture. In fact, McConnell would like both the house and grounds used all the time.

"I want people to understand it's not simply an arts organization but also a community resource," she says. "So we'll be doing much more programming around that philosophy. This is the year of testing new programs." These include expanded initiatives, which allow students to mount their own productions—something never done before.

She is also interested in pursuing historical tours that highlight Montalvo's unique library and distinguished legacy of visitors. Besides all this, festive lunches, weddings and seasonal events will continue, in the spirit of Phelan's wish to encourage joyful celebration.

All of these are essential to Montalvo's financial health. A strong board of trustees and a long-established cadre of almost 100 volunteers keep the place running, practically and financially, but it's critical to generate a robust revenue stream. To this end, McConnell aims to establish an endowment of \$100 million.

"This is an opportunity for community leaders to step up and safeguard this institution for the next century," McConnell says. "It deserves this kind of funding." Plus, an endowment in that range would provide the organization with an annual income of approximately \$5 million—a welcome safety net.

McConnell is already looking farther out on the horizon: Villa Montalvo's 100th anniversary in 2012. "I'm spinning around ideas to give Montalvo the proper celebrations and resources it needs as it approaches its centennial," she says. One possible idea: invite back all the brides of past Montalvo weddings for the "wedding of the century."

## A PLAYBILL FOR THREE SOUTH BAY ARTS INSTITUTIONS

### MONTALVO ARTS CENTER

15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga  
408/961-5800  
www.montalvoarts.org

**Synopsis:** Montalvo's 1,100-seat Garden Theatre, Carriage House Theatre and spacious grounds host big-name performers, intimate concerts, comedy, day camps, and even star gazing slumber parties for families during the summer months.

**In the know:** No need to wait for a performance to visit Montalvo's historic house and grounds or to take in an art exhibit. Check out guided tours starting in May for \$10. Free hiking trails.

**Performance sampler:** Among those appearing in the new year are pianist George Winston (Jan. 22), jazz ensemble Acoustic Alchemy (Feb. 28), sitar player Anoushka Shankar (April 29, pictured right), "American Idol" finalists Brooke White and Michael Johns (May 14) and a group of celebrated Persian musicians (Feb. 14)—with dinner in the villa beforehand! Don't forget family theatre at Montalvo, with regular dramatic productions for children including "Dr. Seuss's The Butter Battle Book" on March 7. Tickets generally range between \$20-\$40 (members/students \$18-\$36). Live Nation-produced summer concerts cost approximately \$45-\$85.

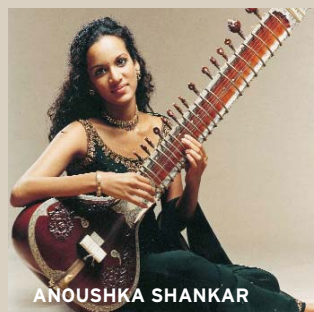
**Tip:** Parking is free onsite for Montalvo-produced events. For Garden Theatre shows take the free shuttle from West Valley College or obtain a permit.

### BALLET SAN JOSE

40 North First Street, San Jose  
408/288-2800  
www.balletsj.org

**Synopsis:** This company might have undergone several name changes but it has earned a top reputation with its classical and contemporary ballet performances. It performs at the Center for Performing Arts, 255 Almaden Blvd., San Jose.

**In the know:** A new, tented Pavilion adjoining the CPA has a bar and plenty of space for events and informal visiting before and after the show. Following matinee performances of the 30th An-



ANOUSHKA SHANKAR



NUTCRACKER



DADDY LONG LEGS

niversary production of artistic director Dennis Nahat's acclaimed "Nutcracker" (\$30-\$85), treat your young balletomanes to High Tea (\$30 for kids and \$50 for adults). You may meet the dancers! **Performance sampler:** "Romeo and Juliet" (Feb. 27-March 7) is a spectacular ballet on a grand scale. Spring Repertory 1 & 2 (April 8-May 9), a medley of exhilarating dance styles, includes "Square Dance," "Salut d'Amour" and "Gaité Parisienne." Five-ballet subscription series: \$110-\$375; single performance tickets, \$22-\$75.

**Tip:** Adobe Garage at 345 Park Ave., directly across the street from the theater, charges ballet attendees only \$5 on evenings and weekends.

### THEATREWORKS

P.O. Box 50458, Palo Alto  
650/463-1960  
www.theatreworks.org

**Synopsis:** Silicon Valley's leading professional nonprofit theatre company presents a year-round menu of musicals, comedies and dramas, from West Coast premieres of Broadway hits to new works developed in the company's New Works Initiative. Performances usually take place at the Mountain View Center for Performing Arts or Palo Alto's Lucy Stern Theatre.

**In the know:** TheatreWorks celebrates its 40th anniversary this season under the direction of founder Robert Kelley, with an upbeat repertoire of new works and new takes on old favorites.

