

'SPEAK' OF THE REVEL!

Venerable Sunrise Theatre celebrates its centennial in (Roaring '20s) style

BY KERRY FIRTH | Correspondent

They arrived in their finest 1920's attire – women in their sequined flapper gowns adorned with long pearls and tassels, and men in their pinstriped suits with dapper fedoras – for the centennial celebration at Sunrise Theatre last Saturday night. Yet, after posing with the antique automobiles parked out front, they were confronted with locked doors and a sign stating, 'Closed for violation of the national prohibition acts by order of the United States District Court.'

Not to worry. These special guests knew of an obscure entrance off the side alley and a secret password and knock to gain access to the theater, which had been magically transformed into an underground gin joint reminiscent of those in the Roaring '20s years of prohibition.

Once access was granted, attendees stepped back in time to a glamorous era starting with the Speakeasy jazz room featuring Mark Green & the Rowdy Roosters of the Fort Pierce Jazz and Blues Society. Some kicked up their heels on the dance floor while others grabbed a table adorned with black-and-white features and beads to enjoy the music while indulging on light bites and libations.

"We've been planning this celebration since last November," said Sharon Engle, Sunrise Theatre executive director. "The turnout is fantastic as we have sold over 500 tickets. I'm sure all of our guests are going to have a rip-roaring good time tonight."

After passing through a black tunnel, guests entered the Grand Casino (formally the theater lobby) where they could try their luck with slot machines, double down on blackjack, or roll the dice. As in all casinos, gamblers bellied up to the bar for more liquid courage, which of course was all in fun because in reality, it was just funny money they were gambling.

Next stop was the Vaudeville Stage, where silent movies were enhanced by the Peacherine Ragtime Society Orchestra – one of the leading ragtime orchestras in the United States. All-time favorite movies of the era – including "Cops," starring Buster Keaton, "The Vagabond," with Charlie Chaplin, and "Big Business," with Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy – were featured throughout the evening.

Of course, even big band orchestras need to have a break, and that's when guests timidly took to the stage to learn to dance the Charleston from seasoned dance pros. After a few how-to tips, their inhibitions faded and they were dancing up a storm.

Upstairs in the Friends Lounge and Bourbon Bar, partiers helped themselves to a huge buffet overflowing with delights for everyone's pallet. More drinks were poured as they mingled and enjoyed music by Indian River State College alumni Dr. Dale Reith, Raven Lawrence and Justin Hines. There was no room for dancing in this venue, however, as it was standing room only for the happy revelers.

Rumors spread about a secret room even further upstairs on the third floor where the original owners (the Koblewards) lived. No one would reveal what was happening up there, and with tall tales of past hauntings, only the brave ventured up to Rupert's Roost, as it was affectionately named by the Kobleward family. As it turned out, in keeping with the stories of hauntings, guests were treated to their personal psychic reading by one of three local psychics.

Before the Speakeasy closed to avoid a raid, everyone was invited to gather in the main theater for a thank-you champagne toast and a slice of the Sunrise Theatre's 100th birthday cake.

And just like that, the magical evening came to a close. It's safe to say that this was a once-in-a-century event that's hard to duplicate. Hopefully, Sunrise Theatre will revive the 'Speakeasy' sooner than that.

All proceeds from the event went to the Sunrise Theatre Foundation, a nonprofit 501(c)3, to assist with their mission to bring the experience of performing arts to children and to support theatre improvements which will enhance the theatre to fulfill its purpose within the community. ■



Robert Bluestone and Joanne Rivers.



Don Rinelli and Sharon Engle.



John Waite, and Aaron, Karen and John Franke.



Ashley Franke and Brooke Steinkemp.



Elaine Bell, Chris Medvetz and Toni Medvetz.



Joanne McCurby and Michelle Miller.



Dan Christopher, Greg Flicks and Joshua Lindoz at the blackjack table. PHOTOS: KERRY FIRTH