

TLC used to restore the Redford

By SUN MASON

STAFF WRITER

Dorothy Van Steenkiste matter of factly tells you she's "looking for a sugar daddy." Standing with her in the lobby of the Redford Theater are Donald Martin, his father (Marty and Margaret Tapler). They nod in agreement.

She chuckles, then explains: "I'm really looking for someone with a lot of money to complete the restoration of this theater. We got overlooked for grants because we're not big enough."

The "we" is the 250-member Motor City Theatre Organ Society which has owned the Redford Theater since 1977 and has spent the past 14 years painstakingly restoring the theater that, when it opened in 1928, was billed as "America's most unique suburban playhouse."

Society membership knows no boundaries, with the ZIP codes stretching from Clawson, Farmington, Clinton Township, Birmingham and Bloomfield to Livonia, Allen Park and Taylor.

Profits from ticket sales and the concession stand ("We put real butter on our popcorn, no extra charge," says Tapler) and donations, mixed with plenty of volunteer labor, have fueled the effort to preserve the theater and the "apple" of the society's collective eye — the Barton theater organ.

The ornate organ sits on a lift in the orchestra pit in front of the stage, raised and lowered as needed. Its two chambers flank the stage, filled with 10 ranks of pipes to produce a full orchestral sound and background sounds like a car horn or silent movies.

It is the organ that has attracted many of the members like John Lauter of Redford, one of the regular organists. He got involved at age 14, when he decided he wanted "to play the big one."

"It's smaller than many of the others (theater organs), but it's very nice for its size," he said. "But then I'm very partial to it because I grew up on it; I cut my teeth on it. I was kind of bitten by the bug; I like the music it made."

Likewise, it was Tapler's 14-year-old son who initially got involved. Now she works as the secretary and librarian and takes care of the concession counter.

"It was a thrill when I first played, but it was quite intimidating," she said. "Members have access to the organ whether they play good or not, so finally, after all those years, I've learned all the quirks. When it all works, it's quite awesome."

Oriental delight

Awesome might be a good description of the John Kunske-built theater in the '20s and '30s. A trip to the Redford was like a trip to the Orient. The box office resembled a bronze and tile pagoda and the interior included an-

tique Japanese tapestries, statuary and walls adorned with murals of misty, Samurai warriors and pagoda-style awnings. But much of its decor was obliterated during World War II.

By the time the 250-member Motor City Theatre Organ Society came on the scene, the theater had fallen on hard times. A part of the American Theatre Organ Society, the Motor City chapter, founded by Al and Betty Mason of Livonia, reintroduced the organ to the public in 1964.

In exchange for organ concert dates, society members offered their talents in restoring the organ. When Community Theaters Inc. decided to close it as a movie house in 1974, the society worked out a lease arrangement, eventually buying it in 1977.

"This theater . . . I feel it's a miracle it's survived and it's still going strong," said Van Steenkiste. "Everything that's been done here, has been done by us. We're known and well-respected, and this theater has become a hub of this community. It has brought people back into the community. It's been a long and tedious process restoring the theater. Donald Martin hasn't kept track of how much stripper has been used or how much debris has been hauled out. He sits in his wheelchair and talks proudly about the restored inner lobby."

"Everything has been redone paint-wise," the Southfield resident said. "When we started the ceiling was white and the walls yellow. There were seven, eight layers of paint on the wood we stripped down to find the stencils. It was like stripping lead through layers of fads."

Through pictures (like an 8-by-10 photograph of the auditorium found in the office) and other means, the volunteers were able to complete the inner lobby. Its two chandeliers had hung in the lobby of Detroit's Oriental Theater were restored, incorporating motifs from fragments of the original Redford fixtures.

Work is progressing slowly in the auditorium, where careful stripping has uncovered the mural of a Samurai almost and decorative stencils on the walls.

"We strip down to get what we need, then redraw from the tracings and get the color samplings by eye," Martin said. "Some places stripped off great to where we started almost and lazily across the ceiling. They weren't dimensional but were painted on."

The ceiling in the auditorium is still blue, but in need of new paint, and still sports working twinkling star lights. Martin is hoping to find the same kind of machine that projected clouds that moved slowly and lazily across the ceiling. They weren't dimensional but were painted on.

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"This was an atmospheric-designed theater that utilized stage affects for other parts of the theater," said Martin, who was "voluntarily drafted to head up the restoration" in 1981.

Family affair

And involvement in the Redford is very much a family affair. While Martin is busy with the restoration, his father Marty is in charge of the organ and his younger brother David is the stage manager. Oren Walther of Livonia works in the projection booth while his wife Vivian works on the concession stand and sells tickets, and son William is chairman of the operating committee.

