

LIGHTS, ACTION!

Flip of a switch restores theater to former glory

By Donna Littlejohn
STAFF WRITER

Greeted by cheers from hundreds of people who jammed downtown San Pedro, the marquee lights of the historic Warner Grand Theatre flashed to life Friday night at a street party commemorating refurbishment of the art deco movie palace.

"It's awesome," said Phillip Ginder of San Pedro as he stared up at the brilliant neon lights spelling out W-A-R-N-E-R. "It's so cool. The only thing left now is to go in and see a movie."

David Parra of San Pedro said the lights of the restored 1930s-era theater marquee looked just like he remembered when he was a child and went to the Warner with his grandfather.

The throngs of people on the street also were familiar, he said.

"This is just like it was back then," Parra said. "At this time of night, people were still shopping. It's a nice atmosphere."

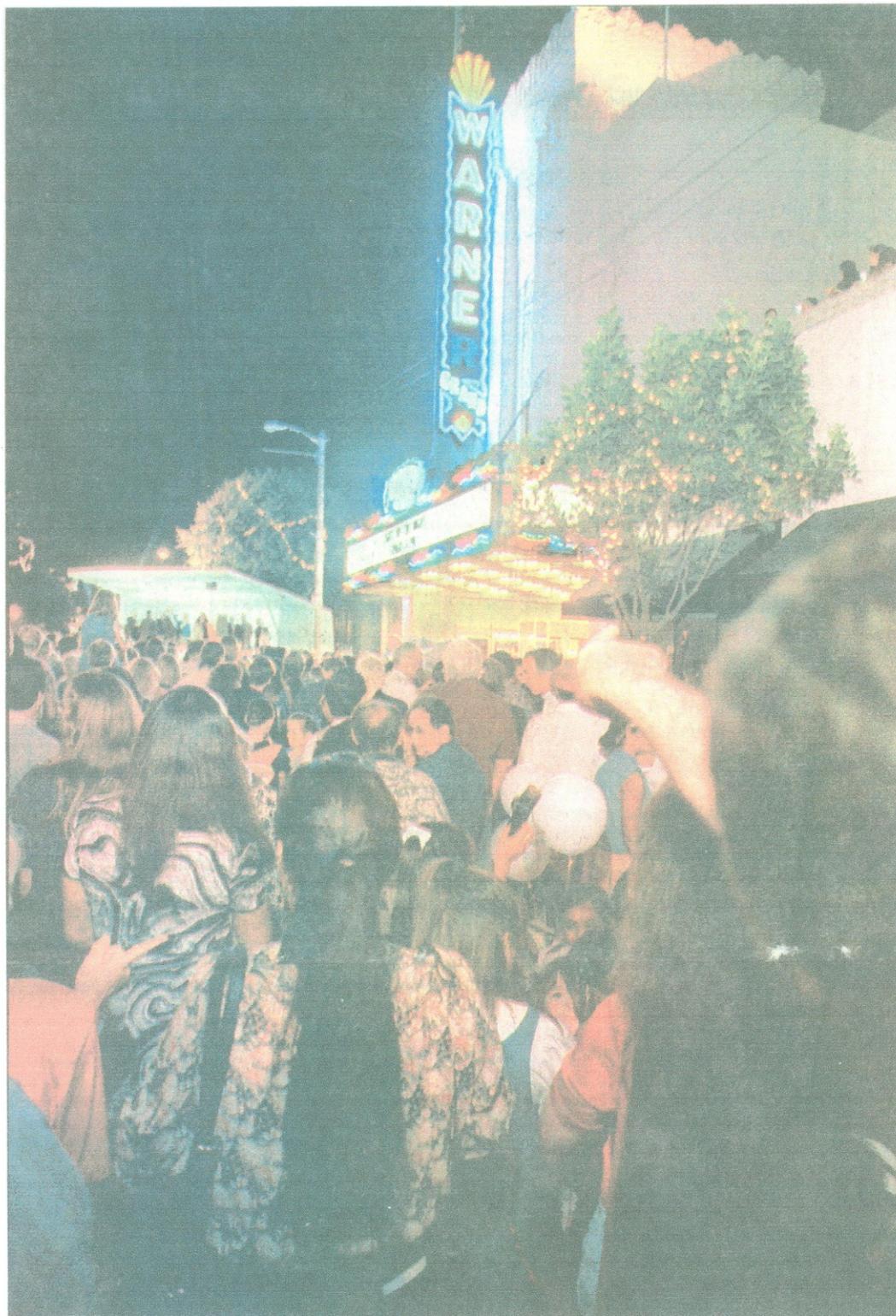
In an evening filled with nostalgia, celebration and hopes for the future, San Pedro residents turned out in droves for the "Light Up the Night" party along Sixth Street.

