

## Beloved drive-in reborn

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After a two-year hiatus, the East Bay's only drive-in theater is reopening tonight.

A week ago, potholes dotted the Solano Drive-In Theater's vast parking lot -- the lot where thousands had, during four decades, craned their necks inside the family car to watch "The Odd Couple" or "Die Hard" just after sunset.

The Concord theater had faded into oblivion in summer 2005 with no explanation. People just assumed it stopped making money like drive-ins across the nation, that movie buffs had given in to Blockbuster and Netflix. Or maybe the long commutes finally had people hating their cars.

The marquee sat empty and had started to rust.

But a funny thing happened during the past two years: West Wind Drive-Ins, which owns the two-screen theater, received a tidal wave of complaints from locals. The company listened, and this week, workers paved over the potholes, returning the lot to its former black sleekness.

Tonight, the 36-year-old drive-in will reopen, starting with a free double feature -- "Shrek 2" and then "Nacho Libre" (with accompanying \$1 nachos) starting at 8:30 p.m.

After that, movie lovers can catch a double feature nightly for \$6.50 per person. "Spiderman 3" and "Ghostrider" will play Friday.

"We're seeing a resurgence in the popularity of drive-ins," said Tony Maniscalco, vice president of marketing for West Wind Drive-Ins, which owns the Solano Drive-In. The company, which used to operate under the name Century Theatres, owns six drive-ins, including theaters in San Jose, Sacramento and Reno.

"Bring your lawn chairs and tailgate," Maniscalco said. "Bring your blankets in the winter. This is the retro aspect that's just sort of in a drive-in's bones."

The minute former box-office attendant Linda Alley heard the news, she jockeyed for a managerial position and landed it.

She had cried when the drive-in closed, the nostalgia hitting her in thick waves. The father of her children proposed to her at the Solano Drive-In, with "Enter the Dragon" starring Bruce Lee playing in the background. Later, she went into labor there with her daughter, Herminia, now 31.

"I didn't actually have her at the drive-in; my sister-in-law got me to the hospital on time," she said.

"No," she said, chuckling. "I don't remember what was playing that night."

General Manager Brenda Rogers, who remembers seeing "Herbie the Love Bug" there, said that in the past three weeks, at least 100 people have applied for jobs.

Ian Willson, a 35-year-old projectionist, filled out an application Tuesday afternoon while other staff members readied for the grand opening. They waxed the floor inside the concessions building and pumped the Pepsi machine full of syrupy sweetness.

Willson has ties to the place dating to childhood. He lived across the street starting at about 10 years old.

"I hate to say this, but my friends and I would jump the fence so we could see the movies for free," he said. "It was and still is one of my favorite places on Earth."

The first movie he saw there: John Carpenter's "The Fog" in 1980.

Maniscalco couldn't elaborate on why Solano closed. He has been with the company for a year, and said he didn't know the back story. Others at the company don't either, he said.

John Montagh, the city's business development manager, said he couldn't speculate on the closing, but he did say that the site --

sitting on 15 acres along Highway 4 near Buchanan airport -- is a bit challenging for the owners.

For years, the company tried to build a more profitable 18-screen indoor movie complex there, but the City Council rejected those plans because they did not fit land-use requirements next to the airport runway.

Maniscalco says there are no new plans to try to add screens. The drive-in has two screens now, one of which has received technological upgrades yielding a crisper and brighter picture. The second screen should be updated by May 18, he said.

"The light coming out of these projectors is seven times brighter than before," he said. "It'll be just like a walk-in theater."

He did note that swap meets taking place on the site each Saturday will continue, and that the company is adding a Sunday meet.

Drive-in theater watchers say that the Solano's rebirth is a good sign, especially in light of the thousands across the country that have disappeared.

In 1967, California had 223 drive-in theaters, according to drive-ins.com. Most were gobbled up in favor of shopping malls and housing tracts, and the state has 21 left, including Solano.

In the United States, there are about 400 left, down from 4,000 in 1958.

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If you go

- WHAT: Double feature at the Solano Drive-In, featuring "Shrek 2" and "Nacho Libre"
- WHERE: 1611 Solano Way, Concord
- WHEN: 8:30 p.m. today; doors open at 7:30 p.m.
- HOW MUCH: Tonight's movies are free. Movies normally cost \$6.50 for adults, and children 11 and younger get in free. Tuesday night admission is \$4.25 for adults.
- CONTACT: 925-825-1951

Share your memories

What was the first movie you saw at a drive-in theater? Post your comments below.

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