Stanford Theatre

Passport to the Past

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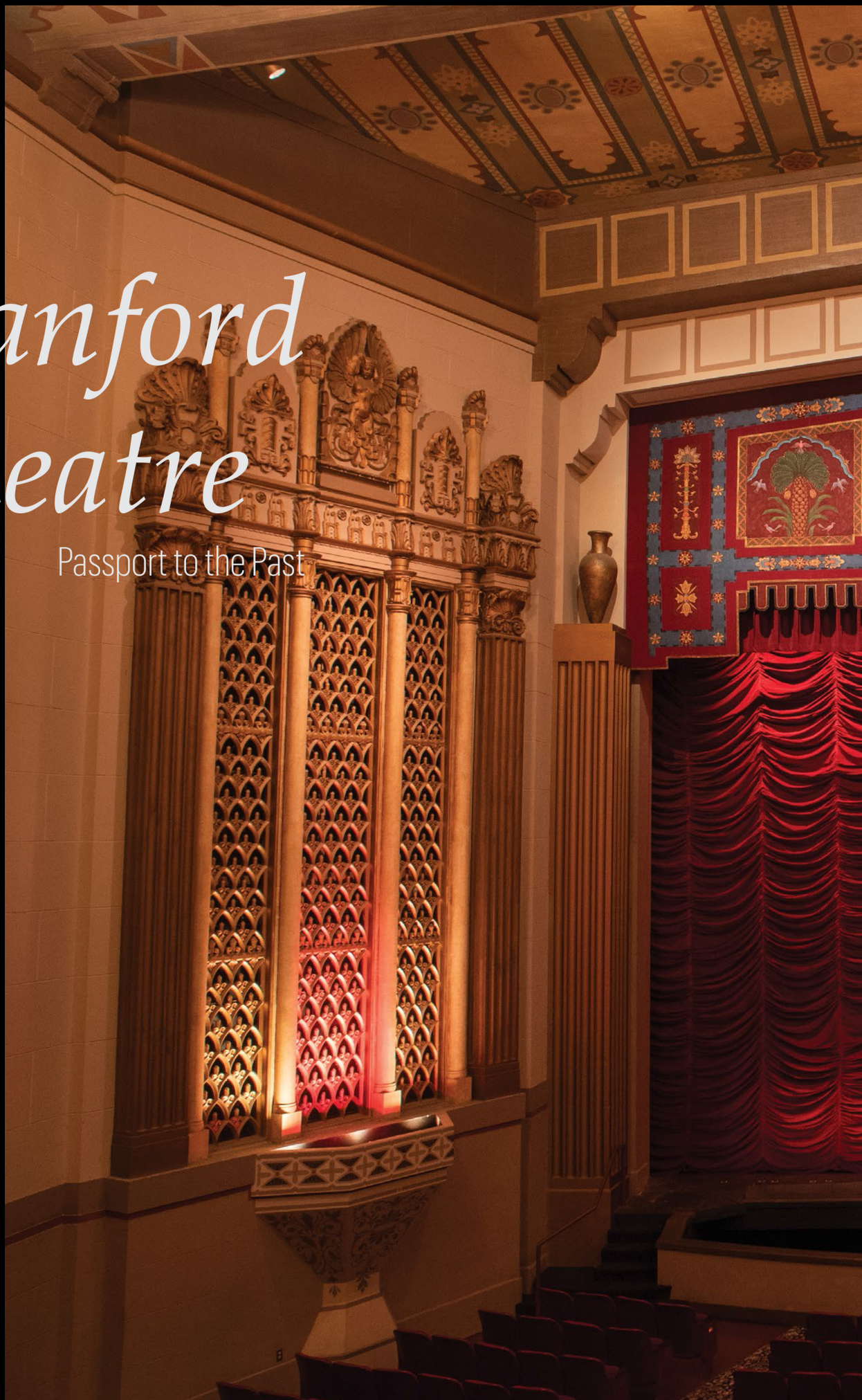

For almost a century now, the Stanford Theatre has been an institution in downtown Palo Alto. It's seen shops and decades emerge—and then dissolve. It's listened as the rattle of wagonesque Ford Model T's on the street outside gave way to the rumble of tailfinned Cadillacs and then to the whisper of sleek Teslas. It's welcomed audiences dressed in pinstripe suits and flapper dresses, tie-dyed shirts and flared pants, flowing maxis and understated khakis.

