

the new roxie theatre makes its mark

By Jasmina Wellinghoff
Photography Greg Harrison

When Jonathan Pennington returned to San Antonio last summer after an eight-month stint in New York City, he proceeded to do what he had already done successfully twice before — he launched a new theater venture. And he had the foresight to locate it in the middle of the burgeoning area north of 410 where there are few arts institutions to serve the huge and growing loop-land population.

Named after his beloved dog, the Roxie Theater opened its doors this past October and has been going strong ever since. A play, two musicals and two youth musical productions have already been staged, including one, *The Paisley Sisters' Christmas Special*, that has never been produced here before. Pennington is looking forward to introducing many more shows to local audiences, as well as his own original pieces in the slightly more distant future.

Most will likely be smaller productions that put performers and audiences closer together to enhance the theatrical experience. Before Pennington remodeled it, the Roxie space was a bar and it still retains that intimate vibe, with the actual original bar still intact and serving drinks to theatergoers.

"I wanted it to have a studio feel," says the producer/director. "My style is interactive and this space creates an immersive environment which is what I wanted to accomplish. While I was in New York, I saw performances in several intimate places like this and I felt like a part of the show just by sitting there. I want the focus to be on the actors and actors feed off the energy of the audience."

The intimate bar setting is perfect for Roxie's January offering, *The Rat Pack Lounge*, a show that features the real-life "Rat Pack" members — Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis, Jr. — as characters in a fictional stage story set in a nightclub. While the plot is fiction, the songs are the real thing, and there will

be lots of them. The musical aspect of the show will be in the capable hands of Tom Masinter, one of the best musical directors in the city.

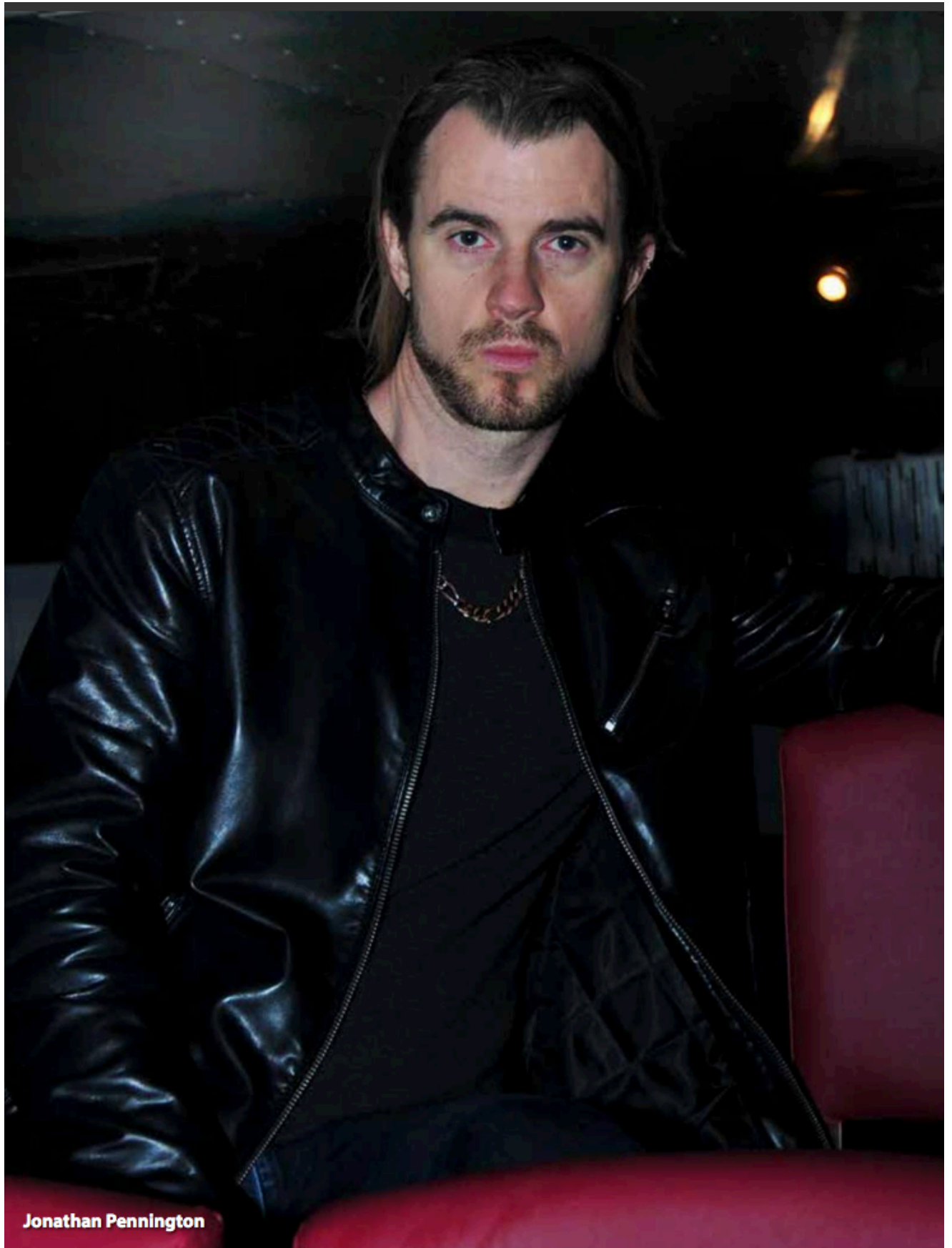
"These are songs made famous by the characters in this play, songs like *My Way*, *Young at Heart*, *What Kind of Fool Am I*, *Everybody Loves Somebody*, and a bunch of others. They are still very popular with the theater-going public," notes Masinter. "As a pianist, I play for a number of private functions and I play these songs. There's a sophistication about this music that people respond to."

