

# Licensed and Live: “Spock’s Brain” a retro-kitsch hit for the ages

by Larry Nemecek

(from November 2004)

(*This is a longer version than that originally appearing in Communicator 154*).

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The comedy theatre is packed this night with a dinner crowd that hoots and howls at the show. But this is no stand-up: it’s a summer Wednesday at the Irvine (Calif.) Improv, and that means Kirk, Bones and “Spock’s Brain.”

Yes, crammed on a tiny platform stage usually meant for a lone comic, Starfleet’s legends are lovingly re-created in one of their more goofy classic adventures as an historic first: the officially licensed staging of an actual *Star Trek* episode.

“I like the show—I know we are low budget, but we’re not cheesy,” says director-producer Mike Carano, who actually pitched and won studio support for his brainchild. “We offer something fresh, but nostalgic; that’s why people liked the show in the beginning, for that family feel. Plus, I like our cast! They all say it’s the most fun thing they’ve ever done.”

Despite the venue, though, this is no madcap send-up. Sure, the reactions are exaggerated here and there, a line interpretation may be a bit twisted—and it’s no accident what episode was picked. But this is a full script of *Star Trek*, performed word for word as aired in the 1968 third-season opener. Movement and gestures are duplicated, too, thanks to DVDs of the show studied by each cast member for weeks—and the sold-out dinner-house crowd of 200 quickly shows their appreciation.

And no fan stereotypes here: The audience could be any commuters, of all ages, stopping off after work for a weeknight chuckle. But *we* know better, by what gets a laugh: just the opening poses and sound effects as the lights come up—much less Chekov’s accent, Scotty’s hang-dog stance, McCoy’s drawl, Kirk’s stop-start delivery—or, as Kara the Eymorg beams aboard, the captain eyeing her ... up ... *and* down. The players have this crowd in the palm of their hand from the get-go.

Of the cast, two are self-proclaimed Trekkers even before undertaking their “Spock’s Brain” odyssey of research: Andy “Chekov” Bray and Gabriel “Spock” Diani; “We’re the two who have actually been to conventions that we weren’t performing at!” says Diani and laughs. Others, like Lola “Chapel/Luma” Davidson, have a connection for other reasons: “My father died when I was seven,” she says, “and there’s two things that I bonded with my father on: one was *Star Trek* and the other was Muhammed Ali. So the original *Star Trek* I associate with my dad, and that means a lot to me.” After a month or more of

intent review of the show for their homage—Tom “Scotty” Deters boned up on his Scottish brogue—all considered themselves fans and felt the audience reaction even more keenly.

Carano admits to sweating the risk—the first of eight Wednesday shows June 29 drew a hundred family and friends, then sunk to just 49 before the press swelled the crowd to a hundred again the third week. After their critical raves, though, the house sold out and the crew never looked back—adding a ninth week, and returning for four fall shows when venue nights were available. “The four weeks we added, we had *no* publicity and they were sell-outs—we were turning away 75-100 people a night!” the director says. The group even had a single show at the annual Creation Las Vegas show—and, along with almost no rehearsal there, admitted to a bout of nerves before such a hard-core group.

“We got laughs in totally different places with the Vegas crowd, where we’re not used to them,” says Cesario “Sulu” Tio, and Lola “Chapel/Luma” Davidson agrees: “I realized [it was so quiet] that people were watching us so intently, and there were these flashes—people were taking pictures of us! And it was the coolest feeling in the world: Ohmygod, they don’t hate us, they love us!” “We signed tons of autographs, tons of shirts—it was amazing,” adds Kelly “Uhura” Park, and Annie “Kara” Tedesco adds: “None of us knew we going to sign autographs; we didn’t have any pens!”

“I actually got to meet Walter [‘Chekov’] Koenig in Vegas,” Bray says of his counterpart. “And afterwards he came backstage and he said, ‘You do the lip thing [sneer],’ and I said, ‘Yes, I *do* do the lip thing.’ And he said: ‘The reason I did that was because of nerves; I would get nervous during the show and my lip would go up!’ And I said, ‘Well, I couldn’t do the Chekov accent until I *did* the lip thing!’ ”

As a bonus, Matt “Kirk” Bianco eventually began swapping his gold tunic at show’s end for an open-necked dress shirt and unstrung bowtie, serenading the crowd a la Shatner’s infamous lounge sound with Elton John’s “Rocket Man.”

“I still get a lot of feedback, three or four emails a day, three letters a day—it’s actually incredible,” Carano says of the show’s past audience. There’s hope for a move north to the more visible Hollywood area or maybe a tour, but for now you can sample a video clip or two at the producer’s website, [mikecarano.com](http://mikecarano.com). After that, who knows?

“I don’t want to let out a secret,” deadpans Steve “McCoy” Millunzi, “but we were approached today about doing a high school play of *The Wrath of Khan*... .”

**UPDATE:** *Sadly, changes in corporate Viacom and its licensing arm never allowed Carano’s license to be extended or include a hoped-for in-town Hollywood run with a real red carpet gala opening and celebrity Trekkies in the audience. However, one note: Andy Bray went on to portray Chekov as well in the New Voyagers’ 2005-06 fan film series episode, “To Serve All My Days,” alongside Walter Koenig himself as an aged Chekov.*

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cast caption (seated, full)

The “Spock’s Brain” cast, post-show: <FROM LEFT> Cesario Tio (Sulu), Tom Deters (Scotty), Steve Millunzi (McCoy), Annie Tedesco (Kara), Danny Esguerra (Security Guard/Morg), Gabriel Diani (Spock), Andy Bray (Chekov), Kelly Park (Uhura), Lola Davidson (Chapel/Luma), Matt Bianco (Kirk) and producer-director Mike Carano.

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