

# Show must go on, but not on screen

## Opera sings out at Capitola Theater

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CAPITOLA — Some residents may wonder when the new owners of the old Capitola Theater will turn it into a hotel, or if the movies will ever come back.

Lately, opera names like "Die Fledermaus" and "The Barber of Seville" have been showing up on the marquee, instead of low-rent double-features such as "Multiplicity, with Kazaam."

But opera is no pet project at the Capitola Theater Bay Shore Lyric Opera Company. Instead, it's the main event. Plans to develop the former movie theater property have been put on the backburner indefinitely.

"It's just not going to happen for quite a while," said co-owner Claire Der Torossian, a former mezzo soprano whose family bought the theater for \$1.6 million from a development group that had proposed a 60-room hotel and retail center in 1995.

Many residents said the development group's project was too big and the project stalled. Then, after the Der Torossians bought it, they spoke of a 40-room hotel, but this project also appears to be on hold. And there are no immediate plans to bring back the films.

The theater is a local turquoise landmark. It opened in August, 1948. It featured cheap popcorn and \$4 double features. Manager and owner Audrey Jacobs ran it almost single-handedly throughout its history. The theater's charm lay in its erratic film scheduling. Sometimes a classic like "Babe" would pull into town. Other times, the movies were tried and true flops, or movies that came and went at other theaters.

In fact, "let's wait and see it when it gets to Capitola" used to be a popular Mid County saying.

When the prices were so low, the movie didn't matter. It was the ultimate cheap date.

Jacobs, upon her retirement, said little independents just couldn't compete with the big multiplexes.

The last movie she ever showed at the theater was "The Three Musketeers." She died on Oct. 13.

The theater has always had a place in the hearts of Capitola residents, but it wasn't doing a booming business in its later years.

Der Torossian met Jacobs during the final movie show. Der Torossian was nervous about any filmgoers knowing who she was because there was so much nostalgia and strong sentiment tied to the place. "I said, 'people remember their first kiss here,'" Der Torossian said. "She told me, 'it's nice these people are here, but where were they when there were only two or three people in the theater?'"

Now, Der Torossian devotes much of her time to the theater. She works as a set designer. Her daughter, concert soprano Jennifer Der Torossian, appears in productions. The family has changed the theater from a "cheap date" spot to a night on the town that costs about \$25, which is still low compared to many other opera houses.

Mayor Stephanie Harlan said she gets frequent feedback from Capitola Village merchants, showing widespread support for a part-time movie theater at the same location.

"It would draw more people there," she said. "If they could just do movies Monday through Thursday, that wouldn't interfere with their weekend performances. They could probably lease a projector."

She said many businesses report that sales have fallen off since the theater closed.

But neighboring Caffe Lido's owner, George Laskowicz, says the change has had the opposite effect on his Monterey Avenue restaurant.

"We have more customers now for sure because we're the type of restaurant that people like to go to before a performance or after," he said. The opera company has cooperated with Caffe Lido, making a point of sending customers there, he said.

"The bigger advantage is that a different type of people are coming (to the village)" he said. "They are more interested in the arts, and I think it's a really good influence."

Der Torossian said she would consid-

er the possibility of weekday movies at some point in the future. But she insisted the theater has been a strong draw for the village. "We've brought people into town," Der Torossian said. "On New Year's Eve, this place was crazy with women in dresses and men in tuxedos." She was referring to the theater's "Prince Olofski's Ball" from the Strauss opera "Die Fledermaus," which has long been a New Year's tradition throughout the world.

Der Torossian described the opera as a labor of love. She said the Bay Shore opera company is a nonprofit corporation that has not quite broken even. "We made a little money on 'Die Fledermaus,'" she said. "Rigoletto" will cost us \$40,000."

"We'll always operate in the red, but hopefully it'll be this much in the red," she said, holding her thumb and forefinger close together as she stood in the aisles of the former movie house.

But she also said the company's four operas since last March have drawn two-thirds to full-capacity crowds. The theater has 321 seats. The movie theater had more, but some had to be removed when the stage was built.

Shutting down the opera would be unthinkable, she said. "I think if I didn't want to do this anymore, they would hang me from the highest tree out there," she said. "It's snowballing." The subscriber list now has 2,000 names.

The theater does not have an in-house company, although it makes use of a wide range of local talent. It also brings in singers from across the nation. Der Torossian plans to have a singer exchange program with Como, Italy.

The opera house has made some significant changes, including the addition of the stage, although visitors will quickly see many signs of its old movie theater identity. The concessions stand

where the famously cheap popcorn was once sold is still there. The owners have added placards showing famous composers, but the ambience is still more cinematic than operatic.