Cast as the famous protagonists are Ryan Guerra as Sinatra, Sean Salazar as Martin and Dwight Robinson as Davis, all of whom have worked with Pennington before. The single female character identified only as Angie (most likely based on Angie Dickinson) will be played by Lauren Mitchell, while the owner of the bar where the action takes place will be portrayed by Chad Collins. Also in January, the theater will bring back the very successful youth production, *The Lion King Jr.*, for two more performances.

To retain flexibility in programming, Pennington avoids announcing a pre-determined season. So far, only three other shows are being advertised for 2017 — *All Shook Up*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Cry Baby*. He describes the first of these musicals as a take on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, set in the 1950s and punctuated by Elvis' songs, such as *Heartbreak Hotel*, *Love Me Tender*, *It's Now or Never*, *Don't Be Cruel*, and many more. "It's a great love story," he adds, "and what is better for Valentine's season than a love story. It's a really good show."

LOVE OF THEATER STARTED IN CHURCH

Pennington fell in love with music and drama as a young boy thanks to a music minister who knew how to combine the two to tell the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in an especially powerful way. "It was



Jonathan Pennington



much more than the typical church production," he recalls. "It was very polished, very theatrical. It definitely captured my attention." Young Jonathan started singing in the church choir at age five and stayed involved through the end of high school. Encouraged to pursue music as a career, he did just that, first at Texas Tech and later at UTSA from where he graduated with a degree in musical education. Both vocal and instrumental music were part of the curriculum, including an emphasis on operatic singing, but his heart belonged to musicals, he says.

Soon after graduation, Pennington launched his first theatrical production company at the Woodlawn Theater, a building that at that point had been dark and neglected for some time. With a loan from his family, he managed to whip it into shape, and then started producing one musical after another for six-and-a-half years. Unlike most local companies, his Pennington Productions never became a nonprofit, a tradition he still follows. Why bother with boards and meetings when he can spend his time putting on shows!

Following the stretch at the Woodlawn, the young producer moved to the Cameo Theater in St. Paul Square where he pursued his passion while also learning a great deal about the business side of running a playhouse from Jim Zaccaria. Along the way, Pennington won multiple ATAC Globe Awards not only as producer and director but also for sound and scenic design. His last show at the Cameo was *Buddy - The Buddy Holly Story*, which is his very favorite musical, so favorite, in fact, that he could do it "all the time," he admits wistfully, as our interview is winding down.

Altogether, he has nearly 100 shows on his resume, which prompts Masinter to suggest that they should have a party to mark the actual 100th one, likely to occur this year. The two men have worked on many projects together and sing each other's praises. Masinter says Pennington is good to work with because he has "an easy touch," "He allows me to be creative and bring the best out of the music and performers." For his part, Pennington observes that he has learned an important lesson from his partner: "Tom taught me to make everything fun. I tend to be a perfectionist, always working hard, and he reminds me to enjoy it and have fun while I work. We are a good team."