



Small Towne Short Stories
Son Light Christian Center: Part II
By Dave Barton

July 7, 1923: "Local capitalist" Harry Z. Adams says he is going to build The Adams Theater, a "modern cinema palace in the onward march of progress," using his plot of land at the corner of Glassell and Maple. A former horseshoe pitching ground and croquet field, the theater will be one "embodying everything to be desired in modern theater appointments," according to the *Santa Ana Register*.

April 25, 1924: The future theatre is leased to West Coast Theatres, Inc. It will have an 1,800-seat capacity, with floor and balcony seating, and will include two adjacent stores. Fifteen thousand dollars is to be spent on a pipe organ and the leasing company will do \$30,000 in interior decorating.

1925: An agreement to build is signed. It specifies that marble and tile work, art stone and ornamental iron and metal will all be part of the building. An apartment upstairs is included.

Building plans are completed soon after, losing 500 of the planned seats. The proposed cost is \$125,000.

After Adams and investors run out of money, former "dirt farmer" Michael Eltiste, owner of the international Harvester dealership, takes over, shepherding the building through unspecified "legal entanglements." It takes four years.

February 9, 1929: A manager is appointed to run the newly renamed Eltiste Theater. A Gala Opening with celebrities and "the presentation of outstanding theatrical

attractions" is scheduled within 60 days, though there may be delays because the planned Vitaphone sound equipment installation is still being sorted out. Seventeen thousand dollars has been spent on the pipe organ.

April 26, 1929: 1,100 leather-cushioned seats arrive, with the Gala delayed until May 15. Tiffany Studios in Los Angeles is doing the decorative work, featuring a "Mediterranean motif." A unique lighting system, the first of its kind in Southern California, will be mounted in the next week. The projection room is one of the largest in the county, but the projector has not yet been installed. Stage equipment, including an apple green plush curtain with folds, gold braided rope and trappings, has been ordered and scenery is being painted in L.A.

May 1929: The opening has been delayed, again. Sound equipment is installed on May 20 and tested by General Electric. At a price of \$40,000, the interior work now costs more than that stipulated in the lease. "Orange will be satisfied only with a first-class showhouse, no more and no less," Eltiste tells *Orange Daily News*. The building no longer carries his name and is now called The Orange Theatre. First come, first served seating is announced for Opening Night.

May 23, 1929: The talkie "Molly and Me," starring Belle Bennett and Joe E. Brown, opens the venue. Vaudeville includes singer Ruth Etting from The Ziegfeld Follies and a Colortone burlesque film from comic duo Smith and Dale. Organist Arthur Cannon presents "a musical novelty for the opening program as well as tonal effects for silent pictures," followed by a banjo novelty by Joe Kozina, a local musician. The new theatre is a hit, with two packed houses for the seven and nine o'clock shows. Prices: 50 cents for the loge seats, 35 and 10 cents for the remaining seats.

1929: Hughes and Franklin Enterprises, the movie chain that bought out the lease from West Coast Theatres, Inc., goes under and Westland Theatres acquires the theatre.

1930: Talking pictures take over, silent movies become obsolete. The organ stops being played.

January 1932: Stink bombs are set off in the theatre by "racketeers" trying to bring union workers to a non-union theater. Audiences apparently just cover their faces with handkerchiefs or walk out the exits, continuing to watch the film from the sidewalk.

February 1945: Western States Amusement Company, Inc. takes over running the theatre for an undisclosed amount.

August 1945: The Orange Theatre undergoes some renovations, including forced-air cooling.

1954: Norman Goodin takes over as owner.

August 1963: Rumors are that a former manager let employees of the theatre buy

the organ pipes to replace exhaust pipes on their cars. Goodin renovates the organ, promising concerts once a month as well as the occasional silent movie with accompaniment.

Thousands of dollars go into the restoration, but the organ is still barely used.

1972/1973, date unknown: The Orange Theatre closes.

April 1974: Goodin changes the name to the Orange Playhouse, with plans to open May 21 and produce plays 20 weeks a year, broadcast closed circuit sporting events another 12, with the theatre being used for unspecified entertainment the remaining time.

