

Published March 30th, 2011

Quick Change at the Orinda Theater

By Andrea A. Firth



The theater's marquee went blank last Thursday
Photo Ohlen Alexander

continuing our excellent relationship," says Orinda resident Laura Abrams, who is a founding member of the Lamorinda Film & Entertainment Foundation (LFEF)-a nonprofit organization that has worked to preserve the legacy of the Orinda for several years and supports some of the theater's other entertainment options such as the Orinda Idol competition and the recently launched International Film Showcase.

Hosting special events at the theater is important to the community and to the success of the theater, according to Zemrak. "Our track record shows that we work well with the community. We still want continue to explore and support these types of events." Currently, there are no plans to change the venue for the California Independent Film Festival says Zemrak, noting the tremendous success and support the CAIFF experienced in Moraga.

"Having seven screens is a great plus for the Lamorinda area. It provides us with great flexibility, so we can give people movie options," says Zemrak as he monitors the scene from the lobby of the Orinda Theater on a rainy Saturday afternoon and calls in to see how things are going at the New Rheem Theater. "There are about 40 people [at the Orinda] now, and there are 300 people over at Rheem," says Zemrak, "In a year, both theaters will be booming. We have a model that works for both theaters. It's only going to improve both venues."

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The sight of the blank marquee over the Orinda Theater puzzled residents who ventured by Theater Square on Friday, and speculation that the theater was closing fueled local rumor mills. The statement "closed pending new ownership" posted on the theater's website seemed to seal the movie house's fate. But by 7:00 p.m., the Orinda marquee was burning brightly, the movie *Sucker Punch* was playing on the main screen, and business appeared back to usual.

"It all happened very quickly," says Derek Zemrak, President and founder of the California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF). The non-profit CAIFF Association took over operation of the New Rheem Theater in Moraga in June of last year, and these same operators will now manage the Orinda Theater under a different for-profit entity. "Basically we will run it as a sevenplex theater," says Zemrak. (There are four screens at the Rheem and three at Orinda.) "You won't necessarily see the same movies running in both locations."

This is not the Orinda Theater's first near death experience, and the previous theater management team had been in place for just two years. But Zemrak, who is also an independent filmmaker, confidently optimistic about turning the historic, art deco theater around. "It all comes down to programming. The key is to program the right films for the market," says Zemrak adding that tickets sales at the New Rheem Theater have risen 63% since the CAIFF Association took over the operation.

Zemrak and his colleagues are not completely new to Orinda's movie scene. The California Independent Film Festival was held at the Orinda Theater in 2010 after moving from Livermore, and then moved to the Rheem Theater in January of this year. He acknowledges the fact that the two theaters will no longer be in competition is another benefit to the new set up.

"There was a great energy there [Friday] night. We're really happy to welcome them back to the Orinda and are looking forward to