

ESCONDIDO

'Queen of Bingo' show aiming to hit the comedy jackpot

By Pat Sherman

TODAY'S LOCAL NEWS

Bingo players are a superstitious lot. Some wear lucky support hose. Others clutter their tables with an army of talismans such as pink-haired trolls. And woe to the novice who plops bingo cards in front of the "lucky seat" a regular player has occupied every Tuesday for the past seven years.

"You don't want to mess with bingo players, the way that they do things," said Shane Partlow, who stars in the comedy "The Queen of Bingo" at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido.

The show centers around two quirky sisters out for a night of bingo: Sis, played by Partlow, and Babe, played by Rowan Joseph. Kevin Horton plays Father Mac, the limber-tongued caller.

The Los Angeles-based actors have traveled the country for several years in the roles, often stopping by a bingo hall or casino nearby to soak up local color.

"I wouldn't say we're fanatics the way that the two characters are, but we definitely do enjoy bingo," said Joseph, who directed the show off-Broadway in New York and in Chicago before taking over the role of Babe.

In different regions of the country, specific letter-number combinations will evoke specific calls from the audience. In some places, O-66 is considered a sign of the devil.

"They'll ring a bell or people will whistle," Joseph said. "Whenever I-22 is called, we go 'too-too' like you're pulling a horn on a tractor-trailer. B-11 is chicken legs. There's a whole culture that sort of goes along with bingo."

As the games progress, the sisters trade catty barbs about other players and each other.

"When we go to bingo halls it's amazing how true to life the characters are that we play," Joseph said. "There is definitely a sense of camaraderie."

In the original script by Jeanne Michels and Phyllis Murphy, Babe and Sis were played by women. Joseph was an agent for the production four years ago when the licensing company received a call from a director who wanted to use men in the roles. Joseph called the playwrights to ask for their blessing.

"Phyllis was like, 'Hey, they can do it with monkeys, as long as they pay the royalties,'" Joseph said. "Jeanne, whose mother and aunt it's based on, was a little more circumspect, but she basically said, 'I defer to you.'"

"For whatever reason, it just seemed to work better, so we started to do it with men. Shane, he's so good in his character that a lot of times people don't know until he takes the wig off at the end that it's a man."

Though the actors cut it up on stage, the characterization is never disrespectful, Partlow said.

DETAILS

"The Queen of Bingo"**When:** 8 p.m. tomorrow and Saturday**Where:** California Center for the Arts, Escondido, 340 N. Broadway**Admission:** \$27**Information:** (800) 988-4253 or artcenter.org

"We play the characters very real," he said. "We don't make fun of bingo players whatsoever."

To get into the role of Sis, Partlow borrowed bits of his aunt, mother and other bingo-playing relatives from the Quad Cities area of Illinois.

"It's interesting to bring all these different people from all walks of life (together) and the only thing that they have in common is bingo," Partlow said.

"For Sis' character, it keeps her mind very active. . . . It's kind of like the exercises that they do today. They're saying empower the brain and keep the brain stimulated for mature people. . . . Well, just go play some bingo and you might win something back."

To add excitement and authenticity to the production, the audience is invited to play a round of bingo during the "Middle Bird Special" before intermission. The winner receives a 10-pound turkey.

"I have good relations with the Smart & Final people," Partlow quipped. "They know I'll be coming in to get eight turkeys a week."



"The Queen of Bingo," a comedy that centers around two quirky sisters out for a night of bingo, will be performed tomorrow and Saturday. California Center for the Arts, Escondido