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L.A.'s Holiday Celebration turns 50

The annual festival, which began as a kind of neighborhood talent show, has come a long way since its start in 1959.



Supervisor Kenneth Hahn is serenaded by kids in 1959. (Los Angeles County Arts Commission / December 10, 2009)

By Karen Wada

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The members of the Opera California Youth Choir -- older kids wearing black and white, little ones in traditional Korean dress -- stand solemn-faced and still in a Music Center rehearsal room, ready to begin their practice performance for the 50th Annual Los Angeles County Holiday Celebration.

On cue, they break into a jaunty "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" and then rock and rap their way through other songs of the season before ending with a reverent "Lord's Prayer." As they perform, every note and camera angle are analyzed by the production staff, which is preparing for the free Christmas Eve concert at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion as well as a live broadcast on KCET-TV and a PBS special.

After the singers finish, they are urged to smile and shout "Merry Christmas" in Korean as their images are recorded for Facebook and YouTube, this being the first Celebration to be streamed on the Web and promoted by a social media team.

What a difference 50 years make.

The holiday program, which began as an oversized (12-hour) neighborhood talent show, was the brainchild of the late Supervisor Kenneth Hahn. The daylong fest became an annual ritual for many families and a once-in-a-lifetime showcase for members of local music and dance groups.

The inexperience of the performers combined with the absence of rehearsals meant anything could and did happen -- an unexpectedly exquisite "Silent Night" mixed in with muffed cues and a tipsy ensemble. Even after KCET began television coverage in 1965, the staging was modest, often consisting of act after act shuttled before the same backdrop.

"The spirit was wonderful, but production-wise it probably had more in common with a marathon than a theatrical event," says Laura Zucker, executive director of the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, which produces the program. "You weren't sure who was going to show up. The camera never quite knew where to go. The producer at KCET likened it to filming a hockey match."

Today, the celebration is tighter (six hours), more telegenic and better reflects the quality and diversity of L.A. culture. This week's show will include more than 1,000 performers and a mix of street dancing, carols, Charles Phoenix mini-documentaries, klezmer music and mariachis -- as well as "interactive opportunities" such as a singalong and tweets from the seats. Among the hosts will be singer Pat Boone, "Heroes" star James Kyson Lee and character actor Fred Willard.

Things started to change in the early '90s, after the arrival of Zucker, a former theater producer. "I could see there was a beautiful core and big heart," she says. "It just needed some producing savvy."

The combined budget for the stage show, KCET broadcast and PBS special is about \$900,000, says Zucker, with much of the money going to television production and labor costs. Financing comes from cable franchise fees and the county general fund.

The rocky economy prompted the county to decide to trim this year's celebration to three hours. In October, however, supervisors approved funding to return the length to six for the 50th anniversary.

"It's important that we were able to restore it," says Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, who made a commitment to Hahn to continue the tradition after Hahn retired in 1992. "The show acquaints people with the Music Center and our arts community. It just brings a good feeling -- like when the Olympics were here -- of brotherhood and sisterhood."

During the program, which runs from 3 to 9 p.m., about 10,000 people are expected to flow through the Pavilion, which seats about 2,800 for this event, or watch on a JumboTron on the center's plaza. The show will be aired on KCET and KPFK-FM (90.7) and streamed at kcet.org. Since 2002, PBS has presented an hour of highlights that last year was carried on 235 stations.

Hahn came up with the idea for a free concert in the 1950s. When civic leader Dorothy Chandler asked him to support her bid to build an arts complex downtown, he agreed -- as long as it would open its doors to the public every Christmas Eve. Hahn held the first celebration at the Los Angeles Sports Arena in 1959 and the next few in the supervisors' hearing room. The show moved to the newly completed Pavilion in 1964.

L.A. City Councilwoman Janice Hahn says her father and his chief deputy used to be the main talent scouts. "They programmed all 12 hours," she says. "Church groups. Bands. People who wouldn't get the chance otherwise got their 15 minutes of fame."

Having so many neophytes onstage led to "a lot of oopses," says Chris Christel, the Music Center's production director, who has worked on the celebrations since 1988. A five-piece combo might pop up at twice the size. Some performers got so nervous they became ill. Others steadied themselves with a few drinks.

After Zucker joined the commission in 1992, production values were sharpened and ad hoc cast selections replaced by aggressive outreach and a competitive application process. Amateurs

remain the heart of each lineup; however, professional ensembles such as the Los Angeles Master Chorale are now included too.

"We also try to push the envelope a little," says Zucker, although she admits not all of her experiments have worked. "I still need to do justice to the Bob Baker Marionettes," she says, noting her attempt to stage one of the puppets' black-light numbers resulted in "five minutes of total blackness."

A year after Zucker arrived, a recession forced the commission to slash the holiday celebration to three hours. The length has since been kept at six. "That big cut allowed us to rethink everything and approach it like a TV special," she says. Among the most significant improvements was the decision to hold rehearsals.

"Each year, things got better and better," says Joyce Campbell, KCET vice president of education and children's programming and a past producer of the show. Eight years ago, the station decided to turn over all production responsibilities to the commission and Kenneth Shapiro, who has produced and directed celebrations for KCET and his own company.

"Even today -- particularly in this economy -- events like this are meaningful to people," says Janice Hahn. "On Christmas Eve, no matter what your situation is, you can walk in and sit in one of those plush seats and listen to music and have a sense of whatever the holiday means to you."

As thoughts turn to the 51st celebration, money remains on people's minds. "When we develop the 2010-2011 budget," says Antonovich, "we will ensure the 2010 program will be comparable to the 2009."

Zucker is on the lookout for new acts and sponsors -- supervisors having requested the commission seek additional sources of funding. "The arts always survive, especially in tough times, because we need them in a chaotic, difficult world," she says. "We'll do everything we can to make sure we're back celebrating the things that matter together for the next 50 years."