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Ghosts stirred at theater? Unexplainable events bring paranormal investigators to Venetian

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Christa Seyferth / The Argus

It's closing time at the Venetian Theater and Bistro, and a staff member heads into the auditorium.

A tall, gray-haired man remains in the back-most row of seats. "It's time to leave," he's told. He does, only not through the door. He simply disappears.

Saxony Peterson, co-owner of the theater at 253 Main St., says the same man has appeared three different times and to different people too.

If this were the only odd occurrence at the Venetian, it might be blamed on late hours, power of suggestion or the overactive imaginations of a weary crew. But it's not.

Peterson said, during play rehearsals, Bag and Baggage's Scott Palmer has heard unexplained footsteps crossing the stage. Staff returning from the upper dining area reported turning off the lights and music, only to have them

come back on as they started down the stairs. This happens regularly, she said.

Normal work flow in the kitchen was once interrupted by water streaming from above. After mopping up, the crew removed the ceiling panels to find the leak's source. Peterson said they found no water pipes, nothing there containing any water. Strangest of all, the removed panels were not even damp, even though a flood had passed through them not long before.

Then there's Dale Buck's experience. One night she was alone in the auditorium, on her way to check the rear exit door, when she heard whispers coming from the left side of the room. Then a "big rush of cold air came past my left ear," she said. "It was colored gray and black, and as it passed my ear, it whispered 'stop.' "

So Peterson and Denzil Scheller invited a team of paranormal investigators, volunteers from the International Paranormal Reporting Group, to conduct an investigation. IPRG, which itself has allied teams in Idaho, Oregon, Montana and Germany, is recognized by The Atlantic Paranormal Society. TAPS, for fans of events that defy scientific explanation, is the group behind the Ghost Hunters show on the Syfy network.

The team came to The Venetian on July 25. They brought digital voice recorders, infrared cameras, temperature sensors and K-2 meters for reading electromagnetic disturbances.

Greg Gieler, who led the IPRG investigators, reported back to Peterson and Scheller Aug. 18 with IPRG's findings.

Gieler set up his laptop on a table in the Venetian Bistro. He explained how he'd pored through hours of recordings made at The Venetian searching for electronic voice phenomena. Such EVPs are disembodied voices, or sounds with no explainable source, that are picked up by recording devices but are not audible to people present at the time.

Passing headphones around the table, everyone present took turns listening to the examples Gieler had discovered. In one, recorded in the theater's projection room, a voice could be clearly and slowly, saying, "Sorry ... I'm sorry ... sorry."

Gieler said paranormal events, by their very nature, have no scientific explanation. That's why they are "paranormal." IPRG, first of all, tries to find a verifiable cause for its findings. The EVPs, like other such incidents don't have one. That doesn't stop ghost hunters from speculating on their nature. In this case, Gieler said, spirits may make use of some actual source -- perhaps a chair sliding back -- and draw it out to create a word.

Investigators also had a strange encounter in the theater's projection room.

As background, Scheller emphasized that room is the only climate-controlled space in the building. The heat given off by the projector in a confined space makes it necessary to keep a constant temperature of about 68 degrees.

Gieler said, he could feel the temperature warming while he was in the projection room, so he asked the presence

to raise the temperature to exactly 70 degrees. His sensor measured 70. Then, by steps, he asked for 71, then 72, then 73 degrees. Each time the temperature rose to the requested point and held until asked to go higher.

Gieler said he then said aloud, "If you make it go to 78 degrees, I promise I won't ask you to go higher because I know it's really hard." That happened. And the process repeated this time in reverse, back down to 68 degrees.

Gieler thinks The Venetian is an interesting enough site to warrant further investigation. He asked Scheller whether he would be interested in hosting a TAPS boot camp, a ticketed event in which up to 60 paranormal investigators gather.

In the meantime, Bag and Baggage is preparing for its first play of the new season. Peterson says the unexplainable events seem to increase whenever more people are in the theater's space.

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