



Review: 'The Light Between Two Towers'

New documentary on San Jose's 'Moonlight Tower' is coming to 3Below Theaters & Lounge

February 20, 2019 by Richard von Busack



San Jose's 24-story light tower was as bright as the moon and may have inspired Gustave Eiffel.

Once, San Jose could have been known as the city that kept the light on for you. At the corner of Market and Santa Clara streets stood a light tower, 237 feet tall with flagpole. It was the size of a 24-story building. Suspended at its top were a clutch of six arc lights, blazing at 24,000 candlepower. Visible for miles, it was bright as the moon—thus the nickname, "the Moonlight Tower."

Tom Wohlmut's documentary, *The Light Between Two Towers*, uncovers new evidence that the Eiffel Tower—built eight years after San Jose's Moonlight Tower—might have been based on ours. Gustave Eiffel's engineers were certainly familiar with models in "certain

American cities" of iron towers bearing lights, "Eclairage électrique grande hauteur." Like the San Jose tower, the Eiffel has a series of arches at its base, instead of the original stone pedestal that had been proposed.

Moreover, Wohlmut traces the strong connections between local landowners the De Sassets, the banking Rothschilds (at last, featured in a benign conspiracy theory) and some of the highest members of the French government. Not only was the San Jose tower potentially a model for the Tour d'Eiffel, its iron structure may also have solved the problem of building the core structure of the Statue of Liberty.

The invention of the arc light, and the electric generators to power them, led to experiments of suspended lights from high structures; towns even as nearby as Nevada City tried it.

But the San Jose tower was heralded right away. *Harper's Weekly*, one of the most important magazines of the day, described the San Jose tower as "the first of its kind." The *Los Angeles Times* swore, "Los Angeles wants one, and must have it."

It was all the dream of *Mercury* publisher J.J. Owen, who becomes quite a character in Wohlmut's crowd-funded documentary. This booster and journalist urged the building of the tower, proposing it to be made of ordinary iron piping. At an initial budget forecast of \$400, it ended up costing more than 10 times that). It was ultimately built by day laborers, and powered

by the steam generator at a nearby lumber mill.

The Light Between Two Towers allows you to sample Owen's fragrant rhetoric about the tower's light: "effulgent glory...like the smile of a loving god." He was quite the futurist, forecasting the telecommunications revolution in his editorials. At the end of his life, Owen soliloquized the struggle to build the tower: "the long delay, the discouraging word, the cold refusal of aid..."

The tower lasted from 1881 to 1915. Restrung with incandescent lights, it withstood the '06 quake. The end eventually came when the decaying structure was slammed by a freak winter storm.

Gone as it is, the tower isn't forgotten. The landmark is replicated at 50 percent scale at San Jose History Park. Not mentioned in the documentary is the matter of a 1989 mock lawsuit held at SCU. (Wikipedia, and all the sources that rely upon it, claims the trial actually occurred.) The city of San Jose sued Paris for copyright infringement. There were unforgivable words on both sides of the line. A French partisan of the Eiffel Tower described our tower as "a clown's hat." Indeed. Well, such a clown would be the size of Godzilla. Judge Marcel Poche found for Paris by claiming that there were parallels through the world of iron towers at the time. Bygones must be bygones, since dignitaries from the French consulate have been asked to attend the invitational screening on Feb. 20, preceding an upcoming run at 3Below.

Born in Australia, Wohlmut worked on 1970s TV programs like *All in the Family* before coming to the Bay Area to make corporate films. He told me he considers this documentary his way of thanking San Jose. A Francophone, Wohlmut dug into archives in Paris and at ETH Zurich to discover the clues of this mystery.

The Zurich technical school recently designed models for a new light tower to potentially be built here, a project that's been sent over to SJSU for more research. If they get it off the ground, perhaps there'll be a plaque honoring the vision of J.J. Owen—literally an enlightening man.

The Light Between Two Towers

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