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March 8th, 2010 | By Tom Strini

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The singing, dancing ushers and usherettes of the Grauman's Chinese Theater, gather on the steps to celebrate the glories of the silver screen before the Los Angeles movie palace opens.

That's the *Day in Hollywood* part of *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine*, which the **Skylight Opera Theatre** will open Friday.

The *Ukraine* part is the movie that's playing in the theater that night; the ushers and usherettes are magically transform into the actors on the screen. Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight; writer **Dick Vosburgh and Frank Lazarus**, who put the show together in 1980, invented a Marx Brothers farce set in Ukraine and based on **Chekhov's** *The Bear*. (Norman Moses and Ray Jivoff, the Skylight's long-time go-to Groucho and Harpo, are back again, with Benjamin Howes as Chico.) The music is a mix of movie songs from the 1930s (*Ain't We Got Fun*, *Too Marvelous*, *Good Ship Lollipop* and more) and such Vosburgh/Lazarus material as *Doin' the Production Code* and *Samovar the Lawyer*.



The Skylight's Harpo, Chico and Groucho – Ray Jivoff, Benjamin Howes and Norman Moses – clowning during a PR shoot at the Oriental Theater.

That's the show; now, about those hats:

Molly Rhode and Chase Stoeger, married about 11 months, are both in the cast. Like all nine players in the show, they share their real names with their characters in the first half and more or less play themselves: charming, bright young people with talent and a love for show business. They got to know each other as cast members in *Cabaret* at the Skylight in 2004.



Chase Stoeger

Skylight patrons know Stoeger well, and not just from his work on the stage. This season, he has volunteered to run the little boutique tucked into a corner of the Broadway Theatre Center. Everything he sells is made by someone connected with the company in some way. They have a consignment agreement, so the Skylight has no upfront costs to buy tchotchkes and hope they sell. Instead, the company collects a cut and the maker keeps the rest.

Crocheted caps, in a variety of sizes, colors and styles, are among their best sellers. Stoeger figures they've sold at least 500 of them at the Skylight last season and so far this season. He or Rhode made every one by hand. They cost from \$20

to \$40, depending on the style. Their most popular, a sort of cloche with a crocheted flower attached, came directly from a Skylight production.

"I was sitting in the audience and Alicia (Berneche) came out in this adorable felt cloche with a pink rose on it," Rhode said. "As I listened to her sing her aria about her little hat, I kept thinking: I can make that! I made a crocheted version of it and brought in three of them. They sold right away."

Rohde, 32, taught herself to crochet years ago, when she was an intern at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

"You have a lot of downtime at rehearsal when you have a small part," she said. "I hate to feel idle. I couldn't read a book and still know what was going on around me. I saw another actress crocheting and thought, well, that looks productive. You can do it and be utterly present to everything around you. So I went to the library and got some books on crocheting and got started."



The Mimi hat

She got Stoeger started after he asked her to make a blanket for his soon-to-be-born nephew. Rhode told him to make it himself. He did, and he was hooked. Stoeger website is [realmenCrochet](#).

"Once he learned, there was no stopping him," Rhode said. "He's faster than I am. But he has a crocheting injury (thumb tendonitis) right now, from the Christmas rush."

"I tried knitting, but crocheting is more my style," he said, with a deadpan delivery that might come in handy in *A Night in the Ukraine*.

The hats have become a cottage industry for them. They're always experimenting with new styles and colors

and taking custom orders. When Rhode worked at the Utah Shakespeare Festival, she signed up their boutique. The couple are regular performers at the American Folklore Theater, in Door County, and sold over 500 hundred hats there last summer.

"We made an open-weave design," Rhode said, "for summer."

"We also made a Packer model for an actor to wear on stage in *Guys on Ice*," Stoeger said.

Taking a cue from the success of the *Boheme* cloche, they've started asking costume designers to let them make hats if the show calls for them. The idea is you see it on stage, then buy it as a practical souvenir on the way out the door.

In this show, Rhode is busy singing and dancing in Act 1. In Act 2, she's Masha, a servant girl. In theater, servants are the leisure class. But she won't let her time waiting go to waste.

"I'm sure I'll make at least one hat per night," she said. "I can watch the play from the wings and do it."

A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine opens at 7:30 p.m. Friday. Full-run times and dates: 2 p.m.: March 14, 17, 21, 27, 28 and April 4 (Easter Sunday); 7:30 p.m.: March 12-13, 17-21, 24-27, 31 and April 1-3. Tickets are \$22-\$64, depending on seat and performance time. All show are in the Cabot Theatre of the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway, in the Third Ward. For tickets and further information, call the BTC box office, 414-291-7800, or visit the [Skylight website](#).

Leave a comment on this story and you could win a pair of tickets to see "A Day in Hollywood /A Night in the Ukraine" at the Skylight Opera Theater!

Cast: Ben George, Carol Greif, Benjamin Howes, Ray Jivoff, Jennifer Kiel, Norman Moses, Melinda Pfundstein, Molly Rhode, Chase Stoeger.

Credits: Costume designer, Shima Orans; lighting designer, Holly Blomquist; music director, James Valcq; set designer, Rick Rasmussen; sound designer, Gary Ellis; director, Pam Kriger; stage manager, Jessica Berlin Krivsky; ass't stage manager, Lillian Tillson.



Actors Chase and Molly, with the tools of their other trade.



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