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Working to preserve Balboa Park's historic architecture, gardens and public spaces since 1967.

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Fall 2017 Newsletter

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Palisades: The Ugly Stepsister

Lovely Plaza de Panama has blossomed with park visitors, art, umbrellas and seating, food trucks and events. The Palisades area, heart of Balboa Park's 1935-

1936 California Pacific International Exposition, is due for a renaissance. The Palisades parking lot doesn't begin to excite the imagination, but it can once again become the public Plaza de America of 1935-1936. While the City readies its Plaza de Panama project, the restoration of the Palisades is underway. Our four murals for the San Diego Automotive Museum building are ready for installation. Save Starlight is ready to resurrect the long-neglected Starlight Bowl. Let's get moving, San Diego.

The City has deferred needed maintenance and infrastructure repairs for so long that catching up can seem hopeless. But hope brought people together for District 3 Councilmember Chris Ward's recent forums. These public sessions attempted to identify and prioritize the needs of the entire Park. It was a start.

We believe Balboa Park needs a dedicated source of funding.

Mike Kelly
president@c100.org



With the encouragement of the City of San Diego and virtually all of the institutions in Balboa Park, a new non-profit corporation called Save Starlight is negotiating with the City of San Diego to reopen the bowl as an affordable community asset, available for a variety of uses including concerts, festivals, ceremonies, meetings, movies...and musical comedy revivals.

By using a permanent installation of sound and lighting equipment, the Save Starlight management seeks to offer the lowest possible rental rates and minimal technical costs with overhead covered by fees and profit-sharing arrangements. And, says the Save Starlight management, state-of-the-art sound technology, possibly including permanently installed headphones, will be used to address the noise considerations.

Both the City Park and Recreation Department and Save Starlight hope to have an agreement in place and some sort of activity ready for the annual December Nights event in Balboa Park this year. ~ Welton Jones

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Committee of 100, 1649 El Prado, Suite 2, San Diego, CA 92101

The Starlight Bowl

By Welton Jones

For San Diegans, the words “Starlight Bowl” probably wake a vision of dancing, singing, costumed musical comedy, outdoors in the soft summer airs of Balboa Park, interrupted only occasionally by airplanes headed toward Lindbergh Field but mainly blissful beauty, aglow with nostalgia.

That hasn’t been reality for many years. The historic 4,273-seat amphitheatre is still there, though worn from years of neglect, but there hasn’t been a show on its stage since 2010, when the remnants of the San Diego Civic Light Opera Association walked away. Famed architect Richard Requa, who



Ford Bowl, 1935. Courtesy David Marshall.

supervised the building of the 1935-36 California-Pacific International Exposition, called the bowl, “Undoubtedly the most valuable new single contribution from a cultural standpoint...” In second place, he listed the Spreckels Organ Pavilion.

Originally called the Ford Bowl, the amphitheatre was built in tandem with the Art Deco Ford Building next door (now the San Diego Air & Space Museum) as a showcase for Ford vehicles and a winding exhibition road down the slope behind the buildings, all for an estimated \$2 million.

Requa was assisted in the design of the concrete bowl by the prominent engineer Vern O. Knudsen, later dean and then chancellor of UCLA, who

pronounced the acoustics in the bowl as perfect.

Ford money also was provided for a season of 132 symphony orchestra concerts, usually two a day except Mondays, beginning in May 1935. Nino Marcelli conducted the San Diego Symphony for the first two weeks followed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the symphony orchestras of Portland, Seattle and San Francisco plus the Long Beach Women’s Symphony.

Portions of these concerts were broadcast live, coast to coast, sponsored by Ford.

In addition to the orchestras onstage, the Ford Bowl had its own organ, an early Hammond billed as “the world’s most powerful musical instrument” because of the 8,000 pounds of amplification equipment needed. Organist Walter Flandorf presided at the console on the concrete platform in the center of the bowl seating area, still there today, for concerts at noon and 5:30 p.m. whenever nothing else was scheduled.

