

Silver screen is center stage

Volunteers celebrate restoration of 1928 movie palace

BY LINDA ANN CHOMEN

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Dorothy VanSteenkiste remembers seeing a movie for 10 cents and receiving a free dish in appreciation of her patronage. Those were the good old days in more ways than one.

VanSteenkiste isn't complaining about the jump in ticket prices since the late 1920s. She misses the ornate movie palaces. So instead of sitting around grumbling about their demise she and a group of volunteers are working tirelessly to restore the 1928 Redford Theatre.

In celebration of the completion of Phase II, they're inviting vintage movie buffs to a gala celebration Saturday, April 13. Michigan Opera Theatre singers Maria Cimarelli, Betsy Bronson, Karl Schmidt and Mark Vondrak kick off the festivities with a Broadway musical review. Tony O'Brien follows with a program on the 1928 Barton pipe organ and then accompanies a silent film starring Buster Keaton. The music of Farmington Hills pianist John Lauter will greet guests in the outer lobby.

"I work the box office every so often," said the 79-year-old VanSteenkiste who in 1972 joined the Motor City Theatre Organ Society, the nonprofit organization dedicated to the restoration of the theater pipe organ and the theater which has received state and national historic designations. "I enjoy seeing people bring their children. People leave musicals singing and happy. I love the theater organ and working with young people and love the companionship of the people. I call this place a miracle. When you think we've bought this place in 1977 and kept it going."

"It took a lot of digging through history by Donald Martin. This a tremendous amount of work. It's nice because we're all working together like a family."

VanSteenkiste led efforts to raise money for the \$400,000 project to replace 1,560 seats

Gala Celebration

What's Michigan Opera Theatre singers perform in a Broadway musical theater revue, organist Tony O'Brien plays the 1928 Barton pipe organ, and a silent short film stars Buster Keaton. When: 8 p.m. Saturday, April 13. Where: Redford Theatre, 17360 Lahser at Grand River, Detroit. Tickets: \$10. Call (313) 537-2560

with reproductions from the Erwin Company in Toronto. The Allen Park resident marvels at the fact, the Motor City Theatre Organ Society received a grant of \$150,000 from the State of Michigan, \$52,000 from the city of Detroit Cultural Affairs Department. VanSteenkiste thinks it's because she took photographs of Gov. John Engler sitting at the organ during a visit two years ago and included them with the applications.

"We never received grants that large before," said VanSteenkiste. "But we also belong to a lot of theater and arts organizations like the American Theatre Organ Society, American Guild of Organists, and ArtServe Michigan. I think the exchange of knowledge was valuable in helping us get this far while other movie palaces were less successful."

The grants and a core of 50 volunteers are helping to return the old movie palace to the glory days of the late 1920s. For months George McCann and Allen Fitzgerald were at the theater every day supervising the installation of seating and flooring, and completing the decorative gold stencil design on the walls. Phase I was finished in 1995. \$100,000 still remains to be raised for the seats which patrons can purchase for \$250 each.

"It was all painted over and we found the original stenciling underneath which we went back to. The amount of hours that went into it is unbelievable and we still have a lot of stenciling to do," said McCann, a Southfield resident and volunteer since 1975. "We started restoring the walls in 1997. I love these old theaters. It seems a shame they repainted them in an effort to

modernize. The beauty of these theaters is why I volunteer. You can't duplicate them."

"I grew up with all the old movie palaces - the Madison, United Artists, Riviera, The Fox, State, and Hollywood on Fort Street."

McCann worked his way up from an usher to management at the Michigan Theater which together with the Redford was one of 22 theaters operated by United Detroit Theaters.

"I remember one day receiving a phone call at the Michigan during World War II that they were painting over the Japanese Geisha because of the bombing of Pearl Harbor," said McCann.

By the time Fitzgerald began volunteering at the Redford in 1974 the theater was dimly lit with 1,400 watt bulbs. His mother Irene raised money for new drapes. He's worked at all sorts of job to restore the theater's interior right down to the paintings of Japanese Geisha on each side of the seating area in front of the stage.

"It's a love of the building," said Fitzgerald. "This is the theater I came to as a child. I grew up a few blocks away. I saw a silent movie here in 1974 and was taking theater at Redford

High School and have been here ever since."

There's still a lot of work to be done but they're not waiting to celebrate. VanSteenkiste is applying for a 2003 grant to refurbish the outer lobby, marquis and handicap bathroom. In the meantime, the chandeliers from the Oriental Theatre downtown and David Dawson's reproductions of stained glass lamps await guests who will see photography exhibits of old movie palaces and the renovations to the Redford, including a dumpster filled with the old seats.

VanSteenkiste is excited about sharing the experience with them. During the school year, she enjoys watching the expressions on the faces of students from Farmington to Canada as they watch silent movies.

"It's the kids look of awe," said McCann.

"They ask can we go in the balcony," added Fitzgerald. "There are no balconies in movie theaters anymore."

For VanSteenkiste, it's also about instilling a love of theater organ in the young. Every March she oversees a competition for students organists from all over the world. Ten cash awards of \$500 and two \$1,000 scholarships are presented by the Motor City Theater Organ Society.

"My reward was my granddaughter (Heather Novak of Farmington Hills) taking up the organ. She competed nationally and won the junior group division and a trip to England. That was the payback to me."



Time Out: Dorothy VanSteenkiste sits in one of the seats recently installed at the Redford Theatre. She and a group of volunteers have worked tirelessly to restore the 1928 theater to its former glory.

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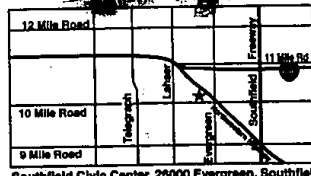
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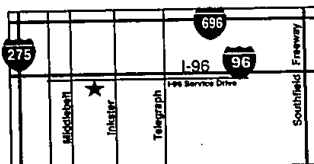
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