

A photograph of the Miller Theater stage, featuring a large orchestra performing. The stage is lit with warm, golden light, and the audience is visible in the foreground. The Miller Theater logo is overlaid on the image.

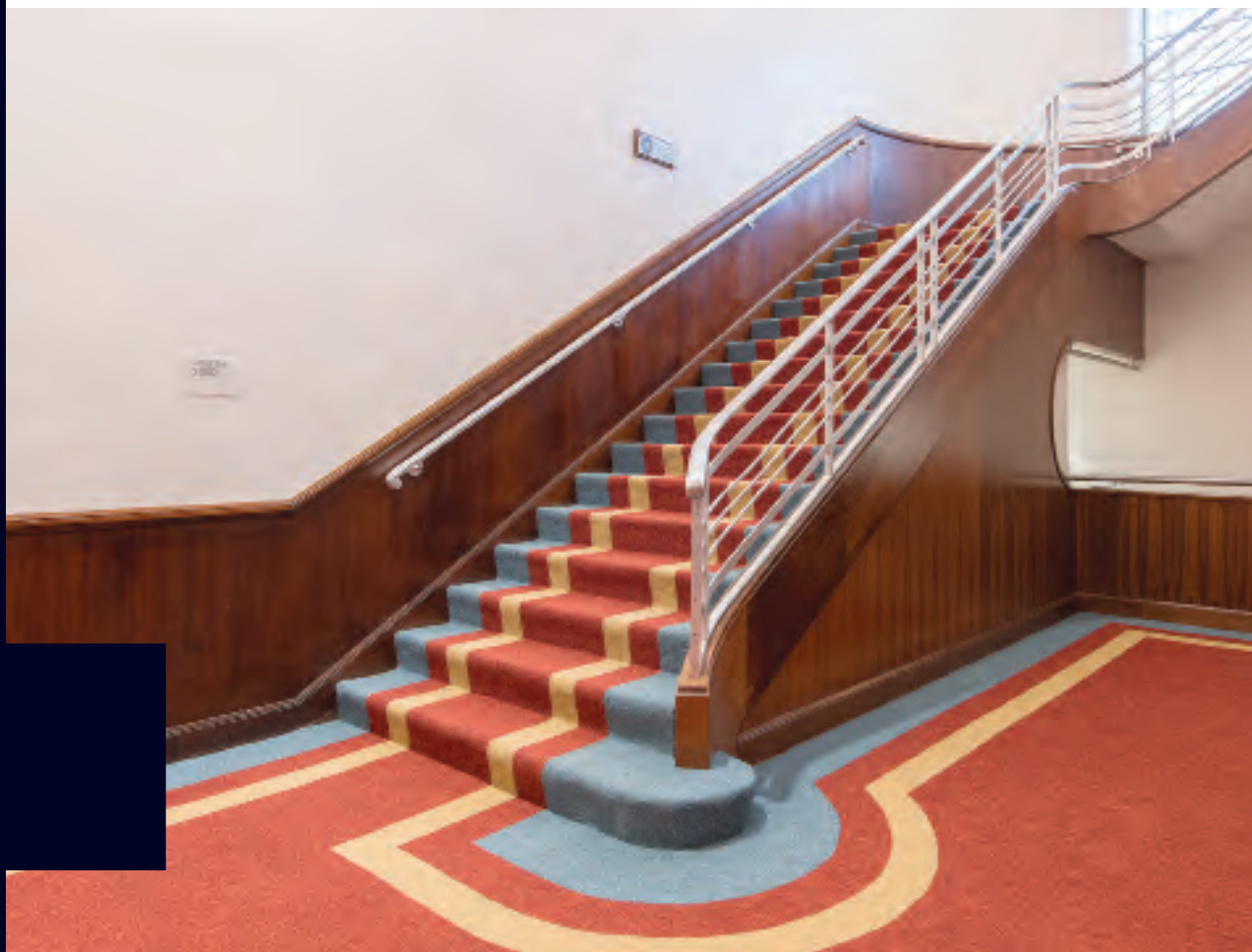
SPOTLIGHT

AFTER
STANDING
EMPTY FOR
YEARS, MILLER
THEATER IN
AUGUSTA, GA.,
RETURNS TO ITS
FORMER GLORY

BY LISA WHITE

Augusta's symphony orchestra performs at the renovated Miller Theater.





VEN BACK WHEN IT WAS CREATED in 1940, Miller Theater in Augusta, Ga., was a spectacle.

Built by Frank Miller for \$500,000, a pretty penny following the Depression, it was designed by Roy Benjamin, a well-known architect with a number of projects in Florida.

The fifth of Miller's Augusta theaters, and what some called his crown jewel, Miller Theater celebrated its opening with "A Night at the Moulin Rouge," featuring 75 dancers. During its heyday, it became a popular site for movie premieres, follies and other events.

At that time, it was a state-of-the-art facility, using as much power as the nearby town of Waynesboro, and was one of the first buildings in the area to use Freon air conditioning.

