

Creative Living

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MOT options Grand Circus Theater

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special writer

THE TERRA-COTTA FACADE is camouflaged by light green awnings and a yellow billboard. Anything attractive around the windows is covered by plywood.

"This is dangerous," said Ray Shephardson as we looked around the soon-to-be renovated 57-year-old Grand Circus Theater in Detroit. "From time to time plaster falls from the ceiling and believe me it hurts."

Shephardson has toured many old movie palaces. The architectural historian specializes in restoring theaters and is working some 25 theaters throughout the country. His most recent Detroit venture is the Fox Theater.

"That is a temple, this is a palace," said Shephardson. "When Michigan Opera Theatre first approached me about the Grand Circus Theater, I knew nothing about it. I have to admit that is a little like Channel 2 not knowing anything about Channel 4."

Above us in the cold, damp air of the long-closed lobby was the second ceiling from which plaster had fallen, forming large jigsaw puzzles on the floor.

The scaffolding called attention to the arches of the art deco styled building. Toward the front of the lobby was the popcorn stand and a tile floor, which contrasted sharply with the once magnificent five-foot chandelier of Czechoslovakian cut glass, now broken on the floor. The red flowered carpet on the staircase leading to the balcony at the right was covered with more obstacles from the ceiling.

THIS THEATER IS built on three parcels of land between Broadway and Madison Avenue. The lobby at the Broadway entrance to the Grand Circus is larger than the other at Madison Avenue. The parcel is flanked by two parking lots which makes this the ideal theater.

C. Howard Crane designed the Grand Circus Theater in 1922, one of nearly 250 theaters he built in a 10 year period.

Crane referred to the layout of the theater as 'opera style' which I think is quite prophetic now that MOT is buying it," said Shephardson. "He seems to have known about acoustics or he was just lucky. All of his theaters have outstanding acoustics - like Orchestra Hall. I would expect this one will too."



David DiChiera, general director of Michigan Opera Theatre, has built the company from a dream to a major entity. A theater designed for opera would top his many successes.

MOT has an option to buy the Grand Circus Theater until July. In the last few months, the company has ordered structural and engineering studies to determine the actual extent of needed renovation. Elated MOT officials say those studies indicate the building is in far better condition than expected. The water in the basement is from the leaking roof and asbestos wasn't used in the plaster.

"Despite its appearance, this building is a long way from falling down," said Shephardson. "Can you believe it was last used in 1985?"

Detroit has the largest collection of Crane theaters in the country - the Fox Theater (1928) is the largest and most ornate and Orchestra Hall (1919) is an early example of his more intimate style and skill for achieving perfect acoustics.

Picking up a piece of fallen molding, Shephardson explained how the thin lute-backed plaster was one reason for the marvelous acoustics.

THE DARK LOBBY stretched out along the back of the 2,000-seat first floor to the Madison Avenue lobby. Above the cast from railings was the second level box seat area. In the center there is a large grand stair-

case leading to the balconies. Above the lobbies two ornately mirrored waiting rooms have been dubbed the "Versailles Rooms" by the MOT staff.

All 3,367 seats in the theater have perfect sight lines. Flanked with a low ceiling such as in the Fox Theatre, the cozy 19 box seats are the most appealing. Above each box is a spider net styled stained glass hiding the now dark lighting.

The once ornate walls of the theater are scagliola. Now the olive green paint covering the simulated marble is peeling off.

"We don't know what color the walls were originally. We do not determine color by cutting through the paint because that method does not help us determine the finish of the paint. I do it with paint stripper, taking off one coat of paint at a time."

The remnants of the leaking ceiling showed in the spongy carpeting on the grand staircase. On the third level balcony, Shephardson explained how the terraces between the seats would be enlarged and the number of seats would be reduced to 3,000.

"We will use the same seats but we will have to make the backs larger," said Shephardson. At the top of the balcony were the projection booths that showed the once popular silent movies. At 10 cents a person, even during the Depression this house was filled. Above the ceiling's caved-in arches was a concert roof.

