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A shot from the 2017 Blue Room production *The Haunting of Hill House*, featuring Development Director Steve Swim (back center) and managing director Amber Miller (second from right). FILE PHOTO BY JOE HILSEE

Hillerman, a Chico expatriate who moved to Portland more than 20 years ago. He has maintained a close relationship with the theater and said he tries to return every year for the annual Butcher Shop Labor Day Weekend theater festival. (The Butcher Shop, Cosmic Travel Agency and Chico Creek Theatre Festival were forerunners to the Blue Room's current incarnation.)

Hillerman was involved with the Blue Room throughout the 1990s and filmed many of its productions during that decade. He recently tapped into those recordings—he said he has more than 100 productions on video, though many have been damaged over the years—to be made available on the theater's Patreon page.

Hillerman said digging through the old videos has led to the discovery of some lost gems, including a recently posted 1998 production of *The Runt Life and Inexplicable Death of Mojo Chan*.

"Every time I'm in Chico, someone asks me if I've found that tape yet, and I finally did," he said by phone. "It was one of the early late-night shows with a live band and was one of our best-selling and most popular plays at the time. I filmed it over seven nights and edited it together."

"The band was called Ant Farm, and they were roommates of mine. The organ player [former CN&R contributor Mary Rose Lovgren] told me watching it again made her year."

Driving home the reality that arts organizations everywhere face, Hillerman said he's also filming Portland performers and compiling video to help one of that city's institutions—the century-old Clinton Street Theater, which shows films and does live stage productions—stay alive.

"One bit of light that I find in this darkness is the realization that we aren't alone," he said. "I think of my artist friends around the

country, and I know they think of me because we're all going through the same crap."

More than a building

As Swim put it, the Blue Room as an entity can't be contained in a building, and its importance to the local arts community extends far beyond the theater itself. Since its inception, the organization has served as a breeding ground for new ideas, original writing and avant garde experimentation. He noted that he had no theater training before he wrote a one-act for the Fresh Ink Festival (an annual event featuring local playwrights) in spring 2001.

"For actors, directors, patrons, volunteers, writers, musicians, all kinds of artists, it's always been a home for people to meet like-minded souls, and to feel safe exploring art in the process of theater," he said.

Julia Rue agrees. She moved to Chico from her native Germany in 2014. Her first role at the Blue Room was in *Rick's Café Américain* (adapted from the film *Casablanca*), and in the past few years she's gone on to direct productions and instruct the Blue Room's Young Company. She credits her experience at the Blue Room with helping to discover her previously unknown love of directing and teaching children.

Rue referred to the theater as her "home away from home" and said she might not have remained in the United States this long if not for the Blue Room.

"It was perfect to come along in my life while I was away from Germany," she said. "I felt like I found my people here."

Said Hillerman: "The Blue Room will go on, that spirit will never leave Chico. It's launched lots of seeds into the wind, and there are people all over the country [who] love it and will continue to support it."

"Hopefully this isn't the end," Swim said, "but just some kind of metamorphosis." □

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