



Captain Peter Stossel (portrayed by Karol Garrison), center, and the crew of the Rouse Simmons, a turn-of-the-century Great Lakes schooner that delivers Christmas trees to Chicago, sing during the Twin City Players' production of "The Christmas Schooner." Jody Warner / HP correspondent

Sharing the Christmas spirit

TCP takes the Mendel Center Mainstage for the first time with production of 'The Christmas Schooner'

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
HP Features Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Bill Klein stares at the box that holds his yet-to-be-assembled artificial Christmas tree as the panic sets in.

"My house is a mess right now," Klein says, laughing. "I have no tree up, no Christmas decorations up, and my grandkids are going to be here in three days."

Klein, who happens to be president of the Twin City Players, isn't prone to holiday procrastination. It's just his thoughts, and much of his time, has been devoted to providing holiday spirit of a different sort. Opening Friday, the St. Joseph-based community theater group, which formed in 1932, will

IF YOU GO

What: Twin City Players present "The Christmas Schooner"

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$15, \$7 for children 12 and younger

Contact: 429-0400 or twincityplayers.org

present a groundbreaking production of "The Christmas Schooner" at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre. The three-date run

marks the first time in the company's storied history that it has staged a show in the 1,500-seat space.

"As an organization it's an amazing step for us," says Klein, who also plays the role of Oskar in the show. "We've been in our little playhouse on Glenlord Road since 1985, and our main season has always been there. This opportunity could open us up to a different audience. The people who go to the Mendel might not have ever heard of Twin City Players. If we can create an audience of people who enjoy live theater, it benefits us, and it benefits the college."

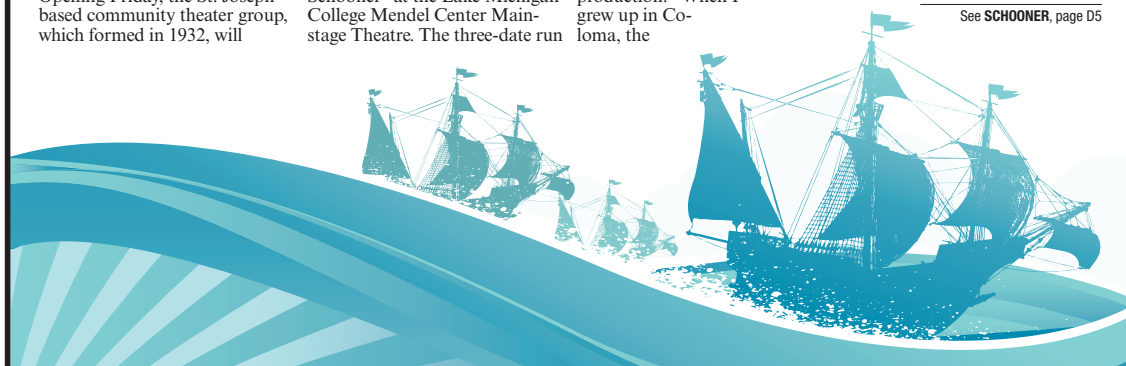
"It's a game changer," adds Paul Mow, who is directing the production. "When I grew up in Co-loma, the

Mendel Center was there, but it was always the place people from out of town could use, did use, and could afford to use. Up until about 18 months ago, we couldn't afford to turn the lights on there. But Mike Nadolski and the people at the Mendel Center have bent over backwards to reach out to community organizations to say they want this to be the region's theater. By cutting fees for us, they've even allowed us to keep ticket prices the same. I just can't say enough about it."

With such a big opportunity for TCP, the company is mounting an equally monumental show.

Based on the historic Great Lakes voyages of Christmas tree

See **SCHOONER**, page D5



Country Opera ready for 'Jolliest Christmas Ever'



Photos by Jody Warner / HP correspondent

Meagan Francis as Alma Stossel, center, and the other village women during the Twin City Players' "The Christmas Schooner."

SCHOONER

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ships during the late 1800s and early 1900s, "The Christmas Schooner," a musical written by John Reeger with music and lyrics by Julie Shannon, tells the true story of a Michigan shipping captain who braves the deadly winter weather to bring Christmas trees to homesick German-American families in turn-of-the-century Chicago.

The story is simple. It pits the altruistic wish of Captain Peter Stossel (Karol Garrison) to bring Christmas joy to Chicago against the need of his wife, Alma (Meagan Francis), to protect her husband by keeping him from the foolhardy journey. The captain's selflessness inspires his son, Karl (Will Turner at age 9, Jason Cope at age 15), earns the trust of his aged father, Gustav (John Berecz), and eventually, the understanding and acceptance of his wife.

"It's based on a German family in Manistee, Mich., around 1882," Klein says. "My character, Oskar, is one of the crewman of the schooner owned by Peter Stossel, who runs lumber during the sailing season. The captain gets a letter from his cousin in Chicago who says they can't get Christmas trees in the city. So the captain decides to harvest them and take them to Chicago. On that first trip, he's wondering if anybody is even going to be there when they arrive, and



Karol Garrison plays Captain Peter Stossel, right, and Will Turner portrays Captain Stossel's son Karl in the Twin City Players' production of "The Christmas Schooner."

when they do there's 500 people waiting on the docks."

"The Christmas Schooner" is based on the true story of the Rouse Simmons, a Great Lakes schooner that sunk in a violent storm on Lake Michigan on Nov. 23, 1912. Each year, its captain, whose real name was Herman Schuenemann, would sell trees right off of the ship at the Clark Street Docks, and was known to give free trees to the needy.

"The story sits espe-

cially close to home for me, not just because it's set on the shores of Lake Michigan, but because my ancestors two or three generations ago, who were German immigrants, went up north to be loggers," Mow says. "I don't know if they were part of any of these ships, but the more I've delved into it myself, the more it's become really personal."

The cast features more than 35 members, an immense set – including the ship – designed by John Taylor, and a

six-member live orchestra. Notable songs from the musical include "We All Have Songs," "Pass it On," "What is it About the Water?," "Winterfest Polka," "Questions" and "Hardwater Sailors."

"As we've talked about this, every one of us has said at one time, 'I've never done a play where I've played a real person,'" Klein says. "I don't know if Oskar existed, but somebody like Oskar certainly did. When the crew gets to Chicago and all these people are waving at us, you realize this isn't a typical trip. They are bringing something more than just trees. It's a family story about traditions and overcoming tragedy and what the Christmas spirit is all about. And it's real. That's what makes it so impactful."

It's not hard for Klein to think of family during this particular production. His wife, Barbara Klein, is one of the costumers for the production. His daughter, Lauren Klein, is a member of the ensemble as well. Then there's those soon-to-be arriving grandchildren, Madeline, 8, and Evan, 5, from Chardon, Ohio.

"My grandkids are coming in for the Christmas holiday a few days early because they've never seen their grandpa perform before," Klein says. "It means so much to me because it's such a beautiful story. I'm so glad they're going to see this show."

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