

THEATER | "Ghosts of the Orpheum" spooks guests and reminds them of what once was



Photos by Jeff Rutherford

By [Barb Teed](#), [TC Daily Planet](#)
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What made *Ghosts of the Orpheum* particularly creepy was that it was based on true Orpheum Theatre ghost stories. Or maybe it was the timing: the day before Halloween.

In the show, actors recreated some of the Orpheum's hauntings. When the Orpheum was being remodeled in the 1990s, construction workers could hear an opera singer's voice in the theater rafters, said Melissa Koch, director of education. The long-ago singer magically reappeared on the Orpheum stage to the thrill of the crowd at the 5 p.m. show.

Host Christopher Yaeger, dressed in tuxedo with top hat, gives walking tours of the Orpheum all year and said people always ask if the theater has disturbances. "Every opening night some hijinks go on," he said. "Lights flicker. We hear creaks and clanks. Every tour I give, the elevator continuously goes up and down with no one in it."

The first-time event was a series of vignettes at various locations within the theater, and the Orpheum's mystery elevator was part of the cast. Up and down it went, opening and shutting with not a person in it.

A "nanny from the past" appeared in one scene on the second floor. Babies and children were heard crying behind the restroom door. "I never get to rest my brittle bones," said the nanny to the audience, telling "the children" in the lavatory to be quiet.

"The Nanny character really worked here at the Orpheum and she was included in the price of the ticket when we provided daycare. Guests that came would drop off their kids, then go see the show. We had a full nursery that had children of all ages in it," said Yaeger.

Koch said Orpheum's [weekly tours](#) sparked the idea to do the variety show scenarios. The Orpheum first opened in October, 1921 to live vaudeville acts. 89 years later, the ghostly reputation of the theater prompted their Halloween production.

Being underneath the stage in the basement of the Orpheum with vintage vaudeville posters added to the charm, and chains rattled against the trap door leading up onto the theater stage. Actors dressed as ghosts emerged in and out of the pipelines and duct work, from behind old cash registers, and under spotlights. Manny the Electrician, with a ghostly face, arrived to scold patrons for touching his pipes.

"This is *my* work space," said Manny. "This equipment carries enough electricity to light up half of Minneapolis. You want to be careful around this electricity. It could kill you. I keep this lever down so the voltage doesn't get too hot. If it does, you don't want to be here if that happens."

Walking through the claustrophobic tunnels in the theater's sub-level you couldn't help but think of potential poltergeists as we were led to the dressing room for a demonstration of how to make a young actor appear aged with the help of makeup.

At the end of the tour, visitors were treated to a full vaudeville production with live musicians—including a superb trumpet player—and actors dressed in period costumes. Entering the auditorium, the audience was greeted with whistling wind and fog swirling around the stage. "Our stage show is based on the acting and music that came out of [vaudeville] novelty acts and dramas," said Yaeger.

Later, theater patrons were invited up on stage to recreate their own shadow silhouettes behind the screen with spotlights. Halloween goodies were dispensed in the art deco lobby.

Ghosts of the Orpheum: The Vaudeville Era was a classy production about a vital part of Minneapolis entertainment history.



(Above): Host Christopher Yaeger leads the audience in.



(Above) "The Nanny" checks out the "crying" children and babies in Orpheum's second floor restroom.



(Above) Live actors, with period costumes from the Vaudeville era, performed a series of vignettes around the theater.



(Above) Christopher Jaeger asks "Do you hear something?"



A vaudeville actor foretold the future for the audience.





(Above) Host Christopher Yaeger attempts to do the Charleston, a popular dance of the vaudeville era.





(Above) Seats in the theater. Every opening night "some [paranormal] hijinks" go on, said host Christopher Yaeger.



(Above) The vaudeville oracle tells Christopher Yaeger his future.



(Above) Actors gather after hearing creaks and groans in the theater.



(Above) "Every tour I give, someone asks if the Orpheum is haunted," said tour guide Christopher Yaeger.