



Town Hall Theater—A Secret No Longer

By Andrea A. Firth



Teachers and Board members at Lafayette Town Hall Theater Front Row (L to R): Jenn Taylor, Janice Peacock, Jessica Magers-Rankin, and Ginny Wehrmeister Back Row: Henry Perkins and Dennis Erokan

Photo Andrea A. Firth

What is the oldest, continuously active theater in Contra Costa County? If you are stumped, take a look in your own backyard. The answer is Town Hall Theater (THT) in Lafayette.

“Isn’t that amazing,” states Dennis Erokan, President of the Board of Directors at THT for the past five years. While he confirms this fact with his ubiquitous smile, Erokan also notes that there are still many people throughout Lamorinda that do not know that THT exists. Board member Amy Goodheart echoes his sentiment. “Often I have heard comments such as ‘Town Hall Theater—where’s that?’ or ‘I’ve driven by that building a million times. I didn’t know that was a theater,’ states Goodheart with a slight note of exasperation in her voice.

The almost 100-year old, large, brown building—a dedicated city landmark—on one of the main thoroughfares (Moraga Road) into downtown Lafayette seems like it would be hard to miss. However, theater statistics reveal that only five percent of community residents go to see their own community theater, so the lack of awareness may have some foundation.

The THT building, which took turns serving as the town hall, a library, an elementary school, a dormitory for ROTC trainees, and a dance hall among other things, has a long and rich history, and for over the last 60 years it has been the home to a dynamic and vibrant theater community. The 187-seat theater

hosts five productions each season along with a number of children’s performances throughout the year.

Erokan, who started his career in rock and roll and feels completely at home on the stage, has spent much of his tenure on the THT Board establishing the THT brand. He’s passionate about theater, and he feels it is important for residents to understand the positive role that THT plays in the community. And, he is a true believer in the educational program that has grown exponentially under the oversight of Janice Peacock, Director of Education at THT. “If we do this right, we’ll be sending a lot of kids to perform on stage and in the movies,” he notes again with a broad grin.

And it appears that he may be right. THT’s kids’ theater programs, which currently serve over 800 area children each year, are thriving. “Our kids’ program is extremely successful and it just keeps growing,” notes Goodheart. Director Peacock has revamped the classes and recruited an energetic team of young actors who provide theater instruction to children from four through 14 years of age along with an advanced acting class for older teens.

Yet the road to a critically acclaimed and financially viable community theater is not easy. “There is a constant need for money,” states Goodheart. “The theater has always struggled financially, which is kind of the definition of a community theater.”

Goodheart came to THT through her children who participate in the kids’ theater programs. Once on the Board, Goodheart quickly recognized that THT would need to boost their fundraising efforts. “We really hadn’t tapped the community at all. Other than some small events, we hadn’t done anything major.”

“The idea is to put together a fundraising machine that will allow us to continue to do the kind of theater that we want to do,” Goodheart explains. However, she accepts that it will take time to raise awareness and establish a strong fundraising network. For example, Peacock, who spearheads the grant application effort, will tell you that it has not been easy to obtain grants when the theater carries the zip code 94549—despite the need.

Still, Goodheart is excited about launching THT’s first annual fundraising gala—Playing Favorites—to be held on April 26th at the Veterans Memorial Building in Lafayette. “It’s going to be great party with great entertainment,” she states enthusiastically. “The Gala is as much about raising awareness for Town Hall as it is about raising money,” she adds.

Town Hall Theater recently completed renovations to the dressing rooms, office and lobby including a beautiful new bar. THT decided to tackle the renovations now because as Board member Janice Peacock explains, “The place did not reflect how we felt about it. Everyone who works at THT loves it. The place looked worn

out.” So, the ever resourceful Peacock rolled up her bargain-shopper sleeves and got to work obtaining grants and donations and finding recycled furniture and Internet deals. Although the renovations continue to be a work-in-progress, the new carpet, paint, and furniture in the theater lobby give the area fresh, clean look.

Next up on stage at THT will be Baby, Be Mine a musical revue that Artistic Director Kevin Morales wrote in about eight hours. “I usually write quickly once I know what I’m going to write,” says Morales confidently without a hint of self-importance. Morales, a Danville native, boasts a theater resume that defies his 31 young years. He made the move to THT when the theater was without a Director and without a play. Overnight (literally) he wrote the musical Let’s Go to the Movies, which went on to be one of THT’s most successful productions.

Morales may be poised for a repeat performance with THT’s final production of the season. The play tells the story of a young actress who invites a producer back to her home to pitch him the next great idea for a musical review. Intertwined with romance, parallel stories, and host of jazz standards from the thirties, Baby, Be Mine will include some of Morales’ and THT audience-goers’ favorite actors such as Sean Griffin and Meghann May. “We love it when Kevin writes a piece for us, and audiences do, too,” says Erokan. “And this is a show not to miss.”

Playing Favorites

On April 26, Town Hall Theatre will hold its first Annual Fundraising Gala—Playing Favorites—at the Veterans Memorial Building in Lafayette. “Come to the party, support the theater and let us do what we do best—entertain you,” says THT Gala chairperson, Amy Goodheart. “There will be singers, actors, scrumptious food, and fabulous auction packages. We hope the community will see this as a great opportunity to have a fun evening, bid on some items, and support the oldest continuously operating theater company in Contra Costa County.”

The evening starts at 7:00 pm and wraps up around 10:30 pm; tickets are \$85 per person. To purchase Gala tickets, buy raffle tickets for an overnight stay at the Lafayette Park Hotel, or make a donation, go to www.thtc.org; or call the Box Office at 925-283-1557.