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Orinda city council kicks off celebration of Orinda Theatre's 80th anniversary

By Sora O'Doherty



Orinda Theatre, lighted Photo Derek Zemrak

The Orinda City Council on Nov. 16 recognized the 80th anniversary of the opening of the Orinda Theatre on Dec. 27, 1941, with a proclamation. Current theatre owner Derek Zemrak has announced that the theatre will host its own celebration of the anniversary on Dec. 27 with a showing of "Cinema Paradiso," free to all contributors to the theatre's GoFundMe effort, without which, Zemrak says, the theatre could not have survived the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Orinda Theatre was built by Donald Rheem and opened with the film "Texas," starring William Holden. The theatre boasted its iconic neon sign, which Rheem called a "blazing informal Neon gateway" to Orinda. The theatre is decorated with murals by the famed artist Anthony Heinsberger.

Slated for demolition in 1984, the theatre was saved by the efforts of the Friends of the Orinda Theatre. This followed nine years of community advocacy and a legal battle that went all the way to the California Supreme Court. As part of that battle, the Friends applied to the State Historical Resources Commission, and, as a result, the building was listed in the State Historical Registry

and later in the National Historic Registry, based on, according to the proclamation, "the streamline modern style of architecture, the mural interior and the bank building's exterior stainless columns and Arizona sandstone rock siding," as well as Rheem's "Crossroads Core of the City concept."

The theatre is now an anchor of the Theatre Square shopping center, featuring retail stores, businesses, and restaurants. The downtown area on the south side of the BART station is alternately known as the Theatre District or Orinda Crossroads.

The council's proclamation expresses "deep appreciation to the individuals and organizations whose dedicated efforts preserved and supported this magnificent community treasure for decades."

Zemrak says that further plans for the celebration on the 27th are underway. During the pandemic, Zemrak took the opportunity to restore many of the theatre's iconic features. See story: www.lamorindaweekly.com/

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Contributions to the Orinda Theatre can be made on their GoFundMe page, www.gofundme.com/f/orinda-theatre-needs-your-help

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