



“The Play’s the Thing” and it’s Atop Mt. Tamalpais
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The inspiration for putting on a play high atop Mt. Tamalpais is believed to have originated in 1912 when three hikers, Garnet Holme, John C. Catlin, and Richard Festus “Dad” O’Rourke, stopped to rest by a large outcropping of rock near the summit of the mountain. Catlin was a prominent San Francisco lawyer, O’Rourke, “a legendary outdoorsman” and Holme, a theater director, playwright and UC Berkeley drama coach. Holme, taking in the dramatic view of the Bay is reputed to have exclaimed, “What a perfect setting for an outdoor theatre.”

The first play was performed on May 4, 1913. It was a production of the ancient miracle play entitled *Abraham and Isaac*, directed by Holme. Scenes from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* were also performed that first year. More than 1,200 people attended the play, paying one dollar apiece for tickets. At the time, there were only two ways to get to the natural amphitheater atop the mountain. Hikers could walk the entire six miles from Mill Valley up the trails to the theater or catch a ride on Sidney Cushing’s *Mount Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway* to the West Point Inn. From there it was a short mile and a half walk. After the play, the intrepid would walk back

down the mountain while most playgoers rode the gravity cars of the *Railway*, dubbed ‘The Crookedest Railroad in the World’, back to Mill Valley. The photograph above is from the 1933 production of *The Daughter of Jorio*.

After the third successful year up on the mountain, William Kent deeded the site to the newly formed Mountain Play Association with Caitlin, O’Rourke and Kent serving as its first officers. In the early years, traditional plays such as *Tamalpa*, *Rip Van Winkle* and *Robin Hood* were performed every few years. Outdoor theater had become quite popular across the state and many cities and towns celebrated their local history and legends in similar venues. What makes Marin’s Mountain Play so special is that it has lasted for more than 110 years.

In 1936, the land was donated to the California State Parks system and work began on a 4,000-seat, natural-stone amphitheater built by the depression-era Civilian Conservation Corp. That amphitheater still serves as seating for Mountain Play audiences today. By the late 1960s, smaller audiences were attending the Mountain Play and it became clear to organizers that there had to be a change in the artistic programming. Starting in the late 1970’s, Broadway-style musicals became the yearly norm with performances of *Oklahoma*, *Peter Pan*, *The Music Man* and *The Sound of Music*, “resulting in a financial revival and stunning artistic achievements.” After a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic, the Mountain Play returned and is once again one of the most popular annual traditions for theater lovers of Marin County and the Bay Area. This year’s production of Stephen Sondheim’s and James Lapine’s, *Into the Woods*, will be performed over five weekends in May and June.

[April 19, 2023]

Photo ID: P1999.1338