

The Story Behind the Story

Bad Romances and High Finances

Thursday, November 18, 2010

By [Barney Brantingham](#) ([Contact](#))

MOVING TELETHON: As the late broadcaster Paul Harvey used to say, here is the rest of the story. Contrary to what you may have read that gave the impression that Unity Shoppe has to find a new location for its December 11 telethon because it was forced out by the Ensemble Theatre Company, this is the real reason: Victoria Hall Theater (33 W. Victoria St.), where Unity has held previous telethons, was closed last April due to structural safety problems, long before Ensemble leased the place. You can't have an event where the ceiling could collapse.



On the Beat

Unity surprisingly makes no mention of this while seeking donations to buy the nearby \$3-million former Magellan building at 110 West Sola Street. And that's where the telethon will be staged on live TV, according to Unity.

Founded many years ago by the fiercely independent Barbara Tellefson to help feed and clothe Santa Barbara's needy, Unity has long been at odds with fellow nonprofit Ensemble regarding Victoria Hall Theater.

When the joint council that operates the Victoria Hall building — co-owned by Unity, RSVP (Retired Senior Volunteer Program) and CALM (Child Abuse Listening & Mediation) — approved Ensemble's 30-year theater lease, Tellefson rebelled. Unity itself badly needed the space, according to Tom Reed, Unity executive director. "We offered to buy or lease the building," he said. However, the building council "fell in love with Ensemble," Reed told me. "We don't fully understand why." Ensemble says it was because it offered a much better financial deal for the nonprofit owners.

Unity sued, prompting months of delay, but lost. Ensemble, which became the tenant last month, plans to gut the theater and make major renovations. It has launched a multimillion-dollar fund drive. It has also promised Unity free use of the theater for its telethons. Unfortunately, during Ensemble's due diligence leading up to the lease, an engineering firm, Ehlen Spiess & Haight, discovered the theater's serious structural problems, and the place was closed by the building committee.

"We are happy to have Unity use it for its telethon, if Unity is not worried about the safety concerns, without charge," said Derek Westen, Ensemble boardmember. But it's impossible to get such a liability waiver, Reed said, even if the Ensemble wanted to take the risk of danger to participants.

Needing space for "year-round fundraising" and other activities vital to its survival, Unity expects to close escrow on the former Magellan property prior to the telethon. It also has the support of Montecitans Jelinda DeVorzon, Harold and Annette Simmons, and a list of other backers, and plans its own major fundraising campaign.

For the time being, Unity will still operate from its Victoria Street Theater basement, serving an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 families with holiday food, clothing, and toys with a combined retail value of about \$1.2 million, Reed said.

Still in its cramped quarters at 914 Santa Barbara Street, Ensemble expects to be able to stage at least one or two plays in the reconstructed Victoria Hall Theater in 2012. It, too, has a list of prominent residents backing its fundraising campaign.

SLEEPING MONEY: The Michael Douglas divorce case may be returning to Santa Barbara. The 2000 divorce, in which ex-wife Diandra received a reported \$45-million settlement, plus more than \$6 million since then, is back in the news. Diandra claims that according to the terms, she should have half of Michael's paycheck for his new movie, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. She filed suit in New York, where a judge this week ruled that it should be heard in Santa Barbara, but Diandra says she'll appeal. Former Santa Barbaran and UCSB alum Michael is fighting throat cancer. I'm on his side.

HOME OF THE REALTORS: Many of us observed Veterans Day in various ways. Steve Kleen did it by sticking hundreds of flags in San Roque front yards promoting his real estate business.

RED LIGHT ALERT: "We read with great distress the portion of [a recent] *On the Beat* referring to an MTD bus running a red light," writes Metropolitan Transit District (MTD) GM Sherrie Fisher. "Based on your article, we have increased our road supervision at intersections throughout our community, with particular emphasis being placed on the State Street corridor. If

anyone witnesses unsafe behavior, please contact us with the date, time of day, location, direction, and, if possible, the bus number. Call 963-3364 or email info@sbmtd.gov."

ABOVE SANTA BARBARA: Want a bird's-eye view of our county? Cinematographer Brent Sumner and producer Sam Scott Tyler mounted a chopper, rode our skies, and produced a magnificent high-def panorama called *Above Santa Barbara*. It'll be screened at the Lobero December 7 at 6:30 p.m. Price: \$10.

PAGEANT IN THE VALLEY: Andrea Fulton is in her 31st year as producer of the famed Bracebridge Dinner at Yosemite Valley. Bracebridge transforms the Ahwahnee resort's baronial dining room into Squire Bracebridge's 17th-century Christmas feast, replete with elaborate decor, a lavish seven-course dinner, 60 professional singers, amusing characters, and various folderol. At one time, it was almost impossible to score tickets to the dinner, but in recent years, it's been expanded to eight performances.

NEPTUNE NOTE: "Win a Free Cremation" is the way the Neptune Society sought to fire up potential customers in a recent mailing.