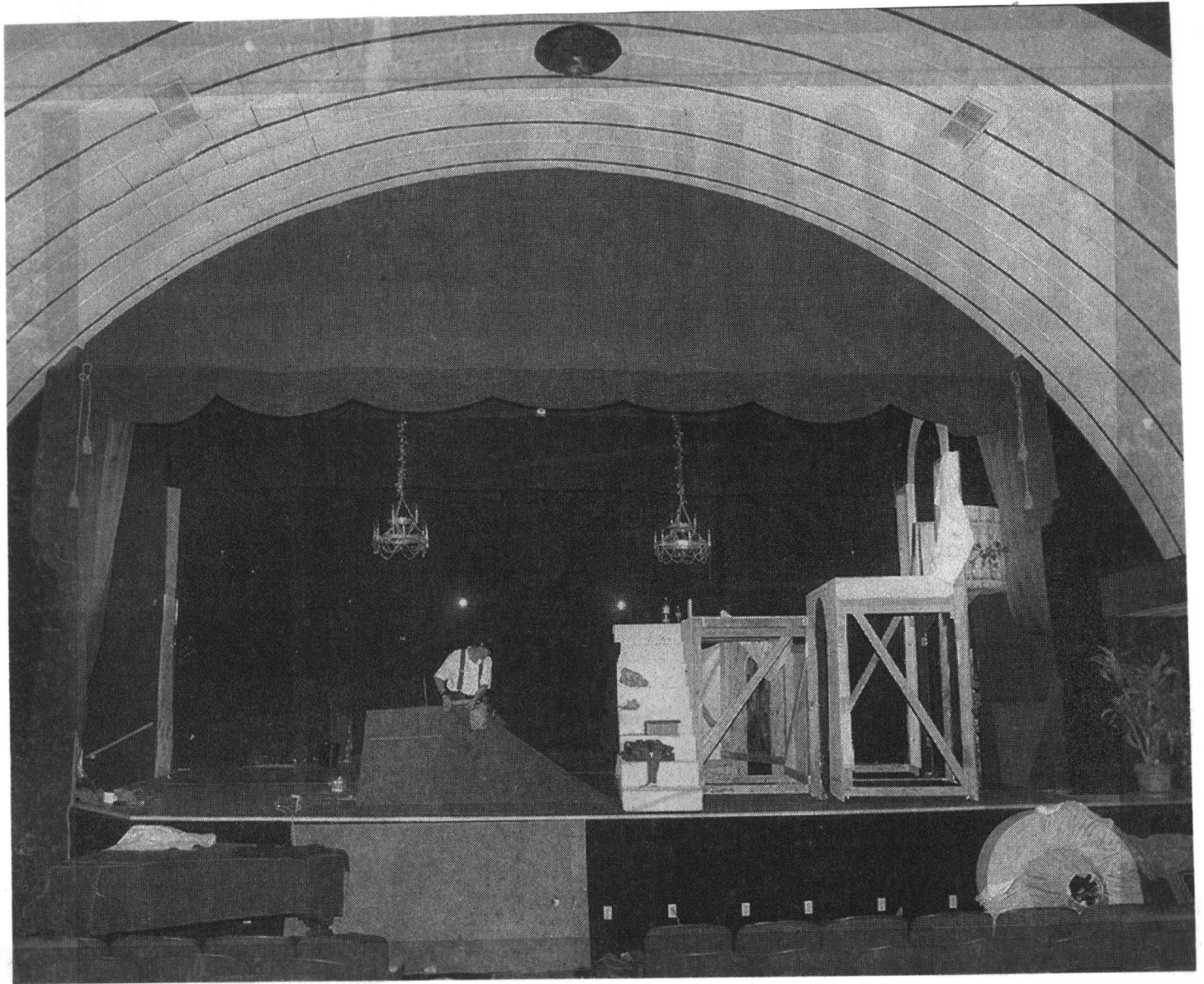
But anyone who hasn't been into the theater area might be surprised to walk in and see an impressive looking castle taking shape from the floor.

The owners have made a point not to change the acoustics in the theater, which they describe as crystal clear. They have also converted many areas of the old theater, including a dressing room that was once a room for parents to let their babies cry.

The only recent discussion of new movies was between the owners and the organizers of the Spike and Mike animation festival, which has been shown at the theater previously. "But I never heard back from them," she said.

The theater still has two screens, but its original 1948 projectors are now gone, and the company has no immediate plans to replace them.

"I wasn't that optimistic about opera taking off in this area," Der Torossian said. "Now there is no question that it stays here. We are in no hurry to build."



A stagehand, above, repairs the stage floor at the beloved Capitola Theater, left, where the new owner is now staging opera productions.

Dan Coyro/  
Sentinel photos