

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace



Water world

by Rebecca Wallace | photographs by Veronica Weber

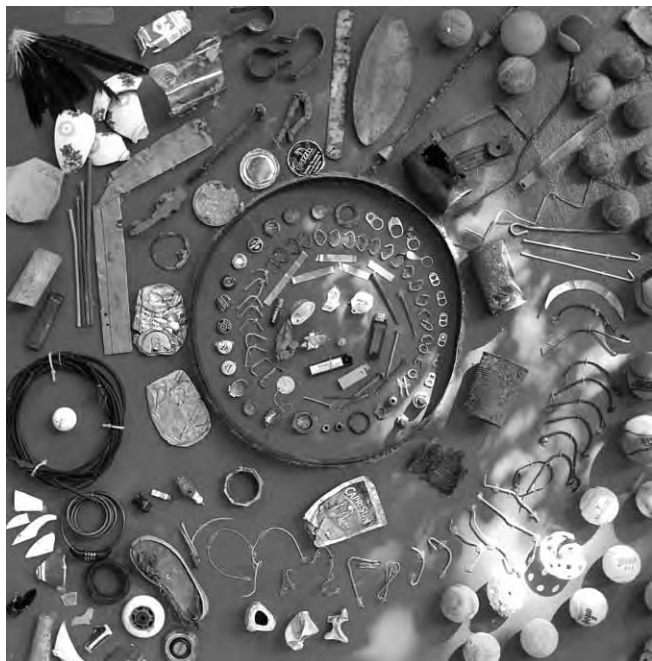


Linda Gass, chair of the "Shaped by Water" exhibit at the Los Altos History Museum, sits on "Barrelled by Plastic" by artist Kathleen Egan.

MUSEUM MAKES A CASE FOR CONSERVATION THROUGH ART, IDEAS AND A SWEEPING HISTORIC VIEW

a few years ago, when volunteers at the Los Altos History Museum started planning "Shaped By Water: Past, Present and Future," they had no idea how timely the exhibit would be.

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Top: Evan Baldonado, 11, reads some of the displays from the “Shaped by Water” exhibit at the Los Altos History Museum; far left: “Trails of Trash” by Hannah Butensky displays items found when the artist organized a cleanup of Permanente Creek with members of her scout troop in 2011; left: “46,000 and Counting,” an art piece by Judith Selby and Richard Lang, consists of bits of plastic collected from Kehoe Beach in Point Reyes.

Water world

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The display of artwork, photos, maps, drawings, activities and multimedia shows the crucial role that water has played in Santa Clara Valley history, and the challenges that could affect the resource in the future. All this is on display during a season that’s been mainly dry and warm. This month’s storms notwithstanding, rainfall this year is at

a low that worries many.

“I feel it strongly this year. I feel this sense of internal distress about how dry it’s been,” exhibit chair Linda Gass said.

But in the history museum, the lush sound of rushing water is ever-present. An audio recording plays as visitors walk around the exhibit hall, virtually traveling through the centuries. They go from listening to tribal stories from indigenous people — who used the creek and Bay waters for drinking, bathing,

fishing and cooking — to reading about modern-day Peninsulans who are restoring native plants and recycling graywater from showers.

Along the way, visitors are continually reminded of man’s growing impact on the environment, as a growing population uses more and more water: in ranching and agriculture, industry and cities. According to an exhibit press release, over the years the Santa Clara Valley has gone from “being self-sufficient using local water to 50-100 percent

reliant on imported water.”

Gass hopes visitors will walk away with new ideas and energy for conserving and preserving the resource. “Because people take water for granted ... we really need an educated public,” she said.

Gass, a full-time Los Altos artist who has her workspace at Cubberley Studios in Palo Alto, has long focused on these issues. Her art quilts depict San Francisco Bay, water-treatment plants, rivers and other bodies of water that have been

affected — or drained — by human activity. In her land art, she has arranged fabric outside to depict water that has been lost.

So when Gass, a member of the Los Altos History Museum, heard that the museum was planning a show about water, she offered her help. “The next thing I knew, I was in charge.”

She added: “They were looking for a novel way to tell the story of the local history, of Los Altos and Los Altos Hills, using a different an-



As part of the “Shaped by Water” exhibition, community volunteers built this willow sculpture at Adobe Creek in Los Altos in January. Designed by Daniel McCormick and Mary O’Brien, the sculpture is designed to help nature rebuild the eroded bank over time.

