

FILM festival partners with Liberty THEATRE

By Alex Wittwer
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The Eastern Oregon Film Festival plans to light up the screen at one of La Grande's seminal landmarks.

The film festival, which was held only online last year due to the pandemic, aims to serve moviegoers and film buffs a special treat this October — the festival will take place in the Liberty Theatre, the newly renovated historic building that dates back to 1910.

There also will be showings at the performing arts space HQ in downtown La Grande and the newly renovated Loso Hall at Eastern Oregon University. But the Liberty, 1008 Adams Ave., will be the main attraction.

With the new venues, new technology will help increase the overall quality of the festival.

"This the first time there's been a good screen and projector," said Chris Jennings, the main organizing force behind the EOFF. "It'll be great to move to more solid ground."

Each year, the film festival shows nearly two dozen films ranging from feature-length flicks to bite-sized shorts. Artists from around the country come and speak about their films and their process in creating them.

The film selection process, which in previous years involved the members of EOFF coming together and watching back-to-back films over a several-hour period before giving recommendations and discussion, has evolved to fit with the pandemic.

Last year members watched on their own or through watch parties via Zoom. This year marked a return of those watch parties and a new addition — a residency program.

Jennings said he wanted even more high-quality talent congregating in La Grande each year, so he created a new film residency program with the goal of having filmmakers write their screenplays

and produce their works in the Grande Ronde Valley, which in turn would promote the region on a grander scale.

In a sense, Jennings is looking for the Eastern Oregon equivalent of "The Goonies" — a way to put La Grande on the map the way the 1985 adventure comedy film raised the profile of Astoria.

The inaugural group of EOFF residents consists of four festival alumni — Alexander Craven, H. Nelson Tracy, Natalie Metzger and Parker Winship — plus Karina Lomelin Ripper and Samantha Crainich, who are new to Eastern Oregon.

"They're here," Jennings said, "with the goal of them coming back in a year to produce those films."

The filmmakers will stay one month in La Grande at The Lodge at Hot Springs Lake. There, they will spend their time writing their screenplays — hopefully inspired by the region, Jennings said.

"The major stipulation of the residency program was we want to have the screenplay to be the focus. (We want) their time here to be very thoughtful and creative about

how the nuance and the culture and the landscape of the Grande Ronde Valley as a whole can play a role within that story."

The 2021 Eastern Oregon Film Festival will run Oct. 21-23. For more information, including how to purchase tickets, visit www.eofilmfest.com.



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Patrons at the Liberty Theatre Cafe sit outside Friday, April 23. The theater is set to open later this year and host a portion of the Eastern Oregon Film Festival in October.

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Opera House expands viewing options for 'High School Musical Jr.'

ELGIN — The Elgin Opera House circumvented the obstacles because the pandemic to film its production of "High School Musical Jr." — and the show is now live for ticket holders.

The remaining showtimes are Thursday and Friday, April 29 and 30 at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, May 1 at 4:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., and Sunday, May 2 at 4:30 p.m. To watch the film online, purchase a ticket for a specific date and time. You have to log in at the time on your ticket — the show cannot be paused or watched later.

The Elgin Opera House also is offering "watch party" public screenings for the April 29-May 1 showings for up to 100 people on a first come, first served basis. Tickets must be purchased in advance. Bring your tickets and show them at the door.

The concession stand will be open. Masks and social distancing will be required per state law.

The musical's cast numbers 70, and all were divided into cohorts of 10 actors in keeping with the restrictions in place on group gatherings. Terry Hale, the executive artistic director at the Elgin Opera House, and his team had to be creative.

"It was a puzzle," he said. "We had to go through the entire script, every song, and break it up into seven pieces."

The final production replicates a live theater experience as much as possible. The entire show was recorded in the theater space and the recordings were mixed to sound like one cohesive group performance.

To get tickets for "High School Musical Jr.," go to www.elginoperahouse.com and click on "order tickets," contact Laura at tickets@elginoperahouse.com or call the box office at 541-663-6324.

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