



EAST COUNTY

Kids hope to do one last musical on this East County stage. The owners want them out.



Eleven-year-old Amani Solorio, center, performs with other students in the musical "Junie B. Jones," produced by Young Actors' Theatre at the Encore! Theatre in Spring Valley in May 2023. (Alexi Ayer / Young Actors' Theatre)

Young Actors' Theatre is simultaneously facing eviction, rehearsing for a final show in Spring Valley and looking for a new home

BY BLAKE NELSON | STAFF REPORTER

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Antony Sanchez's mom had two options.

She was working overtime as a computer technician and needed someone to watch her teenage son. Soccer was a possibility. But she'd also spotted a flyer for a theater camp near their El Cajon home.

Sanchez had never performed in public. But the camp promised free lunch, so his mom dropped him off at Young Actors' Theatre.

Years later, Sanchez now has a lead role on an international tour of "West Side Story."

"If it wasn't for Young Actors' Theatre, I wouldn't be where I am today," said the 31-year-old. "I could explore and make mistakes and try things."

"I feel like there was no other place like that in San Diego," Sanchez said.

While Young Actors' Theatre, known as YAT, is still going strong, the company's immediate future has become more uncertain since its leaders learned they were being kicked out of their longtime stage.

The eviction sets up a possible legal fight as YAT works to simultaneously finish its last show in Spring Valley and find a new home.

In interviews, company officials, parents and former students said the East County institution was a crucial part of the region's arts scene, especially after a rough few years for performers everywhere.

Christian Youth Theater shuttered multiple locations amid [a lawsuit](#) and [criminal charges](#) stemming from allegations of sexual abuse. The San Diego Opera recently [canceled the last production](#) of its season because of low ticket sales and increased

expenses, while The San Diego Repertory Theatre closed down after nearly half a century, millions of dollars in debt.

The pandemic certainly didn't help, and companies are now reducing both the quantity and scale of their productions.

It's unclear why YAT is being asked to leave Encore! Theatre, off Campo Road in Spring Valley, where the company's spent the past 15 years.

YAT was told in March they had 30 days to vacate, according to Superior Court records. That was right as kids were preparing for "Junie B. Jones," a musical based on a book series.

The show did go on, and the owners sued May 8, shortly before opening night.

The complaint is now working its way through the court system. While public documents say little about what negotiations may have looked like behind the scenes, YAT wrote in a legal filing that it tried to pay rent in April but was rebuffed, and the company's founder, Jean Isaac, said they had always paid what was owed.

The space is owned by the Onie O. Lively and John S. L. Trust. Public records show the building has been in the Lively family since at least 2000.

The trust's main contact is listed as Lively Construction. Messages left with that organization — asking how YAT was as a tenant, the reason for the eviction and the owners' plans for the space — were not returned.

The attorney who filed the complaint also did not respond to requests for comment.

Their silence leaves a key question unanswered: Will the dispute affect "Newsies," the company's next production?

The show has already been cast, and tickets are on sale for a summer run at Encore!

Isaac, the founder, declined to comment specifically on “Newsies,” but she said the situation in general had been difficult for the YAT community.

“The inability to plan for our season coming up has been a challenge,” she said.

Isaac grew up performing in a now-defunct theater company in El Cajon.

She was a middle child and didn’t consider herself particularly assertive. Then she was cast as Lucy in “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” and found herself wrapping four fingers into a fist to threaten her on-stage brother.

I would never do this in real life, she thought. But what a rush to do it before a crowd!

Isaac launched YAT more than two decades ago.

The company remains smaller than groups like San Diego Junior Theatre, allowing YAT to rarely cut anyone who auditions, Isaac said.

It’s still grown beyond what she originally pictured.

Running classes, camps and multiple shows a year can annually cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, tax records show. While the company took a financial hit during the shutdown, Isaac said they were out of the red.

YAT became a nonprofit in 2004. Isaac estimated the company has produced more than 100 shows in multiple locations that featured more than 1,000 children.

One was Isabella Lenhoff, who grew up in Santee.

Her sisters were soccer stars, yet anytime their parents stuck Lenhoff on a field she ended up picking flowers.

The family decided to try YAT. For Lenhoff's first show, she donned a pinstriped blazer and rainbow eyelashes to play an Ozian in "The Wizard of Oz."

Stepping into her first spotlight, Lenhoff thought, "I can do this."

Today, the 28-year-old is a senior marketing manager with Viasat, the satellite and technology firm in Carlsbad. Lenhoff drew a straight line from her time on stage to the presentations she gives in boardrooms.

"To sound eloquent, to sound confident is such an important skill that I learned in theater," she said.

Parents volunteer a significant amount of time to make the shows happen. The original stage in Encore! was hand built by several people, including self-described "YAT dad" John Kolb.

He liked that lead roles were regularly shared between a range of kids. Hanging in the Kolb home are photos of his daughter performing in both big parts (JoJo in "Seussical") and small (a fork).

"To lose a community theater is just criminal," he said.

Parents were told in April about the loss of the Spring Valley stage.

"While change can be hard, and we have loved our current theatre space, we are excited for this opportunity to find a new place," Kristina Petrea, the company's executive director, wrote in a mass email.

YAT has since made a public announcement on social media and launched a fundraiser. Locating a suitable stage is only part of the puzzle: Leaders also need ample parking, the right zoning and somewhere that's not too out of the way.

"In the meantime, please know that our current productions will continue on schedule," Petrea wrote.

"Newsies" is set to begin July 6.

If all goes well, kids will close out their time in Encore! by performing a musical about children struggling to get by. Among the show's hits is the song "Seize the Day:"

Now is the time to seize the day

Stare down the odds and seize the day

Minute by minute, that's how you win it

We will find a way

Staff writers Teri Figueroa, Phillip Molnar and Alex Riggins and Editor Pam Kragen contributed to this report.



Blake Nelson