

The Advocate

Grandeur returning to Saenger

N.O. theater could reopen next summer

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New Orleans — The Saenger Theatre looks, at first glance, to still be nothing but a dirty, dusty construction site.

But step inside of the arcade, just off Canal Street, look up, and there you see it: The first evidence that a meticulous restoration is well under way.

Soaring above workmen is the restored ceiling. Its intricate patterns were painstakingly repainted by hand during a laborious two-month process. As work nears completion later this year, several original chandeliers — discovered in a French Quarter antique store — will once again hang from the ceiling, helping to restore grandeur to the Canal Street edifice.

The constellation of stars that will twinkle on the ceiling of the auditorium is being laid out. Once again, clouds will gently sail over theatergoers in the space designed to resemble a 15th-century Italian courtyard.

At the back of the theater, a new stage house will soon begin to sprout from the ground. Sometime in the not-too-distance future, a new marquee — a replication of the original vertical sign — will light the 1100 block of Canal.

The curtain obviously is not ready to rise on the restored playhouse, which was badly damaged when Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters inundated the city, but every passing day brings the \$52 million project one step closer to its expected summer reopening. Those working on the restoration effort said it's running on time and on budget.

"It's moving along," said David Skinner, general manager of ACE Theatrical Group, which will manage the building as part of a public-private partnership among the city and Canal Street Development Corp.

The job is being financed by a mix of private money and federal and state tax credits. The theater is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Cindy Connick, executive director of the development corporation, said the anticipation among locals about the theater's return is palpable.

“It is the quintessential theater experience,” she said. “This building served as the theater experience for most New Orleanians and most folks around the region. For some folks, it is their first brush with a Broadway play. In all the years I’ve worked on this, I have not met anyone who isn’t excited about it.”

The Saenger, designed by Emile Weil, opened Feb. 5, 1927, to much fanfare in the city. The daily morning and afternoon newspapers of the day devoted entire special sections to the ribbon cutting of the \$2.5 million building that seated 4,000 people. The rehabilitated theater will seat about 2,700 people.

During its lifetime, the theater lost some of its luster. Bits and pieces of the building were actually sold off in the 1950s in an effort to help finance needed repairs, Skinner said. Among those sales: Several crystal chandeliers that hung in the lobby areas outside of the auditorium.

Some of those original fixtures are returning to the theater after a surprise discovery, Connick said.

Someone mentioned to her that a mirror in a Royal Street antique store had a tag on it that said it was from the Saenger. During the excursion to find the mirror, it was discovered that another shop had the chandeliers.

“It’s extremely exciting,” Connick said. “The whole goal of this restoration is to bring this theater back to its original glory.”

“We’ve been fortunate to find some of them,” Skinner said of the chandeliers. “We’ve had a lot of ah-ha moments.” Another of those was when a set of original blueprints were discovered tucked away in a closet.

One original aspect whose future remains uncertain for now is the famed Robert Morton Wonder Organ.

The 778-pipe instrument could replicate the sound of anything from various orchestral instrument to honking horns and animal sounds. The organ survives but was damaged when Katrina’s floodwater soaked portions of the theater.

While Connick said the organ’s infrastructure will be installed, a separate fundraising effort will need to be held to help bring it back to life.

“People want the organ back,” Skinner said. “It’s important.”

Another important aspect was the size of the stage. The Saenger had a small one by today’s standards, Skinner said.

“In the theater industry, there was a saying that, ‘If it (a production) will fit in the Saenger, it’ll fit anywhere,’” he said.

Some plays, he said, had to run elsewhere. That should no longer be a problem when the stage house is pushed back and rebuilt, making it deeper than before, he said.

Several months ago, a wrecking ball met the rear of the building, and the stage was ripped out so crews could excavate the earth below their feet in an effort to enlarge the performance space. The end result will allow the Saenger to house today's Broadway blockbusters.

"That's going to be the biggest ... thing people will see in the next few months," Skinner said of the pending work.

The expanded stage house will again make the Saenger the premier theater in town, he added.

"We want to keep the theater experience for patrons at one place," said Skinner, who also manages the Mahalia Jackson Theater, which has hosted Broadway plays in the meantime. "We want to have the Saenger be the home of Broadway."

Connick said that in addition to returning one of New Orleans' signature buildings to commerce, the rehabilitation of the neighboring buildings on the Canal Street elevation will help bring back the corridor.

One of the neighboring buildings, which previously housed a Popeye's, will now be used for office space, a lounge for patrons and concession and retail space that will front the street.

The North Carolina-based Reliance Housing Foundation is doing a complete renovation of the Hotel LaSalle, which for years sat in disrepair. The building will include 32 affordable rental units and street-level retail space. A spokesman for the project did not return a message seeking comment.

Connick said that the Saenger's return, coupled with that of the Joy Theater will provide a "thriving performing arts district where you can see any number or type of performances."

The Loyola Avenue streetcar line, expected to be completed in the coming months, will only hasten the street's revival, she said.

"It will be a newer and better Canal Street," she said.