

Warner Grand Theater Turns 90

By **Melina Paris** - 01/19/2021



Left to right, WGT manager Lee Sweet, artistic director Taran Schindler Johnson and Grand Vision Foundation board president Fred Allen, part of the team ushering the Warner Grand Theater toward its promising future.

Grand Vision Foundation realizes a milestone with the help of community.

January 2021 marks a huge milestone in the San Pedro Arts and Culture District: The Warner Grand Theatre celebrates its 90th anniversary.

For nearly a century and through different iterations and owners, the 1931 art deco movie palace has evolved into a thriving community performing arts center. The Grand Vision Foundation, the nonprofit team behind the 1,500 seat theater is dedicated to keeping it thriving for the community for years to come. But that takes the help of many hands and so far, while it's been challenging, it's working.

The Warner Grand Theater is now undergoing much needed renovations. Grand Vision's executive director Liz Schindler Johnson and the Grand Annex, artistic director Taran Schindler spoke about their hopes for the renovations and the theater's future.

"We're very hopeful that the city will stay on schedule to begin the renovations in January 2022," Liz said. "But the city is in a fiscal crisis now so we're cautiously optimistic."

“The project is two-fold,” Taran said. “The renovation is driven by the City of Los Angeles and then there is the Love The Lobby campaign.”

They explained, the city has secured almost \$10 million to do a major restoration of the theater. — not a complete restoration — that would cost \$30 million.

It may sound like a huge amount of money,” Liz said. “But when the renovations start the money won’t go as far as one would think because it’s a public building with many public financing requirements.

Taran pointed to the second part of the renovations, which involves two campaigns. Love the Lobby is a smaller scale project but a very visible one, based in community support. The campaign debuted in 2018 during Grand Vision’s event, Gathering For The Grand when the fundraiser was kicked off by a \$50,000 gift from Councilman Joe Buscaino’s office. Grand Vision worked to match that figure through fundraising and Save Your Seat, a continuing program in which patrons could adopt a seat. It was initiated in 2004 to refurbish the theater’s dilapidated condition and responded to improvements most frequently asked for by the community.

Individuals were able to adopt a seat, a few seats or even an entire row for a loved one or themselves. Through this effort and other support, the foundation raised almost \$1 million.

“We wanted to continue this enthusiasm by getting not just community involvement,” Taran said. “But as a community stamp on the theater so there could be more of a sense of ownership for the community.”

Love The Lobby funds will go to both functional and aesthetic improvements like revealing the ceiling artwork that was covered over in beige paint in the early to mid-1980s.

Taran shared a “quite off the wall” quote from a circus 1931 press release just before the theater opened. It attempts to describe what the ceiling artwork meant:

“The main foyer has a ceiling beam composition further advancing the Italian influence. Each of the beams is highly detailed with decorative ornaments, richly applied by hand. Each beam has been individually decorated by skilled artists of the highest type of craftsmanship. As a unit the beams have an independent allegorical theme depicting the theatrical arts from their inception to the ultimate in the show business today.”

“The only way we will ever know if this is true, is to raise the remaining \$150,000 and reveal the historic designs,” Taran said.



Standing on the historic theaters staircase, Liz Schindler Johnson shows her pride for Warner Grand Theater.

Indeed, with the mystery of what the designs are and perhaps their meaning, Liz believes that's what propels her on her continued fascination and desire to fix up and improve the theater.

"We hope to revive the theater," Liz said. "And what's nice about this program is that it is not going to be subject to whether the city is in a fiscal crisis or not.

Grand Vision Foundation's efforts have helped remind the community of what it has and it has responded. In these COVID times, the sisters have noticed a renewed enthusiasm for centralized community projects.

Grand Vision recently completed a street banner campaign, with five different designs to brighten up the downtown streets. Individuals and businesses purchased banners to be displayed on street lamps throughout the central San Pedro district and a little beyond, celebrating the Warner Grand's 90th anniversary. The banners will go up any day and they anticipate doing another phase, lasting through most of 2021."

"At a time when we can't even go out to restaurants," Liz said. "It will make it less bleak looking and more attractive to come to the downtown area and see these beautiful banners and remind people that we have this wonderful resource. We just have to be patient and we'll get it all back.

"We're going through so much now ... we need things to keep our spirits up. When people drive by and see the banners ... I hope people will realize how nice it is that there is a theater here that is a galvanizing feature of our community."

Taran noted the theater has had its ups and downs, When it was purchased in 1996 by the city it was with the expressed purpose of it being used as a community theater, to be community accessible.

“Since then it’s become a given that if you’re a school kid in this community that you will visit the public theater at least twice,” Taran said. “Whether it’s from going to see *The Nutcracker*, or going to see an LA Opera performance, or it’s the *Read The Book See The Movie* program, whatever it is — and two generations ago, that was not the case.

“It’s a living place that’s accessible to the community, to producers, like Lee Sweet, who can keep the rental fees flexible and fair,” Taran said. “So, you can have Folklorico Dance Company and you can have Nederlander. It’s everybody.”

When Buscaino took office, Liz recalled he wanted to figure out how to get the theater going and get people in there.

“He had the opportunity to meet ... concert producers in LA,” she said. “He introduced [them] to The Warner Grand to get them interested in doing a show, or possibly more there.”

In order to get the funds from the city for the renovation it had to be proven no private entity would come in and do the renovation themselves. Taran noted nobody was interested because it was an overwhelmingly expensive project that would start from the ground up, being a historical building. The councilman had to demonstrate there were no other options which gave him better leverage to acquire the funds.

“It’s taken a long time,” Liz said. “But patience does win out if there is good advocacy. Having him as an advocate was the only way we could ever get this kind of money from the city. It required this level of determination from the council office.”

It’s no secret that the live concert business is basically dead. It’s a struggle for operations both large and small. But the executive director said she has no fear that the theater will ever be taken away from the community.

“We will remain a community theater, a community art center, a movie house,” Liz said. “With a better facility we will attract a concert promoter who will put on well known acts. Promoters don’t want to run a theater, they want to put on shows with well known acts and make money.

The Grand Vision Foundation was invited to participate in the discussions with Los Angeles’ Cultural Affairs Department and is helping out Los Angeles’ Bureau of Engineering. Liz said they have been very inclusive with this process.

“With the Warner Grand as a feasible theater this is attainable,” Liz said. “So this is what we have to do.”

“It has to be a turnkey operation,” Taran said “Economic revitalization was always the purpose.”

“It is a shame that in the world we live in that it’s not okay to just say we need our theater restored and made completely whole because theater itself is important,” Liz said. “Theater brings people together, it teaches us about our own humanity, it gives us community pride to see young people on the stage”

It's true government is concerned with economic development. But Liz posited, people attend theater and usually buy more than a ticket, they buy dinner. ... It's a huge economic multiplier.

"We can't just say children should learn music because music creates joy and it gives them confidence," she added. "You have to say that music is important because it helps people with their academics. That's true too. It's too bad that the arts can't be funded and appreciated for their own sake."

Details: www.grandvision.org

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