

Mendez brings talents home to Shuler Theater

By Tim Keller
Special to The Chronicle-News
RATON — It was the musical "Oklahoma" that gave TJ Mendez the acting bug.

He was a Raton Middle School eighth-grader when Bill Fegan mounted the production at the Shuler Theater in the early 1990s.

"I was active in music in school," he says. "The choir director asked us one day if anyone was interested in auditioning for a show." His part in the musical hooked him for life.

"From then through my senior year, I was in three or four shows at the Shuler Theater every year. By the time I went to college, I already had a lengthy résumé, which helped me get into shows there."

After years studying music and acting at Fort Lewis College in Durango and Pikes Peak Community College in Colorado Springs, Mendez launched a professional career that has brought him back to Raton this summer to act in two productions and direct the suspense thriller "Web of Murder," which opens this weekend.

Although he now makes his home in Monte Vista, near Alamosa, he's not home much. He takes a gig acting or directing whenever he can, but he's usually on the road as a professional tour manager.

It was again the Shuler Theater's Bill Fegan that provided the first opportunity.

"As I finished my second year at Fort Lewis College," Mendez recalls, "Bill asked me to go on tour as the stage manager and lighting designer for the Chinese Acrobats. I toured with them for nine months. We went coast to coast, back and forth, zigzagging the country."

He followed that with a 2000 summer season at Creede Repertory Theatre before moving to Pikes Peak Community College for three semesters, attracted by its dynamic theater program and the accompanying opportunities at Theatreworks and Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

When the Shuler Theater revived its Kaleidoscope Players and started its professional summer stock



Tim Keller/Special to The Chronicle-News

Raton native son TJ Mendez has returned to the Shuler Theater from his Monte Vista, Colo., home to direct "Web of Murder," which opens Saturday night. Mendez designed the murder mystery set, seen behind him.

series in 2004, Mendez was on board as an actor in three shows, and he returned in 2005. After that he was too busy to get back until last summer, when he acted in two shows and directed "Love, Sex, and the I.R.S."

Since 2004, he's been the tour manager for "Bowfire," a high-energy, highly theatrical show that features a dozen musicians, half of whom are virtuoso violinists or fiddlers. With the big Canadian production, he spends months at a time traveling North America and the world. Recent tours have brought the show to The Denver Center for the Performing Arts and to Sean Connery's 80th birthday party in Nassau, Bahamas.

When not touring with "Bowfire," Mendez's acting work has led to increasing opportunities to direct plays.

"I'm really enjoying directing now," he says, "so I want to further explore that. I've been touring for 10

years, so in my five year plan I'd like to have a house gig, to plant my feet somewhere and work on directing."

He's been getting a big dose of it this summer as he's prepared his cast and crew for Saturday night's opening performance of "Web of Murder."

"For this show, I'm using techniques I learned from Michael Stansbury in Colorado Springs. I've borrowed some of his ideas of set design." At a rehearsal this week, the set is open with no actual walls. A standing door and strands of crooked picture frames suggest walls. The effect is disjointed and a little edgy.

On top of that, Mendez has designed lighting and sound effects to be major components of the play. The company has had to add an extra technician in the control booth to handle all of the cues.

He's designed everything to add to the play's suspense. He committed to this season last summer, but he didn't

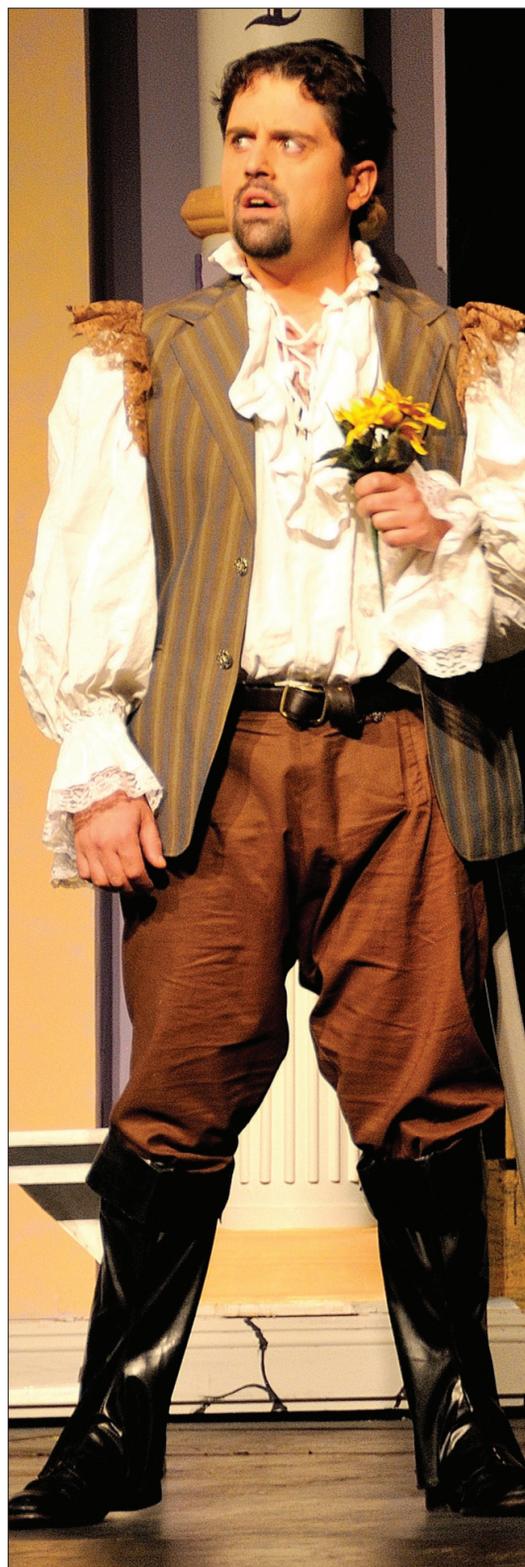
know which play he'd get to direct until March. For three months the production lived and evolved in his head. Finally, after Memorial Day, he met his cast and crew and could start fleshing out his ideas.

