

# Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, culture, books and more, edited by Heather Zimmerman

## Thrills and chills

Musical comedy whodunit about the scandalous sex lives of seniors premieres in Palo Alto

By Ashwini Gangal

When a play is called “Happy Pleasant Valley: A Senior Sex Scandal Murder Mystery Musical,” one is entertained long before the show begins.

The musical comedy, directed by Jeffrey Lo, will have its world premiere at TheatreWorks Silicon Valley. The show opens March 8 and runs through March 30 at the Lucie Stern Theatre, Palo Alto. It is co-produced by Walnut Creek-based Center Repertory Co., where it will be staged this summer.

Happy Pleasant Valley is the name of the senior community where the characters in the play live. While primarily a light-hearted drama, it does have emotional depth, Min Kahng, playwright, lyricist and composer, told the Weekly in an interview.

The title, admits Kahng, is “intentionally redundant” and the subtitle, “intentionally blatant.” In combination though, the name has a purpose beyond creating intriguing and arousing curiosity. “It’s much more than just that,” he said.

For one, it’s an allusion to the metaphoric “valley” between June, a Korean-American grandmother played by Emily Kuroda, and Jade, her Gen Z granddaughter played by Sophie Oda. “They have their own trauma and history to work through,” he said. “It’s about family relationships and intergenerational dynamics.” (Also, the title can be acronymized to spell HPV, which is Kahng’s tongue-in-cheek allusion to a sexually transmitted disease.)

In spite of their differences, Jade teams up with June and her neighbors to solve a series of

murders in the senior community, uncovering a lot about the goings-on there in the process.

Kahng started creating this show at a TheatreWorks writers’ retreat in January 2019. During the development phase of the piece, he recalls speaking with Giovanna Sardelli, current artistic director of TheatreWorks, who was the company’s director of New Works at the time, about the receptiveness of the audience to an unusual theme like this. Sardelli, he said, encouraged him to “just go for it.”

The play, which was later turned into a commissioned piece, has been the focus of several workshops at TheatreWorks, and was also featured in the company’s 2023 New Works Festival. “TheatreWorks has been with this project through its entire development,” Kahng said.

For inspiration, Kahng drew on his early love for murder mysteries — he grew up on shows like “Murder, She Wrote,” cartoons like “Scooby-Doo,” and books like “Encyclopedia Brown” and “Sherlock Holmes” — and his more recent fascination with news articles about the rise of sexually transmitted diseases in senior living communities.

“As a writer I’m interested in the stories that aren’t told as much,” he said. Beyond the initial “shock value,” it is the “humanity” of the subject that interests Kahng. “It makes sense because, you can’t get pregnant, maybe your spouse has passed, and now you’re in this very college dorm-like environment where you have eligible partners down the hall from you. Why wouldn’t you explore and have fun?”

Ages of many cast members range from the late 50s to the

early 70s. Working with seniors, Kahng, said, involves coordinating with the director and choreographer to understand possible physical limitations and being mindful about the way actors’ voices might have evolved with age — “and yet, that’s not 100% true because we do have a couple of sopranos on the cast,” he said.

The maturity, insight and experience of senior actors aided the process in many ways. “Getting their perspectives on these characters has been so rich,” he said. “Especially when it comes to identity and sexuality and sex lives; one actor in particular shared that she appreciated and wanted more of this idea that it’s still awkward, it’s still human, it’s still imperfect past a certain age. Just to be careful of going too far into idealizing it.”

Part of Kahng’s diverse oeuvre is a play called “The Four Immigrants: An American Musical Manga,” which was produced by TheatreWorks in 2017. Though it has a “humorous aesthetic” in common with Kahng’s current work, that play was far more intense and research-heavy, he said.

“I needed to research Japanese immigration, cartoon history, early 20th-century history and immigration history,” he said. “It took a lot of my energy and emotion.”

Which is why, this time around, he was happy to explore a lighter, more fun subject, like the sex lives of seniors set against the backdrop of a murder mystery. “It’s a celebration ... it’s been a joy to work on,” said Kahng, hoping the play appeals to a wide spectrum of theater-goers, from people who like musicals to those who enjoy mysteries to those who are relatively new to the world of theater.



Courtesy Reed Flores

Top to bottom: Dean (Ezra Reaves), Vicki (Lucinda Hitchcock Cone), June (Emily Kuroda), and Jade (Sophie Oda) try to solve murders in a senior living community in “Happy Pleasant Valley: A Senior Sex Scandal Murder Mystery Musical.”

“And to those for whom the identity representation — queer representation, Asian American representation or senior representation — matters,” he said. ■

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“Happy Pleasant Valley” runs through March 30 at Lucie Stern Theatre, 1305 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto. Tickets are \$34-\$115. For information visit [theatreworks.org](http://theatreworks.org).