**CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL THESPIANS**

**SPENDING THEIR SPRING BREAK IN SALEM**

SALEM, NY — The classic musical, *Li’l Abner,* opens Fort Salem Theater’s spring and summer seasons on Friday and Saturday, April 21 and 22, at 8 PM, performed by twenty-five high school students from Orange County, California.

Because a young performer can never get enough time onstage, these students from the Huntington Beach Academy for the Performing Arts have elected to spend a significant part of their spring vacation in Salem, as a part of a week-long program on the east coast, which will include taking in several Broadway shows. Billed as the California Musical Theater Ensemble, and sponsored by The Rose Center Theater in Westminster, California, the Salem production of *Li’l Abner,* the 1956 show based upon Al Capp’s famous comic strip, reprises the students’ very successful winter high school musical.

Directed by Tim Nelson and choreographed by Diane Makis, their musical theater and dance instructors in Huntington Beach, the troupe will be singing and dancing to tunes by Oscar-winning lyricist Johnny Mercer and composer Gene DePaul, in the show that won Tonys for its star, Edie Adams (the Muriel cigar lady) as Daisy Mae, and choreographer Michael Kidd.

With its catchy tunes and colorful characters, *Li’l Abner* purports to be a broad spoof of hillbillies from the fictional town of Dogpatch, USA. It is, in fact, a pointed satire on topics ranging from American politics (and incompetence in the United States federal government) to political correctness and gender stereotypes, written some sixty years ahead of its time.

Strip creator Al Capp, whose *Abner* introduced the terms “hogwash” and “double whammy” to the American lexicon, began his political life on the liberal left and turned radically to the right, becoming friends with and ally to Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew. According to a biographer, Capp “was angered by the activism on the college campuses across the United States. He had no patience for what he felt were privileged kids attending college on their parents' money, raising hell and showing disrespect toward all authority figures, talking like know-it-alls when they actually were very limited in experience…”

The Academy for the Performing Arts is a magnet school of the Huntington Beach Union High School District which aims to provide a creative education that cultivates in students the focus, dedication and collaboration necessary to achieve excellence in the arts. Many of the students trained by Makis and Nelson have achieved statewide and national recognition, and have entertained audiences in Salem over the past ten years. Several of them have gone on to perform on Broadway. Rumor has it that Nelson has invited several performers from the Salem Central School to round out his California cast.

Tim Nelson has a part-time residence on Beattie Hollow Road in Salem. He directs locally at Fort Salem, where, this June, he will mount the The Rose Center Theater production of his original show, *Rip Van Winkle: The Musical,* featuring a cast of professional adults. At Park Playhouse, in Albany, he will direct young people this summer in *The Music Man*.

The California Musical Theater Ensemble production of *Li’l Abner* plays for two evening performances at Fort Salem Theater, Friday, April 21, and Saturday, April 22, at 8 PM. Tickets are $20 for adults and seniors and $10 for any student still in high school or younger. For reservations or more information, call the theater box office at (518) 854-9200, or visit the theater’s website ([fortsalemtheater.com](http://fortsalemtheater.com)).