When the orchestra season ended in October, the California Light Opera Co. presented “H.M.S. Pinafore” and “The Mikado” twice daily at no charge. Next, the Expo management provided five acts of vaudeville entertainment, each afternoon and evening, also free of charge, and a touring stage show called “Anything Happens” featuring the famed vaudeville and radio duo of Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson.

Though attendance was sparse for the 1935 shows in the bowl, the orchestral concerts were considered the artistic peak of the exposition.

When, for 1936, the Ford Company did not renew its sponsorship of the exhibit, it did agree to sponsor four weeks of 46 concerts in August and September by Marcelli and the San Diego Symphony and two by the San Francisco orchestra, conducted by Alfred Hertz, which proved to be great popular successes.

On opening night Aug. 14, 1936, according to *The San Diego Union*, the symphony’s performance of the Idyll from Wagner’s “Siegfried” was: “interrupted for the

audience by low-flying airplanes over the Exposition.”

After the Expo closed, the Symphony continued to perform regularly in the Ford Bowl and various other events and performances took place until, in 1942, the entire Balboa Park was taken over by the U.S. Navy for World War II. There is no record of specific use of the bowl during the war.

After the Navy completed its postwar cleanup and returned the park to the city in the late 1940s, the city renamed the facility the “Balboa Bowl” and seemed to forget all about it.

In 1946, a group of local operetta fans incorporated as the San Diego Civic Light Opera and, using the title “Star-Light,” had begun performing light opera and musical comedy in the 1,200-seat Wegeforth Bowl at the San Diego Zoo. Within five years, both the company and Zoo were ready for them to move. The city turned over the Balboa Bowl, as was, in 1950.

During the 1950s and early ‘60s, Star-Light dropped the hyphen and presented extremely popular summer shows using local performers only. These well-drilled but poorly-paid ensembles benefitted from paid union stage hands and musicians to build the basis of all the legends about the grand old days of Starlight.

But tastes in Broadway musicals were changing and professional productions both on tour and in residence were setting a higher standard. Starlight’s audiences sagged.

During this time, the San Diego Symphony played regular seasons at the bowl, renamed in 1961 “Balboa

Park Bowl.” Shows of other sorts also were booked by the city management, including the new rock concerts.

When the new Civic Theatre opened downtown in 1965, everybody agreed that Starlight should be one of the tenants. This was a disaster, when amateur talent was compared to the touring Broadway roadshows.



Starlight Bowl, 2016. Courtesy Save Starlight.

The Starlight brand was rescued by the United States International University in 1968, which moved the shows back to the Wegeforth Bowl at the Zoo and for the 1973 summer, the Open Air Theatre at San Diego State. Except for occasional concerts and community events, Balboa Park Bowl had sat empty for 8 years.

In 1973, after USIU removed its support, Starlight reorganized and returned to the bowl. The following year, J. Howard Stein, then the company’s executive producer, made a historic decision: He set up a signal light system to the conductor, who stopped the show when an airplane passed over. Thus was born a “tradition” universally loathed by artists but fondly remembered by many former customers.

Continued on next page



Sign says it all. *Howard Lipin, San Diego Union-Tribune*



Amphitheater on canyon slope. *Courtesy David Marshall.*

1984, “Starlight Bowl” became the official name of the facility and, the following year, a major addition was designed by architect Gerald Garapich for a \$2 million including a stagehouse for proper handling of scenery.

Soon thereafter, though, the company began a long slide away from prosperity and into deficit. Productions were cancelled and then entire seasons followed. Occasional revivals faded away until September, 2010, when the last scheduled show was presented. Thereafter, the bowl slipped back into neglect.

Continued from previous page

Under Stein and subsequent managers, Starlight gradually added professionals and carefully moved beyond the “family show” repertoire. In

And that is the case today, in the autumn of 2017, as the City of San Diego and Save Starlight work to find a new future for Richard Requa’s favorite Balboa Park contribution to the Expo of 1936-37.