**Performance sampler:** World premiere of "Daddy Long Legs" (Jan. 20-Feb. 14), a musical romance by Paul Gordon, whose musical hit "Emma" broke box office records. For the holidays, "A Civil War Christmas" (Dec. 2-27), is a musical set on a snowy Christmas Eve in 1864 Washington. Late winter and early spring bring the West Coast premiere of "Sunsets and Margaritas" and the always memorable "To Kill A Mockingbird." Subscription prices vary, but individual tickets generally range from \$24-\$67.

**Tip:** Mountain View has a huge variety of reasonably priced restaurants, most within easy walking distance of the Center for Performing Arts. Get there early for dinner! The theatre has its own spacious underground parking lot.



STEPHANIE ZIESEL

PHOTO BY CHRIS AYERS

**Stephanie Ziesel, who took the helm as executive director of Ballet San Jose on May 25th exudes passion for all things artistic.**

It's an ambitious agenda. But, as Jeffrey Walker, who succeeded her as executive director at CSMA, points out, "Angela is passionate about the arts and education, and a very persistent champion of anything she takes on."

There is something of the performer in McConnell too, as she employs her flair for the theatrical in raising Montalvo's profile. While at CSMA, she learned jazz and classical singing, and she enjoys performing informally, including at a salon she holds at her Los Altos Hills home. Is she hesitant to demonstrate her musical talents? She jokes: "Don't encourage me!"

## STEPHANIE ZIESEL

Stephanie Ziesel, who took the helm as executive director of Ballet San Jose on May 25, exudes passion for all things artistic. "We have so much here in Silicon Valley. But it's the arts that make a city great—we've got to have that to be world class. And we definitely want to be a part of that," she says.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: (TOP) MONTALVO ARTS CENTER; (CENTER) BALLET SAN JOSE; (BOTTOM) CAROL ROSEGG



A thoughtful, focused woman, Ziesel believes this already powerful, innovative dance company can pull in audiences from well beyond the confines of the South Bay and be strengthened in return. “All the pieces are here,” she says, “so what we need to do is to energize and motivate people.”

A native of Wisconsin, with degrees in law and journalism, Ziesel sees San Jose with fresh eyes. The city “strikes me as very robust,” she comments, with its artistically thriving opera, symphony and theatres, as well as ballet, museums, galleries and excellent dining. Having lived in San Francisco for 15 years—the last seven as associate director of development of the San Francisco Ballet, where she played a key

### **Bucking the trend of downsizing and managed expectations, McConnell, Ziesel, and McDonough all combine ambitious goals with marketing savvy, and high hopes with practicality and personal vision.**

role in building up its financial base—Ziesel is familiar with the highly competitive arts scene.

Now her challenge is to popularize the idea of San Jose as a must-not-miss destination. Ballet San Jose offers an entire season for around the price of one ticket to the San Francisco Ballet, Ziesel points out, an obvious selling point that she intends to use to her advantage.

The city has seen tremendous changes for the better since Ballet San Jose was founded almost 24 years ago, initially in partnership with the Cleveland Ballet. The company has held its own through booms, busts, and awkward and confusing changes of name—from San Jose Cleveland Ballet, to Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley—and now finally seems ready to settle down with the streamlined and classic moniker of Ballet San Jose.

Despite all this drama, artistic director Dennis Nahat steadily built up the company’s reputation both with full-length story ballets, such as “Nutcracker” and “Swan Lake,” and with daring new shows. Last season’s “Hidden Talents,” for example, showcased dancers’ choreographic talents to rave reviews for its “saucy,” “slinky” and “sophisticated” dancing.

The current season offers “Coppelia,” as well as a comic danced (and sung) version of Gilbert & Sullivan’s “Pirates of Penzance,” and a spring repertory of dances as different as a hoe-down-style “Square Dance” set to Vivaldi’s music and Stravinsky’s “Agon.” The season also has expanded—opening six weeks earlier than usual with an added production—certainly the mark of a company on the rise.

Such a repertoire deserves a great showcase. Ziesel is keenly aware that San Jose’s Center for Performing Arts lacks some of the key aspects of “a complete theatergoing experience,” but says a new, semi-permanent structure outside the theatre will help expand the space for subscriber and patron events. Furthermore, taking a cue from one of her major achievements at San Francisco Ballet, which was building up its information management system, one of Ziesel’s first undertakings at Ballet San Jose is to unveil a new web site, thus making it easier to subscribe, buy and exchange tickets.

Ziesel sees no reason not to be brazen about Ballet San Jose’s strengths. After all, her own initial reaction was, “Wow, these guys are good, but you wouldn’t know it.” Ziesel is determined to boost Ballet San Jose’s image by “tak-

ing and expressing more pride in our product” through a strong national and international marketing campaign and bringing in top talent.

Growth is somewhat constrained by space. Ballet San Jose’s 1920s building has five studios, with beautiful stained glass windows and molding, yet is barely enough real estate for its dancers and the 500 students a year it trains. Ziesel herself works from an office lined with huge filing cabinets and a desk completely covered with files and paper. Despite any space issues, though, the ballet school thrives, adding for the first time this year, a summer dance camp. “One of the biggest challenges is to attract boys and we’ve been hav-

ing a lot of success with that,” says Ziesel. “Free classes for boys yielded a substantial crop of talent.”