Key to revitalization

The theater has long been viewed as a cornerstone for future revitalization of San Pedro's historic shopping district. The beginning of the refurbishment project this past year has renewed hopes it will spark renewal.

"You could just feel the enthusiasm when we flicked the switch on," said harbor district Councilman Rudy Svorinich Jr., who helped throw the switch to light the sign. "The relighting of the Warner Grand has rekindled the spirit in San Pedro that has been dimmed for over two decades."

Many came with fond memories of the theater that was
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BERNARDO ALPS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A crowd turns out Friday night in San Pedro to watch the relighting of the historic Warner Grand Theatre's marquee. The 1930s-era art deco movie palace opened with a live stage show.



BERNARDO ALPS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Maxine Patton, who sold tickets at the Warner Theatre in 1931, staffs the movie house's ticket booth again on Friday.

Theater

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dubbed "The Castle of Your Dreams" and featured first-run movies produced by Warner Bros. studios.

"It still looks beautiful," said Pat Miller, who at 16 manned the ticket booth in 1954. "It was fun working there."

Miller also spent more than a few romantic date nights at the theater where she remembers watching such romantic comedies as "Three Coins in a Fountain."

"There was a lot of smoochin' going on in that balcony," she said.

One of her fondest memories was of two of her teen-age friends — Kevin McOsker and Pat Garrity — who met, dated and fell in love at the Warner.

"They're still married and have 13 grandchildren and live in San Pedro," Miller said.

The theater's first cashier, Maxine Patton, was back in the ticket booth Friday selling \$10 tickets to the variety show inside.

'Like old times'

"It seems like old times," she said with a big smile. She hadn't lost her touch for keeping the customers from getting impatient as they waited in line.

"I smile and kid with them so they don't dare," Patton said.

For Art Almeida, the theater held another kind of vivid memory.

"I saw 'Frankenstein' there in the late 1930s and didn't sleep for more than a week," he said.

Almeida was back Friday night to watch granddaughter Lexi Manghera, 8, perform with the Warner Kids on stage at a \$10-person variety show held to raise funds for continuing refurbishment of the theater.

The evening began with the variety show at the theater stage featuring the Warner Kids, a city-sponsored program to teach dance

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— BRUCE DOBB,

a consultant to Svorinich's Watts/Harbor Economic Development Corp.

and drama to area youngsters.

Dressed in sparkling, sequined flapper-style dresses and long pearls, the children drew loud applause as they performed.

Between acts, audience members craned their necks to get a look at the ornate interior of the plush theater that was built for \$500,000 and opened on Jan. 20, 1931, with "Goin' Wild" starring Joe E. Brown.

"Isn't it cool?" one young woman commented to a friend who was seeing the theater for the first time.

Actress Toni Alessandrini of Hollywood said the Warner was "just beautiful."

"This is show biz," said Alessandrini, looking around the theater from her seat in the balcony. She was in the audience to watch her niece, Sadie Salcedo, 9, perform with the Warner Kids.

Dana Wise, 12, one of the Warner Kids performers, also was impressed.

"Oh, it's beautiful," she said after the show. "You can tell it's very old."

Also appearing in the show were young pianist Travis McHale, the Dixie Disciples Band from the First Presbyterian Church in San Pedro and the Silver Smoothies.

Master of ceremonies Fred Crawford gave a nearly packed house a new-style radio

report of the theater's construction.

Outside, people strolled Sixth Street, which had been closed to traffic, and dined on burritos and other ethnic fare at long tables as they waiting for the 8:30 p.m. lighting.

Officials help celebrate

Los Angeles city officials were on hand to help celebrate.

Through the Community Redevelopment Agency, the city bought the Warner in January, culminating a long effort in the community to preserve the landmark.

The theater is under the auspices of the city Cultural Affairs Department and the privately run Grand Vision Foundation, which hopes to raise another \$4.8 million for further restoration.

So far, several hundred thousand dollars have been spent on bringing the theater up to code and on the marquee restoration.

Bruce Dobb, a consultant to Svorinich's Watts/Harbor Economic Development Corp., hailed the city's role in getting the refurbishing effort under way quickly.

He also was amazed at the crowd, which ranged in estimates from several hundred to several thousand.

"Only in San Pedro," said Dobb, a Silverlake resident standing amid the mob. "If you had this kind of thing in West Los Angeles, 15 people would show up."

Many commented on the festivities that lasted into the night.

"This is terrific," said Jenny Parra. "San Pedro needs this. We need to bring the community back."