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Orinda appoints first Cal Shakes liaison

By Alison Burns

"It turns out that being the best kept secret in town is not necessarily fiscally sound or a blueprint for financial success," Clive Worsley, Executive Director of Cal Shakes, told the Orinda City Council, when he addressed them at their most recent meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 5.

Under the heading of Policy Matters, the council was meeting to consider appointing additional council liaisons, an arrangement where each council member has a close (but hands-off) involvement with organizations such as the Friends of Orinda Creeks, the Historic Landmarks Committee, and Art in Public Places.

To date, as City Manager David Biggs pointed out, council liaison assignments have traditionally involved nonprofits and other governmental agencies, but the discussion centered around whether Orinda's cultural landscape should also be considered, since COVID has left many of these organizations severely battered. While making reference to Cal Shakes' current fiscal issues, Worsley was not at that time requesting financial help (he'd unfortunately met Mayor Inga Miller and Council Member Janet Riley too late to be considered for a grant). Rather, Worsley wanted to explain to Orinda residents, and the council, why the theater company had been forced to take a different direction by transforming itself into a multi-disciplinary performing and cultural arts center. From now on, he said, the Cal Shakes season at the Bruns Amphitheater would involve just one or two classical plays, with the rest of the calendar devoted to activities such as dance, comedy, programming for families and youth audiences, "live music of all stripes," private, civic and corporate events, weddings and memorials.

Worsley, who started working for the California Shakespeare Theater in 2002, as an actor and teaching artist in public schools, was obviously a little weary of hearing people say "Cal Shakes? I drive by it all the time (located just off Highway 24) and I've never been inside." But he also admitted that "in recent years, in our company's desire to be nationally recognized, it may have to some degree turned its back on its immediate neighbors and I am here to rectify that. We intend to be in good partnership with you all."

The discussion that followed was whether a council liaison should be concerned with only Cal Shakes, or whether to expand that responsibility to Orinda's other iconic cultural institutions.

Council Member Darlene Gee commented that the "excellent idea" of appointing a liaison from the city council "fits into the whole spectrum of our evaluation of our economic redevelopment" but she thought that it would be best to start something "simpler" with just one entity (in this case, Cal Shakes) and one person as liaison.

The motion was then carried to create a liaison to Cal Shakes, with the initial appointment going to Council Member Janet Riley, who later commented that "Cal Shakes adds such cultural value to our community, offering not only traditional theater, but also music, dance, and other live arts experiences. It is right at our fingertips for all to enjoy!"

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