Ziesel sees education as part of her mandate—which includes making ballet more accessible in every way possible. She would like to see the more unusual dance pieces welcomed as much as the familiar ones, and that is partly a function of education.

With her first child expected at the end of the year, not surprisingly Ziesel’s overriding theme is growth.

“I feel we’re standing at the beginning of something very big,” she says. “It’s wonderful to be in a position of truly looking at growth at a time when it could be entirely otherwise, when one could be just struggling for survival. But I think that the arts are so much more vibrant than that.”

### **MEREDITH McDONOUGH**

**A**rriving in June as TheatreWorks’ director of New Works, Meredith McDonough launched immediately into the “insanity” of preparing six stage readings, four panel performances and two musical productions for the three-week New Works Festival in Palo Alto.

Clearly, she revels in such madness. Developing new plays and musicals has been her life since her undergraduate years at Northwestern University, and McDonough is glad to land here in the South Bay, doing what she loves best for audiences who “came out in droves in a way that far exceeded expectations.”

“Here, everyone is so excited...and wants to come and participate,” says McDonough, who found audiences in New York, where she worked most recently, sometimes cynical from oversaturation. What makes Silicon Valley audiences more receptive, she thinks, is their interest in exploration and experiment. Here, folks are attuned to the process of creating something new.

“Putting new work into a season is riskier than putting on a musical everyone knows,” says McDonough. “But if you let people into the process of that piece coming to fruition, audiences have an investment.”

TheatreWorks patrons are not only willing to underwrite the development of new works, but their keen interest often comes with feedback that strengthens the plays. The expanded New

Works Festival, now in its eighth year, elicited valuable audience response. Semi-staged productions at Lucie Stern Theatre in Palo Alto were open at low cost to anyone interested. They ranged from wildly experimental works like “Ernest Shackleton Loves Me,” (with four songs created by its authors just before it was staged) to “Auctioning the Ainsleys,” a dryly hilarious play that McDonough directed in collaboration with its author.

These and other shows, such as the high-energy song-cycle “The Bad Years,” or even one of the 10 works-in-progress read by local playwrights, may provide the material for future full-scale productions—or they may not. Such questions “percolate for a long time” before decisions are made, says McDonough.

Developing new works has always been a major part of the mission for TheatreWorks, which was founded 40 years ago by Artistic Director Robert Kelley. McDonough, who worked at the renowned Humana Festival for new drama in Kentucky, believes the company’s steady commitment to be unique. Both during the summer festival and a winter retreat, actors, musicians and directors are invited to play with ideas without pressure to put on a full-scale show.

“It’s a really fertile and productive time,” says McDonough, “and for many of us that opportunity’s so rare.” Kelley, she says, is “incredibly trusting”—of both the process and the artists—and she describes her own approach as “really present, but at the same time not prescriptive.”

As a testament to her infectious enthusiasm, McDonough saw every performance of every show at New Works Festival and introduced most of them. Such constant involvement is a treat for a director, whose role is normally to take the show to opening night and then leave.

While audiences for subscription theater typically tend to skew to older age brackets, 60 percent of the audience for the New Works Festival is under 35—a younger demographic that tends to think of entertainment differently. As a member of this younger generation, McDonough seems a good choice for building bridges to the diverse audiences TheatreWorks hopes to attract.

On a personal as well as professional level, McDonough welcomes the opportunity to become part of a community. After Northwestern, she received an MFA degree from University of California, San Diego, and then worked as a director “bouncing” all over the country. “I wanted to have a home, both artistically and personally,” McDonough says.

TheatreWorks nurtures writers for years, and part of McDonough’s job is communicating both with writers and other theatres about work that they are developing, “being a little bit of a matchmaker,” as she puts it. “Otherwise...we start to flatline.”

With McDonough’s hearty laugh and forthright manner, it’s hard to imagine anyone or anything flatlining around her. Instead, she is busy reading scripts, always on the look-



MEREDITH McDONOUGH

PHOTO COURTESY OF THEATREWORKS

out for the rough diamonds that will light up the stage in some future TheatreWorks production.

THREE VIBRANT WOMEN WITH ONE SHARED GOAL: to place the South Bay at the center of an artistic renaissance. Bucking the trend of downsizing and managed expectations, McConnell, Ziesel and McDonough all combine ambitious goals with marketing savvy, high hopes with practicality and personal vision.

What’s more, they share a strong sensitivity for community involvement. The future holds the potential for expanded collaboration among South Bay arts organizations, according to McConnell. “It’s so beneficial to combine forces rather than have a competitive spirit,” she remarks. These three leaders will use all the skills and strategic alliances at their disposal—and the balancing acts they perform to achieve success may well be their greatest artistic feat. ■