

Historic Tahoe boathouse's transformation into idyllic theater a test in patience and love



Lake Tahoe is the backdrop from the Boathouse Theatre.
Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

A woman named Spain and a man known as Dr. Love, along with a cadre of other devoted arts aficionados, are responsible for transforming what was a dilapidated boathouse into an iconic theater.

This summer the Boathouse Theatre at Valhalla is celebrating its 20th anniversary. The Tahoe Tallac Association, now known at Valhalla Tahoe, celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2009.

There was a time when the boathouse was slated for demolition.

“We looked at the two big boathouses. The architectural historian said you could take one down if you retain one,” Bill Morgan told *Lake Tahoe News*. He was forest supervisor of Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit from 1975-85. Both still exist today, but it was the one that is now a theater that was eyed for demolition.

When Morgan came on board the plans on the books were to raze most of the buildings at the site.

Carol Spain and others challenged that thinking when they proposed creating an arts and cultural center out of what had been estates owned by wealthy San Franciscans.

To do so would take money and hours of volunteer time. Musicians and other artists donated their time. But the group needed more money. A friend of Spain’s introduced her to Barbara Vucanovich, a Nevada congresswoman at the time.

“She said come see me,” Spain recalled. “She introduced me to some people; that started the whole ball rolling seeking federal money.” That was the first of many visits where the purpose was to get money from the feds. After all, the land to this day is still owned by the U.S. Forest Service.

Dave Kurtzman was along for three of the excursions. Those turned out be more about relationship building than check writing.

It was a meeting in Tahoe that really got the purse strings to loosen up. Sen. Harry Reid, D-



Valhalla Boathouse Theatre 20th anniversary fundraiser – Lucky Baldwin Poker Promenade and Concert featuring Radoslav Lorkovic is June 25 at 6pm. Lucky Baldwin, Claire Heller, George Pope and other historic characters will be at various stations

Nev., was speaking at a local Rotary meeting that Kurtzman and Spain decided to attend. They prearranged for a private meeting with the senator that included Dennis Crabb, who was then city attorney of South Lake Tahoe, along with some of Reid's aides.

"We got a quarter million dollars," Kurtzman told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I think the Forest Service was ticked off because the quarter million just got moved from other funds."

That was the seed money needed to make their dream a reality. And it sealed the deal with the reluctant USFS office that the arts festival was staying.

Spain left Tahoe – and therefore the Tallac Association – in 2002. She plans to come back next month for the anniversary celebration.

Leo Buscaglia's influence

Leo Buscaglia – aka Dr. Love – first became acquainted with the Tallac Association after he attended one of the Starlight Jazz concerts at the Forest Service amphitheater. Through a mutual friend Spain secured tickets for him to the sold-out show. Spain was reluctant to do so at first; she didn't know who Buscaglia was and such favors were met with caution.

"Leo came up to me and said this was the most wonderful experience under the stars and the great music. He said if I if ever need any help, just get in touch with him. That was the wrong thing to say," Spain said with laughter.

Buscaglia had been a professor at USC, and in the 1960s taught

between Valhalla and the Baldwin Museum. Various stations around the Tallac Historic Site will offer food and drinks, and interpretive history. The concert will follow the poker run. Cost is \$75. Tickets are available online.

a class called Love. Through that course, his books and lectures he became known as Dr. Love.

He moved to Glenbrook permanently in 1989. He died nine years later from a heart attack. By the time of his death he had sold more than 11 million books.

Spain soon figured out who Buscaglia was and decided to tap him to help raise money for the boathouse renovation. Harveys had a speakers series at the time, which Buscaglia headlined a few times. He arranged for most of the proceeds to go to the boathouse renovation.

Before the boathouse was renovated, the Grand Hall at Valhalla is where performances were staged. Buscaglia would bring his books, sign them and then give the boathouse the proceeds.

When Buscaglia died his estate gave \$40,000 to the boathouse.



The boathouse was neglected for years before the arts community took over. Photo/USFS

A bit of history

William Tevis as part of his 75-acre estate built the boathouse in the late 1800s.