The silver screen is rolled up and trashed. Wallpaper is exposed and stripped. An old backstage dimmer switch is removed. According to *Anaheim Bulletin*, other renovations: "...include moving the front entrance to the sidewalk frontage, in order to add the present outdoor foyer to the interior; turning the movie house popcorn area into a smart bar and recarpeting in the original mode of the 1930's *[sic]*; reupholstering of seats, stage improvements, new mechanical features backstage and improvement of the dressing room area beneath tile stage. A lavish new curtain and interior painting will carry out a brown and gold color theme to set off the original mosaic chandelier in the main auditorium...Huge beveled plate glass mirrors on the stair landing also will be retained..."

May 1974: The renovation rapidly becomes more expensive than anticipated, ballooning from a planned \$60,000 to \$250,000.

June 1974: Failed Presidential candidate and comic Pat Paulsen opens Neil Simon's sex comedy *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*. Tickets are in the \$4.75 to \$8.50 price range.

August 1974: The new General Manager and House Manger are fired.

The former G.M. and publicity agent from the defunct Melodyland Theater in Anaheim—which closed and became a church in 1969—step in, claiming personality issues with the previous staff have harmed the theatre's reputation with the press. The men lower ticket prices and work on promotion, promising to give the people what they want.

Investors step up and establish the "Friends of the Orange Playhouse." Volunteers are brought in to cut costs.

November 1974: Los Angeles businessman Alberto Morelli takes over production duties, claiming he is buying the theatre and becoming the new owner. The theatre's name is changed to The Playhouse and transitions into a community theatre. The Pacific Academy of the Performing Arts (PAPA) is formed to offer classes to young arts hopefuls.

April 1975: Morelli rapidly runs into deficit, and locks out PAPA without explanation. Goodin kicks out Morelli for not paying his rent. The Pacific Academy of the Performing Arts' director goes before the Orange City Council to ask for \$8,000 to continue operations. The organization is given a \$3,500 loan instead.

August 1975: After producing two more musicals, PAPA goes under, cancelling its production of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* mid-rehearsal. Members split off from the group, calling themselves Stage Two and continue with the show.

By **January 1976** The Orange Theatre-slash-Orange Playhouse-slash-Playhouse closes once again.

The author is indebted to archivist Linda Criswell and the Orange Public Library & History Center for their research and timeline information.

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It's **December 1975.**

Joe Magliato, pastor of the new Son-Light Christian Center—a small fellowship with about 300 members—has been meeting in the upper room of the Jolly Roger Inn, an Anaheim restaurant across from Disneyland. They have a very short lease on the space—only through the end of March—and are already looking for a new space to move into after that lease ends.

During his weekly travels to the Orange Public Library, where he studies and writes his sermons, Magliato passes by the boarded-up cement building with the marquee at the corner of Glassell and Maple. He gets out of his car and wanders around the outside of the building, wondering about its availability. Conservative by nature, he's not interested in throwing away money by renting. He wants to buy the space as a permanent location for his congregation.

Contacting owner Goodin, Magliato finds out the theatre is actually in escrow: Pussycat Theater chain, a series of movie houses specializing in X-rated adult entertainment, is putting together the financing that will allow them to buy the place. Apologetic, Goodin tells the young pastor that if the deal with the pornographers falls through, he'd be happy to work with the church.

As it happens, Pussycat Theater can't get the money together—even after a two-week extension—and the escrow collapses. According to Magliato, Goodin seems relieved by the turn of events and offers Son-Light the space rent free for the next 10 months, granted they come up with enough money at the end of that period to put a down payment on the building.

The church is so new, they've got no money and nothing in reserves. The idea is daunting, but they agree to the deal and move in.

The theatre is in bad shape, despite its recent renovations. Electrical equipment is questionably safe; there's been flooding in the green room downstairs; abandoned costumes, still on their racks, have fallen into the water and the smell of mold and mildew hangs in the air; lights leftover from The Playhouse are unwieldy and not always functional; the curtains and carpeting are in bad shape; the pipe organ is infested with insects.

"We only had what we had—what God sent us," says Nancy Magliato, the pastor's wife and co-founder of Son-Light. But what the couple *had* was something quite powerful: Volunteers with faith. Linda Criswell, the church's archivist, tells me she frequented the theatre as a child and loved watching movies there. For her part, it was half devotion to the ministry and half desire to preserve what she knew that reinforced her belief in salvaging the theatre.