Below: A young visitor to the “Shaped by Water” exhibit interacts with plastic water jugs, an installation showing the average daily water use per person in Santa Clara valley.

Joel Bartlett



Juliana Griswold, center, pours water through a water pump to test permeable concrete, while fellow friends and members of her girl-scout troop — Jennifer Wood, left, Saayili Budhiraja, Claire Lai, Sawyer Mickesem and Lilian Farrell — wait their turn at the “Shaped by Water” exhibit.



gle, water. I took the locally focused idea and expanded it into the whole Santa Clara Valley. Of course, we know that water has no boundaries. Everybody drinks water that comes from far away.”

One display in the exhibit centers on this fact. A visitor can push a button for his or her city on the “Where Does Your Water Come From?” display and learn from a light-up map that it comes from the Sierra Nevada Mountains, or perhaps the Central Valley Project.

While Gass has curated art exhibitions, this was her first time directing an educational show. With help from Jane Reed, who has curated many shows at the museum, Gass assembled an exhibit committee at the end of 2010.

Apart from a few graphic designers and others who were paid for their work, Gass and her team were all volunteers. Several staff members from the City of Palo Alto helped develop and build the exhibit; tribal consultant Chuck Striplen aided in

the section on indigenous people; and retired Palo Alto Weekly editor Jay Thorwaldson edited the exhibit text. The Santa Clara Valley Water District and local water companies helped fact-check.

Unsurprisingly, the artist-chair led an effort with a definite artistic flair. “I understand how art has a way to touch people emotionally when other things may not,” Gass said. “We wanted to create a feeling of love for water within people.”

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Gwen Templeton plays a journalist and Louis Schilling is a terrorist in "Cat's-Paw."

James Kasyn

Engaging and intriguing

'Cat's-Paw' at the Dragon takes the audience to the edge

by Jeanie K. Smith

William Mastrosimone, the playwright of Dragon Theatre's latest offering, "Cat's-Paw," is better known for his other play from the '80s, "Extremities," which was also made into an award-winning film. The two plays share a common interest in what takes human beings to the edge of sanity; what makes them go to extremes and gives them the ability to snuff out another's humanity, for the sake of a cause or survival.

Mastrosimone also likes to embed relevant political themes in his plays — in the '80s we called them "consciousness raising" — and "Cat's-Paw" is no exception, arguing over water pollution. We know from the beginning that one

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of the characters, Victor (Louis Schilling), has taken a man into hostage as a political act — turns out to be a manager at the Environmental Protection Agency, one David Darling (Keith Sullivan). We soon learn of another move Victor's group has made in its bid for political will and attention: a suicide-bombing that has killed 27 innocent people and created havoc in the capital.

Victor alternately bullies and indulges David, as if he both detests and pities him, and David in turn tolerates his imprisonment without resistance, apparently accepting

whatever fate will be meted out. Victor's colleague, Cathy (Sarah Lee), serves him as a good soldier to her commanding officer, running errands and following orders, but she is shaken by the news of her fellow soldier's suicide mission.

When Cathy brings in famed reporter Jessica Lyons (Gwen Templeton), blindfolded and handcuffed, the tension escalates over the terms of the interview and what will ultimately be revealed to the waiting world about this new terrorist group and its agenda. Victor's natural suspicion of the press and how they will slant the story is weighed against his desire to broadcast his group's mission; he and Jessica parry back and forth concerning freedom of the press, what is fact, what is truth, and who has the right to make the distinction between them.

Ultimately, all four characters have some hard choices to make, and much is left to the viewer to

determine. The end is not a resolution, but a pause in Jessica's interview tape that hauntingly challenges us to decide where the truth lies and whether a violent political act is ever justifiable. The arguments against pollution are all too familiar by now; and knowing the play was written in 1986 is somewhat chilling; has anything changed to make these arguments obsolete? But the real question in the play is more of a moral conundrum, one that you may find yourself pondering long after the lights are up.

The play has gaps and inconsistencies, and sometimes muddies its own waters with tangential issues; but it's definitely intriguing for the better part of two hours.

This, in spite of an uneven and somewhat green cast. Schilling is miscast as a terrorist of any stripe; he simply doesn't have the gravitas or menace anywhere about him. But he gives it a go, and musters his best villainy for the role. His stumbling over lines opening night will hopefully clear up as the play runs.

