

Santa Cruz County Stories: Janinne Chadwick leads a unique and vibrant theater culture in Ben Lomond



Janinne Chadwick (standing center left in black) works with her latest batch of kids in Little People's Repertory Theater, performing a musical mash up of 'Peter Pan' and 'Hamilton' — opening this week at Ben Lomond's Park Hall. (Dan Coyro — Santa Cruz Sentinel)

By [Wallace Baine](#) | Santa Cruz Sentinel

UPDATED: September 11, 2018 at 12:00 AM PDT

All across America, summer is theater season when small towns and big cities alike engage in high-entertainment-value live theater, usually involving music, costumes and name-brand creative properties.

Ben Lomond, in heart of Santa Cruz County's San Lorenzo Valley, is as theater-mad as any community in the country. But the summer theater experience in Ben Lomond is utterly unlike any other. What you see there you simply will not see anywhere else.

That's because Janinne Chadwick lives there.

The 56-year-old writer, musician and college professor is the artistic director of Little People's Repertory Theater, which for generations has resisted offering audiences the same old fruit plate of familiar plays. Instead, Chadwick tosses the tastier bits of musical theater, pop music

and popular culture into a giant blender, and hits the button labeled “Mash-up,” producing a unique entertainment smoothie, available nowhere else in the known universe but Park Hall in Ben Lomond.

Chadwick and her charges at LPRT are at it again this summer, and the result is particularly refreshing. This time, she’s taken a treasured story of childhood adventure and mashed it up with the trendiest, most gotta-see theater creation of our times. What happens when “Peter Pan” gets thrown in the blender with “Hamilton”?

You guessed it: Welcome to “Peter Pamilton.”

The video player is currently playing an ad. You can skip the ad in 5 sec with a mouse or keyboard

“I literally had a dream about it,” said Chadwick, backstage at Park Hall after a frenetic rehearsal for the original play to open Thursday, July 20. She already knew she wanted to do some kind of variation on “Peter Pan,” but couldn’t quite come up with another cultural touchstone to combine with it. A couple of months before, one of LPRT’s young performers sent her an e-mail reminding her how hugely popular that “Hamilton” — the [Broadway phenomenon based on the life of Alexander Hamilton](#) — had become with young people. At the time, Chadwick knew next to nothing about “Hamilton” and dismissed the idea, at least in her own mind.

Then came the dream.

“I dreamt I was standing in front of the stage,” said Chadwick, “and all the kids were dressed up like the Lost Boys from ‘Peter Pan,’ and they were singing the ‘Hamilton’ opening song. Which was weird, because I didn’t even know the song. I was so inspired, I turned around and looked at our director, who said, ‘It’s Peter Pamilton.’”

Ideas don’t usually come so gift-wrapped and ready for run with. Chadwick woke up and went right to her computer to download the “Hamilton” soundtrack. A few days later, when she gathered her crowd of young performers – LPRT’s casts range in age from 8 to 14 – there was an anticipatory buzz about the announcement of the 2017 summer show. When Chadwick announced “Peter Pamilton,” she was floored by the reaction.

“Kids literally screamed and shrieked and cried,” she said. “And I’m talking about the little kids, not just the teenagers. They were so into ‘Hamilton.’”

“Peter Pamilton” not only combines elements of its two title plays, it also brings in songs and references to other areas of pop culture. For instance, the play contains a take-off on the Beatles’ “Revolution” (we are talking about the American Revolution, after all) and the Lovin’ Spoonful’s “Do You Believe in Magic?” refashioned as “Do You Believe in Freedom (and

Liberty)?” Costumes and characters are also mashed up; 14-year-old Lila Rose Roberts (who first clued in Chadwick on “Hamilton”) plays Tinker-Burr.

“She takes a bunch of songs that are floating around in the zeitgeist,” said one of Chadwick’s crucial lieutenants, music director Arindam Krishna Das, “whether they are show tunes, or rock tunes, or songs that are just big hits at the time. And she makes them into parodies to tell our story.”

Though the “Hamilton” wrinkle is new, mash-up theater in Ben Lomond is anything but. It is, in fact, a tradition. Chadwick has been Ben Lomond’s mad scientist of theater for 20 years, supported ably by Krishna Das and director Daria Troxell. Last summer, LPRT mashed up “The Wizard of Oz” and “Harry Potter.” Before that, “Jack & the Beanstalk” with “Back to the Future,” and before that, “The Little Mermaid” and “E.T.”

“Peter Pamilton” will consist of 72 young performers — everybody gets a speaking line — coached and mentored by older teens and college students who have gone through the program in years past. Nowadays, former LPRT performers are bringing their own children to rehearsals.

When Chadwick first arrived in Ben Lomond, LPRT was already well into putting fun into summer theater, thanks to her predecessor Mary Lynn Painter who was folding Beatles songs into theatrical revues. Chadwick upped the ante in the productions, bringing in bigger sets and costumes, more songs and a rock band to play them. Her own children immediately got wrapped up into the summer tradition. But even after her kids grew up into adults, Chadwick kept bringing original productions into Ben Lomond each summer.

“I love the idea of a mash-up,” said Chadwick. “That song in ‘Hamilton’ says it all: ‘Who lives, who dies, who tells your story.’ The real magic is that we are making these for this community. I know this community. As these kids grow up, hopefully they’ll be like my kids have been, people who have taken on the arts as a really important part of their lives.”

Janinne Chadwick

Occupation: Artistic director of Little People’s Repertory Theater in Ben Lomond.

Day Job: When she’s not running theater during the summers, she teaches childhood development and liberal studies at both CSU-Monterey Bay and Cabrillo College.

Home: Ben Lomond

Family: She and husband Daren Chadwick, a well-known audio engineer, have three now-grown children (George, Henry and Hazel), and one granddaughter.

Originally from: Orange County, “until I could drive away.”

Influences: Her love of mash-ups was probably sparked, she said, by her parents' recordings of novelty artist Allan Sherman, as well as Dr. Demento's radio show and Weird Al Yankovic.

Santa Cruz story: She had lived in various places from New York City (including the fabled Chelsea Hotel) to Hollywood before settling in Ben Lomond with Daren after the birth of their oldest child. "I did a lot of traveling," she said. "I wanted to be a rock star and poet." Once moving to Ben Lomond, the whole family got involved in LPRT productions. Inspired by "Beach Blanket Babylon," she parodied "Jungle Book," for instance, with references to the Rolling Stones and the Jackson 5. Her son played in the Jungle Book as Kaa the Snake, reimagined as Mick Jagger. Her daughter was the title role in the early mash-up, "Pinocchio: A Bohemian Rhapsody."

'Peter Pamilton': LPRT's mash-up of "Peter Pan" and "Hamilton" plays July 20-30, all shows at 7:30 p.m., except Sundays, at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$18 adults; \$12 children. For more information, go to lprt.org.

Originally Published: July 16, 2017 at 12:00 AM PDT