It also was known for beautiful acoustics, thanks to audio consulting company RCA. "When it initially opened, Mickey Rooney and Clark Gable sent Frank Miller notes of congratulations,"

said Levi Hill, president of the Miller Theater board. "There are many memories locked up in that building that would be released when it reopened."

Shuttered since 1983, the building fell into disrepair as the city fell victim to an exodus of residents.

The building changed hands a number of times throughout the years, until philanthropist Peter Knox IV bought it and seven years ago gave it to Augusta's 65-year-old symphony, which had never had a home.

"The symphony had to rent spaces, held performances at a Baptist church and played pop concerts at a neighboring theater down the road," said Anne Catherine Murray, executive director of Symphony Orchestra Augusta. "This was the first opportunity to have our own place where we could build and diversify our audience."

With sister theater the Imperial, another Miller creation, across the street, the Miller Theater's \$23-million refurbishing project was an opportunity for Augusta's theater district to be reborn.

"We knew we could re-create that glamour and provide the city with a versatile venue," said Marty S. Elliott, Miller Theater's general manager.

The grand opening on Jan. 6 marked the beginning of a new era for the venue.

Fab from drab: Architects found many of the theater's features, such as the main staircase (shown at right before the renovation), remained largely intact.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MILLER THEATER

SPOTLIGHT



"EVEN 75 YEARS LATER, THE DESIGN STILL LOOKS MODERN"

START OF SOMETHING BIG

The process began in 2011 when Knox handed the theater over to the symphony, when a restoration feasibility study was commissioned. Hill was on the symphony board and went to the committee to see whether the theater could serve as the symphony's home, said Hill. "Our members contributed money to hire consultants, who answered questions," he said. "We spent about 2 1/2 years looking into this before determining it was possible."

Despite the study's conclusion that a restoration would take a lot of time and money, the symphony voted unanimously to move forward with the project.

"We all got behind it for fundraising, architectural and construction plans, and everything necessary to bring the theater back to life," said Hill.

The funding mix included public money with a local sales tax allocation approved by county residents and private money from foundations and individuals. Almost a third came from state and federal historic tax credits (see related story).

BACK TO ITS ORIGINAL LUSTER

Restoring the many unique aspects of the venue did not come easy.

The theater's art moderne architecture, a post-Depression style, is distinguished by clean horizontal lines, curves and a more streamlined, less ornate look than the more well-known art deco design.

"Even 75 years later, the design still looks modern to the

TAX CREDITS 'HELD US ACCOUNTABLE'

The goal of the the Miller Theater project was to retain as much of the original structure, design elements and fixtures as possible in an effort to restore the venue to its original grandeur.

"It would have been easy to gut this place, and we could have completed that project years ago," said Anne Catherine Murray, executive director of Symphony Orchestra Augusta. "We wanted to maintain the historical significance of the building and were bound to do so by federal historic tax credits to qualify for the program. It held us accountable."

This credit gives those who rehab historic buildings a 20 percent tax break from a federal level, which helped finance about \$4.4 million of the total \$23-million project.

The state of Georgia provides historic tax credits as well. "From a state and federal standpoint, these tax credits totaled more than \$7 million," said Murray.

The refurbishment also was financed through a special options sales tax, approved at the beginning of the project and distributed at its completion. This totaled \$5.14 million, according to Murray.

"This theater holds great memories for many people in the area, and now they can see it as it once was," said Murray. "That's important to a lot of locals." —Lisa White

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MILLER THEATER

Commissioned in 1938 and completed in 1940, the Miller Theater is a historic Art Moderne movie palace recently restored and reimagined as both a symphony hall and state-of-the-art theater in Augusta, Georgia.

Designed with both the artist and audience in mind, the 1300-seat Miller retains its historic flourishes - Italian marble terrazzo, black walnut millwork and iconic hand-painted panels flanking a generous stage - while integrating modern theatrical facilities. Amenities include the Founders Room, which features a full custom bar and private access, five private and two company dressing rooms with controlled access, a flying orchestra shell and a full array of lines sets, lighting, sound and rigging systems.

Most importantly, the Miller has reignited the passion of a community. As one patron, who was at the final Miller performance in early 1985 and the first in early 2018 said, coming to the Miller feels like coming home.

Centrally located for convenient routing from Atlanta, Charleston and Charlotte, the population of the Greater Augusta Area is more than 800 thousand people and growing quickly. A music town with a storied history, Augusta has produced legendary performers such as James Brown, Sharon Jones, Jessye Norman and Lady Antebellum.

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THE MILLER THEATER IS AN SMG MANAGED FACILITY

THE INTERMISSION IN AUGUSTA IS OVER



A CITY REBORN

Miller Theater's renovation is part of a recent wave of activity in downtown Augusta, Ga.

Much of this surrounds a \$50-million cyber range and training facility. The Georgia Cyber Innovation and Training Center, part of Augusta University's Riverfront Campus, will help develop the workforce and infrastructure to protect the U.S. from cyber threats. The second phase of the project is expected to be completed by the end of this year.

"Augusta's downtown has experienced an economic boom due to the cyber center attracting business," said Anne Catherine Murray, executive director of Symphony Orchestra Augusta. "Our downtown has gone from having many empty storefronts to being full in the past two years."

