

The Tower Theatre has become a cultural hub in Central Oregon since its renovation in 2004.  
Submitted photo

# 10 YEARS

# LATER



Ryan Brennecke / The Bulletin file photo

Marty Stuart, center, and his bandmates perform for the crowd at the Tower Theatre in 2011.



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Comedian Cash Levy filmed his comedy special, "Cash Levy: Crowd Control," at the Tower Theatre in March 2010, and returned to present it in 2012.

- Downtown Bend's iconic Tower Theatre celebrates a decade of music, arts, comedy, celebrities and more

By David Jasper • *The Bulletin*

As we bid farewell to 2013 and prepare to usher in a new year, the employees, board members and volunteers of the Tower Theatre have their eyes on another impending date: Jan. 30, the 10th anniversary of the downtown Bend theater's grand-reopening in 2004.

Over the past decade, a wealth of performers, singers, actors and comedians have entertained Bend audiences from its stage.

Tower audiences have heard bands including country singer Jo Dee Messina, South African a capella greats Ladysmith Black Mambazo and folk legends including Peter Yarrow and Ramblin' Jack Elliott.

Hollywood has also come to the Tower: Actors who have appeared on its stage include Sam Waterston, Gregory Harrison, John Waters, Ed Asner, Tom Dugan, Michael Learned and Molly Ringwald.

BendFilm Festival has always held

**Inside**  
• Ray Solley's top Tower Theatre moments, **C3**

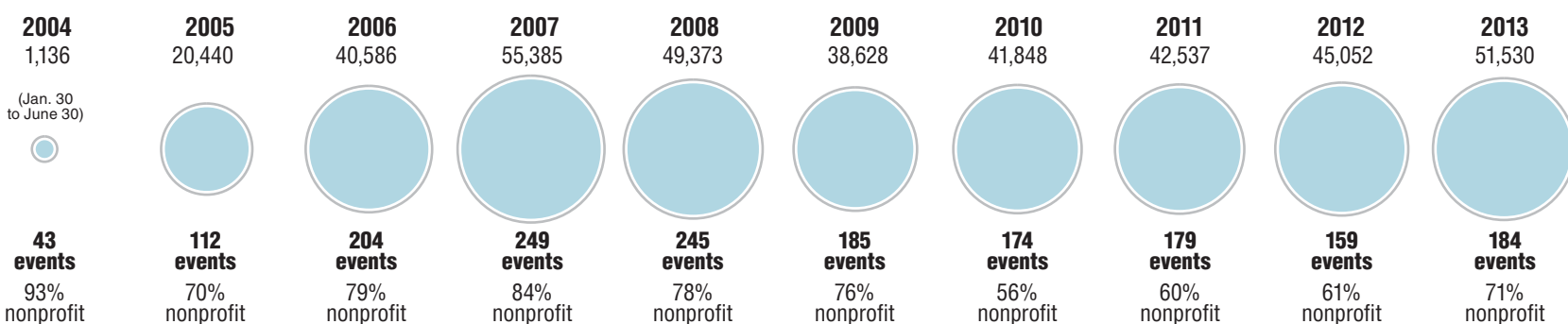
screenings there. Literary events have brought major authors to the Tower stage, including Augusten Burroughs, Annie Proulx, Anne Lamott, Khaled Hosseini and Kathryn Stockett. Local theater groups have staged productions of "Chicago," "1776" and "A Christmas Carol" there, among other plays.

After his thrilling decathlon gold-medal victory in 2012, Olympian Ashton Eaton, a graduate of Mountain View High School in Bend, was honored with a homecoming parade that concluded at the Tower, on whose stage he later met with fans.

See **Tower / C2**

## Tower Theatre attendance since 2004

Since re-opening in 2004, the Tower Theater has hosted more than 1,700 events with a total overall attendance of 419,251. Sixty-three percent of those events were full, and overall 73 percent were non-profit events. Numbers are reported by fiscal year, which ends June 30.



Source: Tower Theatre Foundation

Andy Zeigert / The Bulletin

## Tower

### Continued from C1

That's not to mention the children's entertainment, film screenings, singalongs and other events that have been presented here. The space is also rented out for meetings by nonprofits and other organizations and has been used for weddings, parties, lectures, fundraisers and more.

