

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Backstage at Lafayette's Town Hall Theatre



Town Hall's Managing Director Dennis Markam in front of stage

Photos Vera Kochan

By Vera Kochan

In 1914 the Town Hall Theatre – the “oldest continuously active theatre company in Contra Costa County,” according to its website – offered its first event: a Grand Ball.

Additional such events became so popular that the Oakland-Antioch & Eastern Railway provided special trains with a stop at West Lafayette, where passengers could disembark near the Town Hall to attend dinner/dance parties. The proceedings would usually begin around 9 p.m. with a late dinner around midnight, followed by dancing until the wee hours of dawn. It is said that one train left the Lafayette station around 5:30 a.m.

The building also did its patriotic duty during World War II, when it was used as troop barracks between 1941 and 1945.

As far as theatre productions go, The Lafayette Playshop had its first performance at the Town Hall in December of 1941, only to be interrupted by the war. The Straw Hat Revue rented the theatre in 1947, followed by the Dramateurs in 1955. Laf-Frantics also held productions at the theatre between 1956-1986, with the Dramateurs morphing into today's Town Hall Theatre Company in 1992. Past productions included: “A Few Good Men,” “One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,” “Little Shop of Horrors,” “Macbeth,” “Sense and Sensibility,” and “Miracle on 34th Street.”

According to Town Hall Theatre Managing Director Dennis Markam, who has been with the theatre since 2008, and in his current position since 2014, “In the 1950s, a stage was finally built in the center of the room and it was theatre-in-the-round. In the early '60s, the audience sat in regular chairs and the current stage was built. By the late '60s, the theatre-style chairs were put in along with the sprinkler system.”

The 185-capacity theatre,

like most businesses, experienced coronavirus lockdown blues. The building's owners, Lafayette Improvement Association, was an understanding landlord and suspended the rent during the pandemic. “We will do whatever the county wants,” stated Markam. “We will do what is safe. We're changing things as we come back from COVID.”

Indeed they are. As Town Hall Theatre prepares to open its doors to live audiences once again, a tour of the building revealed a reorganization within its walls similar to what every home in America was going through during the first months of shelter-in-place. In evidence was the cleaning out of closets and storage spaces, repurposing of rooms, and a lot of out-with-the-old and in-with-the-new philosophy.

“We don't have a lot of storage space, so a lot of the furniture we use for shows are rented or bought,” explained Markam. “Props are rented, but those that we own are stored on site. With costumes, we rent a storage space. The ones that are used during a show stay on site.”

Wooden cubbies line the theatre's wall behind the background sets on stage and contain props necessary for a current production. All essential lighting equipment is located above the stage. The dressing rooms contain the same type of round light bulbs surrounding the makeup mirrors as one would find on Broadway. The staff makes due with what little space they have to work in by being as organized as possible.

The house staff of approximately eight employees stays the same during each production, however the playhouse crew changes all the time. “We use stage crews from Saint Mary's College, Campolindo, Acalanes, Miramonte and other places,” said Markam. “It's good experience for them, and it looks good on a resume.”

Given the cramped quarters that the staff, crew and

actors have to deal with, Markam was asked if they would ever move to a larger location. “It's so much of our identity to stay here and be the Town Hall Theatre.”

One important addition the theatre is attempting to make is an upgrade to its air conditioning system. Summers are so stifling; it's the reason there are no productions during the hot months. With no money coming in due to COVID mandates for over a year, Markam is hoping for a few benefactors with a love for live theatre to donate funds for the new system. (Markham can be reached at (925) 283-6673.)

You can't have a show without actors, and the casting process is pretty basic. The theatre usually holds one big audition before each season where notes are made as to which actor would be right for an upcoming production. Later, another audition is held prior to each show to fill in any additional parts. Town Hall uses professional actors as well as amateurs.

Each season typically contains four shows, and there's always a holiday themed show in December. This season, Town Hall is switching things up a bit by offering shows that have never been produced before. Called “New Voices,” the purpose is to provide feedback to the artists and writers. The first one is set for October. They also plan on hiring a curator, who will solicit information from actors in the area as to which productions they'd like to see on stage.

Every old theatre has its ghosts, and Town Hall Theatre is one of them. Besides the typical theatre pranks, staff is convinced that an April Fools' Day incident in 2009, was caused by an unseen helping hand. The building was in desperate need of new carpeting, but the cost was unaffordable. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the sprinkler system over the back row seats turned on, only soaking the one row. With minimal damage, the seats were replaced through the insurance policy, and there was enough left over to buy new carpeting. Coincidence?

The folks at Town Hall Theatre are looking forward to welcoming audiences back from the long COVID hiatus. “I'm excited about the changes we've been making this past year,” Markam said. “I think the community will appreciate what we're doing!”



Town Hall's Managing Director Dennis Markam has the best seat in the house

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