

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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Big stage Stars to glitter, live at the Omni

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

WHEN SUPERSTAR Wayne Newton opens the new Omni Star Theatre in Livonia on Thursday, Feb. 25, the audience of showgoers will see a Las Vegas revue in a totally revamped setting. Gone will be most reminders that this used to be a movie theater, the Mal Kai, which showed its last movie in January. In place of the big screen will be the big stage.

"We'll have a sky blue cyclorama — not a curtain — that can project colors and lights on it," said Joseph Viski, producer and artistic director. Viski, formerly with the summer-time Star Theatre of Flint, Viski is now on board at the Omni for a year-round schedule of concerts, Broadway musicals and comedies, and other performances.

Referring to the backdrop, visible on the opening series of concerts by show-business greats, Viski said, "Instead of a black curtain, the shows will be dazzling and colorful."

NEWTON IS bringing his whole 26-piece orchestra; the Jive Sisters, his backup singers; and an opening comic to the Livonia facility, for a full-blown Las Vegas-type show, the Omni's producer/artistic director said.

"There will be a fog machine, a laser light show and rain effects," he said.

Viski and general manager Ed Morelli, both busy on the premises, one afternoon last week talked about the renovation of the Mal Kai into the Omni. Viski provided a tour of the theater, now in a bare-bones state.

"The gum has been scraped off the seats, so to speak," Viski said. "Seats are being reupholstered in a beautiful blue velvet. The carpet, a blue print, is being cleaned of popcorn and Coke of the last 25 years."

He pointed out that the Omni first opened in 1962 as a Nicholas George Theatre. When George's movie theater was sold to AMC, the Mal Kai was not part of the package because it was outdated, with only a single screen.

But this was good luck for the owner of the Omni Limousine Service, Ed Morelli, who decided the theater would be a great setting for live stage shows.

MORELLI DESCRIBED his busi-

ness in Plymouth as "the limousine service of the stars." He said many of the stars are personal friends of his, and he sometimes rides with them and the driver.

For the last 22 years, Morelli has operated about 10 different clubs in the metropolitan area, including Ma Bell's in Belleville and the former Michigan Palace (the old Michigan Theatre) in Detroit.

"You get to meet these people over the years," Morelli explained. "Wayne Newton became a friend. I needed someone to open the club — a big star. He (Newton) said, 'Livonia! That's a new one on me.'"

Viski said the 1,400-seat theater, with seats all on one floor, is "a lovely intimate theater. The last row is only 100 feet from the stage, which is very unusual in a theater."

Although the Mal Kai was built as a movie house, Nicholas George had the foresight to plan for the possibility of live stage shows, he noted. There's an orchestra pit, also very unusual in a movie theater, Viski said.

"THE STAGE has a proscenium that is 65-feet wide and 40-feet deep, with wing space of 18 feet on each side."

However, the theater did not contain enough voltage for the Omni, and a lighting system needed for live concerts and musicals also was added. "We have a whole new lighting dimmer system," Viski said.

A special stage floor has been prepared for dancers. Backstage, there are all new curtains and many other changes. Four new dressing rooms have been built, extending the original structure. All work is expected to be completed a week ahead of Newton's arrival. Then, a dry run will test the sound and other equipment.

"I have been to many cities opening new venues, but I have felt the most enthusiastic response from the public here," Viski said. "We have sold over 1,000 season tickets (out of 1,400 seats) times five shows, equaling 7,000 seats."

A total of 5,000 tickets have been sold for 15 busloads of theatergoers for Saturday and Sunday matinees. "We've now sold 40 percent of the tickets," Viski said. Tickets have been sold to people living as far away as Canada, Indiana, northern Michigan and Ohio.

SEASON TICKETS will be available till Feb. 13.



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

With only a few more weeks to go before remodeling is completed and the premier season begins, general manager Ed Morelli pauses in the lobby of the new Omni Star Performing Arts Theatre in Livonia. His foot rests on the last of the lava rock from the theater when it was the Mal Kai movie house.

"It's right here in our own backyard," Viski reminded of what the new Omni season offers Detroit-area residents. "Ann Arbor is coming in droves," he said.

Viski said the original inner lobby featured glass with curtains. This has been replaced by a solid wall and double doors, to provide quiet. A new ladies' room and outer powder room and a men's room are being done. Both will have attendants.

In the outer lobby, Morelli continued the story of the renovation which, he said, cost close to a half-million dollars. Forty thousand dollars was spent on new draperies alone.

Mirrors and photographic blowups of the stars will decorate walls and

doors leading to the inner lobby. "I didn't want horizontal seams," he said about the mirrors, which are 12 feet high and 6 feet wide.

"We hope to do many Broadway musicals and comedies with Hollywood or TV stars, as well as concerts," Morelli said. The four new dressing rooms already are outmoded. "They're not enough for book shows. We can go up two stories. When we're done, we're looking at eight dressing rooms. Also, a big press room for press conferences and a big hospitality room for friends of the star or for dignitaries, to visit with the stars."

HE SAID the theater's full name is Omni — taken from the name of his



From an onstage perch, Joseph Viski, producer and artistic director for the Omni, points out changes to the interior of the theater. Although built as a movie house, the old Mal Kai planned for the future possibility of live stage productions. Its big stage and orchestra pit was already available for the Omni to use.

limo service, Star — for the stars. and Performing Arts Theatre — because they want to present many kinds of performing arts. "I bring in all the talent," he said.

Morelli said the mayor and assessor of the city of Livonia had always

envisioned a performing arts center. Besides the two star series and a summer series of Broadway musicals and comedies, there may be such entertainment as a symphony series this fall with a new orchestra of at least 75 musicians. "I really want to do that," he said.

Concerts, musicals, plays coming

At \$28.75 per ticket, Wayne Newton and his full Las Vegas Extravaganza the week of Feb. 25 will be the highest-priced ticket on the new Omni Star Theatre series.

Tickets for other concerts in the series range from \$19.75 to \$22.50. Booked are Jerry Vale and Patti Page with full orchestra, the week of March 3, \$19.75; the McGuire Sisters and Jack Jones with full orchestra, the week of March 10, \$19.75; Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds, the week of March 17, \$22.50; Bobby Vinton, the week of March 24,

\$21.75; a new attraction (along with guest stars), to be announced this week, replacing Lou Rawls who canceled, the week of April 7; and the Temptations, with guest star to be announced, \$22.50.

Newton will give six performances: Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Saturday-Sunday at 4 p.m. and Sunday at 7:30 p.m. Other shows will each run for five performances — Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Saturday-Sundays at 3 p.m. Shows will be 2½ hours in length, including a half-hour intermission.

Season tickets at \$135 are available by calling the Omni box office at 422-6664. Individual tickets are available at the box office and Ticketmaster locations including AAA and Hudson's.

The first series ends April 24, and the second series begins with Tom Jones, April 28 to May 1, followed by Dionne Warwick and the Spinners, June 2-5. More attractions will be announced. Tickets go on sale in April.

FROM JUNE through part of September, the Omni will do a season of shows, a mixture of concerts and

Broadway musicals and comedies. Shows will be presented every other week, so people can buy tickets and still spend some weekends on other activities or on vacation trips.

The same variety of shows also will be presented as extra added (non-series) attractions, for one or two nights, on the alternate weeks.

Both the coming two concert series and the summer series each offer seven shows for the prices of six, with season's tickets.

The Omni is at 3330 Plymouth Road at Farmington Road. Parking will be available at the theater for \$2. Valet parking is optional.

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