

Dreams, determination fuel theater makeover

'Evening at Fox' only the beginning

By LAUREN COMSTOCK

Watsonville on the itinerary of the American Conservatory Theater Troubadors? The Monterey Jazz Festival's tunes trumpeted on Main Street? The New York Ballet on tip toe to perform here?

As far as Lorraine Boyle, Ethlyn Miller and Nyira Gitana are concerned, it could happen.

"We've worked too hard to not believe this will work," Boyle said of their efforts to transform a local Spanish-language movie house into a theater for the performing arts.

Boyle and Miller, co-chairpersons for the Pajaro Valley Arts Council (PVAC), and Gitana, publicity chairperson for Friday's "A Gala Benefit at the Fox," have worked diligently the past year to see the Fox Theater, the largest slant-floor theater in the county, become a viable performing arts center.

Built in 1923, the theater figured prominently in the lives of Watsonville citizens for decades. It served as a stage for vaudeville performances and later as a movie house for silent films and then "talkies."

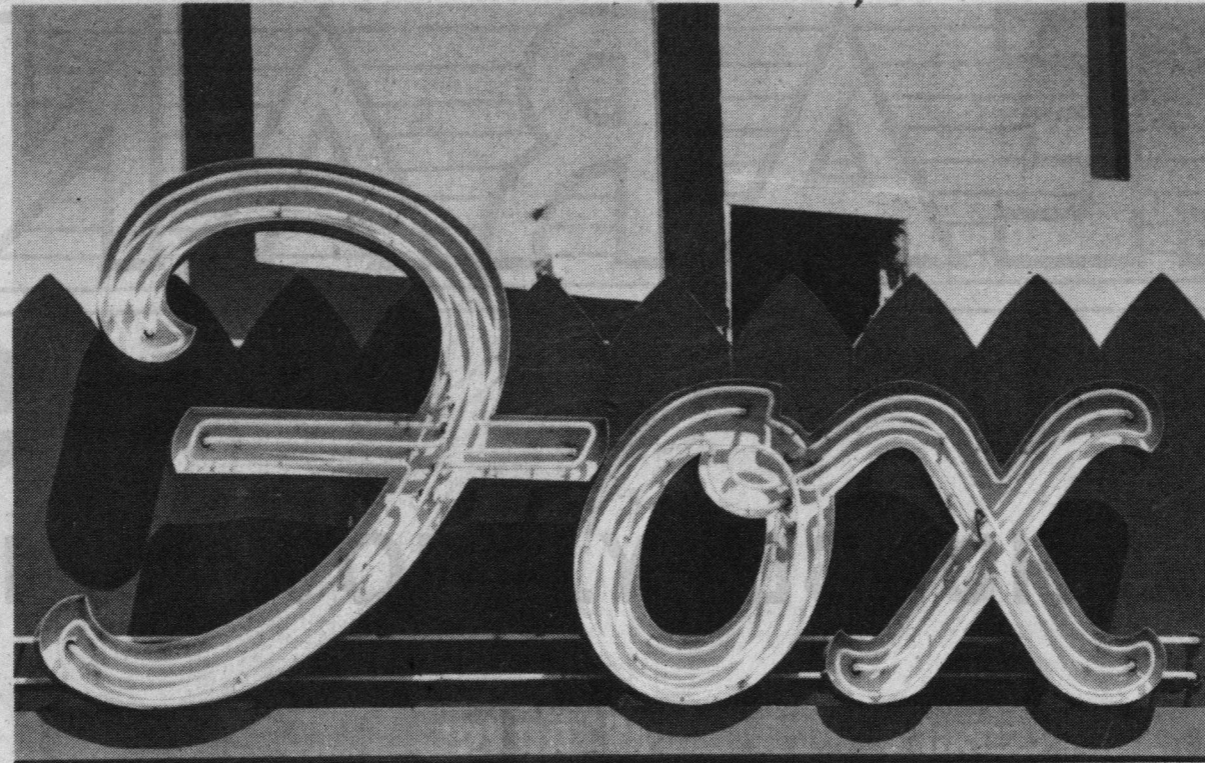
In 1973, owner Hank Garcia began catering to a Spanish-speaking audience by showing Spanish-language films.

A county-wide facilities study done in 1983 pointed to the Fox as the theater with the most potential for county-wide use.

Garcia had extensive renovations made on the theater in 1983. After that work was done, improvements in the backstage area were made by PVAC, with the help of private donations and the Cultural Council.

The refurbished theater was unveiled to a sold-out crowd May 17 at "An Evening at the Fox."

In August, guitarist Ralph Towner performed to an audience of 800 as part of the Cabrillo Music Festival.



Friday's benefit performance marks the third and last live performance in the theater until fire code standards are met.

PVAC hopes to have the theater ready for a May, 1985 pops concert by the Santa Cruz County Symphony.

"The first thing we have to do — almost in the next five minutes — is we have to go for more money for sprinklers," Boyle said.

Miller said the 40-member council was left with a "good bottom line figure" after the May performance. She also said the Cultural Commission has indicated it may have another grant for PVAC earmarked for use on the Fox.

Sprinklers, lighting equipment and acoustical improvements top the list of renovations

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still needed at the theater. Stage improvements, curtains and drops are next in line.

A contract is being negotiated now between Garcia and PVAC to determine use once the theater is renovated.

The Fox will continue to feature Spanish-language films with restricted use by the arts council, probably 12 times a year.

"It's a unique joint venture, to say the least," said Boyle. "The fact that he (Garcia) is open to it at all is wonderful."

Despite the enormously costly task ahead of the PVAC, the three women are optimistic.

"I think when people see the facility has been used successfully in the past, that will be a big impetus to support it," Gitana said.

"Anytime you go into a venture like this there's a certain risk and a challenge," Miller said. "Maybe I'm an optimistic, naive person but I think the community will definitely support this."

Interest from the artistic community is certainly no problem.

"We've had quite a number of inquiries," Miller said, citing groups including La Esperanza del Valle, the Watsonville Band, Sweet Adelines, Cabrillo Music Festival, theater groups, schools and the ACT Troubadors.

"When artists know there is a theater, they will try, by hook or crook, to get into it," Gitana said.

The three women believe Watsonville would do well to accommodate those artists.

"Anything that's successful in Watsonville will help to enhance its image and break down the old barriers about how dangerous it is and how much crime there is," Boyle said.

"We want to let people know there's a fine group of citizens here who are interested in a variety of cultural events," Gitana said. "I live here and it's important that when I say I live in Watsonville I don't get that strange kind of look."

"There's a selfish motive for me as well. I don't want to have to go to the (Santa Cruz) Civic or to Monterey or Carmel or up to the city to see something good."

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