

## Exhibition adds fun to Conservatory of Flowers

Peter Hartlaub, Chronicle Pop Culture Critic  
Friday, January 6, 2012

The camera mounted on the miniature cable car was met with skepticism at the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco. But when a sound designer let it loose on the garden railway, its rollicking journey captured on a video monitor charmed the staff.



"That's how we test things here at the conservatory," says Lau Hodges, director of operations and exhibitions. "If it entertains the adults - if it causes the 8-year-old in all of us to come out - then it definitely stays."

The horticulture themes of the museum don't immediately conjure images of whimsy or adventure. The stately wooden structure was finished in 1878, making the conservatory the oldest building in Golden Gate Park. But the indoor botanical garden has nurtured that inner third-grader in recent years, quietly infusing the beauty and botany with a little fun.

### A new benchmark

The Playland at the Conservatory exhibition, on display until April 15, is a new benchmark for an organization that has been trying to lure in demographics that might not normally visit a plant-themed destination. After success for the past three years with a more conventional garden railway in the special exhibits hall, the Conservatory conjured up the seaside entertainment theme last year.

It pays tribute to the Sutro Baths, the Cliff House and Playland-at-the-Beach, an Ocean Beach amusement park that was torn down in the 1970s. In addition to a railway with four working cars circling Playland landmarks on landscaped hills (the video shows a first-person view of a train moving over hills and through tunnels), vintage carnival-style exhibits were brought in, audio from the era was re-created, and a team of enthusiastic experts provided historic material for guests.

Bette Landis, 85, was sitting on a nearby bench, soaking in the nostalgia of the exhibit. A Texas native who moved to San Francisco after World War II, Landis remembers taking her kids to the real Playland when it was in its decline.

"There was no vegetation," Landis says, joking. "This presents an improvement over the original."

## **Collaborative effort**

The exhibition was a collaboration by a group of local artists and historians.

Artist James Sellier returns to the railway, building scaled-down structures and other models out of recyclables. The Rock-O-Plane Ferris wheel is made up of a Makita cordless drill, a bike tire and several old hand-crank pencil sharpeners. Other highlights include the Diving Bell aquarium exhibit made out of a campfire stove, Cliff House roof turrets from a Louis Vuitton purse and the Sutro facade in part from the chandelier in Sellier's bedroom.

"I want to start a campaign to get the man a new chandelier," Hodges says. "He's been cutting up pieces of his home to build this for me."

The unsung hero of the exhibit is arguably Andrew Roth, a San Francisco native and professional sound designer whose efforts to re-create the sounds of Playland included the recorded screams of conservatory staffers on a wooden roller coaster in Santa Cruz.

The Conservatory of Flowers, which has in the past skewed toward an older crowd than the nearby California Academy of Sciences, is open about its attempts to get young families into the exhibit. In 2007, the garden premiered the kid-friendly "Chomp!," a carnivorous-plant exhibition that featured weekend feedings and plant dissections. That exhibition returned last year.

## **Wheel of plant oddities**

There are more than 100 dwarf plants in the Playland railway exhibition, and the conservatory has placed the names of several oddities of the plant world on a carnival-style wheel, creating a sort of horticulture freak show scavenger hunt for kids.

But the restored bumper car, toothpick carnival (an original Sutro Baths exhibit) and other surprises have little connection to the rest of the botanical garden. Hodges says she hopes families come for the railway and then discover the rest of the conservatory.

Bianca Galladora, a Richmond District mother of a 2-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl, has been visiting about twice per year. She likes the conservatory because it works well for an hour visit, and her son likes it as much as her daughter.

"I don't know if you know too many 2-year-old boys, but they love trains," she says.

More children are gathered near a pool of vegetation-covered water on the south end of the railway. Two turtle heads look as if they might be another recycled prop in what would be the Pacific Ocean.

They're very real, and should get an even bigger role in next year's exhibition - a Barbary Coast/pirates-and-swashbuckling theme that will expand the water features in the exhibit. Which gives the staff less than a year to figure out how to rig a boat-mounted camera.

**The Conservatory of Flowers:** Tues. through Sun. Golden Gate Park.

[www.conservatoryofflowers.org](http://www.conservatoryofflowers.org). To see archived Chronicle photos of Playland, go to The Big Event at [blog.sfgate.com/thebigevent](http://blog.sfgate.com/thebigevent).

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