In other words, the Tower has been, for the past 10 years, a community center of entertainment, discourse, art and music.

Thousands of patrons have taken in all those entertainment offerings. In September, the Tower welcomed its 400,000th customer, Tom Griffin, of Bend, on the closing night of the musical comedy "Spamalot," produced by Stage Right Productions of Bend. (As of Tuesday, the Tower counted attendance of 420,000, according to Ray Solley, Tower Theatre Foundation executive director.)

Back in the late 1990s, the proud theater may never have seen one more patron were it not for the efforts of concerned citizens with a vision. According to architect John Kvapil of DKA Architecture & Design, which handled the Tower's redesign early last decade, the Tower's rebirth "came to be through the cooperation of a dream list of people who represented the local government, state government, federal government, COCC, the Downtowners, the downtown business community, the larger business community, individuals, individual donors, interested citizens," he said. "All of those people were active at a critical (time) ... it was not one single group that made it happen."

The theater had been built in 1940 in the late art deco off-

shoot known as streamlined moderne. A shoebox-shaped movie theater, it hosted countless film screenings over the decades that followed, and also served as host to amateur hours, fashion shows and recitals on the small stage beneath its screen.

But by the early 1990s, the theater had fallen into disrepair. Ownership changed hands, and at one point an office and retail space had been in the plan, until efforts to save the theater got underway. In 1997, the Tower Theatre Foundation formed to raise capital and refurbish, reopen and run the Wall Street gem. (The City of Bend had purchased the theater prior to its restoration, and the Tower Theatre Foundation agreed to repay the \$445,000 purchase price with no interest. The foundation paid \$145,000 in 2001, and pays \$6,000 per year on the remaining balance, which is now \$240,000, according to Solley.)

### History and renovation

If you're talking about the Tower Theatre in front of Kvapil, don't use the word "restoration." The right word is renovation. Back when it was a 998-seat, single-screen movie theater, moviegoers encountered travertine marble at its entrance, and neon lighting that led down its 40-foot "Tower" sign into the front entrance of the building.

Kvapil calls that look "spartan" by comparison to today's Tower, which he designed.

Earlier this month, Kvapil took a seat at a computer at DKA Architecture & Design's office in Northwest Crossing. He said he created a PowerPoint slideshow chronicling the renovation in part because "people were saying, 'Nice restoration job,'" he said. "And we said, 'No,

we didn't restore it. We gutted it and completely re-created it anew."

Often, the next words were "Really? You're kidding," he said. Kvapil shows his slideshow to Tower volunteers, new board members and others "to familiarize them with how the Tower came to be originally, how it met its demise and how it came back miraculously," he said, noting that sometimes, undocumented history gets rewritten after those who had been there move on.

Kirby Nagelhout Construction Co. began working in November 2002, jackhammering constantly in the early months as work was done on the basement and giving a steeper slope to the floor than a movie theater required. Other changes included a stage door that was installed in the back of the theater along Brooks Street so crews could unload equipment and access the stage area.

Despite months of jackhammering and construction, not once did neighboring businesses complain, said Kvapil. Prior to the project, the Tower's square footage was 10,432. Today, the theater, which seats 466, clocks in at 13,630 square feet.

"The Tower sign is the one thing on the exterior that is exactly the way that it's always been," Kvapil said, yet even that was restored with new neon lights.

The renovation also saw the installment of new box seats and a raised ceiling that, Solley said, adds to the dramatic effect upon entering the theater.

"You walk down these little

aisles on either side that are small and low overhead ... and then you walk 10 or 15 feet and then you walk in and boom! It opens up," he said. "They took out the ceiling and exposed beams, and all of a sudden there's this big cathedral-like place with this big proscenium arch and box seats in the balcony and it has a sense of 'Boy, this is like nothing else in Bend.'"

The renovated theater also included a larger basement and orchestra pit with a motorized lift and an expanded lobby area. Large glass panes in the front windows were replaced with smaller individual panes, more in line with the art deco look.

To Solley's thinking, the changes put the Tower more on par with classic theaters in other cities.

"The idea of a movie theater in the 1940s ... in bigger cities, was you walk in and you've gone away from the world. You've exited the world. You've gone into a fantasy land. You've gone into an art deco showcase. You've gone into an Aztec temple. You've gone into an Egyptian tomb," Solley said. "All those things were really big theaters back in the 1940s. So when they built this one, it was partially that. But when they renovated it, it really became that. It became a special place off of Wall Street."

