

Published June 23rd, 2021

Town Hall Theatre preps for its resurgence

By Lou Fancher



Dennis Markam at work behind the scenes at Town Hall Theatre. Photo Suzie Shepard

People who attend and appreciate live theater know that marvelous onstage magic arrives largely due to remarkable behind-the-scenes machinations - props, sets and backdrops are repaired or finessed into place, costumes are adjusted or replaced at the last minute, sound and light checks happen, actors pace or stand alone in secluded cubbyholes backstage rehearsing troublesome lines, dancers in a musical stretch or practice partnered movements.

During the drama that has been the pandemic, the shuttered Town Hall Theatre has been similarly engaged in a bevy of backstage machinations. Managing Director Dennis Markam says that although the year has been difficult, support from longtime donors and subscribers has helped the theater to remain afloat. "We also were able to take advantage of some government programs which have given us the funds to start hiring some people back. Over the course of the year we've had a couple of staff people step away to pursue other opportunities, and we have reorganized which eliminated a couple of positions, but now we're in a hiring phase."

With the help of the Education Director and Patron Services Manager, the community theater is gearing up for a Bay Area Celebration July 10 at Moraga Commons that will feature local singers and spoken word artists based in five Bay Area counties. With themes of hope, renewal, equity, resilience, home, inclusion and celebration, the outdoor summer theater presentation promises to speak to the times in which we live. Education director Madison Geringer directs the eight acts that will be accompanied by the Steve Carter Trio, an East Bay Groove Funk band.

The summer camp outdoor, in-person education classes and productions for youth returned in June, along with plans for an improvisation course for adults with a schedule TBA. Information about fall education programs, ongoing fundraising virtual presentations and the Winter Season mainstage productions are available on the website.

During the last 15 months, work behind the closed doors of the historic Town Hall that was built with community funds on land donated by Frank and Rosa Ghiglione and completed in 1914 has been similar to a teardown and reconstruction related to inclusion and equity issues. No timber was moved or seating replaced, but an examination of the organization's practices and principles received a thorough overhaul.

Asked in what changes are in store, Markam says, "The biggest change to our programming is having more diversity not only on the stage but in our production selection process. Our first performance back is going to be in October with the launch of our New Voices program. Twice a year, as part of our regular season, we'll be producing two smaller-scale productions by local playwrights that give audiences a taste of what local talent has to offer and give those playwrights structured feedback as they develop their work."

Markam says "getting the word out" to Bay Area playwrights and others about the refocused initiative is a priority. "It's a new thing for us so we're not on a lot of folks' radars. Also, in doing that, we want to make sure that the selection process is equitable and inclusive so that we can feature as many voices and experiences as possible."

Markam is so excited about the July 10 Bay Area Celebration because it's a way to "kick off our new programming that features more local artists."

"These Bay Area artists, a lot of whom haven't worked with Town Hall before, are presenting pieces that mean something to them rather than us deciding what we want them to present," he says. "That's not really something a lot of companies made space for pre-pandemic, especially on this side of the tunnel. It's also a great chance for audiences to re-familiarize themselves with Town Hall and get a taste of what kind of passion and artistry we have locally."

While energized by the sight of young theater camp participants at last "interacting outside of a Zoom box," and bolstered by community support that through the pandemic provided crucial financing to stay operational, Markam admits the year took its toll on staff, performers and audiences alike.

"Getting through this last year has had obvious downsides," he says, "but I think it should be noted that we've used this year for self reflection and to reimagine what Town Hall could be. We're in a better position now to be a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just a company which can serve our community and beyond in more ways. My primary objective is to make sure that these changes stick. There have been companies that made bold declarations this time last year and are releasing seasons that don't look substantively different than what they offered before. It's important to me and to all of our staff and board that we don't backslide."

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA