

MACKINS MAKE MELODRAMA TRADITION IN CRIPPLE CREEK

The stage for drama was set when gold fever hit Cripple Creek in 1890. A gold rush of major proportions was underway at the turn of the 20th century and a boomtown atmosphere called for entertainment galore.

Tired, thirsty and social hungry miners preferred gambling halls and saloons that lined the streets of all the small communities around the mining district. Madams, dance hall girls and medicine shows kept the less cultured, working element entertained.

But there was also a more sophisticated lot who yearned for the social cultures they left back East. Moving to the West where social dress and fine dining was as scarce as running water, was not easy on the socially inclined.

Cripple Creek and Victor early on both sported grand opera houses, providing grand theatrical shows and music. Such notables as Texas Guinan, Lily Langtree

In 1946 Wayne and Dorothy Mackin purchased the Imperial Hotel and began the tradition of producing 60- plus years of melodrama.

The first year they hired a group from Kansas to produce a show and the second year they started producing their own shows. In 1953 the Mackins began the tradition of producing true turn-of-the-century melodrama at the Imperial, a tradition that continued for 45 years.

The Imperial Players performed to summer crowds in the 280-seat Gold Bar Room Theater and helped revitalize the town with a new tourism economy. The award winning dinner/theater venue was a hit and such notables as Victor Borge, Arthur Godfrey, Walt Disney, Mary Tyler Moore and Lowell Thomas visited the theater. Ragtime pianist Max Morath got his start at the keyboard in the Imperial. In the early 1990s the last Imperial show was performed as the Imperial became a casino and the Gold Bar Room closed.

Early in 1999, the city of Cripple Creek began extensive renovations to refurbish the Butte Theater on Cripple Creek's west end with fresh paint, Victorian-era wallpaper, and period chandeliers. The stage was set for another era of theater.

The Butte became home to the renewed tradition of classic Cripple Creek melodrama with the Mackin Family's new Cripple Creek Players taking the stage during summer months. Bonnie and Steve produced again the classic melodrama

so well loved from the former Imperial Days. The Cripple Creek Players brought back to life the traditional scripts that Dorothy Mackin edited and recreated the summertime melodrama craze. Stacy Mackin eventually became the third generation of Mackins to produce melodrama at the Butte, serving as the Butte Theater manager and melodrama producer.

The Mackins ended their productions in 2006; but Steve opted to take the stage in the community theater production of *A Cripple Creek Christmas Carol* that holiday season.

In 2007 Thin Air Theatre Company took the lead to produce melodrama and a variety of theatrical venues.

The success of the Butte's new lease on life is due to the long tradition Wayne and Dorothy began over 60 years ago; and due to the professional path of classic melodrama that the Mackin family created.

In this 2009 season, we at TATC salute the Mackins and their dedication to promoting Cripple Creek and professional theater and for making possible the town's long tradition of melodrama.



Steve Mackin, right, took the stage in 2005 in *A Cripple Creek Christmas Carol* as Winfield Scott Stratton, along with Mel Moser as Gooch.

Thin Air Theatre Company Enters Third Season at the Butte

Former all former Imperial and/or Cripple Creek Players cast members Chris Armbrister, Mel Moser and Mickey Burdick put their theater talents together in 2007 to form a new company – Thin Air Theatre Company (TATC). This marks the third year TATC has produced shows at the Butte Theater.

The new venture has been staging classic Cripple Creek melodrama after the long and successful tradition of melodrama appeared to be ending with the resignation of the Mackin family in 2006. The actors pooled their energies, efforts and resources to create a new company that would ensure the continuation of professional theater and melodrama.

Their efforts, made possible by their involvement with the long-time Mackin family tradition of melodrama, have paid off with popular shows, and this

year the Colorado Springs Gazette named TATC the Best New Theater Company.

"After years of working as an actor in Cripple Creek, I was naturally thrilled when the opportunity arose to become a part of the new Butte programming", said Burdick who has performed in several shows and is now the Butte Theater manager.

"The first time I drove down Tenderfoot Hill I was captivated by the vision that stretched out before me. As I pulled up to the Imperial, where the melodrama used to be performed back in those days, I felt like I had stepped into another era; you

gotta remember this was before there were any casinos in town...it was magical," said Armbrister.

Actors, directors, writers and managers – the three are also friends as well as business partners in TATC.

"The chance to work with such talented individuals in such a fine theater rarely comes along, so I welcomed the challenge with open arms," said Burdick, who is also managing a professional theater project in Estes Park.

A longtime face on the Imperial and Butte stages, Moser grew up in eastern Montana's ranch country.

"I have been given a chance to work with two great theater minds, Mickey Burdick and Chris Armbrister; how they have put up with me God only knows. They both have worked their tails off everyday for the past year and we have not had one disagreement, ok.....one. I want to thank the City of Cripple Creek for giving Thin Air Theatre Company this opportunity; at each turn in the road or maybe I should say "bump" in the road, they have always been there for us with the best of intentions and a willingness to advise and council and I want to give them my sincerest thank you."

The 2009 season includes more professional theater productions, including *The Fantasticks* and *Godspell*, which will rotate days and times through Sept. 26. TATC will be producing a classic melodrama *The Lost Soul of Cripple Creek* and the popular *A Cripple Creek Christmas Carol* later this year. The fall show will include a Halloween Olio. An all new schedule this year includes more matinees and the show is open additional day each week - only closed Tuesdays.

