

STANDING O

New Village Arts has given Carlsbad 25 years of exceptional theater.

Written by **WENDY HINMAN**



"RENT" in 2025 brought back nostalgic feelings with new verve (photo by Jason Sullivan).



The best standing ovations happen involuntarily. Could be the whole play, could be an individual actor or even one song, but when theater magic happens, the audience enters the emotional energy of the play's other world. We feel deeply. We think even more deeply. We feel human again in the best sense. For 25 years, New Village Arts (NVA) has brought us to our feet.

A nonprofit, highly acclaimed professional theater company, NVA is in the heart of our Carlsbad Village. Right in the middle of our mundanity, the extraordinary is waiting for us. "We want to tell stories from as many different experiences as possible," Kristianne Kurner, NVA's founder and executive artistic director, says, so we can "feel something outside our lived experience; it's like you get to travel all over the world and never leave Carlsbad."

"There have been Kurners in Carlsbad for over 70 years," she says. Like many drama nerds, Kurner grew up and left her small town to seek her fortune in New York. She was in the first class of The Actor's Studio Drama School in '97. She returned to the best coast to the entertainment capital of the world. But Carlsbad, smaller than NYC or L.A., can still give a Sintraesque sense that, "If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere."

NVA began as the little theater that could. "Our first full production [2001] was at the granary in Magee Park ["Brilliant Traces," by Cindy Lou Johnson]," Kurner says. For the two-person play, "there was space for 25 people." But all the shows sold out and began building buzz. There were eight years of free Shakespeare every summer to start spreading the news. There were play readings at the Cultural Arts Center. Through Jack Misset's acting, NVA did four shows a year for five years in Judy Misset's Jazzercise office building.

Theater is the ultimate team sport. Though the uniforms vary wildly, as do

a) "As You Like It" cast from the Shakespeare in the Park days, 2001. b) A song busting out in "Smokey Joe's Café," 2019. c) Season 21 - "Singin' the Rain" is always a sentimental draw, 2003 (photos by Jason Sullivan).

the skills of each position, actor, director, costume, lighting, sets and sound are unique in contribution while utterly vital in synergy. “It’s an art form that’s completely collaborative,” Kurner says.

In 2006, NVA found a permanent home in the old Bauer Lumber building on State Street. It opened with “True West,” by Sam Shepard, in 2007. NVA has since become the best company in San Diego County to do a “big production in a small space,” Kurner says as the set for “Hair-spray” was getting its final comb out. The theater seats 99, which means there is not a bad one in the house. “We just kept building from there,” Kurner says. When you’re riding the wheels of a dream, you don’t let anything slow you down. During Covid, NVA did 40 outdoor shows at The Flower Fields.

They were also there in 2023 when they got a long-term lease from the city and a renovation of the old lumber building turned it into the cultural hub it has become. NVA began on a shoestring budget and the \$3.5 million refurbishing demonstrates not only NVA’s reputational heft, but the community’s commitment to its art. There is a major fundraising campaign right now. Go watch the current shows and tip really well.

NVA reopened from the renovation with “The Ferryman,” by Jez Butterworth, at the newly named Dea Hurston New Village Arts Center. “We were so fortunate,” Kurner says, “to have Dea Hurston with us for the celebration.” Hurston, a lover of and a champion for live theater in San Diego, passed in 2024. “We are the first arts center in the U.S. named after a black woman.”

The renovation added another stage for live music, stand-up and improv comedy. Live art takes risks. It’s why, as Terrence Mann suggested, theater makes us good. Better than TV or movies. When live performers land their parts in our physical presence, there is a connection we respond to, body and soul.

And “Is there a better place to live?” Kurner asks. “We are two blocks from the beach.” After the first big production, they celebrated with a cast party at Tom Giblen’s Irish Pub (now Carlsbad Village Books) and then the whole cast jumped in the ocean. “The city welcomes art and art people, and there is a great foodie scene.” The best dessert in town is the conversation we have after giving a New Village Arts play a standing O and wandering down State Street.

To learn more about the theater, including the schedule of events, visit newvillagearts.org.



a) When you’ve had a long day, Cozmic Comedy provides the best relief (photo by Michael Ward). b) The 2024 production of “The Color Purple” (photo by Jason Sullivan). c) Everyone needs a little “Hairspray,” on the Ray Charles Stage (photo by Jason Sullivan). d) The Dea Hurston home of New Village Arts on State Street (photo by Michael Ward). e) Cheers to the new renovations (photo by Michael Ward). f) Kristianne Kurner putting the ‘fun’ into fundraising at the Silver Gala 2026 (photo by Jason Sullivan).

