



CONTACT:
Anthony Zelig
Production Manager
anthony@coronadoplayhouse.com
(917) 687-0699

Barron Henzel
President Emeritus
barron@coronadoplayhouse.com

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The Historic Coronado Playhouse

CORONADO PLAYHOUSE: A SAN DIEGO TRADITION FOR 75 YEARS

CORONADO, CA –In 1941, a small group of Coronado residents, calling themselves the Coronado Players, began performing in the Coronado High School auditorium. The aspirations of this humble group were put on hold upon the bombing of Pearl Harbor as the United States entered World War II.

Coronado Playhouse was officially organized as the Coronado Players in February 1946, after the war. The first production, *The Male Animal*, was staged in May of 1948 at the high school auditorium. This production was followed by *Biography*, directed by and starring Luther Kennett, Jr., the first director of the Old Globe Theatre in Balboa Park. The Coronado Players found themselves in the spotlight with glowing reviews in the Coronado and San Diego newspapers. The group produced four successful seasons at the high school auditorium while selling tickets door to door.

Early organizers involved in getting the Coronado Players on its feet included Hester Ann Hickey, Rena Kenyon, Isabella Kennett, Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Canedy, Mary Lee Carel, Rosa E. Dena and Marie Durland. The organization of this group, along with 22 charter members, is considered by the Playhouse to be tremendously significant in the history of the theatre and to the history of Coronado.

The volunteer directors in the first four seasons produced professional productions with talented actors and actresses that resulted in the Coronado Players advancing to the stage where they were drawing large audiences with quality productions. Since the beginning, the Playhouse has avoided amateur quality shows by selecting experienced and knowledgeable directors and teams.

In 1949, the Navy offered the group a surplus North Island Quonset hut and an adjoining building that were once used as a WAVE barracks and sentry house in WWII. The city approved a 20-year lease for a tract of land on the Silver Strand to the Players. The newly formed board of directors signed personal notes to enable financing, removal, transporting and remodeling of the two buildings which would become Coronado Playhouse.

The opening of the new Playhouse in 1950 was considered a huge achievement for any community group, especially for one only four seasons old. In May of that year, Rena Kenyon directed the melodrama, *The Curse of an Aching Heart*, the first major production to be staged in the new theatre. Having their own space, the Playhouse was able to extend the run to five weeks.

In the 1940s and early '50s, Coronado Playhouse won many honors as a member of the old San Diego Little Theatre League. Eventually, in 1954, the Playhouse hired Stanley Martin as its first professional director. Martin, who worked at the theatre for twenty-two years, directed many shows including *Suds in Your Eye*, based on the bestselling book by Mary Lasswell, which ran for sixteen consecutive summers from 1950-1966 and has been staged nineteen times at the Playhouse.

The barracks facility became the home of Coronado Playhouse for the next 53 years. The theatre featured unique cabaret-style seating where patrons enjoyed snacks and beverages from a full-service bar. During intermission, the doors overlooking Glorietta Bay would open and guests could enjoy the view of San Diego and the Coronado Bay Bridge. This is where a second stage would later be added for outdoor Shakespeare performances. Guests enjoyed countless opening night dinners and Sunday brunches in the space. The building was notorious for the support pole on the stage which became a well-known feature to actors and patrons alike.

In 1966, the Coronets was formed as a women's auxiliary. Its main goal was to provide financial and volunteer support to the Playhouse. The Coronets had its own charter, by-laws, Board of Directors and volunteers, most of whom were also members of the Playhouse organization. Over the years, the Coronets had come to the aid of the theatre through its fund-raising efforts by furnishing everything from paint to power tools, from linoleum to lights. They were key to raising money for new chairs for the auditorium, and helping with many other Playhouse needs, large and small. Throughout the years, the Coronets held a variety of galas, luncheons, teas and parties with special presentations, speakers and guests.

Captain J. Dunham Reilly, a noted Coronado resident and guest columnist for the *Coronado Journal* wrote in 1977 "It's a tough job getting a theater group going, even after a war. The work is hard, costs must be met, and the income is sparse. Top quality performances must be achieved by gradual improvements over a period of many years. Our playhouse won the struggle. It hung on, and there are indications that it has at last earned a fine reputation. We have something here."

Arguments regarding relocating and/or demolishing the Coronado Playhouse space involved City Hall and the community for several decades from the 1980s until the early 2000s. The Playhouse worked diligently during these discussions to remain relevant and to remain on the island. When the city made the decision to dismantle the theatre, Coronado Playhouse persevered by buying a tent and acquiring land at the Coronado Ferry Landing to continue to produce plays, not missing a season since 1946.

In 2003, the Coronado Playhouse structures were demolished to make way for the Glorietta Bay Project, which included the new City Hall, a small park, and the Coronado Community Center, which now houses the theatre. Coronado Playhouse moved into its new space in 2006.

Over the years, the Playhouse has produced hundreds and hundreds of plays, musicals, theatre and radio workshops, youth productions, cabarets and jazz and chamber music series performances. In 1997, under the direction of Keith A. Anderson, the Playhouse started an Annual Free Classic festival, offering Shakespeare and other classics at no cost. This beloved tradition has been a Coronado Playhouse staple since it began 24 years ago.

In 2013, Coronado Playhouse began partnering each production with a local non-profit organization in the true spirit of community. Since then, the Playhouse has raised several thousands of dollars, organized food drives and book drives, and raised awareness for other Coronado and San Diego-based non-profit groups.

Since 1946, the Playhouse has produced over 500 productions. Countless performers, designers and patrons have been a part of the Playhouse's colorful 75-year history.

Coronado Playhouse is the longest continuous running community theatre in San Diego County, and, according to the LA Times, is the longest continuous running playhouse on the West Coast. The Playhouse still features cabaret-style seating, which has been its trademark throughout its colorful history.

The Playhouse has operated as a volunteer-based organization throughout its years. Having hired a managing director and a few artistic directors only a few times in their past, Coronado Playhouse has traditionally been led by the board of directors who invite local independent directors and teams to propose programming that the board then selects.

The current board of directors is continuing and enhancing the blueprint laid down by their many predecessors. Current board president Desha Crownover is tremendously proud of the many achievements the Playhouse has enjoyed over the years. "CPH has been a vital part of our community for 75 years. We have had so many actors, technicians and patrons as part of our family that it is impossible to count."

Crownover, who has been board president for two years, is pleased she can serve such an historic organization where so many have come before. "We are thrilled we can continue and look forward to entertaining and enlightening audiences over the next 75 years. We are committed to seeing the Playhouse remain an essential part of the San Diego and Coronado arts communities for years to come."

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Coronado Playhouse is a qualified 501(c) 3 non-profit organization as San Diego County's longest continuously run community theatre.