

Orinda Theater Celebrates its 75th Anniversary With A Night To Remember

By Sophie Braccini



The Orinda Crossroad in 1946.

Photo provided by the Orinda historical society:

On Dec. 29 there will be a unique opportunity in Orinda to step back in time 75 years and find oneself magically transported to the inauguration of the Orinda Theater on Dec. 29 1941. The theater is the beloved landmark that signals Orinda as much as the Eiffel Tower symbolizes Paris, and to celebrate in style, Derek Zemrak and Leonard Pirkle, owners of the theater, are offering the community a party to remember, with a ticket price of 50 cents, just like 75 years ago!

Zemrak and Pirkle love a good show, on the silver screen or live, and they are making sure that everything on that evening will feel 1941. "Our purpose is to create something unique where everyone can come, step back in time and celebrate this beautiful art deco icon," says Zemrak.

Some research to recreate the real opening night was made considerably easier by Ann O'Connell-Nye, a woman who's been part of the efforts to save the theater from destruction in the '80s and has collected significant historical information about the theater.

The Orinda Theater was built by Donald Rheem. With his brother, he had started a galvanizing company in 1925 in Oakland; he was the son of William S. Rheem, President of Standard Oil Company, and friend of William Randolph Hearst. He was also a developer and in 1937, he bought land at the Orinda Crossroads. A movie buff, he started the construction of the Orinda Theater that opened on Dec. 29, 1941, 22 days after Pearl Harbor. At the time, there was nothing there, besides the building across the road where the restaurant Casa Orinda moved a few months after the theater opened. Other retail was developed around the theater and in January 1982 then owner Clark Wallace proposed to demolish the theater to build a shopping center; the owner closed it pending approval.

The Friends of the Orinda Theater formed to preserve the city

landmark and several years of fight between the developer and the Friends concluded in a compromise that included the creation of Theater Square and the preservation of the historic site. It reopened in 1989. It has operated continuously since, and quite successfully now according to Zemrak.

People today are able to enjoy the original decor that was commissioned by Rheem. The original murals representing "air, fire, water and earth" were by Anthony Heinsbergen, a famous muralist who created both the heroic murals that decorate the theater walls and the ceiling of the foyer. These murals were part of the 1972-74 Smithsonian traveling exhibition of Heinsbergen's works, and they were one of the reasons the theater became part of the National Registry of Historic Places in 1982. The State of California's declaration of the theater as a classic example of art modern style led the preservation of the building. It has not yet been designated an Orinda historic landmark.

Zemrak and his team will present that night a very similar program to the one that was offered on the first night: the main feature film was the then new George Marshall's movie "Texas" with William Holden, Glenn Ford and Claire Trevor. "Texas" is a good Western movie, action packed, with humor at times, with Holden and Ford still in the early years of their stardom. In 1941, an evening at the movie was more than the main feature, and the 2016 version will also have more to offer: the newsreel of the time, the shorts, a ventriloquist - just like Paul Winchell 75 years ago, and Zemrak has also invited an opera singer to be a part of the fun.

In the lobby elements of O'Connell-Nye's historical collection will be on display for those interested to learn more, usherettes in period costumes will add to the festive atmosphere, and patrons are encouraged to also come in 40s attire. "At the time the tickets were 40 and 45 cents," says Zemrak.

"We made it 50 cents to make it simple." Tickets can be purchased at the theater or online. Local sponsors can support the event with a "\$75-for-75-years" donation.

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