



Rod North and his wife, Theresa, bought the Bingen Theater in 2008. It is now home to a recording studio and a venue for community celebrations.

New Life for Bingen's Theater

New owners provide much-needed TLC to Bingen Theater

By Jeanie Senior

Rod and Theresa North first visited the old movie theater on Oak Street in Bingen in early 2000. They checked it out again in 2008, and bought the building—leaky roof and all.

The prior residents had done some remodeling, sometimes without building permits.

The roof no longer leaks, and the now-insulated building includes a stage, dance floor and an elevated seating/standing area.

Under Rod and Theresa's ownership, the Bingen Theater has been reborn as a nonprofit center for the arts. Its mission is to present high-quality musical, artistic, film and cultural offerings to

the community, and to focus on furthering the arts and arts education through workshops and seminars.

It has become a popular place for a variety of events.

In March, a rollicking Mardi Gras celebration included bands Samba Hood River, the Two-Dollar Jazz Band and Funkship Columbia. The event earned more than \$2,000 for the Columbia Gorge Fellowship for Peace.

Funkship also played at the theater's annual Halloween party.

Rod says the Mardi Gras and Halloween parties are anchor gigs for the theater.

Another annual event is community radio station Radio Tierra's Independence Eve live broadcast,



The equipment in Rod's studio belonged to close friend and fellow musician Rick Hulett. Rod is putting together an album from previously recorded music by Django's Cadillac. Proceeds will benefit the Bigfoot Foundation, which provides instruments to young musicians.

featuring the mayors of Bingen, White Salmon and Hood River, as well as musicians and poets.

Last September, the theater hosted four performances of a live concert version of the Rocky Horror Picture Show. It was the first production by CGOA Stages—the newest addition to the Columbia Gorge Orchestra Association's roster of ensembles.

Although the theater's original projection equipment is gone, there is a digital projector Rod says has been used for musical acts, including what he describes as the amazing production put on by the Portland-based Pink Floyd tribute band Pigs on the Wing, which appeared

in March for a sold-out performance. It was the band's third show at the Bingen Theater.

CGOA Stages will do seven performances of "Death of a Salesman" at the theater April 13-15 and 20-23. The Squirrel Blues Show, featuring the Nick Moss Band, is May 6.

A door on the north side of the theater's lobby opens into a recording studio, which Rod says is one of the reasons they bought the building. The equipment belonged to his friend and fellow musician Rick Hulett, who died of cancer in 2014. They set up the studio together, which is available to rent for \$50 an hour.

A much-loved Hood River resident, Rick was a member of several bands, including Django's Cadillac and the Bigfoot Band.

Rod is an emergency room physician at Klickitat Valley Hospital in Goldendale. He says it is hard to find the time for all he wants to do at the theater.

He is working in the recording studio to put the finishing touches on an album of several songs recorded by Django's Cadillac. The music had been on a hard-drive in the studio since 2007 or 2008, Rod says, almost forgotten until band member Dennis Williams asked about them.

Rod says there will be a CD release party at the Bingen Theater when the album is complete. Earnings from the recording will go to the Hulett family's Bigfoot Foundation, which provides quality musical instruments to young musicians. ■

The Small-Town Screen

The Bingen Theater was called the Canyon Theatre when it opened in February 1948.

The week after the grand opening, a story in the Mount Adams Sun newspaper said proprietor Dale Palmer had borrowed an air rifle from the Hiway Hardware to shoot down 17 helium balloons lodged against the theater's ceiling after the opening.

A 1951 notice in the Sun, which

was published in Bingen until 1968, announced an unspecified increase in admission, "necessary due to the sharp increase in the cost of motion picture rentals together with increases in the cost of supplies, transportation and other operating costs, and will enable the theater to continue to bring the top attractions and maintain the good service that has been the policy of the theater."

Summer newspaper ads touted the theater's air conditioning, saying it was a place to escape the summer heat.

After the Canyon Theatre closed in the late 1960s, it re-opened as the Gorge Theater and stayed open for perhaps a couple of decades, according to the White Salmon Valley Library.

In both incarnations, it functioned as a small-town movie theater rather than an opulent movie palace. ■