



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

It's odd to be on the stage of The Orange Theatre after over 40 years.

The last time I'd been in this position—facing out at the auditorium—I wasn't even actually *on* the stage. I was 12 years old, a foot and an inch shorter and I was about to exit the side door after a matinee. The theater was still dark inside, save the flicker of credits running, so all I could see was the half-illuminated faces of patrons in a chiaroscuro of grays and blacks.

Looking out at the hundreds of loge seats in the Son Light Christian Center's auditorium and its balcony, the scope of the building is still impressive. It was big when I was a kid, but looking at it with the seen-it-all eyes of an adult, it's grandeur and familiarity is like reconnecting with a long-lost friend; a relationship so easy and comfortable you pick up where you left off, even after many years.

There's none of the mustiness that usually accompanies old buildings—even those that have been renovated or well cared for—and it comforts me that most of the building's tropes are still around. The gold lattice organ sound grates are still on either side of the stage wall above me looking just as they did four decades earlier, save the faux greenery, drooping and curling along the edges as if the grates have become giant planters. The wood floors still periodically squeak, but they're no longer sticky with soft drink spill. The forced-air vents in the floor are shiny and bright, with nary a sign of all the candy wrappers and ticket stubs I slipped into them as a child.

There are speakers to my left, a microphone, piano and American flag. On my right, a drum kit, other musical instruments and more speakers.

Son Light archivist Linda Criswell doesn't wait for me to move on from my fawning admiration for the building and how good it looks. She's already down the stairs of the stage and halfway up the right aisle before I even notice she's gone. I trail after, following her into the lobby.

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The former snack bar is gone, or at least modified into what looks like a large information desk. Nothing is left of the picture frames above. The lobby has been expanded out onto the sidewalk and a pair of the movie poster marquees that used to be outside are now located inside, empty reminders of the past, waiting to fulfill their function. The watch repair shop that was next door has been opened up and made into a café for youth groups, with coffee pots, chairs and tables in place of broken timepieces. The elegant mirrors, once located in the stairwell leading up to the second floor, have been removed, replaced by scriptures painted onto the wall.

We climb upstairs to the dark hallway leading to the second floor.

An apartment that used to be closed off from the public is now open and brightly painted, full of well-used furniture and now available for staff meetings and Bible studies. It's spacious and comfortable, surprisingly big. I look out the window, see the top of the church's marquee outside and people-watch as families walk Glassell Street.

Across from the apartment is where the old projection booth used to be. Also surprisingly spacious, the room has been gutted, redecorated and turned into an oversized classroom. Criswell points out the tiny projection window that's been left intact. I chuckle with delight, duck slightly and look out.

Onto the balcony.

\* \* \*

We're really high up.

The hand rail leading down into the balcony seating is spotty. It's perfectly sturdy, but available only in small sections, more something to provide the illusion of steadiness than something to grip and offer safety.

I look up briefly, notice the patchy brown water stains in part of the ceiling, something I remember the previous owner having issues with as well.

I walk down the steep steps, the queasy unease of my pre-teen years now a kind of stomach-clenching, adult acrophobia. I mention casually to Criswell that I simply can't imagine blue-haired ladies or older men navigating the incline with any degree

of certainty. She agrees and doesn't follow me down.

I get to the edge of the balcony and look over, remembering the stray jujube falling into the beehive tease of some unsuspecting woman, or popped corn plummeting onto the *Dippity-Do* slick, short back and sides of some kid my age.

\* \* \*

Back downstairs, the former theatrical green rooms now hold Sunday School classes. Additional spaces are used as storage areas, a cornucopia of various holiday and religious decorations tucked neatly away.

Criswell graciously wraps up the tour by showing me the basement housing the church's swamp cooler, the rambling *thud thud thud* of its motor drowning out most of the traffic sounds coming from the street directly above us. I peer through a sunlit crack between the building and the sidewalk, and can hear the conversations of students walking overhead.

\* \* \*

It's Sunday, several weeks later, and I hear music before I even walk through the front doors.

Greeted warmly, my hand is shaken, a program nestled gently in my palm and I'm thanked for coming.

The balcony is closed this Sunday so my plan is scuttled to watch the service from where I used to sit many years previously. It forces me to be down on the main floor amongst the people. No sentimental ivory tower allowed.

I walk into the theatre and pause from habit, immediately flashing on childhood memories of stepping into the darkness and waiting for my eyes to adjust to the flickering light of the projector before locating my seat. The lights are dim, but the auditorium is lit well enough that I have no problems seeing, walking toward the elevated tech booth in the center of the space. I sit next to it, hoping not to draw too much attention as I take notes. The chair is less comfy than I remember, but then I'm also considerably heavier than I was and the seat tilts back farther than I expect. Startled, I look around to make sure I'm not crushing the legs of someone behind me and when I see I'm not, I inch forward and do a quick headcount. There are about 40 people in the audience.

The musicians are having issues with their monitors. They can't hear themselves, but it doesn't seem to matter in the long run: They're in good voice, with two of the women belting *He Walks With Me (In The Garden)* with the kind of passion I'd expect from a pop star. The songs, a mixture of traditional hits and Maranatha Music modernism, are accompanied by lyrics projected karaoke-style onto a movie screen above their heads.

The screen is bookended by scarlet and gold curtains. A backdrop hovers above it, painted with what seems to be a scene from the Holy Land, the name of church and 1975, the year it was established.

Pastor Joe Magliato walks on stage, crosses to the mic and asks his congregation if they're ready for church.

\* \* \*

Magliato is warm and loving, clearly comfortable in front of his crowd (despite earlier protestations to me that he's really a shy person). His call for individual prayer follows and as a group of parishioners moves enthusiastically toward the stage, the pastor walks to each, kneels or bows his head, grips them gently on the arms or shoulders and prays quietly with them.

It's incredibly intimate, even from my seat in the middle.

\* \* \*

The audience has doubled, with more than 100 people drifting in as the music plays, even as late as 30 minutes into the service, the music overscoring their entrance as they take their seats.

When it stops, the sermon, much shorter than the long musical interludes, begins. It's a modest affair titled, "Holy Smoke." The reading is from Exodus, about Moses' conversation with the burning bush.

Magliato accompanies the talk with clips from the animated film, *The Prince of Egypt*, and for a brief moment I'm again sitting in the old theatre watching a movie. The pastor talks about how God raises up "nobodies," people who think little of their own abilities or go about life unseen, and uses them to lead others. He tells his congregation that God always sends his children to places that are "trouble," but that He's always there for them, always at their sides, accompanying them on their travels.

"You're not alone," he says.

And then the music begins to play, again.

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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

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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.

Aerial view of the City of Orange, California, 1971. Image shows view north to Palm Avenue and south to Palmyra Avenue, and west to Lemon Street and east to Center Street. Plaza Square is visible in the upper center. The larger white building at the end of the 100 block of North Glassell Street is the Orange Theatre. In the middle of the 100 block of South Glassell Street, signage reading "EHLEN & GROTE CO." is visible painted on the access road side of the brick wall of the building. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.