

# Act of Creation

Villa Montalvo's Elisbeth Challener reinvents the legendary South Bay landmark

By Sally Wing      Photography by Peter Doven

**D**RIVING UP THE SPECTACULAR WINDING ENTRANCE to Villa Montalvo, I'm prepared for a sedate tour of an historic estate. But the moment I step from my car and survey its dramatic hilltop grandeur, I'm caught up in a swirl of laughing school children pouring out of the Carriage House Theatre.

Percolating with an exuberance usually reserved for the latest video game, the very lively, very new millennium youngsters underscore Elisbeth Challener's idea that a National



Historic Register landmark can have a significant impact in the modern world. "They've just seen *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. Kids absolutely love that production," Challener laughs. "It's one of our many educational outreach programs. We definitely want this to be a kid-friendly place."

Challener has served as Villa Montalvo's executive director since 1989. After 11 years on the job, she maintains the same enthusiasm for her work as those children showed for the Saratoga arts enclave's theatrical production. And that contagious enthusiasm, she explains, is based on Montalvo's community-wide promotion of the arts.

# VILLA & MONTALVO

CALIFORNIA'S HISTORIC ESTATE FOR THE ARTS



Challener was drawn to an arts administration career by way of performance, and she knows how important early experiences are in shaping an appreciation for art. "I distinctly remember every single music and art teacher I had in my early school years," she says, and is particularly appreciative of one high school music teacher "who took all the main choruses and arias of an opera and dropped them down many keys so that we could sing them and experience them."

Challener's parents also instilled in her a passion for the arts, regularly taking her to performances and galleries when she was growing up in Princeton, New Jersey. She later studied voice and drama at the Boston Conservatory of Music and performed in local musical theater and light opera. However, her post-college experiences gradually merged her love of the act of creation with the "business" side of the art world. She headed the performing arts department at New Jersey's Purnell School, worked as an education outreach director for the Cleveland Playhouse, and later served as administrative director of the San Francisco Boys' Chorus.

But the Montalvo experience, Challener feels, is synchronism. I was "in exactly the right place at the right time," she says, pointing out that her tenure at Montalvo parallels Silicon Valley's rocketing expansion and fruition. "During the last 10 years, there has been an increased focus on the South Bay art scene as the population has grown. There is now much more support and interest and encouragement than there was formerly, and that has been reflected in Montalvo's growing pop-

ularity and expanding programs."

But that enhanced interest is not explained by population growth alone.

Challener sees a blossoming commitment to art as a natural outgrowth of the Silicon Valley lifestyle. "I believe that there is a direct correlation between the strenuous work-dominated lives led by so many in Silicon Valley and the growing need for Montalvo," she says. "This unique spot is a retreat and a respite from our hectic everyday work lives."

## WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

It's clear that as United States Senator James Phelan stood on Villa Montalvo's broad verandah in 1912, proudly surveying his exquisite 175 acres and a broad swath of the Santa Clara Valley beyond, he could hardly envision what changes the next 90 years would bring to his just-completed mansion and the sleepy orchard lands in the distance. But he was able to foresee and provide for the ongoing importance that art would play in our modern lives.

At the time of his death in 1930, Phelan specified in his will that Montalvo was to be maintained as a public park and a center dedicated to the development of music, art, architecture and literature.

The implementation of Phelan's wishes has become manifest via a unique three-part mission to "inspire a love of the arts in everyone." That mission encompasses presentation, creation and education—all in an extraordinary setting. In the pursuit of these goals, Villa Montalvo has gradually evolved into the largest arts organization in the



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South Bay with a budget of \$7 million.

Behind Elisbeth Challener's desk, there is a bold, red, city-issued warning sign hanging inconspicuously. In an otherwise serene office setting, it startles. "Danger: This building is deemed unsafe for human occupancy," it reads. Challener chooses to let the sign hang there as a reminder of the days following 1989's Loma Prieta earthquake, when Villa Montalvo sustained over a million dollars in damage. But the grand old lady recovered beautifully following a bit of cosmetic surgery.



"The sign's also a reminder," Challener adds, "that we never know what's ahead."

That truth came home to her again this fall when the nearby Mountain Winery shook things up in a different way by choosing not to renew its four-year collaboration with Villa Montalvo in producing about 50 concerts a year at the Mountain Winery site.

Challener quickly and optimistically points out that there will be no negative effect on the community. "In a way," she notes, "it will be better for patrons because we'll be bringing the same artists here to Montalvo. Instead of seating them in a 1750-seat theater, they'll be in a more intimate 1150-seat theater. And they will still be in a beautiful outdoor setting. Plus we are planning additional concerts in our Carriage House Theatre, and we'll be continuing to pioneer new performance places in the Greater Bay Area."

These new venues include Mission Church at Santa Clara University, which will showcase the Vienna Choir Boys in February. Outdoor perform-

ances are planned for Ironstone Vineyards in the Gold Country next year, and a second season of shows at a Los Gatos park is scheduled for next summer. The South Bay community can look forward to approximately 45 outdoor concerts during the upcoming season.