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## My Top Tower Moments (so far!)

By Ray Solley  
Executive director, Tower Theatre Foundation

### ED ASNER'S PARTING WORDS

Ed Asner launched my first season at the helm of the Tower in October 2009 with a sold-out, one-man performance as FDR. As he was leaving the venue, Ed pulled me aside, put his hand on my shoulder, leaned into my face and, in Lou Grant style, softly growled: "You take care of my theater for me, OK?" I've tried to keep that promise every day since.

### 'OUR' OSCAR WINNER

Sure, Octavia Spencer richly deserved the 2012 Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress in "The Help." But during her acceptance speech all I could think of was the evening nearly two years earlier when she lit up the Tower stage, reading excerpts with her friend and author Kathryn Stockett at the Deschutes Public Library's 2010 "A Novel Idea."



Submitted photo

**Decathlete Ashton Eaton speaks in front of the Tower in 2012.**

### WORLD'S BEST ATHLETE

It's hard to top Ashton Eaton, Central Oregon's Olympic gold medal winner, addressing thousands in front of the Tower, and then signing autographs and posing for pictures on our stage for hours afterward.

### HOME TO ACTORS, SINGERS, DANCERS

I've got a montage of memories: Actors from Cat Call, 2nd Street, CTC, BEAT, Shore Thing Productions. Singers from countless choirs, schools, chorales and clubs. Dancers taught by Mrs. Marcelle's, Academie de Ballet Classique and Gotta Dance. All sharing post-show hugs, flower bouquets and family photos in the lobby. The memory of being part of the Tower now belongs to them.

### SURPRISE CELEBRITY

Last April, the first skit of our first major fundraiser — "The Bend Follies" — was a parody titled "What's the Little Caesar Lady really listening to on her headphones?" When dancing-and-waving Mary Barackman made a surprise appearance at the end of the sketch, the audience exploded with a spontaneous, boisterous standing ovation. Mary's contagious smile beamed through a few tears of joy.

Submitted photos

**Mary Barackman does her trademark dance for the audience at "The Bend Follies" in April.**

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### Uses and users

"It's the centerpiece of Bend's performing arts. It's for anything that you want to do in an intimate, classy setting," Solley said. "It is always going to be — because it was designed this way — special."

Back when the Tower reopened, then-foundation director Patricia Iron told a Bulletin reporter, "It can be used for lectures, plays, music concerts, business meetings, wedding receptions. The use is only limited by the renters' imagination."

Since it reopened, though, the Tower has transitioned from its early vision of being a rental facility used by outside groups "into a presenter and provider of top-quality performing arts from across the region (and) the world," according to Solley.

Matthew Bowler served on the board from 2003, was the chair from 2007 to 2009 and saw that transition firsthand.

He was invited to join the board shortly before the theater's reopening. At the time, "You had a foundation and a board that was in fundraising mode, the purpose of which was to renovate an historic building. They weren't structured ... to operate the theater. Their focus had been on renovating the building."

The board had anticipated, however, that once operational, needs might shift, and had even created a reserve fund "that would allow us to improve the theater and its experience once we became operational ... because until we become operational, we don't genuinely know what our needs will be," Bowler said. That fund helped update the theater's sound system when the need arose.

"The other thing we did is we said, 'When we first open our doors, we're going to focus exclusively on rentals. We're not going to be a nonprofit that produces its own events.'"

There are risks to contracting with performers when there's money involved, Bowler said, and additional theater staff would have to be hired as well, folks with expertise in booking acts and technical skills such as sound engineering.

Those were risks the board was reluctant to take in the first two years.

"So it was a conscious decision that said, 'Let's get our feet wet by being a rental facility only,'" Bowler said. That allowed the Tower Theatre Foundation to debug operations before going into event production.

Over 2004 and '05, the constitution of the board shifted from members who had been focused on fundraising and creating infrastructure into one that was ready to take on theater operations and production.

"You had people who had been on the board a long time who had reached the point where they felt it was better for them to step down. They had been working away for five to 10 years and they'd reached a point where they wanted to go and do different things. And they brought a different skill set ... because it was becoming an operating company instead of a fundraising company," Bowler said.