Its historical weightiness continues to draw in passersby today. As soon as your gaze lands on the majestic marquee sign above its entrance, the pull is almost irresistible. If you allow it to, the theater will tug you in through its doors, sweep you across a grandiose, chandeliered lobby, escort you up a blue-tiled staircase, and, finally, invite you into a red velvet balcony seat. As the red curtain parts in the front of the theater and an old black and white movie begins, you'll have fully transitioned back in time.

In the summer of 1925, this neighborhood movie palace opened to great fanfare. Reginald Denny, star of that night's motion picture, made an appearance, and the mayor gave a speech. The newspapers applauded the building's mushroom ventilating system, remote-controlled switchboard system, and crushed silver curtains. They marveled at the Greek-Assyrian paintings adorning its walls and took note of the maid in attendance in the "women's retiring room."

These days, you won't be greeted by a maid when you visit the little girl's room, but you'll still witness decor identical to that of opening night. This hasn't always been the case. By the time the '80s rolled around, the Stanford Theatre had spiraled into disrepair. "It was a ramshackle, falling-apart, poor old skeleton of a theatre," describes Cyndi Mortensen, general manager at the Stanford Theatre and the Stanford Theatre Foundation (the nonprofit that runs the theater). As it bounced from owner to owner, the elaborate Greek-Assyrian details were painted over, the layer of grime thickened, and the seats rusted. Gone were the days when dancers, ventriloquists, acrobats, and other performers traveled to entertain in vaudeville acts accompanying the movie. Before long, it was reduced to second-run action flicks for 50 cents (a dime cheaper than ticket prices over half a century earlier).

Fortunately, that's when David Woodley Packard, son of one of the billionaire cofounders of Hewlett-Packard, took center stage in the theater's rehabilitation. After beloved singer, dancer, and actor Fred Astaire passed away in 1987, Packard rented out the theater for two weeks to

Cyndi Mortensen, general manager of the Stanford Theatre and the Stanford Theatre Foundation


LESLIE HOWARD
OF HUMAN BONDAGE
BETTE DAVIS
The LITTLE FOXES
HERBERT MARSHALL
WILLIAM WYLER
It's Love I'm After


OF 1938
Keyes's
Please return
to N. Y.


Silk Stockings
JANIS PAIGE · PETER LORRE
CINEMASCOPE
JERRY WALD · LEO McCAREY · DELMER DAVES ... LEO McCAREY
BUDDY ADLER
HENRY KING
JOHN PATRICK
M-G-M's MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS
JUDY Garland
MARGARET O'BRIEN
MARY ASTOR LUCILLE BREMER
TOM DRAKE MARJORIE MAIN
TECHNICOLOR
GREGORY PECK
AUDREY HEPBURN
WILLIAM WYLER'S
Roman Holiday
EDDIE ALBERT
What a Glorious Feeling
SINGIN' IN THE RAIN
M-G-M's TECHNICOLOR MUSICAL TREASURE!
GENE KELLY
DONALD O'CONNOR
DEBBIE REYNOLDS
JEAN HAGEN · MILLARD MITCHELL · CYD CHARISSE

commemorate every movie the star ever made. His humble goal was to get at least 50 people to show up. Instead, more than 1,000 moviegoers lined up each night to savor the contagious tap-dance numbers of Astaire in his trademark top hat and tails. After such a remarkable success, Packard convinced his father and the Lucile Packard Foundation to purchase the theater and grant him stewardship so that movies from the silent era through 1965 could return once again to the big screen.

