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MPC Theatre shares its history in graffiti before the walls come tumbling down

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It all began in the 1960s, when Monterey Peninsula College's theater arts department was located on the main part of campus — in what Peter DeBono could only describe as a Quonset hut-type structure, with some bleachers set up inside and an attached trailer for a stage.

"There was a little room in the back that was the dressing room," said DeBono, the recently retired department co-chair who was an MPC student at the time. "They had a long set of mirrors with light bulbs all around them (mounted) on a piece of wood above the makeup table. People started putting their initials around the mirrors, then their signatures and the name and year of the show they were in."

When a new theater arts building was built in 1970, the long light-up mirror and makeup table were moved into the new dressing room and, as DeBono said, "It grew from there — people started writing on the walls."

Over the next 40 years, the graffiti expanded to the floors, doors, ceilings, hallways and stairwell.

Some of the graffiti is elaborate, with artistic logos from various shows surrounded by cast members' favorite lines.

Some of it is humorous, like the bathroom wall space dedicated to "Urinetown."

Some of it is difficult to imagine creating — like the signatures for "Oklahoma!" that were painted Michelangelo-style on the ceiling along the 10-foot long heating duct.

Now that the MPC theater arts building is officially closed for major renovation,

the dressing room walls are about to come down —

along with the recorded history of 40 years worth of shows they contain.

But while the graffiti still remains, current theater arts department chairman Gary Bolen has been overcome with a desire to preserve some of the history.

In a wistful mood, Bolen documented the dressing room walls with a video recorder and then posted the recordings on the "Friends of the MPC Theatre Company" Facebook group page.

"When I posted on Facebook, people I've never even worked with posted about their memories," said DeBono, describing comments he's received from people who haven't been to the theater in over 25 years — as well as from people who were in productions as recently as last season.

MPC theater icon James Brady wrote that watching the video was like watching his life pass before his eyes: "I signed these walls for the first time in November of 1976 for the SRO production of 'The Graduate' ... the last time I signed them would have been in May of 2010 for 'Beyond Therapy.' Thirty-four years of my life is recorded on those walls. Thirty-four years."

In closing, he quoted the famous playwright Tom Stoppard: "There's only one direction, and time is its only measure."

Many of the other posts mentioned things such as "misty eyes," "great memories," "best years of my life."



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One comment even said, "I feel like I'm watching an old friend die of cancer" — to which Bolen replied, "Don't think of it as 'dying' of cancer, think of it as 'rehabbing.' We'll be back better than ever!"

Even though he's looking forward to the theater's much-needed renovations, Bolen admits that thinking about those beloved walls coming down brings him a "tremendous amount of sadness."

On the video, he even muses that he might just unhinge the "Rocky Horror" door — painted with the familiar logo bleeding down the door — and save it before it's destroyed.

"I've only been here 12 years, but you get attached," he said. "The theater is our second home. We spend almost as much time in the theater as we do in our own home. I always joke that I've been married 28 years, but it feels like 17 because I've been in rehearsal for 11 years."

A few years ago, a new custodian tried to paint over the "vandalized" walls. DeBono told the story of how he walked into the dressing room to see one of the walls covered in fresh, white paint, with the well-meaning custodian continuing to systematically cover the graffiti. "We told him, 'No, no — that's part of (the history of) this place!'"

Bolen said it's ironic that the walls are coming down at the same time DeBono is retiring: "It's like both he and the theater are starting a new life."

The sadness really hit DeBono when he was moving out of the building.

"I was packing up my things and I saw (graffiti) from 'Championship Season' with a drawing of all of us in the cast," he said. "Morgan (Stock) had signed it and I saw my own signature up there. It's a new experience. I don't know quite what to make of it yet."

"There are lots of changes right now," said Bolen. "The theater renovations, Peter retiring, I'm taking over as chair. To me it's the end of something — but the end of one thing is the beginning of something else. The thing is, neither (the theater or DeBono) is really going away. The building will be renovated, but it will just become a better version of itself. Peter will still be a teacher here and will still direct shows for us."

DeBono confirmed that he'll continue to teach the film appreciation class that he's taught at MPC for the past 32 years, as well as direct one production a year.

And as for writing on the new walls once the theater reopens? Bolen didn't hesitate to say, "That's a tradition I'd like to see continue." GO!



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