

Return to Splendor by John Manning

Minneapolis Skyway News Week of August 31-September 6, 1993

A welder's torch looks like a strobe light inside the historic Orpheum Theatre. The on-again, off-again blue glow reflects off the aluminum leaf that wraps around plaster vines of fruit and lines a 50-foot-wide dome at the center of the ceiling.

The light exposes a space as breathtaking as any stage set- despite all the work that remains to be done. Much of the painting on the ceiling, walls and balcony has been finished, but the theatre lacks seats, carpeting, chandeliers, stage curtains and even the stage itself.

Workers recently dismantled the scaffolding that had blocked the view of what was going on overhead. Although the renovation is far from finished, the architectural details have been restored and the drama of the space has been revealed.

"It's going to be truly grand," said Richard Victor, project manager for the Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA), which owns the theatre. As if it's not grand enough already.

The \$7.25 million renovation work will be done Nov. 15, Victor said. The MCDA bought the 1920-era theatre at 910 Hennepin Ave. in 1988 from Bob Dylan. A new roof and carpeting were put in at that time, but only now is the theatre getting the major overhaul it needs.

Although the new paint and plaster give the renovation work its polish, adding to the structure and updating the mechanical workings of the theatre make up a good share of the project.

The area behind the stage was expanded, for example, to better house the huge sets Broadway shows bring with them. The back wall was torn out and replaced with a 35-ton beam to support the roof. A new wall was erected about 20 feet behind the original.

Victor pointed out that new loading docks for semitrailers have been put in. For example, "Miss Saigon," the first show that will open in the Orpheum after the renovation, will come in 28 semis.

One of the more visible changes coming out of the Orpheum renovation is a new, miniature "plaza" at the corner of Hennepin Avenue and South 10th Street that will double as an extension of the ramp the semi-trailers will back down.

Back inside the stage, even the dressing rooms are being rebuilt from scratch. There is one suite of small rooms for lead performers and four smaller rooms for secondary stars on the stage level. Downstairs are large rooms for the rest of the performers to share.

"The idea is that the stars' dressing rooms are plushy places," Victor said as he walked where a prima donna will lounge. "They are actually more like a small motel room, in my opinion."

Other improvements include a new elevator, a new orchestra pit, a new fire escape and lots of new restrooms. Much of the building is being made accessible to disabled people, from the box office to the balcony seating.

But some of the most exciting changes at the Orpheum are renovating what is old, not adding something new.

Victor shows off a wall in the Orpheum's entry with the pride of a curator. Ornate terra cotta work fills up a wall, framing openings where show posters will hang.

“Rather than tearing it down, we are obviously bringing it back,” Victor said. “This will be our artwork.”

The wall had been covered up by the time the ‘60s rolled around, Victor said, and no one was sure what was behind it and the built-in trophy case. When the black velour-coated walls were torn out in the lobby area connecting the entrance of the theatre itself, workers found long-forgotten frescoes.

But most of the renovation work hasn’t been about discovering things; the focus has been on fixing up the inside of a building that has been neglected and even abused.

Plasterers are working on-site to replace broken or missing moldings, using rubber molds of the existing plaster. Replacements for missing terra cotta pieces in the entryway are coming from California.

Decorative painters are using a variety of techniques to spruce up the space with a rich palette of burgundy, gold, blue and silver. Clouds are being painted on the hallway’s ceilings; the walls are being painted in what is called a “double rag” or rubbed-on style. Dark glazings are getting buffed on light-colored plaster details to give them more depth.

Back in the theatre, Victor stands in the orchestra pit, away from all the construction work going on backstage and the painting going on in the lobby.

He looks up at the ceiling, imagining the space on opening night.

“When that chandelier is lit and everything is glistening, then it will be really great,” he said.

Until then, the renovation work itself will provide all the drama the theatre needs.

Copyright 1993 Skyway News