

Published April 28th, 2021

Extensively renovated Orinda Theatre reopens April 30

By Sora O'Doherty



Orinda Theatre lobby Photo Derek Zemrak

During the past year, while the COVID-19 pandemic prevented business as usual at the Orinda Theatre, owner Derek Zemrak has been working away with a small team to restore the landmark building to its 1941 glory. Throughout the building, theaters have been renovated, paintings restored, and carpets and tiles cleaned. When the theatre officially reopens on Friday, April 30, patrons will be able to appreciate all this work.

Zemrak says that he is allowed to reopen at 50% occupancy, but out of an abundance of caution, he is only reopening the main theater, which has a capacity of 750, at 25% occupancy. The first movies available will be "Minari" and "Nomadland." Zemrak says he will adjust week by week to the requirements reported by Contra Costa County. Cine Cuvee will be open weekends only with outdoor seating under the marquee, but no indoor seating at this time.

All of the neon light fixtures in the building, some up to 80 years old, have been restored. In the process, neon light expert Greg King remarked, "I wish the black lights were back." Zemrak was unaware of the black lights but did some research and discovered that the murals that decorate the theater were painted by famed movie theater muralist Anthony Heinsbergen, a Dutch immigrant who started a painting company in 1918 that would go on to employ nearly 200 people at its height.

One source states that the studio painted murals in 757 theaters in addition to hotels. The murals in the Orinda Theatre were supposed to come to life when exposed to black light. Zemrak got a small black light and shined it on the walls. To his amazement, the murals did in fact react to the light. He proceeded to install black lights to illuminate the murals, being very careful to keep it close to the paintings and not to shine it on patrons. Some of the paintings lower down on the walls do not react to the black light because they were repainted after the theater sustained water damage in 1986. The murals reflect themes of earth, wind, fire and water.

In the lobby, the chandelier and carpets were cleaned. As they started taking things down, Zemrak and the small group of people who stayed together through the pandemic began to find out the history of things in the theater and to restore them. In the ladies lounge the make-up stations received new LED lighting. When patrons are leaving the theaters, on their way out they would see an opaque white panel over the doors. When they took it down, Zemrak was amazed to find that there were blue and yellow neon lights that hadn't been visible since 1986, even though the lights had been turned on.

Originally the panel was an exit marquee that would have announced upcoming movies, but Demrak doesn't have lettering for the area. He says that Heinsbergen wanted you to walk into the theater and see blue and gold, and see it again when you left, and now you can see it again. The outdoor marquees will again return to advertising current films, but the center panel will continue to be rented out to announce birthdays and anniversaries.

Other upcoming events at the theater include the Psychotronix Film Festival which will be held May 1, in the 189-seat theater. Zemrak says this event sold out pretty quickly. On May 30 the theater will host a concert by local group George and the Cool Katz, who promise to take you down memory lane with your favorite tunes from Elvis and Johnny Mathis; country to rock & roll. For information, visit orindamovies.com.



Restored to 1941 original, Orinda Theatre features work of famous theatre muralist Anthony Heinsbergen (1894-1981). Photo Derek Zemrak

Reach the reporter at: sora@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA