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NEWS

# Fires grow in scale, jangle nerves at Fullerton's Muckenthaler center

Seven fires within a month have caused \$25,000 in damage to equipment and facilities around the amphitheater, officials said.

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Damage includes the loss of a newly refurbished Yamaha piano, original to the Muckenthaler family, valued at \$12,000, burned theater curtains, \$1,500 worth of damages to the stage dance floor and more than \$5,000 in damages to a



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BY PETER LARSEN, LOU PONSİ AND CLAUDIA KOERNER / STAFF WRITERS

Published: May 6, 2014 Updated: May 8, 2014 6:22 a.m.

**FIRES AT THE MUCKENTHALER**

On each weekend for six weeks, a few more bits and pieces of the Muckenthaler Cultural Center in Fullerton have burned at the end of an arsonist's match.

- The latest fire was set in the outdoor theater area.
- Two fires have been set in a garden cart behind the stage.
- Two fires have been set in trash cans.
- One fire was set in a backstage area.
- One fire was set under a cargo van.

Seven fires at the much-loved museum and cultural center have rattled nerves, caused at least \$25,000 in damage, and sent police and fire investigators tromping across picturesque grounds where blushing brides and classic car lovers more commonly parade.

At first the fires were small affairs: A couple of trash cans, a pair of garden carts behind the amphitheater on the 8.5-acre property anchored by the historic 1924 Muckenthaler mansion.

But lately, in a possible sign of an arsonist's growing ambition, they've increased in scope and impact: A small fire beneath a cargo van a few days ago, then a Yamaha grand piano destroyed on the amphitheater stage on

Monday.

The Muck keeps burning – and no one knows why.

"I can't imagine why," said Blake Smith, 86, a Fullerton resident and judge for a car show set for the Muck on May 17-18. "It's unbelievable they would do such a thing to one of the best cultural centers in Orange County."

The fire set around 4:30 p.m. Monday was the most serious in terms of damage but also the most promising in terms of cracking the case.

A recently refurbished grand piano purchased by the Muckenthaler family in the late 1960s at \$12,000 was destroyed and part of the stage was damaged.

"My heart sank when I saw the Muck's historical piano burn," said Zoot Velasco, executive director of the Muckenthaler. "It was a beautiful piano."

Insurance will cover most of the costs of the \$25,000 in damage, he said, and the center is fortunate the price tag isn't higher: Velasco said volunteers on the grounds setting up for the car show helped fight the fire on the piano, saving the stage from worse damage, which might have forced the cancellation of summer events.

Investigators also came away with a lead. Surveillance cameras installed after the first few fires captured images of a woman in a pink, short-sleeved shirt, dark pants, a white backpack and a backwards-turned ball cap.

Each of the seven fires has erupted in and around the amphitheater, a secluded area cut off from much of the rest of the grounds, the area behind it bordered by a low wall that wouldn't keep anyone from approaching the back of the amphitheater unseen. Velasco said teens and homeless people have snuck back there before to sleep or do other activities away from prying eyes.

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"I don't think it's a personal vendetta against the Muck," he said.

Instead, because the blazes largely have been set on weekends or after school hours, Velasco says he'd be more inclined to suspect a young person, perhaps someone who attends high school or college.

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