"Now that I've got sets and props and lights and actors, it's still evolving," he says. "And it'll still be evolving until opening night. And that is what I love about directing."

The opening night curtain goes up at 7:30 p.m. Saturday night, followed Sunday by a 2:30 p.m. matinee. Additional performances follow next Thursday and Aug. 2 and 3.

Mendez can also be seen as Florindo in the wildly funny "Servant of Two Masters," presented at the Shuler July 19, 20, 28, and 29.

General admission tickets for all shows are available at the door — \$15 for adults, \$13 seniors, and \$5 children. Additional information is available at the Shuler Theater, (575) 445-4746.



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TJ Mendez performs in two of this summer season's plays, including his role as Florindo, above, in the current "Servant of Two Masters," which continues this weekend.

Wife still making husband pay for affair even after seven years

DEAR ABBY: Seven years ago, while on a business trip to Europe, I went to a bar, got drunk and went back to my hotel with one of the "hostesses." It was a one-night stand, but my wife found out.

I quit drinking with the help of AA and have never had another affair. However, I am a sociable, friendly person, and I like to share laughs and light-hearted conversation with members of both sexes.

Although my wife claims to have forgiven me, she constantly brings up my



Dear Abby
Jeane Phillips

and my determination never to do it again. She has made my life a living hell. She has an extremely caustic tongue that she uses at

"fling" and makes it clear that she doesn't trust me to this day, despite my repeated apologies, my desire to make amends

every opportunity to embarrass and humiliate me.

I no longer love her, but her health isn't the best and she hasn't worked for several years. What can I do, Abby? I feel so alone and stuck. -- DESPERATE IN THE U.S.A.

DEAR DESPERATE: Because you are both miserable, do what other couples with troubled marriages do -- get marriage counseling to see if you and your wife can reach an understanding you both can live with. If that doesn't work, however, and she continues to berate and humiliate you, consult a lawyer and go on with your life.

DEAR ABBY: My husband and I are going to Italy

next year and taking our two sons, ages 8 and 12, with us. We have planned and saved for this trip for five years.

When my sister-in-law heard about it, she invited herself along, with her husband and two children who are my sons' ages. Although I love all of them, I don't want to spend my vacation of a lifetime with her. She often pawns her children off on others while she goes and does her own thing. She's a pro at it and has done it to me many times.

How do I approach this without anyone's feelings being hurt? There's no way I can go on this trip with her. I'd rather not go. Help! -- BOUND FOR ITALY

DEAR BOUND: You

may be "bound," but were you also gagged when your sister-in-law invited herself and her family along? That's when you should have had the gumption to say no.

The longer you put off telling her, the harder it will be, so tell her NOW. If you don't have the courage to do it alone, you and your husband should do it together. You have every right to go on your dream trip the way you and your husband planned it. His sister can schedule her family's visit to Italy at another time.

DEAR ABBY: My husband and I have clearly stated more than once that we didn't plan to have children. Recently, however, we realized that we had simply not been ready.

We have decided to try for a baby in the near future. If we are lucky enough to conceive, how will we respond to the inevitable barrage of questions about whether or not the baby was planned? -- TAKING IT BACK IN NEW YORK

DEAR TAKING IT BACK: Just say you changed your mind and the baby not only isn't an accident but is a welcome blessing.

Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren, also known as Jeane Phillips, and was founded by her mother, Pauline Phillips. Write Dear Abby at www.DearAbby.com or P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069.

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July 23: ACE Scholarship Application Deadline 5:00 p.m. for students transferring from public or home schools.

August 6th: Scholarship Applications Deadline 5:00 p.m.

August 22: Registration 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Sept. 4: First Day of School 8:00 a.m.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL
ANDREA JIMENEZ AT 719-846-4522.

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