

# COMM

SPOTLIGHT

The 111-year-old Philadelphia Metropolitan Opera House reopened last year after a \$56 million renovation.

PHOTO CREDIT: HELE IK





# UNITY

## ASSETS

REVITALIZED THEATERS PROVIDE A BOOST  
TO THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS, CITIES

BY NOELLE RILEY



**T**HE ROMANTICISM OF walking into an ornately decorated historic theater has drawn communities to save the old structures, and cities across the nation are now watching new development around theaters grow and neighborhoods flourish.

An outsized example of economic growth around a revamped historic theater is The Met Philly, a 110,000-square-foot structure that was saved from despair with a \$56 million restoration.

The once blighted building is now called the crown jewel of Philadelphia's North Broad Street, an area that's going through a renaissance with new hotels, residential and mixed-use development sprouting up.

The Met Philly opened as a massive concert venue in December and continues to wow audiences and musicians alike with its grand facade, plush seats and double balcony.

"I have to keep pinching myself, that's how great it is," said Geoff Gordon, regional president at Live Nation Entertainment, who operates The Met Philly. "There's something special about being in a building that was built over 100 years ago."

The original structure opened in 1908 as the Philadelphia Metropolitan Opera House developed by opera impresario Oscar Hammerstein.

Throughout the decades, the opera house was used as a movie theater, a sports venue, a school, a gospel concert hall and a church. It closed from 1988 to 1995 until the Church of the Holy Ghost started holding services inside the auditorium and spent thousands of dollars trying to keep it in shape.

In 2012, the church and developer Eric Blumenfeld bought the building, hoping to one day rehabilitate it. In 2017, Live Nation signed on as the venue's concert promoter and plans were announced to redevelop the site into a concert venue.

Bob Dylan headlined the first show in December. The 3,400-seat venue has 25 bars, modern technology and lighting, and a huge stage for performances.

"We have the ability to do arena-size shows," said Walter McDonald, chief programmer at The Met. The backstage has enough room to load in up to eight concert trucks for mega performers like Madonna, who just announced three shows in December at the venue.

"That was a very exciting booking for us. There's no shortage of production elements with Madonna," McDonald said.

The venue also has a huge chandelier that rises to the ceiling when shows start.

"We wanted to do something that had a wow factor. We wanted to put some great lighting in," Gordon said, highlighting the massive chandelier. "It literally blocks your sight lines when people come in. As soon as the lights go down, the chandelier goes, up, up, up to the ceiling. It's unbelievable."

The venue will host roughly 150 shows a year, with Logic, Ray LaMontagne, Kacey Musgraves and more playing in the next several months.

"It's a huge success in terms of putting that theater back on line," said Jeff Greene, chairman and founder of Ever-Greene Architectural Arts, an architectural firm that ren-

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 46**

## SPOTLIGHT

**Peoples Bank Theatre in Marietta, Ohio, celebrated its 100th anniversary in May.**







San Diego Theatres  
Civic Theatre   Balboa Theatre

## SAN DIEGO'S PREMIER VENUES

### San Diego CIVIC THEATRE

2,967 Seats  
Downtown San Diego



### The Historic BALBOA THEATRE

1,335 Seats

Heart of the Gaslamp  
Downtown San Diego

*New state-of-the-art sound system*



[SanDiegoTheatres.org](http://SanDiegoTheatres.org)

CINDY BOWERS, *Programming Director* – [cbowers@sandiegotheatres.org](mailto:cbowers@sandiegotheatres.org)





#### CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44

ovates, preserves, rebuilds and restores old buildings. Last year, Greene and his team worked on 24 historic theaters.

At one point, The Met Philly was almost in complete disrepair, Greene said. "They had a blue tarp stretched over the orchestra to catch the pieces of ceiling that were falling down. If you walked upstairs, you were literally walking in rubble that was falling off the ceiling."

