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Saving the State - a labor of love - Old Theater restored to its former glory
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When Ray Shepardson walked onto the stage of the old State Theater in downtown Minneapolis and looked out over its glittering new auditorium, you could see the conductor coming out in him. Workers were sawing, hammering, grinding and shouting last week as restoration work was reaching its finale. They were fitting things together, untangling loops of wire, pulling ropes, lowering rigging.

In the middle of it all was Shepardson, standing out in his white sweatsuit with a cotton towel draped around his neck.

He was happy. All he needed was a baton. His orchestra was making an awful racket, but it was music to his ears.

His orchestra includes more than the workers who hustled to get the place ready for its official opening Sunday.

There are many others, businessmen, politicians, designers, developers, planners, artists. They all came together to create a gilded palace whose equal hasn't been built in the Twin Cities since the State opened its doors in 1921.

Shepardson is a specialist at theater restoration. He has saved and restored old movie palaces all around the nation - in Detroit, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Seattle, St. Louis, Cleveland, Chicago, New York.

And wherever he's been, according to newspaper accounts, theater restoration led to more people coming downtown and more businesses serving them.

Shepardson has led the fight to save old theaters from destruction, directed their revitalization, helped raise funds for the work, even secured and promoted the shows that led to their economic renaissance too.

"He's a presence and an extreme talent," said Jeff Valenson of Los Angeles, the project designer who has worked with Shepardson on a half-dozen restoration jobs around the country.

"He combines the best people in the country for the work and gets the best possible results . . . he knows how to make the pieces fit."

When Shepardson first set eyes on the State a few years ago, it was dismal, dark, stuffy and uncomfortable, and the developers of the property wanted to tear it down.

Now it's light and radiant, sparkling with crystal and color.

Shepardson, 47, a bearded man with dark, intent eyes who speaks rapidly in sentences spiced with parenthetical asides, steams through the building with

such energy that he's in a constant sweat. That is why a towel around his neck has become his trademark.

It's gotten so that he wears a towel even when he isn't sweating. He has a white velour towel for formal occasions, and when he attended the opening of another restored movie palace in Detroit, he wore a red, sequined one in honor of the main attraction that evening, *Liberace*.

Theaters weren't always his passion. He grew up in Seattle and majored in anthropology at Seattle Pacific College. Campus demonstrations were his specialty in those days, and his hero was Howard Griffin, a Southern newspaperman who wrote "Black Like Me," an account of his experiences in the South while posing as a black man.

After college Shepardson went to work bringing celebrities like Bill Cosby, Chet Huntley and astronauts to inner-city schools for the Cleveland Board of Education. One day in 1970, while looking for an auditorium for one of his presentations, he entered the old State Theater in a blighted, high-crime area of downtown Cleveland.

He looked around the cavernous, boarded-up auditorium, and "I was blown away," he said. "The place had been stripped for demolition, but it still had four 50-foot murals by James Daugherty . . . and what I saw was one of the longest theater lobbies in the world, 325 feet long, longer than a football field. There were three other theaters on the same block, all of them closed.

"I was mesmerized."

A little later he went to a barbershop and saw a photo of one of the murals by Daugherty, "The Spirit of Cinema," on the cover of *Life* magazine, illustrating a story about Metro Goldwyn Mayer selling off all the memorabilia of its glory days. Soon he quit his job, moved into a small inner-city apartment and dedicated himself to saving the State Theater, which had opened on Feb. 5, 1921, coincidentally the same day as the State Theater in Minneapolis.

"I was obsessed," he said. "I was only 26 years old. I didn't know anything, so I went ahead."

He formed an association and a foundation, raising just enough money to stay ahead of the wrecking ball.

To bring people downtown again, he began staging big productions, and by the time he left Cleveland in 1980 to go on to other theater restorations, the theater was drawing a million people a year. The result, some critics have said, was the largest theater-restoration project in the country.

In 1984 Shepardson had a partner, Sonya Winner. They had met trying to save the State in Cleveland. In 1984 they married on the stage of the Fox Theater in St. Louis, another Shepardson restoration job.

Compared to the State in Cleveland, the State in Minneapolis was clean when Shepardson first saw it in 1986. But it had problems.

"It was ugly," he said. "I didn't know if it would ever be beautiful again."

Acoustical tile had been glued over some of the murals. Big blue stripes were painted on the walls. Statuary had been damaged. The lighting was out of character. The auditorium chandeliers, too small to begin with, were made to look larger by attaching what Shepardson calls "wagon wheels" and draping decorations from them.

Shepardson roams around the building constantly, like a scholar examining fine treasures.

"The hard part in this place was getting the place to look unified. It was awkward, and I wanted it to be elegant with some of the glitter of the movie-palace days, maybe a combination of Carnegie Hall and the movie palace. It had to be lighter and more airy. I wanted the ceiling lifted. The place was heavy like a shroud, and over the years it had been bastardized."

Old light fixtures were replaced by others that glittered with crystal and clusters of cobalt blue glass grapes. Grapes are everywhere, on the ceiling, the walls. Dutch metal (a gold-leaf substitute) shines from the walls and statuary. Plump cherubs pop out here and there.

"I agree with Liberace," Shepardson said, pointing to the ornate surroundings. " `Too much of a good thing is wonderful.' "

He found the chandeliers while he was trying to revive Cleveland's State Theater. Shepardson discovered three of them, worth \$75,000 each, in a piano store in Toledo, Ohio. Originally they adorned the ballroom of the Commodore Perry Hotel in Toledo.

Now they hang in the lobby of the State in Minneapolis with their cherubs and leaves hewn in walnut, their twinkling crystals, their glass grapes from Italy.

Shepardson gave them to the project because, he said, he was so happy with the ways the city helped push the project along.

The stage, the overhead rigging, the orchestra pit and the basement were demolished and reconstructed. Half the wall sconces in the lobby were missing and had to be replaced. The ceiling chandeliers in the auditorium were replaced. Artists restored the big canvas murals in the lobby and the others in the auditorium, all damaged when acoustical tile was glued over them.

Theatrical masks on the wall had been covered by shields adorned with crosses by a church that once occupied the building. Other masks, held by statues of nudes on each side of the stage, had been mutilated. All were recast.

By the time the work is done, it will cost \$8.8 million. Shepardson-Winner, theater and restoration consultants, the organization owned by Shepardson

and his wife, is getting about \$250,000 for the restoration work, which has been going on since 1986. That fee includes his expenses.

The result is worth the expense, Shepardson said. He said that reopening downtown theaters will stimulate development just as closing them brought on urban decay and made eight-hour stopovers out of downtowns all around the nation.

"An old theater is like a fine violin, and a fine violin is only good in the hands of a master," said Shepardson. "It is a tool that can effect change, and you can attract any number of people, create whatever image you like. You play it."

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