As for Montalvo itself, this transition period will present new challenges. Challener admits that the "concert season has been the engine that drives the



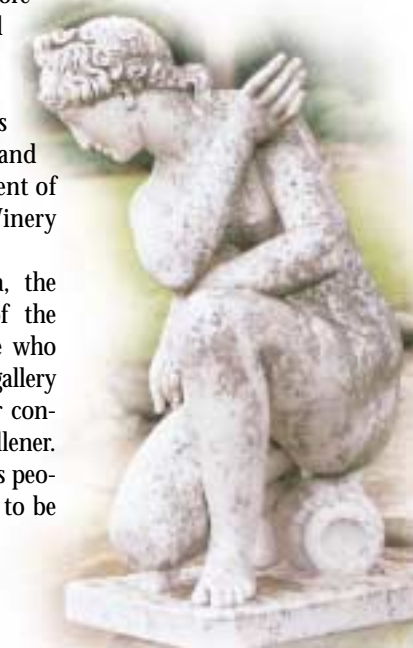
Montalvo train. We will now be doing more fundraising with individuals, corporations and foundations."

She is, however, buoyed by the dramatic increase in contributions that the villa has received from the Friends of Montalvo and other financial backers since the announcement of the bittersweet news of the Mountain Winery divorce last fall.

Located in the pavilion next to the villa, the Gallery at Montalvo is a second prong of the Montalvo Mission presentation phase. People who are not art aficionados often come upon the gallery quite by chance while visiting the grounds for concerts or hiking, and that's just fine with Challener. "We want the gallery to be a place that interests people who may not be gallery-goers. We want it to be accessible to everyone."

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The Gallery exhibits the work of contemporary California-based artists and focuses on innovative, interactive works. In addition, the public frequently is invited to workshops and discussions with artists at the Gallery.

#### MAGIC IN THE AIR

Challener suggests we walk down the hill to view the construction site and models of planned housing for Villa Montalvo's expanded Artist Residency program. "It's so exciting," she exclaims, "to see the progress." And, indeed, just walking past the rough, muddy beginnings makes one envious of the artists who will live together on the lovely, sloping hillside.

The arts center is raising \$6 million to build ten small cottages and a community center for visiting artists, tripling the space available in Montalvo's present residency program. Montalvo hopes to focus on fellowships for emerging artists with the stated goal of fostering "a place of personal inspiration and exploration in a community setting." The organization hopes to award monthly stipends of \$1,000 to each artist and to provide for a maximum stay of three months. Although it will not be required, participation in the local arts community will be encouraged and facilitated.

Challener says that the changes underway will elevate this program to one of the most significant in the country if not the world. Artists will be selected for the program by panels of experts appointed by the Montalvo staff and board. Even the initial design process in this endeavor has been a work of art.

Six teams of architects worked with artists as consultants to plan individual cottages, which are designed for the varying needs of writers, musical composers or visual artists. Writers' cottages facilitate contemplative interaction with nature, but composers' cottages will be built into hillsides and sound-proofed. Plans call for the new program to be in full swing by the fall of 2002.

The third prong of Montalvo's mission, educational outreach, is very close to Challener's heart. Clearly she loves the fact that this multi-faceted program touches the entire community. She wants students to have the kind of art experiences so instrumental in her own development. She enthusiastically describes the patient way that jazz great Wynton Marsalis coached a local high school jazz band and the appreciative response from the students involved. And, she marvels, "Mary Chapin Carpenter taught a Master's

Class to high school music students, giving them a chance to connect personally and learn from a phenomenally successful artist."

Each year, Montalvo provides art experiences for nearly 13,000 Santa Clara County students. Half of them come from lower income communities and some experience the arts for the first time thanks to the program. Students participate in gallery tours, art workshops and live performances. Because these programs are integrated with school curricula, they help fill an arts education void that exists in many post-Prop 13 school systems.



Challener is adamant in her assertion that art programs such as these are not "fluff" or "just for fun." She notes recent studies that demonstrate "the value of arts in teaching discipline, teamwork and creativity."

Students who come into contact with artists living and working at the villa see that there is indeed magic in the air, but they also come to understand that there is a great deal of effort and dedication involved in any successful artistic endeavor. This understanding can be applied to any goal in a student's future.

Hard work and dedication are certainly qualities with which Challener personally is well acquainted. She juggles a staggering array of programs with aplomb. But she is quick to deflect praise and is downright modest in her assessment of her own role in Villa Montalvo's growth.

"I'm not unique here," she says. "There is a whole array of volunteers, trustees, staff and Friends of Montalvo who share my intense passion for this special, beautifully unique place. It's a place that connects to you in a way that few others do. I consider it a privilege to be a part of its legacy."

Group efforts are grand things, but it never hurts when the woman in charge brings both love and competence to the project. This perfect marriage of business sense and artistic passion has a name: Elisbeth Challener. Maybe you've heard of her. ■

