

Architect writes book on navigating Malibu zoning code



Malibu architect Lester Tobias, above, has written a new book called "Building in the 'Bu: Navigating the Malibu Zoning Code." Tobias says the book is meant to serve as a guide for newcomers to Malibu who are hoping to get a home built through navigating what can be a complex building process.

By Melonie Magruder
Special to The Malibu Times

In his 20-plus years as an architect in Malibu, Lester Tobias has seen his share of architectural triumph and disaster. In his new book, "Building in the 'Bu: Navigating the Malibu Zoning Code," he aims to codify his hard-won knowledge of the city's often-labyrinthine Planning Department regulations—in a format that is, as he says, "for the average layman who comes to Malibu and cannot believe what it takes to get a

home built."

Malibu, of course, is famous for its development-leery ambience. The city joins other regulatory agencies like the California Coastal Commission to present an eager new homebuilder a plethora of codes whose interpretations frequently change, leaving the owner to wonder if his property will ever be developed or remodeled.

"I wrote the book just because it had to be written," Tobias said. "I have heard so much frustration in people just trying to put an extra

bathroom in their house."

The book covers subjects such as environmentally sensitive habitat areas (ESHAs) to the "50 percent" rule, the definition of which he says neither the code nor the city make clear. The book contains graphs and diagrams that chart a prospective homeowner's path, depending on the permitting scenario, from the beginning of the process to obtaining a building permit.

Tobias has long experience in Malibu, establishing his company, Tobias Architecture, 30 years

ago. He also serves on the city's Environmental Review Board and its Green Building Committee.

He says that problems began when writing Coastal Commission design guidelines for Malibu and Santa Monica back in 1986. When the county moved from unincorporated to incorporated, an "interim" zoning ordinance was written, and then written again when Malibu became a city.

"We could never write one that got approved, so we kept with the interim ordinance," Tobias said. "It leads to lawsuits and problems."

The book's chapters detail concerns a homebuilder or remodeler will face when launching the process to obtain a building permit in Malibu. "Which Code Do I Use?" "Is My House Grandfathered?" "How to Deal With a Nonconforming Structure" and, significantly, "What's That Smell?"

"The planning approval process involves forms, reports, eight sets of plans, mailing labels and a radius map of every home within 500 feet of your project," Tobias said. "You have to have the money to build or be a developer who can wait it out."

This process hurts the normal family who might want to redo something on the property themselves, he argues.

Thus, the book is meant to serve as a guide to "newcomers to help them through the process," he said.



'Belfry'

From page B1

where a mild-mannered church sacristan falls in love with another man's wife, opening up a world neither had ever experienced.

"There is a purity to the sound and language of Irish writers," says Veronica Brady, the play's director. "And Billy Roche perfectly captures that cadence and soul in his characters. I think you must have to be very Irish to absorb the stories that these playwrights translate onto the stage so well. Billy's characters are an amalgam of the people he knew growing up. In a way, he never left Wexford."

"Belfry" is the third in a trilogy of Roche's plays set in Wexford. Malibu Playhouse Artistic Director Gene Franklin Smith and the Irish playwright struck up a friendship several years ago when he produced another of "The Wexford Trilogy" at the Matrix Theatre in Los Angeles. So when he approached Roche about producing a play at the Malibu Playhouse this season, "Belfry" was one of four offered to him. Smith said he knew that "Belfry" was the piece that would be the most accessible to American audiences and would be something "really representative" of what he wanted to do at the Malibu Playhouse.

"Everybody has gone through love relationships that are really miraculous and that really change you," Smith said. "But then, somehow, it ends, even though something lives inside you afterward

forever. That's what 'Belfry' is all about. When we feel something is unlocked inside and brought to life."

The next duty for Smith was to find a director with the right sensibility to bring the play to life. He tapped local Veronica Brady, who happens to be a first-generation American, with a family who comes from the green hills of Ireland.

"Timing is everything," Brady said. "I had just finished a documentary project ("Patrick Dempsey: Racing Le Mans" for the Discovery Channel) and I wanted to get back to theatre. 'Belfry' was a sweet opportunity to live in that Irish world that is very familiar to me. Religion, drinking and jokes."

It required someone with the proper ear to bring the play to life. Roche is not the only 20th century Irish playwright to explore his roots. Martin McDonagh wrote his celebrated Leenane and Aran Islands trilogies set in County Galway, where he grew up, and the poetry in all these plays is dark, passionate and very funny.

Brady likened Roche to an Irish Chekov, as someone who captures those small moments that change your life.

"'Belfry' has that everyday voice of the small town Irishman," she said. "It's a language that has no sense of time."

Finding her actors was no

small task. She took almost three months to cast the play, looking for actors who had a sense of the cultural experience as well as the ability to capture the distinct Irish accent. Brady also had to find working actors who were willing to take on the commitment of traveling to and from Malibu for a rigorous rehearsal period. She said the local community helped.

"Local people have been great about taking these actors into their homes and guest houses for this project," Brady said. "It's a big sacrifice considering how far they have to drive to make a living and how little they're paid. So this is community theatre in the best sense of the word."

Audiences are sure to be pleased with the set design by Erin Wallley. The Playhouse used to be a church and Brady had wanted to highlight "the bones of the building." Accordingly, the expansive, multilevel set transforms the Playhouse stage in a scope that has never before been used.

Malibu Playhouse's production will be the West Coast premier of "Belfry." Smith sees it as a testament to the poetry of everyday experience. "It's very funny with a lot of sadness," he said. "A perfect balance."

"Belfry" runs at Malibu Playhouse January 31-March 9. Ticket information may be found at <http://malibuplayhouse.org/>



"Belfry" is set in the vestry and bell tower of the local church attended by the townspeople of tiny Wexford, Ireland. Here, Daniel David Stewart (left) and Michael Hyland rehearse for the production.



Michael Hyland and Rebekah Tripp rehearse a scene from "Belfry" in the belltower where the play takes place.



Rebekah Tripp rings the bell as Michael Hyland looks on during rehearsal. "Belfry" opens Friday at the Malibu Playhouse.