Another theater that's being saved is the Uptown Theatre in Chicago. Late last year, the venue's owner, Jerry Mickelson, who is also co-owner of Chicago-based Jam Productions, announced an \$80 million renovation to the property. Half the money has been raised so far, Mickelson said.

The venue has been closed since 1981, so its opening is a big deal for the Uptown neighborhood, he said.

"We're teed up and ready to go as far as all of the city approvals that we needed, which is a big task that we tackled in a short amount of time," he said. "We're now out raising the final \$40 million."

The first half of funding was provided by grants, city funds and historic tax credits. Mickelson is also looking to design a nonprofit component that might purchase or run the theater.

"The other mission that we're really looking forward to is this theater will create a huge social impact," he said. "We're assembling a program with Chicago Public Schools for After School Matters. Kids will learn about the front of the house and back of the house productions."

Likewise, The Met Philly gives back to area schools and has donated \$23,000 to date to schools in the area.

Just like The Met Philly, the revamped Uptown Theatre

is poised to turn the blighted community around, Mickelson said. "It's not just about bringing concerts to the Uptown Theatre, but it's about doing good things for our community. It was (Chicago) Mayor Rahm Emanuel who realized that Uptown Theatre needed to be reopened in order to revitalize the Uptown neighborhood."

The mayor's support made it easier for Mickelson to get all the permits needed to start the renovation process. Mickelson predicts they'll raise the remaining \$40 million by the end of the year and start renovations immediately after and that the theater will open roughly two years after that.

The 44,000-square-foot building has a spacious lobby

**"It's not just about bringing concerts. ... It's about doing good things for our community." — JERRY MICKELSON**

with lounges. It will have about 4,400 seats when it reopens, and Mickelson has every intention of preserving as many of the historic aspects of the building that they can.

Much like Uptown Theatre, Peoples Bank Theatre in Marietta, Ohio, was closed for more than three decades, reopening in 2016. Built in 1919, the historic theater cele-

**Clearwater, Fla.'s Capitol Theatre had a \$10.7 million renovation in 2013.**

**SPOTLIGHT**

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48



SAN JOSE  
THEATERS

FOUR VENUES | 600+ SHOWS



SAN JOSE CIVIC  
2850 Seats



CENTER FOR  
THE PERFORMING  
ARTS  
2608 Seats



MONTGOMERY  
THEATER  
468 Seats  
Newly Renovated



CALIFORNIA  
THEATRE  
1120 Seats



CIVIC/  
MONTGOMERY  
COURTYARD  
New Courtyard. Available  
for VIP experiences and  
private events.



TEAM SAN JOSE DOWNTOWN SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

JOHN CIULLA  
GENERAL MANAGER  
DIRECTOR OF ENTERTAINMENT

408.792.4195  
JCIULLA@SANJOSE.ORG

SANJOSETHEATERS.ORG



Half of the \$80 million needed to renovate Chicago's Uptown Theatre (shown in a rendering) has been raised.



## SPOTLIGHT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

brated its 100-year anniversary in May.

The theater "has added to the momentum of downtown Marietta's revitalization efforts and the area's growth as a tourism destination for history and outdoor recreation enthusiasts," the theater's marketing director, Drew Tanner, said in an email.

Many who live in Marietta remember seeing their first movie in the theater, and country music legends like Kitty Wells, Ernest Tubb or Randy Travis back in the day, he said.

"Today we're not only presenting major shows and concerts, but it's really functioning as a community space, hosting dance and youth orchestra recitals, benefit events for our local foster families foundation and Ronald McDonald House, as the venue for Marietta College's performing arts programs," Tanner said. The theater has around 100 events each year and has outreach programs for local schoolchildren.

Greene applauds efforts to save and reopen venues.

"There are less and less of them to restore," Greene said. "But many communities have recognized that if they have a historic theater, they have an asset they need to restore."

The Capitol Theatre in downtown Clearwater, Fla., also

has seen economic growth surrounding its facility.

