

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

A ghostly presence or two at Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre?



Photo Vera Kochan

An orb hovers over the stage as something bright white spills over the back of a seat at THT.

By Vera Kochan

Most playhouse theatres can be spooky enough during the day, but at night with all manner of bizarre props and human-like mannequins as part of the normal backstage décor, anyone with an active imagination could easily become startled. Add to the mix, the month of October with Halloween on the horizon, and the hackles are bound to go up on the necks of even the most stalwart of ghost skeptics.

Most, if not all, theatres follow the custom of a ghost light. "A ghost light is a single bulb left burning whenever a theatre is dark," according to an article in Playbill. "Some argue that its function is to chase away mischievous spirits; others insist it lights the way for the ghosts that are said to inhabit virtually every theatre, keeping them happy and contented. Either way, that light ensures that no one takes an accidental tumble off the stage."

Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre building was built in 1914 and initially used for dinner/dance parties. Between 1941-1945 it was used as World War II troop barracks. It wasn't until 1947 when its first incarnation as a theatre began. That's over 100 years of active history and enough people passing through to make one or two want to linger for an eternity.

THT Managing Director Dennis Markam believes there are two spirits haunting the building. One is a male and the other a female. "Down in the lobby, in front of the bar, there's often a cold spot. It feels like it's female. Other staff members have felt things, but nothing specific. We also have lights and fuse boxes that seem to have a mind of their own."

Markam recalled one incident several years ago when a teacher brought her young students over to the theatre to rehearse for a show. They were alone in the building. During the process of posi-

tioning the youngsters on the stage, one of the children pointed toward the technical booth at the back of the theatre and asked, "Whose the man in there?" Knowing that they were alone, the teacher didn't want to take a look. Staff decided it was the ghost of Carl Rasmussen, the theatre's art director in the 1950s. His picture now hangs above the booth. For years an old technical director would always talk to the departed Rasmussen and include him in the daily workings of the playhouse.

With Town Hall Theatre's decades of success, and survival through COVID mandates, it would seem that the ghosts are keeping a benevolent eye on things. "Even if after-hours lighting weren't required for safety purposes, superstitious thespians would probably still insist on keeping the ghost light burning," stated Playbill. "After all, the business of theatre is risky enough without an irate spirit or two in the wings."

Marquee talent for Park Theater fundraiser



Photo provided

"You and Me" by Ames Palms

By Jeff Gomez

To celebrate the 80th anniversary of Lafayette's Park Theater, The Park Theater Trust – an all-volunteer group dedicated to reopening the classic theater – has partnered with the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery to hold an exhibition of neon art. The show features work from three Bay Area artists: Shawna Peterson, Bill Concanon, and Ames Palms. All three have a deep history and expertise in the form, having worked with neon for decades.

The show came together through a serendipitous set of circumstances. When plans for a huge birthday celebration for the Park Theater – which opened on August 11, 1941 – had to be scaled back due to lingering concerns around COVID, the board of directors of The Park Theater Trust thought a show of neon art would be a good way to celebrate the theater, and the town's, history.

Tracey Karsten Farrell, a member of the TPTT board, got in touch with the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery, which sits half a block away from the

theater on the corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Way. "Jennifer has been very supportive of our efforts since the beginning," Farrell says. "Her gallery is so innovative, and such a presence in downtown Lafayette, we were thrilled when she agreed to do this for us."

Perlmutter, a longtime resident of the area and patron and supporter of local artists, thought it was an excellent idea; she'd wanted to curate a show of neon art for some time. For Perlmutter, the show's an opportunity to have people look at objects in a whole new way, elevating neon above mere decoration or advertising purposes. "The artist has a point of view and perspective they're expressing, and so when you show pieces like these it sparks a conversation," says Perlmutter. "It becomes about ideas rather than signage."

A show of neon art is more challenging than just hanging paintings. All the pieces require electricity and, because they're made out of glass, are quite fragile. It's a situation the artists have to deal with every day. Creating with neon, says artist Ames Palms, "You have the risk of being shocked, cut, and burned." But the love for their chosen medium shows in their pieces, which combine art and science to create something technically intricate and wholly beautiful.

All of the pieces on display will be available for sale, with 50% of the proceeds being donated to The Park Theater Trust. The neon artists are also willing to donate a portion of any additional commissions to the Park Theater restoration effort.

"I hope this will encourage guests to make a purchase,"

says Perlmutter, "knowing that not only are they supporting the artists, but also the Park Theater. This show gives our community, and the gallery, a chance to have a real stake in the future of Lafayette."

The Park Theater Trust is currently engaged on a mission to raise \$8 million, with \$3 million going toward the purchase of the building, and the rest paying for renovations and additions such as adding a mezzanine theater and rooftop terrace. Restoring the theater's vintage neon marquee will cost around \$80,000.

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