

Creative Living

Marie McGee editor/591-2300

Thursday, July 7, 1988 O&E



(F)1E



The lobby of the Fox Theater.

A return to glory

By Brian Lysaght
staff writer

EDWARD FOX won the race to build a better movie house. The film mogul's crowning glory was a 5,000-seat movie palace on Woodward Avenue called the Fox Theater. It opened September 21, 1928.

Fox and Detroit architect C. Howard Crane wrapped the building in jewels, dressed it in marble and gold leaf, and called the style "Hindu Temple."

This was an era when bigger and better was best, and Fox was building movie houses around the country. Detroit had the Capitol, the Michigan, and several more

theaters that invited people to watch movies and shows in grand style.

But none was as grand as the \$10 million Fox. William Fox, Crane and a host of Detroit heavies attended the grand opening on Sept. 21, 1928 — the day singer Al Jolson married his third wife, 19-year-old Ruby Keeler and the day 1,500 people died in a Florida hurricane.

"The Fox is the largest amusement auditorium in the city, seating 6,000 persons, and its monogrammed, medallion tapestry red chairs were filled for the premiere with men and women representative of the professional, business and industrial life," reported the Detroit Free Press the

'I think it's the grandest building people today will ever get into. That's why it's so important to save.'

— Ray Shepardon

following day.

The entertainment consisted of newsreels, a film and a "Neapolitan Festival" with a Fox orchestra, choir and the 32 Fox Tillerette dancers ("foremost exponents of unified rhythm").

BUT THE MOVIE palace era ceased soon after for Fox. His wife, who had helped decorate the Detroit theater, died, and the stock market crashed on Black Tuesday of October 1929.

Fox lost his fortune, but business was good for movie houses through the 1930s and 1940s, with movies and stage shows. Jack Benny, Kate Smith and Benny Goodman played the Fox, and a 21st anniversary show in 1949 featured Louis Armstrong and Liberace.

In 1951, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis packed 'em in and played six shows a day. Then came Elvis Presley and the Motown reviews in the 1960s, and harder times and horror films for part of the 1970s. The 1980s brought new owners and new wave rock bands.

For most of 1983, the Fox has been getting washed, polished, recast and repaired, part of new owner Mike Ilitch's plan to make the strip of Woodward Little Caesar corporate headquarters, and a viable theater district.

The theater is expected to be finished by year's end. Ilitch-owned Olympia Arenas'

hired Ray Shepardon and Sonya Winner to head the project. They have done theater restoration work in Portland, Ore.; Seattle, Wash.; and St. Louis. But this one, said Shepardon, is different. It's bigger and grander than the others, and is to be restored almost entirely.

"I think it's the grandest building people today will ever get into. That's why it's so important to save," he said.

The Fox has been purchased and renovated before, but never on this scale. Little Caesar International will move its headquarters and 250 employees to the 10-story Fox building above the theater, and there are plans to build an enclosed mall between the Fox and neighboring State theaters, and construction has begun next door on an 1,100 car parking garage.

Even the neglected gem across the street, the Elwood Bar, is getting spruced up.

Shepardon calls Little Caesar founder Mike Ilitch's decision to move his pizza business downtown "miraculous, absolutely miraculous, and gutsy."

SUPPORTERS HOPE the move will pump life into a section of Woodward between Grand Circus Park and the Cultural Center.

Shepardon said the theater is a mix of middle eastern, Mexican,



Ray Shepardon is directing a cast of hundreds on the renovation of Detroit's bejeweled Fox Theater. The restoration should be completed this year.

Indian and Oriental influences.

"The stagehands call it Cambodian Gothic," he said with a laugh.

The lobby's Greek columns, large leaded glass chandeliers, terrazo floor leading to marble stairs.

The auditorium itself is hailed as innovative in theater design, for wider seats, more leg room and good sight lines. The acoustics are excellent, Shepardon said.

Spokeswoman Chris Kelly said Olympia Arenas hopes to have 250 shows a year at the revamped Fox, pop, jazz, comedy music and Broadway-type shows.

The ceiling, with its sharp rods, blues and golds, is fascinating. It follows a big top motif. Shepardon said it was modeled after a tent for the Arabian nights.

The ceiling sculpture is rich in sculpture. Many are bejeweled — inlaid with colored glass. There is a larger-than-life elephant's head and dozens of ceramic tassels along the tent's edge. There are lions, snakes complete with red tongues — all rendered with incredible attention to detail.

The ceiling stenciling, partially damaged by a leaky roof, was copied and replaced. About 90 percent of the work is being done by Detroit area artists and disadvantaged youths, he said.

"You, Virginia there are plenty of quality artists in the country," Shepardon said.

In September, October and November all the fashions are to come in, plumbing and plastering and roof will be done, Shepardon said.

Then it's show time.



Sonya Winner applies inlaid oil to the stained surface of the ceiling.

Staff photos by Bill Brecker