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Engineering by day, musicals by night

By Melissa Heckscher Staff Writer

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The Aerospace Players rehearse a scene from Brigadoon which is being performed at El Camino College's Marsee Auditorium. The Aerospace Players is a performance troupe comprised of aerospace employees and Air Force Personnel. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

Being an aerospace engineer can't be easy. You know - there are rockets to build, satellites to develop, top-secret projects to oversee.

So what's such a stressed out 9-to-5er do to relax?

Sing.

Well, and dance.

At least, that's what members of the El Segundo-based Aerospace Players like to do to blow off that post-workday steam.

"I think other people find it surprising," said Chuck Gustafson, president of the Aerospace Players, a theater group founded by aerospace workers and Air Force personnel. "It can be funny when you tell people our goal is to take engineers and make them sing or dance."

But that's what they do. Beginning tonight and running through July 25, the Players

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Cathryn Starr, playing Fiona Maclaren, rehearses the song "Almost Like Being in Love" with the Aerospace Players from Brigadoon which is being performed at El Camino College's Marsee Auditorium. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

will present their latest musical, "Brigadoon," at the Armstrong Theater in Torrance.

Written in the 1940s by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe (the team behind other Broadway hits including "My Fair Lady" and "Camelot"), "Brigadoon" centers on a mysterious Scottish village that appears out of the mists only one day every 100 years.

When two American men stumble upon the village, one falls in love with a village woman and must decide - within the day - whether he will stay in Brigadoon or leave it, and her, forever.

"It's got some nice comic elements, drama, romance, and beautiful choral music," said Gustafson, who directs the show. "I thought it was a really good fit for our group because, with of all those

vocals, even the people who don't have big parts have a lot to do."

As if Gustafson doesn't have enough on his plate. An engineer who by day manages about 300 fellow engineers at the El Segundo-based Aerospace Corporation, he - like others in the group - spends three or four nights a week rehearsing with the Players.

"It really does get tight," said the 50-year-old Hermosa Beach resident, who has been with the Players since their inception in 1988. "People always ask me, 'When

do you eat? When do you sleep?' People are really dedicated."

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In all, about 80 men, women and children make up the group, which is funded by the Aerospace Corporation as well as through member dues. Being in the industry isn't a requirement for membership; some people are friends or children of aerospace



Matt Everett, playing Charlie Dalrymple, and the Aerospace Players rehearse a scene from Brigadoon which is being performed at El Camino College's Marsee Auditorium. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

employees.

Others, such as Mandy Juarez, just like being a part of the team.

"They're a really welcoming, fun group of people," said Juarez, a three-year veteran of the group who plays the supporting character Meg Brockie in "Brigadoon." "They're just people who have some serious, high-stress day jobs, and for whom this is a chance to let loose and have some fun. They're definitely a much more social group."

Juarez doesn't work in the aerospace industry; she's a behavior analyst with the Torrance Unified School District.

But after having done community theater for 19 years, Juarez said it was refreshing to work with a different sort of performance group.

"It's definitely a unique experience," she said. "For the Aerospace Players, this isn't their primary focus. It really is a creative outlet for them."

Anyone who tries out for the Aerospace Players makes the group. Of course, they don't necessarily score the leading roles.

"We have people who are complete novices," Gustafson said. "And, there are some performers who are quite capable. We have a lot of people who were double majors in math and music in

college."

That was the case for Stephen Cathers, a 25-year-old Aerospace Corporation computer programmer who plays Tommy Albright, the lead character in "Brigadoon."

A USC graduate, Cathers majored in computer science and minored in musical theater.

He said he likes putting his "real job" first.

"I'm quite happy to do musical theater as a hobby," he said. "That way I can make engineering money, not struggling actor money."



The Aerospace Players rehearse a scene from Brigadoon which is being performed at El Camino College's Marsee Auditorium. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

Sure, not all the Players have a background in musical theater, but Cathers said the group puts on as good a show as any.

"My hope is that we're going to put on a show that's going to be entertaining and high quality," Cathers said. "Hopefully, you won't necessarily know by the performance that it's all engineers."

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Brigadoon

When: Opens tonight and plays at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 7 p.m. Thursday and Sunday through July 25.

Where: Armstrong Theater, Torrance Cultural Arts Center, 3330 Civic Center Drive.

Tickets: \$20; \$15 seniors, children 12 and under, and students with I.D.; call 310-781-7171.

Information: To find out more about the Aerospace Players, go to www.aeaclubs.org/theater.


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