The combined efforts of the congregation allowed the church to complete all the clean-up on its own for very little money. Volunteers rebuild the stage, paint, pull up and replace the damaged carpet, renovate the upstairs apartment, remove the projection booth, install a giant cross above the marquee, remove and sell the verminous pipe organ, buy a new curtain, polish the chandeliers and secure Lawrence Welk singer Norma Zimmer for their opening.

During the month it takes to do this, Magliato is approached by two Orange County police detectives, who ask him how a church barely a couple of months old can afford to pay for the renovations. When the pastor explains that members of his congregation are footing the bill with their labor, the detectives wave him off, accusing him of being a mob front laundering money. They tell him that they'll keep an eye on him and when they find out he's dirty, will come for him. When they return sometime later, it's to apologize after they find out the pastor's been telling the truth.

March 28, 1976: Magliato performs his first service on the former Orange Theatre stage.

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Almost 40 years later everyone is older, grayer, but the church continues.

Pastor Magliato sits to my right in his wife's small office. Soft-spoken, but direct when I ask him about the future of the church after he's gone, he tells me he enjoys what he does and has no plans to go anywhere.

Mrs. Magliato pipes in that they'll have to "take him out on a stretcher."

Criswell smiles and nods in agreement.

The church has been approached numerous times and asked if they'd like to sell. It's not something they're averse to, but their answer is always the same: They're open, so long as wherever they're moved to, they don't have to start all over again—and

there's no rent. No one wants to repeat the work it took to open the church a second time.

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I ask if it's true that the church painted over greenroom graffiti from various famous vaudevillians. Criswell shakes her head, no. "If that happened, it would have been long before we got here," she says.

Mrs. Magliato shakes her head at the gossip, asking what else I've heard.

I tell them I'd heard the church owned the entire Orange Circle, that that was the reason for the overabundance of antique shops. Everyone in the room laughs. Criswell replies that the church owns the building across the street—tenants in front, fellowship and a foodbank in back—but that's it. Mrs. Magliato offers that if the church did own everything, "everyone's rent would be a lot cheaper than it is now." I ask about the conflict between the church and the bar next door. Pastor Magliato tells me there isn't any. "We were asked about them before we moved in, if getting them to close was something we wanted to pursue," he says. "We said no. We don't care that they're there."

I ask them what rumors they've heard, if any, and Mrs. Magliato says she's been asked several times whether they're storing the old Orange Theatre sign in the basement.

They aren't.

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The city has passed legislation that prevents the church—now the hyphen-less Son Light Christian Center—from selling the building to another non-profit. Magliato offers that the family that's formed at the church is a tight-knit one that has created a home away from home. If he wanted to move on, the church would likely hire another pastor and remain a non-profit rather than put the building in the hands of someone interested in just its commercial possibilities.

Criswell continues in that charitable vein, talking about the 80 local families Son Light feeds every Saturday at the church's foodbank, local businesses generously providing food—and some financial support—to the ongoing ministry. Open for three years, Criswell estimates they've fed 800 to 900 people, using 14 volunteers who've invested their own time and money in the effort, even paying for their own gas to haul the loads of food they purchase from Second Harvest Food Bank in Irvine. A noble effort and a far cry from those mobster racketeering rumors.

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"Want me to show you around the building?" asks Criswell.

I tell her I haven't set foot on the premises for over 40 years and that I'd love the opportunity to see how much it's changed.

We get up and walk out onto the stage.

Part III of the Son Light Christian Center will be released on Tuesday, February 2, 2016. Subscribe to [The Paper Trail](#), our free subscription newsletter, to receive our monthly installments of Small Towne Short Stories.

Dave Barton has written for the LA WEEKLY and OC WEEKLY for over twenty years, the last eight as their lead art critic. He has interviewed artists from punk rock photographer Edward Colver to monologist Mike Daisey, queer performance artist Monica Palacios and screenwriter Phyllis Nagy, to playwright Joe Penhall and art troublemaker Ron English. He recently joined ORANGE COAST magazine as an arts writer.

South Glassell Street, Orange, California, ca. 1923. Image shows view looking north toward the Plaza of the 100 block of South Glassell street with businesses on either side and many parked automobiles. Harms Drugstore, The Bootery, Coronet Theatre, Higgins Furniture, and Ehlen & Grote can be identified. The Plaza Park flagpole is visible in the background. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.