

The Elks Opera House Reliving the Past 105 Years Later



Pictured above left: Lecia Breen, as Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink; Above right: Jody Drake, as Sharlot Hall and Melissa Ruffner, as Mary Ward Ruffner

By Elisabeth F. Ruffner

According to the newspaper of the day, The Arizona Journal Miner, a February 21, 1905 headline claimed "Opening of the Theatre Last Night a Brilliant Social Event."

The 900 seats, including the eight opera boxes, were sold out. The evening was declared "magnificent" and the house, "the finest without exception in the Territory".

The Florence Roberts Troupe, hailing from San Francisco and on a national tour, stepped off the train in Prescott and gave the evening crowd a taste of the glamour to come. "ZaZa", as Miss Roberts was known, was one of the most prominent actresses of the time.

Fast forward to February 20, 2010, the 105th anniversary of The Elks Opera House opening. With the inimitable Kurt Vogel of Batterman's Antiques as Master of Ceremonies, "ZaZa" returned in the person of Gail Mangham, who has brought the actress alive for the Elks Opera House and other venues in her retrospective performances of Miss Roberts' life in "Tea with ZaZa".

She was joined on stage by the Clyde Score Trio, with Clyde stepping forward as the celebrated John Philip Sousa, leading a rousing rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever". The real Mr. Sousa appeared

at the Elks with his traveling band on October 20, 1909.

On November 24, 1909, Astronomer Percival Lowell, founder of Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, appeared at the Elks to give a lecture describing his beliefs about the canals on Mars. At the 2010 anniversary party, Lowell was portrayed by actor Tedd de Long, of Prescott Valley, who was last seen as Marcus Aurelius Smith, Arizona's first United States Senator, at Sharlot Hall Museum's Blue Rose Theater.

The Honorable Ralph Henry Cameron campaigned five times at the Elks while seeking public office and was the Arizona Territorial Delegate to Congress, standing with other dignitaries at the United States capital when President Taft signed Arizona's statehood bill on February 14, 1912. Elegantly portrayed by Elks Opera House Historian Parker Anderson, the politician came alive with a speech on Arizona statehood, given in the House of Representatives in 1910.

Two historical ladies of Prescott, Mary Ward Ruffner (played by granddaughter Melissa), was a pianist and performer of note, and Sharlot Mabritth Hall (played by Jody Drake), named by the Territo-

rial Legislature as Arizona Historian, also made an "appearance" at the anniversary. Both ladies had appeared there many times, but on this night they met on stage at the piano and spent a few moments delighting the audience with their gossiping.

In 1921 Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink graced the Elks stage as she was touring the country entertaining the troops during World War I. She was known as the world's greatest contralto. Two selections from "Carmen" one of the operas in which she appeared, were sung by Prescott contralto, Lecia Naziri, whose lovely voice entranced the audience at the 105th anniversary, as Schuman-Heinks had in her appearance those many years ago.

All in all, a wonderful time was had by all as the audience was served refreshments and stood in awe of the restored opera boxes and all of the construction and art work completed so far. Much more is still yet to be done, making all of Prescott look forward to the grand opening this summer, July 24, 2010.



Pictured above: Alicia Bauer, as Sophie Tucker