

Waterfront figure on board as 'Pinafore' villain

By Hillary Hauser
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THOSE WHO KNOW Fred Benko — especially Fred Benko during livelier days — say it's a ridiculous example of typecasting.

And speaking of his role as Dick Deadeye in the Civic Light Opera performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore," which opens Friday at the Lobero Theater, Benko doesn't disagree.

"They say Dick Deadeye is as close to a villain as Gilbert and Sullivan got in any of their pieces," Benko said. "He's an ugly son-of-a-gun, and he has bad habits. He has a pessimistic attitude, so the crew hates him. At one point, they throw him overboard, but he crawls back on board again."

Everything's rosy

But everything turns out rosy, he said. That's the way Gilbert and Sullivan always had their stories go.

Benko in real life is a salty, bearded character of the Santa Barbara waterfront, best known as a slightly bad-habited fisherman and one-time owner of a parrot.

As founder of Sea Landing in the harbor (which he sold in 1985), and builder of the fishing vessel Condor (he launched it in 1979 and is still captain of it), Benko also is known for his deep-sea bass voice — which has always been accented by a note of chicanery.

It's Dick Deadeye

So add some tunes to what might be Benko's ordinary conversation, and you have Dick Deadeye.

He tried out for the role soon after he and his wife, Hiroko, attended a Civic Light Opera performance of a Gilbert and Sullivan trilogy.

"I was fortunate enough to get one of the principal roles in my debut performance," Benko

said. "But I have to confess, I've got butterflies. I haven't been on stage in 30 years."

Benko's charter passengers are familiar with his blustery guitar playing and singing on the Condor's evening cruises. But less known is the fact that at one time he had a full-time career at singing, serious style.

Getting his start at the age of eight as a soprano in a boys' choir, Benko performed at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Akron, Ohio. He was paid a quarter for each rehearsal.

A lot of Bach

He sang in Handel's "Messiah," and did "a lot of Bach — remember, this was an Episcopalian church," he said.

By the time he wrapped it up with the boys' choir at age 14, Benko had gone from soprano to bass — and he quit singing to play football.

That was his formal musical training.

Even though Benko sang in choirs here and there after that, his real singing got its start during his stint in the Marine Corps.

Then later, he "got into the wrong crowd," he said, and spent a couple of years on the beaches of North and South Carolina, Georgia and elsewhere, "running around with a guitar and singing for beer."

He eventually landed in Washington, D.C., performing at the Cellar Door in Georgetown, and after that, the Bitter End in New York City.

In 1963, he toured Europe as a solo act in a U.S. Food and Agriculture exhibition of American music. He was about to perform in Amsterdam when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. "They loaded us on a plane the next morning and brought us home," Benko recalled.

That was the end of his singing career because, he said, he



Dick Deadeye, above, dons a jaunty cap and a mean-looking eyepatch for his capering about in "H.M.S. Pinafore" — but under neath it all, he's Fred Benko, at right, singing fisherman and waterfront personage.

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— Fred Benko

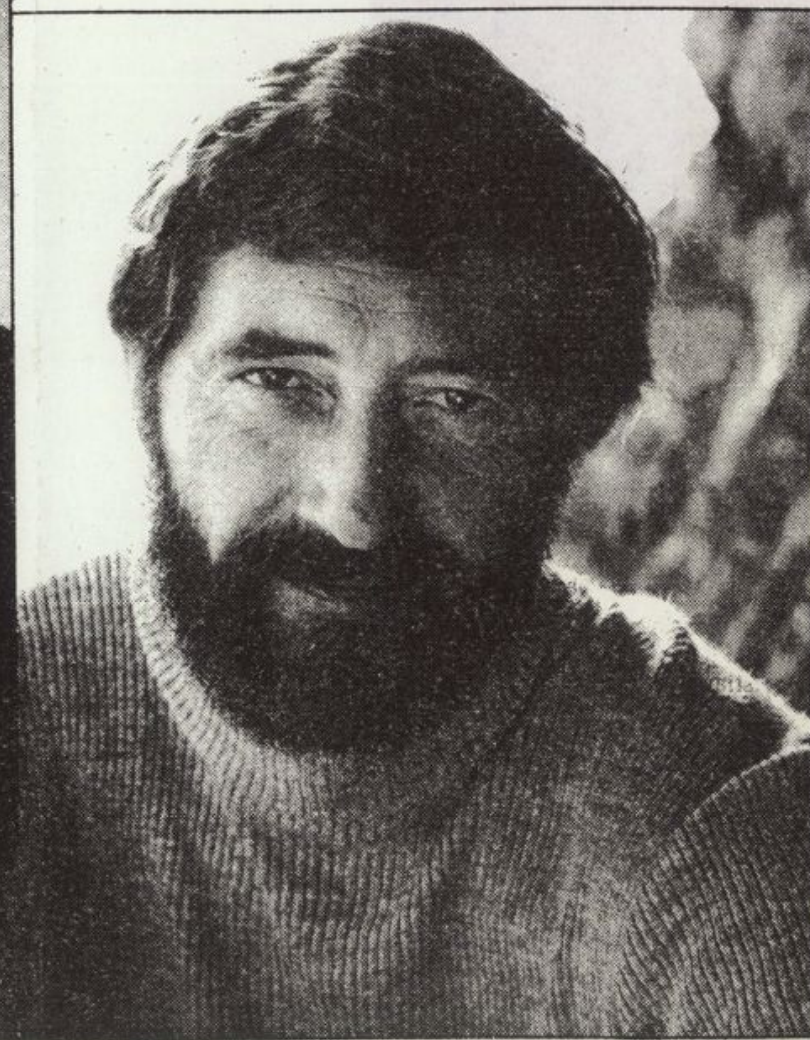


Photo by Rebecca Jeske

met his first wife on the plane. He became a corporate salesman, and during one of his West Coast trips, discovered Santa Barbara and gave up sales for fishing.

Now, after 13 years of being at sea and sometimes going overboard, Benko is going back on stage again, doing what comes naturally — going over-

board and playing the part of a scoundrel.

He hints that all that time at sea has educated him for his role ("I think Dick Deadeye is a castaway," Benko said).

"I've crawled out of the bilges so many times covered with slime, I think I can play this character with my eyes closed," he said. "He's basically a good guy inside," Benko

said. "When everything gets good, he's out singing and whooping and hollering with the rest of them. He's not really accepted, but he's happy. He's not a member of the crew, but a sailor who somehow got on the ship."

Benko says he is having so much fun singing again that he tried out for (and got) the role of Sir Marmaduke in "The

Sorcerer," another Gilbert and Sullivan production scheduled for fall.

Sir Marmaduke, Benko said, is a man who likes to have a good time — "always having the troops over to his house for parties."

Benko landing the role, his friends say, is a sure sign that typecasting has reached its peak in Santa Barbara.