Templeton has the requisite intensity for the reporter, but not enough detachment or chutzpah, or at least faked chutzpah, in the beginning, so there's not enough transition for her in Act Two. Still, her arguments for journalistic integrity are impassioned and believable.

Lee and Sullivan both do fine with fairly limited characters. Darling seems misdirected in his on-camera interview, but maintains a wide-eyed corporate naivety that's convincing.

Ron Gasparinetti's set is positively stunning; a fabulous construction in an intimate theater space that significantly enhances the action, both stylistically and conceptually. ■

What: "Cat's-Paw," by William Mastrosimone, presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: through April 15, Thursday-Saturday 8 p.m., Sunday 2 p.m.

Cost: Tickets range from \$16 to \$30.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.

Water world

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There are several works of art in the show, including "Barreled by Plastic," an "eco-sculpture" by Kathleen Egan. Empty plastic bottles — from juice, water, dish soap, sports drinks — are arranged in a swoop around a surfboard where kids like to stand and have their pictures taken.

"In just three weeks, surfers collected the plastic bottles," the artwork card reads.

Another piece is "46,000 And Counting," by Judith Selby Lang (who also made "Lawn Bowls," now on Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto) and her husband David Lang. Pieces of plastic debris that washed up on the beach dangle in the museum window.

The exhibit has also had several hands-on components. In a section called "Creek Stories," visitors write down memories of playing in and around local creeks, many of which don't have the wildlife they once did. Kids can crawl into a playhouse that has succulent plants growing on the roof, demonstrating how a "green roof" can retain and filter rainwater, helping reduce Bay pollution.

Offsite projects associated with the exhibits include "Watershed Sculpture at Adobe Creek: An Inquiry into Ecological Restoration." Under the guidance of artist Daniel McCormick, about 70 volunteers helped restore an eroded creek bank in Los Altos in January by building his criss-cross willow-and-wattle sculpture.

The museum partnered with the Palo Alto environmental group Acterra on the project. Acterra workers had removed an invasive non-native plant from the area and had been mulling over what to do with the bank, Gass said.

As part of the sculpture, willow stakes have been put into the ground and watered. "Ultimately this will

grow into a willow thicket," Gass said, adding that in time nature will also help restore the bank with silt and other materials. In time, the human hand behind "Watershed Sculpture" will become invisible, she said. "It will become a natural creek bank, like it should be."

The deeper environmental message behind the works of art may likewise go unobserved by some of the youngest museum visitors. But it doesn't mean they can't have a good time.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, a boy ran excitedly around the exhibit's labyrinth of river stones. His mother gently corrected him: "This is a meditation path. You walk it and meditate."

Gamely, the boy stopped, put his hands in the namaste position and bowed. A few seconds later, he was off running again.

No one else was in the labyrinth, so there was still room for his mother to softly walk her own section and study the quotes posted on small signs. One from "Poor Richard's Almanac" read, "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water." ■

What: "Shaped by Water: Past, Present and Future," a multimedia exhibit about the role of water in the Santa Clara Valley's history and future

Where: Los Altos History Museum, 51 S. San Antonio Road

When: through April 22, open Thursday through Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.

Cost: Free

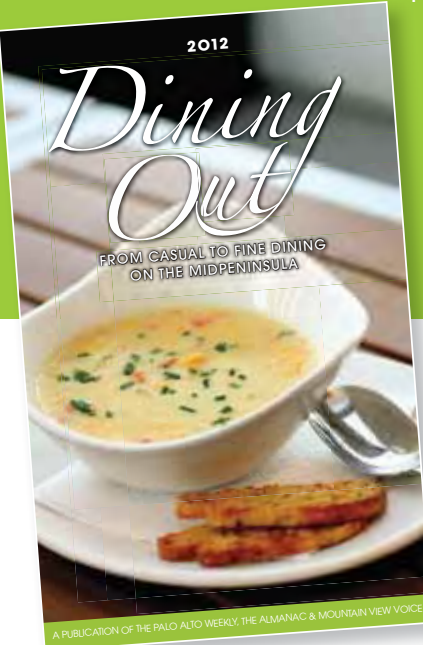
Info: For more about the exhibit, go to losaltoshistory.org.



SEE MORE ONLINE
www.PaloAltoOnline.com

To see a video made by Lessa Bouchard about the community creation of Daniel McCormick's creekside artwork "Watershed Sculpture at Adobe Creek: An Inquiry into Ecological Restoration," go to losaltoshistory.org and click on the YouTube icon.

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