

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

WEEK OF FEBRUARY 23-MARCH 1, 2022 WWW.FLORIDAWEEKLY.COM | SECTION B





## 85<sup>TH</sup> SHELL FESTIVAL

TAKES OVER SANIBEL

**BY SANDRA YEYATI**  
Special to Florida Weekly

**T**HOUSANDS OF PARTICIPANTS AND VISITORS FROM around the United States are expected at the 85th Sanibel Shell Festival, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 3-5, on Sanibel Island. This collaboration between the Sanibel-Captiva Shell Club and the Sanibel Community Association is the longest-running and most prestigious event of its kind in the

SEE SHELL , B4 ►

**AT TOP:** The Scientific Room at the San-Cap Shell Club's judged Shell Show inside the Community House.

COURTESY PHOTOS

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**Music**  
Celtic Woman brings fresh new show to Fort Myers. **B12 ►**



**More music**  
MercyMe on tour to promote new album, "Inhale/Exhale." **B18 ►**



**Notables in the Arts**  
Get to know local artist Sandy Mendoza. **B20 ►**

## "Avenue Q" musical kind of a Sesame Street for adults

**BY SANDRA YEYATI**  
Special to Florida Weekly

Entertaining audiences with humor and bouncy tunes, the Southwest Florida premiere of the Tony award-winning musical "Avenue Q" is coming to The Laboratory Theater of Florida (The Lab) from Feb. 25 through March 27. Expect riotous laughter as complex adult themes are debated by puppets resembling Sesame Street Muppets. With songs like "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist," "The Internet is for Porn" and "If You Were

Gay," this show is decidedly not for young children, despite the adorable, hand-operated characters.

"There is puppet nudity," Artistic Director Annette Trossbach says with a chuckle. "It has adult language and sexual situations with important life lessons, such as how not to be a racist, why to be open-minded with LGBTQ issues and how to be a good neighbor and care for others. This is meant to be a fun show, and it also sparks conver-



COURTESY PHOTO  
From left, Mrs. T (Tracy Weaver), Gary Coleman (Robert Barner), Kate Monster (Ruthgena Faraco) and Christmas Eve (Liz Mora).

SEE AVENUE Q, B23 ►



**Calendar**  
Enjoy a full list of things to do around town this week. **B6-9 ►**



“Each exhibit tells a story. There may be exhibits on how mollusks grow over time, how they reproduce or feed and take care of themselves. I find the most interesting entries are the ones that show diversity — the variety of sizes and colors — because shells are all unique and special, and even if it’s the same family of mollusk, they can look very different from each other.”

— Linda Friedrich, SCSC publicity chair

# SHELL

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country, featuring scientific and artistic competitions and exhibits, author appearances, live mollusk demonstrations and shopping opportunities.

For enthusiasts, the main attraction is inside the Sanibel Community House, where the SCSC holds its world-renowned competitions. Admission to this portion of the festival is a suggested \$5 donation to fund education and research in the fields of conchology and malacology, as well as for conservation and water quality projects, primarily in Southwest Florida. Since 1997, the SCSC has donated more than \$380,000 in grants.

More than 200 participants in two divisions and 90 different categories will vie for ribbons and trophies this year, and well over 600 linear feet of competitive exhibits will be onsite, offering much to see and learn. In the Scientific Division, competitors demonstrate the variety, ingenuity and beauty of shells found across the globe, with insights into the lives and behaviors of mollusks — the sea creatures that create their own exoskeletal homes. Presentations range in size and scope from a single shell to 40-foot displays.

“Each exhibit tells a story,” says SCSC Publicity Chair Linda Friedrich. “There may be exhibits on how mollusks grow over time, how they reproduce or feed and take care of themselves. I find the most interesting entries are the ones that show diversity — the variety of sizes and colors — because shells are all unique and special, and even if it’s the same family of mollusk, they can look very different from each other.”

