

# DANCING INTO GOLDEN AGE

FOR 50 YEARS 'FOLLIES' PERFORMERS HAVE BEEN KICKING UP THEIR HEELS

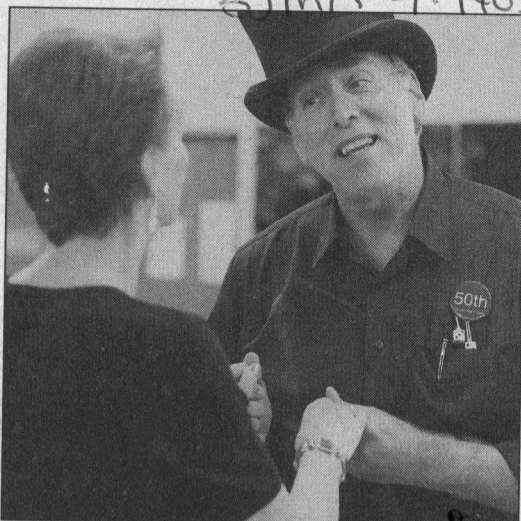
Events By Mark de la Viña  
Mercury News

When the retirement-age hoofers and crooners of the "Santa Cruz Follies" call this stage of their lives the golden years, they truly mean it.

The 35 performers starring in the musical revue for the AARP set are celebrating the troupe's golden anniversary with five performances today through Saturday at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium.

More than just a song-and-dance fest that keeps seniors busy, "Follies" has developed into a regional cultural phenomenon since its inception in 1955. Like similar groups in Southern California and Florida, "Follies" draws fans eager to see this lively example of performers over 50 demonstrating that their best years are not necessarily behind them. Money raised by the annual showcase goes to the Market Street Senior Center, where "Follies" performers have rehearsed since June.

With marketing aimed at senior groups, the "bread and butter" of "Follies" are busloads of retirees who attend the annual revue, says Kris Wheeler, music director and costume director. At



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Jim Idleman, right, rehearses a song with Kris Wheeler for the "Santa Cruz Follies" show.

## SANTA CRUZ FOLLIES

**Where:** Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St.

**When:** 1 p.m. today through Saturday, 7:30 p.m. Friday

**Tickets:** \$15; (831) 423-6640, (831) 420-5260, or go to [www.baymoon.com/~follies/follies.html](http://www.baymoon.com/~follies/follies.html)

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Bari Miller, left, leads cast members in rehearsal for a number in the "Santa Cruz Follies" performances that begin today at Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium. It's the revue's 50th year.

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## FOLLIES | Santa Cruz performers are glorying in their golden years

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least 75 motor coaches from as far as Nevada and Southern California are coming to this year's production.

"It's a tremendous community event," said Nancy Meyberg, of the Santa Cruz Arts Commission. "You can't pigeonhole older people because this group has so much energy and really puts on a great show. They've been here for so long that they've become as vital a part of the community as Santa Cruz Symphony, the Cabrillo Music Festival and Shakespeare Santa Cruz."

At a recent rehearsal at the senior center spry 86-year-old dancer Jeanne Gualco defied Father Time as she tapped her way through Cole Porter's "Anything Goes." Doris Banks, 76, a first-timer with the "Follies," relived her past performance glories by singing selections from "My Fair Lady."

Banks, who moved to Santa Cruz in 2003, lamented the lack of activities for seniors outside of Santa Cruz. But when she saw the "Follies"

shortly after arriving, she was so "blown away" that she decided to rekindle her amateur light opera performance career that began at 15 in her native Burnley, England.

"Back then, I was playing someone who was 40," she recalled between numbers at the rehearsal. "And today I'm playing a woman of 40. That's acting."

The revue's 41 songs draw from the '30s, '40s, '50s in part to appeal to audiences who grew up with the music. Furthering the golden anniversary theme of the show is a clutch of tunes that acknowledges that rock 'n' roll turns 50 this year.

The annual event is a year-long project for the performers who develop a close kinship through rehearsals. Many pitch in on everything from costume design to the development of the program.

Ivan Dodson, 68, helped make the "Purple People Eater" costume with his wife for the "Follies" version of the Sheb Woolley novelty hit from 1958. The retired musical instrument repairer with a han-

dlebar mustache also sings and dances in such numbers "Luck Be a Lady."

"I'm not a religious person," he says, "but if I were to choose one, I'd say this is it for me."

A month after the performances, director Bari Miller, 57, will begin planning next year's revue. Auditions are in March and rehearsals are in June.

More than a nostalgic jaunt through the music of their youth, "Follies" has become an affirming experience for performers whose many contemporaries believe their life has already ended, said Wheeler.

"When I turned 50, I was pretty resentful," said Wheeler, 64, a former community theater veteran rejuvenated by tap lessons that led to joining the "Follies" in 1993. "But when I got with this group, I looked around saw people in their 70s and 80s performing. And I said, 'Oh, gosh. Life has just begun.'"

Contact Mark de la Viña at [mdelavina@mercurynews.com](mailto:mdelavina@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5914.