

MorningStar
Reviewed by David Kashimba
Photo by Julianne Odell

MorningStar, now playing in Spreckels Performing Arts Center's Condiotti Theatre in beautiful Rohnert Park, is a very entertaining slice of Sonoma County history. The musical, conceived by Nicholas Alva, is based on the true story of Morning Star Ranch located two miles north east of Occidental in western Sonoma County. The ranch became known when Lou Gottlieb, a member of the popular Limeliters music trio, purchased the property in the early 1960s. From 1966 through 1972 – with Gottlieb's declaration of "open land: access to which is denied no one" – the ranch became an unintended commune, generating a great deal of media coverage and public interest.

The musical celebrates the many people who felt the ranch was their home. When Gottlieb (Dave Struffles) is asked by a reporter about all the Hippies on his ranch, he answers: "I prefer 'flower children,' because I like flowers and children." He's also asked about the scientific goal of the ranch and he answers: "For people to play." This sets the tone of the musical, and as we watch the playing flower children in their modern Garden of Eden, folk music fills the theatre with sounds of peace, love and nature.

While the inhabitants of this garden do nothing to anger God, they do anger a world already in upheaval over the war in Vietnam. Sonoma County regulatory agencies – including Public Health, the Building Permits Department and the Sonoma County municipal Courts – did everything they could to close Morning Star Ranch. Even then governor Ronald Reagan promised that: "There will be no more Morning Stars."

Alva, who lives in Cotati and works at the library in Rohnert Park, first started thinking about the musical when a co-worker told him that he reminded her of Gottlieb. She loaned Alva a Morning Star scrapbook. This was the beginning of years of research that led Alva, with the collaboration of many talented musicians and some former residents of the ranch, to write the book, music and lyrics for the musical. But his ultimate inspiration came when he learned that Gottlieb deeded the ranch to God. In the musical, when the authorities are threatening to shut the ranch down, Gottlieb says: "Life without love is a tragedy... I will give Morning Star Ranch back to God."

Directed by Michael Fontaine with a large talented cast, *MorningStar* takes on the proportions of a folk opera, but the tone of the story is mostly comic. It's a very enjoyable Sonoma County history lesson written by a very talented Sonoma County resident. For tickets or more information call (707) 588-3400.

