

ART STOP: RATÓN

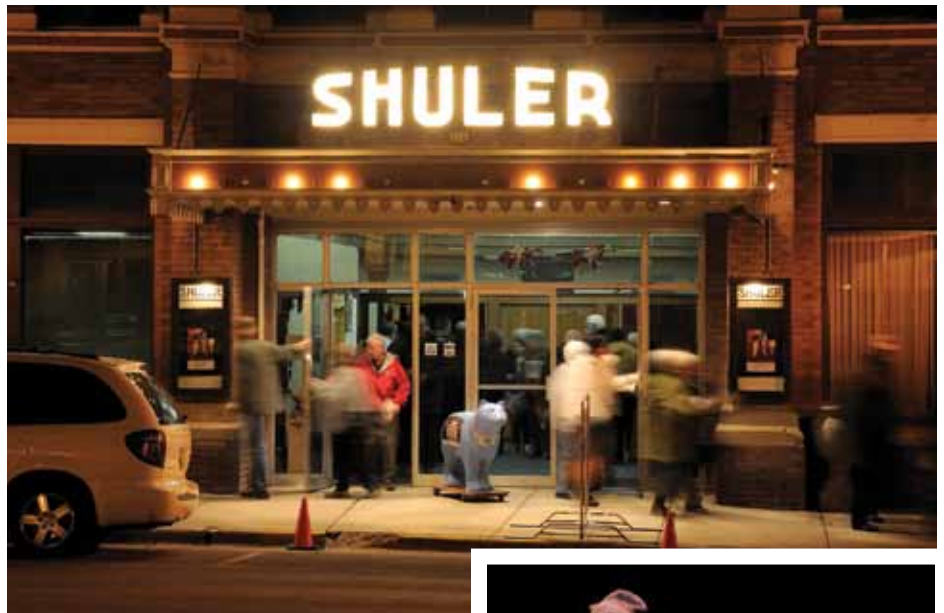
Shining Through

IN A TOWN ONCE KNOWN for coal mining, the Shuler Theater is its diamond. This jewel—boasting 450 seats, an orchestra pit, a balcony, and box seats—is in downtown Ratón, a burg of about 6,500 people better known today for its proximity to the New Mexico–Colorado state line and neighboring Ratón Pass than for its home of the performing arts.

This afternoon, impresario Bill Fegan ushers me in. Back in 1963, he and his Kaleidoscope Players set up an office off the lobby; now, at 83, he's still on hand each day to give narrative tours. He calls this area Ratón's "theater district": Two doors down is El Ratón, a single-screen, art-deco movie theater built in 1930, and still open for Metropolitan Opera and other simulcasts, occasional live performances, and weekend first-run movies.

The Shuler Theater, built in the early 20th-century rococo style, presented its first show in April 1915. In the lobby, brilliant WPA murals by Manville Chapman, added in the 1930s, show a timeline of Ratón's history as a mining town and as a stop along the Santa Fe Trail. The stage still employs its original, hand-painted drop curtains, one a trompe l'oeil scene of a Roman palace, another of a landscape of the nearby palisades of Cimarrón.

Today, the city-owned theater hosts 60 live performances each year. The Ratón Arts & Humanities Council presents a series of touring shows ranging from plays to big bands, musicals, comedy, and dance, and offers season tickets. The Shuler has also spawned a long, vibrant history of community theater; its annual production of *A Christmas Carol* incorporates 60 costumed locals. Tonight's performance is an ambitious community-theater production of *Man of La Mancha*. I sit front and center, where I can see the musicians in the pit. Another night, I catch Ratón High School's drama club presenting a one-act play, before they take it to the state competition in Portales. Both shows sweep me away—aided by this magnificent theater from another era.



Top—Downtown Ratón sparkles when there's a performance at the 450-seat Shuler Theater. **Center**—Rick Trice and Brenda Ferri portray Sancho Panza and Dulcinea in last year's production of *Man of La Mancha* by the Ratón Community Theater. **Bottom**—The 10 O'Clock Classics perform in front of one of the Shuler's hand-painted drop curtains.



This month: *Beauty Lou and the Country Beast*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, and *God's Man in Texas*; tickets from \$5, 131 N. Second St., (575) 445-4746, www.shulertheater.com

—Tim Keller



PHOTOS BY TIM KELLER