Packard took great pains to reconstruct the theater's majestic original appearance. He spent close to two years and $6 million on renovations–a sizeable hike up from the single year and $300,000 it took to initially erect the theater. With the help of a black-and-white photograph and original watercolor sketches, he oversaw the return of the Greek-Assyrian detailing. He also restored the period chandeliers, stage pillars, seats, and curtains.

But the crowning glory of the jewel box theater was the Mighty Wurlitzer organ. It took six experts nearly two years to acquire and restore its pieces. Every night since the theater's reopening, the Wurlitzer and its accompanying organist rise out of the stage floorboards during intermission to astound theatergoers with the musical complexity of keys, bells, and pedals. "It's something that people don't forget," says Mortensen.

Packard is also behind the carefully crafted movie lineup. "He has very good instincts about these things," says Mortensen, who occasionally contributes ideas herself and tracks down 35 mm reels from studios and archives. Programs vary by focus on genres (like screwball comedies), directors (like Alfred Hitchcock), and actors (like Jimmy Stewart). In the summer, the greatest hits of all time are on the screen.

The most beloved films? "*Casablanca* hands down," Mortensen says. It's hard not to fall in love with its suave, affably cynical hero and its clever dialogue ("Here's looking at you, kid"). On the film's 50th anniversary, more people watched the drama in the theater than anywhere else in America. Other crowd favorites include *The Wizard of Oz* and G*one with the Wind*. All three were released between the golden age years of 1937 to 1947, which Packard considers the peak of film as an artform. Movies starring Audrey Hepburn or Cary Grant also draw a dedicated following. And, of course, there's the annual Christmas Eve showing of *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is so adored that people start asking about tickets in July.

"I think most people would assume that we have mostly senior citizens," Mortensen notes. "We do have some, but we also get all different ages." Parents enjoy introducing their kids to films they themselves grew up with. "We get these young teenage girls dressed as Holly Golightly. Which is really cute, but I don't know whether she's a great role model," Mortensen chuckles, referring to the main character of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*–a high-end escort who goes on adventures with Paul, the "kept man" of a wealthy married lady. Mortensen also fondly recalls a group of elementary schoolers who visited the theater dressed as the squirrelly, bespectacled actor Harold Lloyd.

Then of course, there are the Stanford students. They've been a staple audience at the theater since the very beginning–for better and for worse. The theater's close proximity to a college campus inevitably means student hijinks. One such shenanigan dates back to the night of November 7, 1929, when 150 first-years in pajamas rushed the theater (without paying) and stormed the balcony for a screening of "Our Gang." Another night, after the theater's restoration, a group of Stanford ballroom dancers twirled down the aisles as the organist played a tango from Astaire's film, *Flying Down to Rio*.

As if there wasn't already enough personality in this one building, Packard added a gallery, stocking it with original movie posters, newspaper clippings, and other ephemera. Mortensen acts as curator, switching out displays to match the current program. During the months of *Hitchcock and Other Masters of Suspense*, the walls were covered with artistic renderings of intense action shots–like Cary Grant sprinting away from a dive-bombing plane and Grace Kelly struggling to break free from a strangler's grasp. On special occasions, programs are accompanied with the actors' costumes or, better yet, the actors themselves.

The Stanford Theatre's success raises the question: why do old movies continue attracting modern audiences? "I think it has something to do with classic Hollywood acting," Mortensen muses. "People don't act like that anymore." Classic movies are our passport to life of bygone eras. Actors, directors, and scriptwriters of decades past were influenced by a distinct environment that uniquely flavored their approach to storytelling. But these movies are also relatable. We can still empathize with feelings of frustration over injustice, heartbreak over unrequited love, amusement over minor miscommunications. "They continue to move us, speak to us, make us laugh, make us cry," Mortensen adds. "They have heart. They resonate. They may be old–but they don't get old."