He later sold the parcel to George Pope Sr. of the Pope & Talbot Lumber and Shipping Company. Pope's boat, The Sheik, was stored in the boathouse that is now the theater. At the time it was the biggest and fastest boat on the lake.

Pope in 1924 sold 3.3 acres to San Francisco financier Walter Heller, with the boathouse being part of that transaction.

The boathouse at one time had four bedrooms and a bathroom on the second level.

The Forest Service acquired the estates between 1965 and 1971. In total the area is 74 acres.

Before the arts group took over the boathouse it had fallen into disrepair and was being used for storage.

It was the late Bob Harris who as the forest supervisor green lighted the renovation of the boathouse.

The transformation

"I was always borrowing stuff from the casinos ... pianos, speaker systems, you name it," Spain said. "They were tearing up the Harrah's stage and replacing it. Supposedly it was cherry wood and many famous people danced on it. They trucked it out to the empty boathouse. The carpenters looked at it and said you can't use it."

That example spoke to the generosity of the community and the stumbling blocks to get the work done.

The Stateline casinos were huge supporters of what was going on on the other side of the South Shore. Lights and sound systems were donated. Workers gave their time.

Ken Kurtzman was the architect on the project. (He, too, plans to be at the party in June.)

Everything had to be photographed before work could begin because of the historical nature of the building. Interviews with anyone who might have a speck of information about the old days were conducted, including with members of the Washoe tribe.

An apartment used to be upstairs where the bathrooms and sound system are today. Originally the second floor was going to have balcony seating, but because there was no way of working the bathrooms into the first floor design, they went upstairs instead of the added chairs.

The floor was naturally sloped, which made it ideal for a theater. The old tracks for the boats were covered. Outside, though, they are still prominent. The seats came from an old theater in Colorado.

"The exterior is pretty much exactly how it was," Dave Kurtzman told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That's true in terms of aesthetics.

"When I started working out at Valhalla with the Forest Service in the '70s at that time the only thing holding up the boathouse was the big tree next to it. It was really rickety," Steve Yonker with Yonker Construction told *Lake Tahoe News*. "To begin with there were cables inside holding things together. We replaced those with cross members. There was quite a bit of engineering in there."

Yonker was one of few contractors to work on the renovation. He built the stage and installed insulation.

"We had to deal with the big doors on back so they could be opened up with a view right to the lake," Yonker said.

The roof, siding and single-pane windows were replaced.

Jail inmates provided some of the labor.

For actors, though, there are still constraints. There are no dressing rooms. The back is tiny.

“The boathouse when you saw it, it was in a rough state. It was kind of just a wild dream that came true,” Spain said. “To have those doors open, to have the glass wall and pianist on stage in front of it ... it is just a lovely, lovely experience. So, when it all came together, it was better than the dream.”



The exterior of the boathouse looks much like it did when it was used to store watercraft. Photo/Provided

Modern day

While a variety of musical and theatrical performances have graced the stage of the boathouse in the last 20 years, the facility is still in need of upgrades.

The curtains came down earlier this spring for cleaning and all festival director Evangeline Elston could think about was

what if they fell apart.

“The boathouse really needs a lot of TLC,” she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

A fundraiser on June 25 is designed to be part celebration of the theater’s milestone anniversary, an opportunity to recognize those who made it a reality and for the public to learn that more needs to be done.

“I would like to completely revamp the technology – the lighting, sound system. I would like to do interior stuff that would not be invasive to the look and feel, but might improve how it works, like lighting in the back of the house,” Elston said. And replacing the curtains is also on the to-do list.

Changing the lights to LED will cost a minimum of \$15,000. Besides being more energy efficient, the threat of fire would be greatly diminished.

Every time the building is closed up for the night the circuit breakers are flipped so the lights can’t just come on because if they did, the fear is that a fire would start based on how hot the lights are and that the building is old wood.

The association plans to do an in depth needs assessment so by the end of the season the board of this nonprofit has a better idea of the costs associated with doing all the wanted upgrades.

The boathouse fundraiser is June 25, three days after the season opens.