Inspired by nature’s aesthetics, competitors in the Artistic Division create an astonishing array of art with carapaces discovered on worldwide shorelines. Popular entries include vivid and lifelike floral bouquets made entirely out of shells, as well as sailors’ valentines, which are heart-shaped, shell-encrusted motifs often encased in wooden boxes — a traditional art form started



COURTESY PHOTOS

Sanibel Community House’s raw shell sales tent outside on the festival grounds.

by seamen on months-long voyages who wanted to express their devotion to sweethearts back home. “The intricacy and originality of the art exhibits is incredible,” says Ms. Friedrich. “The patience that people have to do this type of work and their creativity is just amazing.”

Apart from the competitions, two artists have been invited to display their one-of-a-kind creations. Wire-bending jeweler Todd Allen’s Mermaid Crown is back in the spotlight by popular demand after its first showing during

the 2020 Shell Festival. Made of 14-karat gold and platinum, and encrusted with diamonds, sapphires, green tourmalines and gold-covered shells, this dazzling piece fit for a mermaid princess will be shown in a glass case under lock and key because of its precious value.

Fast becoming a celebrated shell artist in the local scene, Ginny Dickin-son was invited to create a special piece for this show to be auctioned for charity later this year. Appropriately named “In My Heart of Hearts,” this immense showpiece is a 6-foot-tall

fiberglass heart exquisitely embellished with thousands of shells arranged in heart shapes and mounted on a welded metal base. Visitors will get an up-close viewing of this labor of love.

On the festival grounds outside, the SCA hosts free, tented activities, as well as food and beverages for purchase. Its Shell Tent offers thousands of shells and fossils for sale, as well as arts and crafts by the Sanibel Shell Crafters, including jewelry, decorative mirrors, flower arrangements and adorable animals, all embellished and made out of shells. Proceeds from these sales go toward maintaining the Sanibel Community House.

The Author’s Table hosts local published writers selling autographed copies of their shell- and Sanibel-themed works, including Jane Kirschner’s children’s storybook “Annabel from Sanibel”; Amanda Collette’s photographic journal “My Way of Shelling”; Harlan Wittkopf’s bestsellers “The Sanibel Kaleidoscope” and “Beach Treasures of the Gulf Coast,” and kids’ book “Alphie Finds the Seashell Alphabet”; Jennifer Lonoff Schiff’s mysteries “A Shell of a Problem,” “Shell Shocked” and “For Whom the Shell Tolls”; Karen Bartlett’s “Mostly Kids’ Guide to Sanibel and Captiva Islands”; Megan McCormick’s Sanibel-based young adult novel “Legacy”; James Usavage’s novellas “On these Shores,” “A Bottle that Washed Ashore” and “Of Songs and Dreams and Fields of Flowers”; and Alice Cypress’ children’s books “Scuba Zak Meets Thaddeus the Barracuda,” “Scuba Zak Searches for Thaddeus” and “Sophia the Nurse Shark.”

The Live Tank area involves a series of aquariums containing living mollusks provided by the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum. Sanibel Elementary School children are on hand to answer questions and share their knowledge on these fascinating sea creatures. “If you’ve never seen them crawling around, they’re pretty cool,” Ms. Friedrich says. “You get to see what the animals look like, how they move—sometimes they slide under the sand, and you can see little trails behind them. Sometimes you can see one eating another one, because they are very often cannibals. If you’ve never held one, that’s pretty cool, too, to see and feel them try to squirm out of your hand and back into the water on the beach.”

“The Gulf of Mexico has wonderful treasures that it spews up onto the beach like surprise gifts,” Ms. Friedrich says. “If you find something fabulous to take home with you, then you’re pretty lucky, and this festival is a great way to celebrate our love for these beautiful creatures.”

Outside activities and parking are free. Masks are recommended on festival grounds and required inside the building. The Sanibel Community House is located at 2173 Periwinkle Way, on Sanibel Island. For more information, call 239-472-2155 or visit [www.sanibellshellclub.com](http://www.sanibellshellclub.com). ■

## In the KNOW

### 85th Sanibel Shell Festival

- » **When:** 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. March 3-5
- » **Where:** Sanibel Community House, 2173 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel Island
- » **Information:** 239-472-2155 or [www.sanibellshellclub.com](http://www.sanibellshellclub.com)



Shell creations and floral artistry for sale by the Community House’s talented shellcrafters.