"It was the catalyst for developing downtown Clearwater," said Katie Pedretty, director of public relations for the theater, owned by the city and managed by Ruth Eckerd Hall. "We have people come see shows here from all over Tampa Bay. It's a very intimate atmosphere. You're walking into a theater that looks vintage, it feels classic, it looks like you're walking into another era."

The Capitol Theatre opened in 1921. It had a \$10.7 million renovation in 2013 during which two adjacent buildings were connected to the theater. They also expanded the seats to 725, upgraded lights and technology and created a larger lobby and VIP lounge.

On May 17, the venue announced a \$2.5 million gift from Nancy and David Bilheimer for arts education programming for children. In return, the city renamed the theater Nancy and David Bilheimer Capitol Theatre.

"People want to live near these (theaters) and that's what makes these cities unique," Green said. "Theaters are the largest secular gathering places. People come together of all religions, classes races. The theater is a great equalizer, where the rich man and the poor man, they're all going to see what's being put on on this stage. Communities are recognizing that culture and the arts are a huge magnet for the quality of life." ■

## Q&A

### MARK BLACK PRESIDENT, INTERAMERICA STAGE INC.

**MARK BLACK IS** the president and founder of InterAmerica Stage Inc., a specialty rigging and stage machinery company, which opened its doors in 1989.

The company has worked on a raft of theaters in Florida, many of them historic theaters, including the Historic Cocoa Village Playhouse, Sunrise Theatre in Fort Pierce, Falk Theatre at the University of Tampa, Colony Theatre in Miami Beach, Polk Theatre in Lakeland, Actors Playhouse at the Miracle Theatre in Coral Gables, Olympia Theater in Miami; Athens Theatre in DeLand; The Coliseum in St. Petersburg; and the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall in Sarasota.

Other projects have included Northern Stage in White River Junction, Vt., and The Forum in Inglewood, California.

Black talked with Brad Weissberg of *Venues-Now* about how he got into the business and how his company works on historic theaters as well as some of the country's newest arenas.

#### How did you get your start in the business?

I stated in Caracas, Venezuela, working for Hoffend and Sons. In the late '70s and '80s we were it when it came to theater rigging and staging. I opened opera houses in Europe and Argentina. But I wasn't one of the sons, so it was time for me to try something new.

#### When did IASTage take off?

We were discovered by Disney and they turned out to be a very good client who are very interesting — they are very much like a theater-world client. We've kept a great relationship with them for 27 years. Anything you walk underneath in a Disney park, worldwide, that's cool is probably ours.

#### You are known for your skydecks, a tension wire grid. Where are these installations located?

We've got hundreds of installations like the new Chase Arena in San Francisco. Little Caesars Arena in Detroit has the largest skydeck in the world.

#### Why do like to work on historic theaters?

We like to work in them because it's a different level, more intimate, more community-minded, and there's a theater vibe and you are actually helping out the people who love theater.

#### Do you make money on historic theaters?

Not much. We don't make money on any of the historic theater jobs we do. But we feel like we are serving the community. We actually donate a lot of the work to the community theaters we do, like the DeLand, Fla., theater, where we donated the main curtain and box curtains. It makes us feel a part of something.

#### Who brings IASTage in?

Often we are brought in by the theaters. They say, "Hey, do you think this is safe?" We are known as overhead safety contractors and riggers, and our opinions matters. They engage us to do an inspection, and they need an issue fixed. Community theater is great and filled with volunteers who may not have a good eye for dangerous situations and rigging.

We also have our own sewing shop, so we do high-end draperies. For a lot of these older venues, that's really important. If the look of the drape is ratty and weird, it's a turnoff.

#### Why do you do this work if it's not profitable?

Probably 80 percent of our office staff and project managers are all grads of theater programs in the U.S. We have a lot of people who like theater. The other part is that if you don't want anyone in the industry to come in and steal your business, you better be available. ▣



- SkyDeck™
- Custom Hoists
- Drapery
- Counterweight Systems

**We specialize in thoughtful upgrades that maximize usage while respecting the historical and cultural identity of your space.**