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## Town Hall Theatre celebrates 75 years



Town Hall lobby from years past

Photos provided

By Adam Blake

Throughout its rich history, many community members of Town Hall Theatre have stepped up to preserve the 104-year-old landmark. The late Wirtabel Harris played an instrumental role in saving the building back in 1964 by spearheading the "Save Town Hall" campaign, after it had failed to meet new building and fire regulations.

The 185-seat theater was originally constructed as a meeting space and town hall for the local farming community in 1914 and was in dire need of renovations. It likely would not exist today if it weren't for Harris' relentless efforts to raise \$50,000 from the community in order to bring the building up to code.

Harris moved to the area in the 1940s and quickly became an integral member of the Dramateurs, which was all-female at the time. The group formed in 1944 and their first production was "Catching up with Christmas" at the Orinda School PTA. They moved to the "barn" on school street 10 years later and eventually reorganized themselves as the Town Hall Theatre Co. in 1992. Over the years Harris acted, made costumes, and served as president of the company twice.

Today, Harris' daughter, Rebecca Mallon, has carried on her mother's legacy by frequently volunteering at Town Hall Theatre over the past 15 years. Her favorite spot is behind the bar where she can converse with the attendees.

Mallon was quick to point out that despite her mother's passion for the stage, she was never one to bask in the spotlight.

"My mother was always very humble about recognition. She didn't go out of her way for recognition and praise. She did what she did because she loved it," Mallon said.

Nevertheless, Harris' lifelong commitment to the theater has been memorialized with the "Wirta-bell" mounted in the theatre's foyer. It is rung at every show to signal attendees to take their seats at the beginning of a performance and after intermission.

Of course, Harris and Mallon are just one example of the hard work and dedication it takes to keep the theater thriving. From building sets, to cleaning the seats, to maintaining the landscaping around the building, it takes a village, to say the least.

"Town Hall Theatre runs on volunteers and in the last three years we have had tremendous re-growth in our corps of volunteers," Shepard said. "Our volunteers don't just



Wirtabel Harris rings the "Wirta-bell"

keep this historic building running, they also take care of it and become part of our family."

Mallon, who grew up in the early days of the Dramateurs, says her mother would be thrilled to see how far Town Hall Theatre has come today. This includes recent updates to the theatre's technical capacity with new LED lighting and an updated sound system, in addition to expanding community outreach and educational programs.

Education has always been central to the Town Hall Theatre's mission, but they recently have been able to expand and deepen how they reach students in Lamorinda. In addition to serving Spring Hill, Lafayette, and Burton Valley elementary schools, the theater runs an Adult Education class that has toured around the elementary schools and built interactive programs for middle school classrooms.

With help from The Lafayette Community Foundation and The Bill Graham Foundation, Town Hall Theatre has also been able to offer student matinees for select shows with free tuition to under-served schools. They have also created countless opportunities for high school and college students to gain first-hand theater experience, both on stage and behind the curtain.

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## New Art Moves Project installation planned for this weekend



Photo provided

Submitted by Dina Bogan

Art Moves Project continues to create new forms of public art for the Lafayette community by commissioning California-based artists and choreographers from varying disciplines and backgrounds, using non-traditional and socially relevant themes.

The result is a temporary outdoor multisensory experience.

AMP will present its third annual public art installation, "You Me Us: In Community," with dance on Friday and Saturday, Oct. 18 and 19, at

Plaza Park, which includes two free performances at 5 and 6:30 p.m. each day. "You Me Us: In Community" is a study of how dance, film, music and sound converge to create a unifying community experience.

This year's installation explores us as a community: our stories of arrival, the assumptions and views we brought with us and how they change over time. "You Me Us: In Community" delves further into these questions through an exploration of native versus non-native plant ecosystems.

What can we learn about

ourselves as individuals and ourselves in community through the flowers and trees in the hills that surround us, or from the weeds in the cracks of our sidewalks? How do their stories reflect our own? How do these non-native plants arrive, assimilate, integrate, resist and persist?

How do they change the existing native plant community? How did we arrive here?

"I'm so excited and grateful to be working with AMP on such a meaningful project. They have a true spirit of exploration and an openness to experimentation that I haven't always encountered elsewhere," says Charmaine Koh, visual artist on "You Me Us: In Community." "Working with them has helped me push my own limits, and to experience the amazing things that can be achieved in community."

Adults and children alike will have the chance to experience the result of this unique Art Moves Project collaboration and will be invited to participate by sharing their thoughts on "You Me Us: In Community" by writing on an interactive installation.

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