

Los Alamitos military theater has a rich history -- and maybe ghosts



Don Bartletti, Los Angeles Times

BACK STORY: Tom Lasser, a retired California National Guard officer who commanded the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos and now serves as its unofficial historian, tells a visitor the history of the Liberty Theatre, which opened in 1942.

The Liberty Theatre at the Joint Forces Training Base, called 'a diamond in the rough' before it was refurbished, is home to at least five musical productions a year.

By David Haldane, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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It is fitting that the Liberty Theatre's friskiest ghost is a man dressed as a sailor.

The first time Jeff Hathcock says he saw him, the apparition was sitting quietly in a back row. "I said 'Hi' and he just put his head down," the theater's director said. "When I turned around, he was gone."

Later, the ghostly sailor allegedly touched and whispered to two actresses as they performed onstage. One got so flustered that she flubbed a line.



"He seems to like buxom women," Hathcock said.

In fact, the lecherous seaman, who Hathcock claims lives in the men's dressing room, is one of many ghosts said to inhabit the old theater at the military Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos.

Whether they are literal or figurative depends on who's talking.

"It's part of our history from another time," Hathcock said of the facility, among the last World War II-era military base theaters still in use. "When I walk into this building, I feel like I'm walking into something alive."

That life began in 1942 when the base was a naval air station housing American forces waiting to be shipped overseas. They needed to be entertained, so the theater -- then known simply as Building 6 -- served as a venue not only for military briefings, but also for movies, newsreels and live USO shows.

It also was a staging area for movie crews who frequently used the base as a backdrop for feature films about the war.

"This was the closest military installation to Hollywood at the time," said James P. Combs, a retired Army brigadier general who commands the National Guard base. "All the famous show business figures of that period" came through.

Among them, he says, were actor Clark Gable and comedian Bob Hope. Later, according to Hathcock, the theater held events attended by both Presidents Bush as well as Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger greeted troops returning from Iraq there.

There's a plaque in the lobby stating that the theater was used in the famous scene from the 1970 movie "Patton," in which actor George C. Scott delivers a rousing patriotic speech in front of a huge American flag.

A great tale if it were true. According to at least one historian, it's not.

"The story got started by people explaining, as a point of reference, that this is the type of setting in which Patton spoke," said Tom Lasser, a retired California National Guard lieutenant colonel who commanded the airfield until 2001 and now serves as the base's unofficial historian.

The theater certainly looks the part.

Built in the shape of a long, narrow shoe box, it has 930 rickety seats and pock-marked walls. The stage, small by modern standards, was recently extended 15 feet. And the long-abandoned projectionist's booth upstairs has a row of metal slots once were filled with newsreels and films.

"The first time I walked in here," Lasser says, "I knew it was a little gem."

So did Hathcock, founder and artistic director of the nonprofit Theatre Guild and Southeast Civic Light Opera, who first saw the room in 2002. It languished for years after the base became a National Guard post in 1977. "It was all pea green and a movie screen covered the presidio," he recalls. "I looked at it and thought, this is a diamond in the rough."

Hathcock spent about \$10,000 of his own money to paint the place, enlarge the stage, install modern lighting and sound equipment and add murals to the walls. Renamed the Liberty Theatre, the venue is home to at least five musical productions a year.

All of which seems to have stirred up its ghosts.

In addition to the lustful sailor, Hathcock insists that he and other cast and crew members have seen what appears to be the ghost of an elderly woman in a dressing room, a pair of black shoes walking backstage and a nurse in a World War II-era uniform who remains silent when music from the 1940s is played but starts banging on walls at the first sound of rock.

He swears they have also seen the theater's seats open and close on their own, the lights and sound system go on and off without aid and a prop fly mysteriously across the stage.

"I get goose bumps just thinking about it," Hathcock said.

Though military officials acknowledge such ghost lore, they tend to minimize its significance. More important, they say, is the venue's rich history.

"It's got more charm and character than anywhere else I've performed in my life," Hathcock said. "I love this theater. I feel like the building itself is very happy that we're here."

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