Oren Walther lived near the Redford and started going to the movie series. Interested in things mechanically and electrically, it was only a case of firing a nail to get him involved. He's been running the projectors for more than 10 years.

"The projectors were originally in the Summit Theater (in Detroit)," he said. "When the theater was torn down, our members were literally carrying the projectors out of the building as it was coming down."

The projectors are taller than the 5-foot, 9-inch tall Walther who has to reach to the top to put on the top reel. The bottom reel is on the floor. By checking that the film is spliced right and the 20-minute segments are in proper order, he has been able to avoid most problems.

"We're still in a manual system; there's a queue marks on the film at the end of the reel to signal when to start the other machine," he said. "So you have to watch out and not blink at the wrong time."

The society presents a biweekly movie series of classic films interlaced with organ concerts. The movies on Fridays and Saturdays and lead off with a half-hour organ concert that includes the national anthem and stagewired American flag.

"We have the largest neighborhood screen (20 by 40 feet) in southeast Michigan," Marty Martin said. "The whole screen is usable with CinemaScope."

A three-member committee selects the films, focusing on big screen classics suitable for the entire family. In addition to the films and concerts, the society sponsors a young organist competition that gives out \$500

scholarships and conducts theater-oriented educational programs for school children.

Familiar face

For those who take in the movies and concerts at the Redford, the most recognizable society member may well be Don Lockwood. He's the master of ceremonies, providing the audience with some background on the feature film upcoming organ concerts and the organization and handling the 60/60 raffish.

It was Van Steenkiste who suggested he get up and talk about the organ shows after hearing him at lib about the theater history at a Christmas party. Some of his historical tidbits include one about actor George C. Scott, who attended Redford High School and is believed to have ushered at the Redford Theater.

"I really love it," said the Redford resident. "The payment is, when someone comes up to me and tells me they like what I'm doing. It's more than going to a movie. It makes the audience feel like they're going to a legitimate theater, like they've been some place. It's really an experience to go to the Redford."

Lockwood studied piano, but his real interest became the organ after hearing the theater organ that had been in the Fisher Theater. It was moved to the Iris Theater at East Grand Boulevard and Joe Campus in 1961 and a few years later to the derelict Senate Theater on Michigan Avenue.

That theater and organ have been restored by the Detroit Theatre Organ Society of which Lockwood also is a member.

"The Redford is still the way used to be. It's like taking a step back in time," Lockwood said. "The Redford is so typical of a local neighborhood theater in size and its organ. It's not a recreation."

As the restoration continues, members have set their sights on June 1995 when it will play host to the American Theatre Organ Society's national convention. More than 1,000 people are expected to turn out, according to Van Steenkiste who is chairwoman of the event. One of the draws is the number of theater organs in the area.

Tax-deductible donations can be sent to the Redford Theater, 17360 Lahar Road, Detroit 48219-2938. For more information about the Motor City Theatre Organ Society, call Dorothy Van Steenkiste at (313) 383-0133.



AND HEALEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A ducky day: Deborah Watson takes a break on the porch of her house near the Warner Mansion. Passersby regularly take note of her ducks — one is dressed in a scarecrow outfit for fall and the other is wearing a Betsy Ross dress, which is usually reserved for holidays like the Fourth of July.

Ducky outfits and crafts

You've heard of dressing for the occasion. Well, Deborah Watson takes the rule a step further.

Drivers never know what to expect when they pass her house on Grand River between Farmington Road and Gill Road near the Warner Mansion.

One day the ducks outside her house might be dressed as mail carriers, construction workers or Marines. If it's June a wedding dress is appropriate, and summer calls for bikinis and snorkels.

Of course the ducks have a complete wardrobe for the holidays, like Pilgrim outfits for Thanksgiving, a red heart dress for Valentine's Day and Santa gets up for Christmas. She also adds a Farmington Hand costume to her line of clothes.

Watson's playful ritual has been going on for four years. And

the public seems to love it.

"I've had four or five letters from people who say they drive by my house to see what I'm doing," Watson said. "(One) said if they're having a bad day, they'll drive by my house and it takes their bad day away. That makes me feel good."

"People started coming to my door and asking about the outfits," Watson said adding that she started selling the clothes this summer.

Watson also paints country wooden items, such as signs and stick lawn ornaments for craft shows and for area shops. She also makes country dolls that come in all different styles, like animals and angels. Look for her card, "Debi's Crafts," at shows.

To talk to Watson, call her at 477-5837.

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