

Welcome to Night Court

By Benjamin K. Sanchez

As the lights went down and the curtains opened, the audience was instantly transported back to the Wild West. The show was in the Hobby Center—a perfect venue considering the stunning set and costumes and fantastic music. The audience was treated to a wonderful show in Houston’s entertainment district, and that was only the final dress rehearsal!

This may sound like any night in Houston’s downtown entertainment district, but that was not the case, for the performers on stage were all lawyers, as were most of the people behind the scenes. Normally these people do their hooting and hollering during the day a few blocks away at the local courthouses or in offices and conference rooms around Houston. So, why were they causing such a ruckus on stage at the Hobby Center’s Zilkha Hall on a weeknight?

Welcome to the world of the Houston Bar Association’s Night Court. This group produces the annual all-lawyer musical comedy known as Night Court, bringing together judges and lawyers of all practice areas to satirize current events, celebrities and entertainment genres, as well as the legal profession. The annual musical is a full-blown production. The lawyers and judges do not just dance and sing. They also help build the sets, create the costumes and play the music. The committee’s goal is not only to entertain, as the proceeds benefit the Houston Bar Foundation and other charitable causes. Night Court 2006 raised over \$36,000 in proceeds, which were distributed to the Houston Bar Foundation, Harris County STAR Family Intervention Court Program, Harris County Criminal District Court’s STAR Drug Program and Texas Children Hospital’s Pediatric Heart Center.

Each year the musical has a different theme. In 2006, the show was entitled “The Law of the West.” Cowboys, cowgirls, lawmen and outlaws provided all the giddy up and yeehaw you could want. More than 50 lawyers appeared on stage, including eight sitting judges. Recent themes have included “The Law of the Jungle” (2003), “The Law in Black and White” (2004), and “Legal Superheroes” (2005). The 2007 production will be entitled “Draculaw.”

Night Court was not always as popular as it is today. In the early days, Debra Baker recalls that the production had too few people. Yet, in recent years, they have had to turn away lawyers wanting to be a part of the production. Baker, an environmental lawyer and founding partner of Connelly · Baker · Maston · Wotring · Jackson LLP, co-produces and co-writes Night Court, along with Tim Weltin, a plaintiff’s attorney and founder of Weltin Law Firm, PLLC. Both are also veteran Night Court performers. Baker has been affiliated with the annual musical in a variety of ways since the beginning, 17 years ago.

In the early years, Night Court was a series of skits. The musical was held at Rice University’s Hamman Hall for 13 years before moving to its current accommodations,

the Hobby Center's Zilkha Hall. Night Court is now a full-fledged production that includes an engaging plot line, singing, dancing, and extraordinary staging. Only in Night Court can a judge use his skills to build part of the set, including the "Law Firm of Ill Repute" (Judge Jack Cagle, County Civil Court at Law No. 1), and another judge employ her operatic skills to sing beautiful solos and duets (Judge Jennifer Elrod, 190th District Court).

Night Court Director Judy Frow, of Judy Frow's Show Business, and Night Court Music Director Jim Benton enjoy the challenge of training and coaching the vast array of vocal and musical talent of the lawyer volunteers. While some lawyers have great talent, others, admittedly, do not. Yet, what becomes apparent to anyone who talks to the Night Court performers and crew is the fun and joy they have working with each other to produce such an outstanding charitable event each year. One small symbol of such commitment and caring is the red rose placed on the stage in memory of long-time cast member Pamela A. Prestridge, who passed away suddenly in January 2005.

Sadly, the final curtain has closed on "The Law of the West." Do not despair, though, as Night Court 2007: "Draculaw" is coming to the Hobby Center's Zilkha Hall on June 13-16, 2007. Tickets go on sale April 2, 2007. Watch your Houston Bar Bulletin for more details!

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