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The show goes on at Orinda Theater - just two less days - for now

By David Scholz



Photo David Scholz

A calling card for Orinda has long been the vibrant marquee of the Orinda Theater aglow seven nights a week for those driving by along Highway 24.

It's a little less so these days, seeing it dark on Mondays and Tuesdays, as owner Derek Zemrak comes to grips with a \$2,000 spike in the cinema's PG&E electricity bill.

"Our goal is to open seven days a week," he said. "We just have to figure out how to do it. We have to do it efficiently."

The one exception to the recent decision is for the last Tuesday of the month for a popular classic film matinee experience that will still welcome patrons on April 30, and for the last Tuesdays in May and June, respectively.

When word started circulating about the theater's plight earlier this month, the community responded in kind and voiced support by saying "okay, we will just come a different day," said an appreciative Zemrak.

"The community loves the theater and that is why we are still open," he said of the public's backing during other rough times, such as during the pandemic.

The plan now is to re-examine the books in May, and see if it pencils out financially to reopen for one of the two

nights that is currently closed.

The immediate decision earlier this month was made to close on Mondays and Tuesday evenings, because they were the slowest nights of the week for the theater. By doing that, a savings on at least utility costs of \$240 per night could be realized.

Shock is understatement to describe Zemrak's reaction when he checked his bank account online April 1. After an initial peak in the morning, he was floored later in the day to see the \$6,250 payment to the utility giant.

"PG&E had announced the commercial rate increase," he said, "But I didn't expect it to go up \$2000."

PG&E offered to assign a dedicated representative to him in the wake of the initial attention his story had received among local media outlets, but as he saw it, "They are not there to help us."

No discounts were offered. Rather, PG&E's big idea for keeping his costs down was closing in the evenings, notably during the period from 4 to 8 p.m. when utility rates peak. The only problem with that strategy is that people come to the theater to watch movies during the evening.

The movie business is a difficult one for small theaters like the Orinda, as they lose 35% in revenue to studios for the movies shown. And when there aren't blockbuster movies to bring in patrons to fill the 750 seat theater, such as what the extended writer's strike further compounded, that makes keeping on the lights even more challenging.

"If you are not getting attendance, that makes it tough to cover a utility bill," he said.

So what he is to do now? Zemrak considered an increase ticket prices, but determined the tradeoff isn't worth it.

"I don't want to turn away people just for 33 cents that is the return on a \$1 increase," Zemrak said. "The math doesn't work out."

"The whole industry is a math game," he added.

Ten employees, three full-time and seven part time, continue on the payroll despite the recent setback.

Zemrak noted just one shift was lost along the way.

So the show goes on and that includes the monthly Tuesday afternoon classic movie matinee program. After James Dean's "Rebel without a Cause" attracted another 100 patrons in March, the 1936 "San Francisco" starring Clark Gable and Jeanette MacDonald is on the bill on April 30, which Zemrak projects to also draw well.

The \$10 admission for the classic movie program helps cover the rent of the film and employees, including the expertise of a union projectionist that ensures a flawless viewing and listening experience for patrons.

As opposed to some theaters that might just show the occasional classic movie, the entire Orinda experience is even more transportive for the audience.

The Orinda Theater's monthly classic movie program is a wholly vintage experience that begins at 1 p.m. with a newsreel from the era. For April 30, a restored 1936 Fox Movietone is planned, followed by some color cartoons.

These will be followed by original coming attraction shorts, which will spotlight flicks that are on deck in the classic series, including "North by Northwest" and "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

Matias Bombal, the series host and a syndicated radio movie critic and film historian, keeps the authentic fun and entertaining experience going with remarks to further generate excitement, as opposed to some stodgy lecture about the film. Then, without further ado, it's showtime for the day's main attraction.

"There is no aspect of the program that is modern," said Bombal, who grew up enjoying such an experience and went on to learn the craft as an usher.

Bombal lauded Zemrak's efforts to keep this unique matinee program going as well the diverse array of presentations, including showing foreign films with English subtitles like "Bonjour Switzerland" coming in May, and live concerts like Vladimir Korneev on May 19, alongside the mainstream movies - in light of difficult times.

Furthermore, Bombal sees it as one of the few theaters where the public has a true sense of ownership that keeps the theater going such that every purchase, even at the candy counter, really makes a difference.

"The Orinda is a unique experience where the public embraces it. That is very special that few cities have," he added.

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