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## Town Hall Theatre celebrates 75 years

By Adam Blake



Town Hall lobby from years past Photos provided

in 1944 and their first production was "Catching up with Christmas" at the Orinda School PTA. They moved to the "barn" on school street 10 years later and eventually reorganized themselves as the Town Hall Theatre Co. in 1992. Over the years Harris acted, made costumes, and served as president of the company twice.

Today, Harris' daughter, Rebecca Mallon, has carried on her mother's legacy by frequently volunteering at Town Hall Theatre over the past 15 years. Her favorite spot is behind the bar where she can converse with the attendees.

Mallon was quick to point out that despite her mother's passion for the stage, she was never one to bask in the spotlight.

"My mother was always very humble about recognition. She didn't go out of her way for recognition and praise. She did what she did because she loved it," Mallon said.

Nevertheless, Harris' lifelong commitment to the theater has been memorialized with the "Wirta-bell" mounted in the theatre's foyer. It is rung at every show to signal attendees to take their seats at the beginning of a performance and after intermission.

Of course, Harris and Mallon are just one example of the hard work and dedication it takes to keep the theater thriving. From building sets, to cleaning the seats, to maintaining the landscaping around the building, it takes a village, to say the least.

"Town Hall Theatre runs on volunteers and in the last three years we have had tremendous re-growth in our corps of volunteers," Shepard said. "Our volunteers don't just keep this historic building running, they also take care of it and become part of our family."

Mallon, who grew up in the early days of the Dramateurs, says her mother would be thrilled to see how far Town Hall Theatre has come today. This includes recent updates to the theatre's technical capacity with new LED lighting and an updated sound system, in addition to expanding community

Throughout its rich history, many community members of Town Hall Theatre have stepped up to preserve the 104-year-old landmark. The late Wirtabel Harris played an instrumental role in saving the building back in 1964 by spearheading the "Save Town Hall" campaign, after it had failed to meet new building and fire regulations.

The 185-seat theater was originally constructed as a meeting space and town hall for the local farming community in 1914 and was in dire need of renovations. It likely would not exist today if it weren't for Harris' relentless efforts to raise \$50,000 from the community in order to bring the building up to code.

Harris moved to the area in the 1940s and quickly became an integral member of the Dramateurs, which was all-female at the time. The group formed

outreach and educational programs.

Education has always been central to the Town Hall Theatre's mission, but they recently have been able to expand and deepen how they reach students in Lamorinda. In addition to serving Spring Hill, Lafayette, and Burton Valley elementary schools, the theater runs an Adult Education class that has toured around the elementary schools and built interactive programs for middle school classrooms.

With help from The Lafayette Community Foundation and The Bill Graham Foundation, Town Hall Theatre has also been able to offer student matinees for select shows with free tuition to under-served schools. They have also created countless opportunities for high school and college students to gain first-hand theater experience, both on stage and behind the curtain.

Shepard looks forward to expanding community partnerships with more local nonprofits that have themes related to the art they produce. In December, the theater will work with The John Muir Land Trust Foundation during "Cinderella, A Fairytale" and Center for Elders' independence during "The Cherry Orchard." Shepard says nonprofits like these pair well with the themes in the shows of the upcoming season.

On the production side, artistic director Susan Evans hopes to continue putting on high-quality shows, while attracting artistic talent and welcoming new audiences from the greater Bay Area. Since space is a limiting factor, she plans to explore putting on shows off-site, bringing productions into new spaces in the community.

Town Hall Theatre will host a masquerade gala fundraiser in honor of its 75th anniversary and 300th production on Oct. 26 at the Lafayette Veterans Center. "I think the longevity of Town Hall Theatre is a result of the support of the community, the warm and welcoming spirit of the Town Hall staff and volunteers, and the diversity of what we have to offer," said Managing Director Dennis Markam, who has been with the theater for over 13 years.

The upcoming celebration will be emceed by local DJ ryanO and include a cocktail hour with live music, dinner, dancing, and the original cabaret "Coming Home - Town Hall Theatre Through the years" directed by Glen Riggs. The show will feature Main Stage and Education alums, highlighting the important role the theater has played in so many lives across generations.

"We are a place for the community to gather together, in person, and create memories and have shared experiences," said Shepard. "There are a dwindling number of spaces where people can gather in person and experience stories and performances so close to home with their friends and family."

Tickets for the gala are available through the Town Hall Box Office at (925) 283-1557 or online at [www.TownHallTheatre.com](http://www.TownHallTheatre.com).



Wirtabel Harris rings the "Wirta-bell"



Town Hall early days Photo provided

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