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Celebrating Life in Boise and the Urban West



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'The Love of Generations'

Nearly nine decades later the Egyptian Theatre remains a community treasure

By Patti Murphy

For 90 years, Boise's Egyptian Theatre has been a gathering place for locals of all ages to slip into the dark and lose themselves in the wonderment and escapism of show business. The iconic theater on the corner of Capital Boulevard and Main Street in downtown Boise opened with much pomp on April 19, 1927. Like many U.S. theaters during the 1920s, the striking architecture of the Egyptian reflected the fascination with Egypt sweeping the country following the 1923 discovery of King Tut's tomb.

Stepping across the threshold was like entering a pharaoh's palace. Regal and mysterious, it was a visual feast with its red, green, blue and gold decorative paint and carpeting, Egyptian symbols and gleaming gold-leaf motif surrounding the massive proscenium. This single-screen theater was, and still is, an architectural treasure and cherished local landmark.

The near loss of a treasure

But its historical significance wasn't always appreciated. Over the years, it changed hands and suffered both neglect and misguided revamps, including the time someone completely covered the elaborately decorated lobby walls with beige paint. With every new owner came a new name: the Fox in the 1930s, the Ada in the 1940s and the Egyptian again in the late 1970s.

In the 70s, an urban renewal effort to tear down the old to make room for the new swept through Boise. The plan was to turn an eight-block space in the heart of downtown into a shopping mall. Historic buildings on four blocks of downtown Boise fell victim to the wrecking ball before the mall plan was relocated to another area of town. The then-Ada Theater was on the demolish list, but was purchased and saved by Earl Hardy, who renamed it the Egyptian and undertook its first renovation in 1978. The Hardy Foundation commissioned the most recent renovation in 1999.

Much work needed to be done to return the elegant movie house to its previous glory. Paint layers were removed and microscopically examined to restore the original color schemes. Gleaming gold leaf was restored on the columns and statues. Approximately 30 paint colors were used throughout, with some areas requiring more than 70 differ-

ent tones, according to records of Conrad Schmitt Studios, the restoration artists.

"It has taken some updating, but it continues to be restored as needed to keep it in a historically relevant state," said theater manager Destiny Lee, who has worked at the Egyptian since 2004. She noted that the original 1970s carpeting runs throughout the theater and is regularly restored.

Entertaining generations of Boiseans

There's something charming about being able to sit in a dark theater, in the same spot where your parents and grandparents also made memories.

"So many people in our community, our elderly generation who grew up coming to movies here, bring family and friends and you hear them explain that the theater was going to be torn down, but it's amazing it's still here," said Lee. "They share stories about the wonderful experiences they've had here. Hearing a grandmother say to her grandkids, 'Your grandfather kissed me for the first time up in that balcony,' it's just so sweet. It's the love of the generations."

Lifelong Boisean Jane DeChambeau remembered that going downtown in the 1960s and 70s to see a movie was a "special occasion," especially at the Egyptian. "I remember going to the midnight showing of 'Love Story' and just crying my eyes out," said DeChambeau. "It was on New Year's Eve, and we arrived at the theater in 1971 and left in 1972. There's more to being there at midnight than I will tell," she teased, "but every time I'm in the theater now I glance over to where I was sitting and relive the whole night."

DeChambeau added, "I remember 'Love Story' in my childhood, and my daughter tells me that she remembers going to the Harry Potter premiere dressed as Hermione," said DeChambeau. "We have such fun talking about our memories from that theater."

Boisean Debbie Cook said, "When I was in junior high school, we went to the Egyptian to see 'Cleopatra.' The movie was quite racy for that time, and it was a big premiere and quite the to-do. I remember looking up at the balcony seats, and always thought it would be so cool to sit in one of those."



The new Egyptian of today

Today, the Egyptian remains true to its original architecture, but its entertainment focus has evolved with the cultural needs and demands of the growing Boise community. No longer a full-time commercial movie theatre, the intimate, 745-seat venue now serves as a premier concert venue, opera space and community host to a variety of happenings.

A huge community advocate, the Egyptian regularly hosts events such as Boise Classic Movies, in which Boiseans vote online for the films they'd like to see and the winning movie is then shown during a special community screening.

Other events include film festivals and premieres, special silent films, weddings, guest speakers, author readings and fundraising concerts for the local food bank and homeless shelter. "We are providing a space to give back to those in need in our community and the money is staying local," said Lee.

A theater for future generations

"I am so happy that the right people stayed involved with the Egyptian so it continues to be a highlight of the community," DeChambeau said. "Today, when I go to the Egyptian, I cherish the feeling I have in there, the feeling that I have been in that space during many different chapters of my life."

Said Cook, "It's wonderful that it's being used for so many great things now. I cannot believe the historic buildings that were lost in our city, and how fortunate that this building was not destroyed. I would be sick if anything happened to this theater."

Lee sums up by saying, "We are more than just movies. We are a true community event center, and our goal is to continue being a big part of the community and bring in great entertainment.

"It's all about remembering how to live and enjoy life again. We just try to spread the love." ■