

Published September 12th, 2012

How to Maintain Town Hall Theatre's Building?

By Sophie Braccini



Clive Smith and Betsy Streeter in front of the plaque that tells the story of the Town Hall building. Photo Sophie Braccini

the LIC was replaced by the Lafayette Improvement Association. A new constitution and by-laws were adopted and the title to the Town Hall was transferred in 1944, according to the LIA website.

When the City incorporated in 1968, LIA lost much of its function, but continues to be the steward of the building. "We've rented the building to different groups that pre-dated the current tenant, Town Hall Theatre," said Clyde Long, president of LIA's Board of Directors. "We see our mission as preserving this historical building and promoting the arts; that is why we are renting the facility on a very long term lease at below market rate." He added that the rent covers only a portion of the upkeep and that LIA adds what's needed from its own funds. Long acknowledges that there is inherent tension between a tenant and landlord, and that sometimes it's hard to get things done right away.

From their perspective, THT staff and volunteers believe that maintenance has not been done in a timely manner. "We've had problems with the air conditioning unit since 2009," said THT Artistic Director Clive Worsley. "It's taken a lot of phone calls, emails and complaints for us to get anything done. It should not have taken two years and water falling out of the ceiling on patrons."

The problem culminated in July during the two first performances of the very well received *Pygmalion*. "We'd like our audience to understand that if it was 100 degrees in the Theatre, it is not THT's fault," added Worsley.

"We care what our audience's experience is," says THT Board President Betsy Streeter, "and when something happens we are the ones who are apologizing and reimbursing tickets. We do so much work to bring highest quality performances and something like that happens!" Worsley added, "We worry that we will lose people."

"If the building was an empty shell it's possible they could rent it for more, but everything that makes it a theater belongs to our company: the stage, the seats, the electrical equipment, the bar downstairs (that is named after Ed Stokes, a major donor)," Worsley pointed out. "We know what the taxes, utilities and everything else costs," added Streeter, "but we cannot seek grants to improve the building. Our hands are tied; we do not own it."

LIA on the other hand wants to start fundraising to create an endowment that will sustain the upkeep of the historical building. "We will soon announce the dollar amount we want to raise," said Long. He believes that members of the Theatre understand that the rent is less than the maintenance costs, and that it's in their interest to help raise the money.

"We will seek different types of donors than those who support the Theatre," he said, "people and foundations who support historical buildings. If we support each other it will help everybody."

Going to see a play at Town Hall Theatre, one seldom wonders who the building belongs to - unless something happens... like the time the air conditioning failed, leaving audience members warm and increasingly damp as they tried to enjoy the show. The group that brings the community the very successful plays and educational programs, Town Hall Theatre Company (THT), does not actually own the building. The structure belongs to Lafayette's oldest service organization, the Lafayette Improvement Association (LIA) that rents the building to the theatre company.

LIA began as the Lafayette Improvement Club, established on November 11, 1911, at a time when the Lafayette area had few residents and most lived on outlying ranches and farms. The group came together for community betterment and to solve problems.

In 1914 the land at the corner of Moraga Road and School Street was donated to LIC by the Ghiglione family. The building was paid for by popular subscription. It became the not-yet-a-city's first hall where dances were held, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts met, as well as the Horseman's Association, the Red Cross, the American Legion, the Lion's Club, the Dad's Club, and various church groups. In 1941,

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