In keeping rental rates affordable in order for nonprofits to use the facility, "The rental rate is below the operating cost, he said. "So if the theater had continued to run on rental alone, one of two things would have happened: It would have ei-



Submitted photo

**Audience members find their seats for the 2011 "Winnie the Pooh" children's show.**



Submitted photo

**Audiences line up for the Best of BendFilm in October. BendFilm is one of the Tower's long-term users, and is scheduled to use the Tower for its 11th year in 2014.**

ther gone out of business, or it would have had to raise its prices."

"As the theater evolved into an entity that produced its own shows and started fundraising again, it was able to offset the gap ... (and) maintain financial viability," he said. During his time on the board, Bowler found that "the community was delighted to have this asset. I think, broadly speaking, the users of the facility were really happy," he said.

Nonprofits have always used the facility, from Sunrivers Music Festival to BendFilm and the Education Foundation for Bend-La Pine Schools, Solley said. "Basically ... three-quarters of our users are nonprofits. That includes us — we're a nonprofit, so we're in that mix, but that's one of the purposes of the building."

### Frequent flyers

Deschutes Public Library has been one of the Tower's longest running users, along with BendFilm Festival, which holds screenings at the Tower. Both organizations are already contracted to use the Tower for their events next year, which will be their 11th using the Tower. Solley and staff refer to such organizations as "frequent flyers."

Chantal Strobel, community relations manager for Deschutes Public Library system, oversees A Novel Idea. "The Tower is our community theater and 'A Novel Idea' is our community read — a perfect pairing we hope continues for at least another decade," she said.

Over the years, the Tower's relied on hundreds of volunteers who work on fundraising

and usher at events. The number of annual volunteer hours shot from a total of 2,584 hours in 2008 up to 4,047 in 2012.

Solley marvels at how well the Tower has held up over the last 10 years.

"It's getting old!" he said. "The carpet is still the original carpet. The paint's the original paint. The seats are the original new seats. It's incredibly well done. We've put in new audio. We've put in new video. We've put in new sound monitors and speakers. We've put in new lights. Most of the things I'm listing have been done in the last three years."

### The future

Tower volunteer Susan Pope became downright excited recently when she heard Solley had already scheduled the return of political satirists Capitol Steps, a group that has sold out the room in the past.

"I've got them booked for the week before the presidential election in 2016," he said, laughing.

Pope, who said "Yes!" exactly five times as Solley ut-

tered the above sentence, was more than a little enthused.

"Can I buy my ticket now?" she said.

In the much nearer future, as part of the anniversary celebration, which will continue throughout the year, the Tower has scheduled "Bend Guitar Blast," an eight-day celebration of the six-stringed instrument that includes concerts, clinics, classes and more. It begins during First Friday Gallery Walk (Jan. 3), when the DIY guitar fest will welcome anyone onstage

who wants to play guitar for a few minutes. (Visit [www.towertheatre.org](http://www.towertheatre.org) for more information.)

Solley envisions diversifying the entertainment options at the Tower.

"I would love to see us move toward some things that would enhance the performing arts community. I would like to have more dance, both contemporary and ballet. I would like to have a couple of good dramas ... maybe ones that are touring," he said. "Down the line, I think we need to move toward providing the kind of performing arts that aren't being done locally, or are being done in some shape and form in other cities, and we just have to make sure they come here," he said.

He'd also like the Tower to host more one-man shows, a la Ed Asner's performance in "FDR."

"The guy is a national treasure," Solley said. "He was channeling FDR."

With an improving economy, Solley is hopeful that additional underwriting, sponsors and donations will allow the Tower to bring bigger names at reasonable prices.

The Tower is a special room, Solley said. When Manhattan Transfer played in October, "The place was jammed to the rafters. It was a big New York-style show, with projections and the whole thing. That couldn't be done anywhere else in town."

Granted, "this venue is such that if you don't fill the place up, it feels awkward," he said. "But there's a vibe in that room, and when it is full, the vibe is there."

Former chair Bowler thinks "It's important to note that the Tower's success really is a reflection of the commitment of the community to supporting its art and culture," he said. "It's not just one person or a small group of people that have allowed the Tower to succeed. It really is, I think, a reflection of the community as a whole. It's something we should all be very proud of."

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