Three hotels opened in 2017, three more are under construction and another three are in the engineering and design phase. All told, more than a dozen hotels have opened during the past five years, pushing the metro area's lodging inventory above 7,000 rooms, according to data from the Augusta Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"More restaurants are underway, and the entertainment district has been revitalized," said Marty S. Elliott, general manager of the recently refurbished Miller Theater for SMG. "It's all happening simultaneously, breathing new life into Augusta's downtown."

The latest proposal takes the city's museum to the streets, providing information on Augusta's history through interactive kiosks located throughout key districts.

Signature Design, which works with Cooper Carry – the Atlanta-based landscape architecture firm designing the city's downtown streetscape projects – enlisted the help of the Augusta Museum of History to come up with the proposal.

Murray said the Miller Theater project, with its always-illuminated marquee, has been a key component to the city's revitalization efforts.

"We're helping to stimulate more businesses, along with other projects, at this end of Broad Street," she said.

Elliott agreed, adding, "It's a real tribute to Augusta's revitalization efforts."

—Lisa White



A preserved drinking fountain reflects the Miller's art moderne architecture.

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eye," said Hill.

Fortunately, during the many years that the theater lay vacant, many of the original features and components remained intact.

Atlanta-based architects Lord Aeck Sargent and Lansing, Mich., contractor The Christman Co. uncovered pleasant surprises behind the walls that spoke well of the building, such as concrete supports.

"When we extended the stage back nine feet, we had to remove some columns and, to accomplish this, had to reinforce other columns to take on the additional load, but there was nothing we uncovered beyond what we thought we'd see," said Hill. "Rather than using columns, the balcony is suspended and held by a 39-ton beam."

Many of the interior elements were salvageable, including marble terrazzo floors; peach-colored mirrors; an ornate, coved plaster ceiling; anodized aluminum railings; and even 500 original seats left from those that were sold in prior years.

"We were able to rebuild many of the original seats, making them a bit wider, but utilizing much of the original hardware, wood, side paneling and fabric," said Hill.

The remaining seats were custom-made to replicate the originals, and the seating configuration remained intact.

Distinctive 1940s light fixtures were salvaged and retrofitted with LED bulbs, and millwork was retained whenever possible.

"The architects capitalized on storefront space to build the theater in the back at a right angle, which is unexpected," said Murray, who also is a trained preservationist. She adds that, with the refurbishment, acoustician Kirkegaard,



MILLER THEATER

BY THE NUMBERS

YEAR BUILT

1940

COST TO BUILD

\$500,000

YEARS
SAT VACANT

35

LENGTH OF
RENOVATION

7
YEARS

COST OF
RENOVATION

\$23
MILLION

COST OF
CONSTRUCTION

ABOUT
\$19
MILLION

HISTORIC
PRESERVATION
TAX CREDITS

\$7
MILLION

SEATING
CAPACITY

1,300

NUMBER OF
SYMPHONY
PERFORMANCES
ANNUALLY

2-14

NUMBER OF
PERFORMANCES
BOOKED IN THE
FIRST FIVE
MONTHS OF 2018

30+

with offices in Chicago, Houston, St. Louis and Erie, Colo., took everything into account, including the breathability of the seat fabric. "Everything was calculated into the acoustics."

With this project, the adjacent building also was acquired, which provided 23,000 additional, and much needed, square feet for a box office, dressings rooms, additional restrooms, a future music institute for educational outreach and pre- and post-event spaces. It also includes elevator access.

The extra space will be used during the day for educational purposes. Already scheduled is an educational session with Tony Award-winning actress Sutton Foster, who was to meet with students from Augusta's John S. Davidson Fine Arts Magnet School before her evening performance on opening night.

Several bar areas throughout the venue will offer light snacks, cocktails and beverages.

"We're looking to develop relationships with area caterers for post-symphony events and receptions, but don't yet have a full menu offering," said Murray.

A DIVERSE LINEUP

Miller Theater's recent opening was filled with as much pomp and circumstance as its original unveiling almost 80 years ago.

On Jan. 6, a black tie gala was held for the symphony that included special guest Foster, whose roots are in Augusta. "This was an immediate sellout, with 1,300 tickets going to many contributors of the restoration project," said Elliott.

The following day, a community open house was held. Attendees took tours of the facility and saw a documentary of the renovation project from start to finish.

Not only is the stage extension large enough to hold the symphony's 100 musicians, but it also accommodates other types of events and performances.

"SMG is our management company," said Hill. "We are planning amplified and non-amplified performances and events, including music, meetings, conferences, movies and dances."

More than 30 events are on the books through May, including musical performers Diana Krall, Gordon Lightfoot and Ronnie Milsap and comedian Ron White.

The symphony also will perform about a dozen times a year, with six pop concerts.

"SMG is so proud to add the Miller Theater to our portfolio," said Elliott. "It says a lot to have so many events on the books even prior to the venue's reopening."

The lobby invites guests into another era at the theater, which originally opened in 1940.