“We’re pretty excited to be able to produce edgy and cutting-edge theater. Theater was designed to make you think. You should have fun, yes. It should be an enjoyable evening, but you should be thinking about what you just experienced after you leave the room, and that’s what we try and do. ‘Avenue Q’ prompts stimulating conversations in an easily digestible way, and we like that.”

— Paula Sisk, marketing and education director

# AVENUE Q

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sation and thought. All of those serious topics go down with a spoonful of sugar when there are very hilarious puppets involved.”

The story centers on Princeton who recently graduated college with an English degree and can’t find a job. All he can afford is a low-rent apartment on Avenue Q, in Alphabet City, where he meets the other down-and-out characters — most of the puppets like Princeton, animated and voiced by actors visible on stage. Peering from a second-level window is Trekkie Monster, the show’s version of the Cookie Monster. Among the human characters is a portrayal of Gary Coleman from the 1990s television show “Different Strokes.” Having lost all his TV money, he’s the superintendent of the grimy brownstones in this beleaguered neighborhood.

“I saw ‘Avenue Q’ six or seven years ago at the New World Stages in Manhattan, and I found that in the first five minutes I stopped watching the actors and started watching the puppets,” Ms. Trossbach explains, adding that The Lab rented the beautifully crafted puppets directly from Broadway. To enhance the illusion, the puppet-wielding actors wear dark clothing, in contrast to the colorful costumes of the human characters in the production.

Ms. Trossbach is delighted with the caliber and dedication of the local cast, helmed by Carmen Crussard, a frequent director and actor at The Lab who also runs the theater programs at Cypress Lakes High School Center for the Arts and the Alliance for the Arts. “If ‘Avenue Q’ were a book, it would be called ‘Adulthood for Dummies,’” says Ms. Crussard. “I think this show is hilarious because we see so much of ourselves in these characters. Sure, we all deal with all kinds of problems as adults, but as long as we can still laugh at ourselves, I think we will all be okay, even if we still haven’t found our purpose.”



COURTESY PHOTOS

Kate Monster (Ruthgena Faraco) is ready for “Avenue Q” at The Lab!

The two leads are played by veteran performers at The Lab. Ruthgena Faraco, who recently played Celie in “The Color Purple,” is Kate Monster. Playing Princeton is Steven Michael Kennedy, who starred in the national premiere of “Sex Tips for Straight

Women from a Gay Man.” After a triumphant turn as musical director for “The Color Purple,” Earl Sparrow returns in the same capacity. “The rehearsals are an absolute scream,” Ms. Trossbach says, adding that the actors are having a blast despite sore wrists and tendons in their forearms from handling the puppets.

“Anyone who watched ‘Sesame Street’ as a kid is going to love this twist,” Ms. Trossbach says of the 2004 Tony award winner for best book, best score and best musical. “‘Avenue Q’ is perfect for our Southwest Florida audience. I look for shows like this that start conversations, have a good community outreach element and allow us to consciously be more representative of our diverse community.”

“We’re pretty excited to be able to produce edgy and cutting-edge theater,” says Marketing and Education Director Paula Sisk. “Theater was designed to make you think. You should have fun, yes. It should be an enjoyable evening, but you should be thinking about what you just experienced after you leave the room, and that’s what we try and do. ‘Avenue Q’ prompts stimulating conversations in an easily digestible way, and we like that.”

“Avenue Q” runs from Feb. 25 to March 27 with Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening performances at 8 p.m. and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.

Tickets are \$37, with discounted pricing for students, preview performances and every Thursday night show. Seating is socially distant, and masks are required inside the theater.

The Laboratory Theater of Florida is located at 1634 Woodford Avenue, in Fort Myers. For more information or to purchase tickets, call the box office at 239-218-0481 or visit [www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com](http://www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com). ■



## In the KNOW

### “Avenue Q”

» **When:** Feb. 25 through March 27

» **Where:** The Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Ave., Fort Myers

» **Information:** 239-218-0481 or [www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com](http://www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com)



Princeton (Steven Michael Kennedy) is excited for the SWFL premiere of “Avenue Q” opening on Feb. 25 at The Lab.