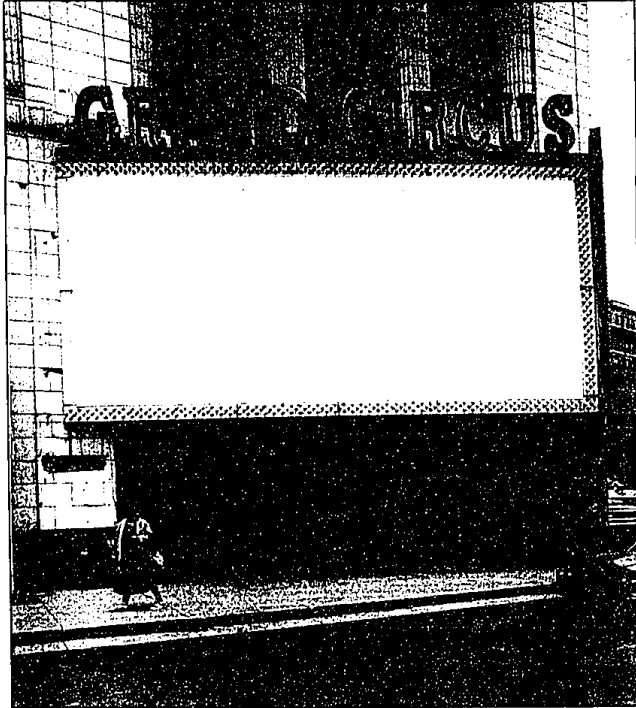
"The roof is covered with wood to house the restaurant that was originally planned," he said.

If MOT exercises its option to buy this theater, it will be one of the few opera companies to own its own building. Company treasurer Cameron B. Duncan estimates the entire project will cost the company \$15-20 million.

"What I want to do is to take a year to make the plans for the building and then spend the next two years rebuilding and renovating," said Shephardson.

IT IS DANGEROUS to walk out into the theater proper to view the stage because of the weakened floors. MOT's General Director David DiChiera said he needs at least 75 feet back stage to mount sets for the operas, to avoid what happened this spring in "Marriage of Figaro." (Masonic Temple has about 50 feet.) Once renovated the Grand Circus Theater would surpass even the Metropolitan Opera itself.

"With the parking lot behind the



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

The 57-year old Grand Circus Theater, between Broadway and Madison in Detroit, may look tired and deserted, but it's on the verge of a new life in store as a home for Michigan Opera Theatre. It was designed by C. Howard Crane, who also did the newly renovated Fox and Orchestra Hall.

stage, it gives us another 50 feet to work with to enlarge the stage," said Shephardson. "When this is complete it will be a world class house."

"What is so remarkable about Detroit is that there are four enormous

historic theaters in this small area with more than 4,000 parking spaces in a 90-minute driving distance for over nine million people. There isn't a theater district in the country with those facilities. It is amazing these

buildings have survived. "I am from Seattle, have an apartment in San Antonio, have spent the last 10 years living in Cleveland and I have a ball in Detroit," Shephardson said.

Pick your day — gardens await visitors

St. James' tour has variety

The Birmingham Garden Walk, sponsored by Episcopal Church Women of St. James Church, will be held 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday, June 29.

Presale tickets are \$5 and day-of-the-walk tickets are \$6. For ticket information, call 643-9218.

Tour participants may park in Divine Science Church parking lot, 1129 W. Maple, and walk to the first two gardens. One is self-contained, with winding garden paths and many perennial plantings. The other has a country atmosphere in the heart of the city.

Also on the tour are a developing rose garden with old-fashioned roses, shrub roses and reliable tea roses; gardens surrounding an authentic reproduction 18th century New England saltbox home; a large site with a lush English style garden and contemporary outdoor sculpture; and the gardens and "sort of waterfall" on a charming, historic site on North Adams. Maps are on the tickets, which will be available at 212 Lake Park the day of the walk.

The English cottage architecture of the home is enhanced by lush plantings in front and the rose garden being developed with old fashioned as well as contemporary favorites.



JERRY ZOLYNSKI/staff photographer

Spend day in Beverly Hills

Beverly Hills Garden Club, a member of the Federated Garden Clubs of Michigan, is hosting a garden walk 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday, rain or shine. Presale tickets are \$4 from any club member or \$5 on day of the walk at Beverly Hills Park Pavilion, Beverly Road between Southfield and Evergreen. For information, call 644-5135.

There are five gardens on the tour, all within relatively short distance — a brick terraced garden on a lot that slopes sharply down to the Rouge River in which the owners let the contour of the land dictate the design of the garden with small ponds and a bridge to a wooded area; a garden around a 1940 Cape Cod style house; a garden of deciduous and evergreen plantings, a brick patio, fountain pond and lots of flowers; a yard with lots of shade and flowering trees and shrubs, a planted berm and colorful show of annuals; 35-year old garden planted around unusual and rare varieties of trees; and a yard of plantings designed to provide a year-round display of colors.

Free, homemade refreshments, gift boutique and white elephant sale at the Beverly Pavilion are included in the ticket price.

More than 60 species of birds have been identified by Mary and Bill Basse who built the brick terraces, ponds and rock gardens above the Rouge River themselves more than 20 years ago.



JERRY ZOLYNSKI/staff photographer