

COLUMBIA THEATRE

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An historic theatre is being restored and will once again dazzle audiences with its beauty and uniqueness.



In 1927, the Columbia Theatre opened in Paducah, with the movie “It” starring Clara Bow. The majestic theatre, which had a main ground floor theatre and a smaller one on the second floor, was modeled after the Rialto Theatre in Louisville, and presented both vaudeville acts and movie pictures. The building has an elaborate façade of blue and white terra cotta tiles and an eclectic assortment of architectural details, including spiraled Byzantine columns, classical urns, friezes, capitals and busts of Greek goddesses. The two architectural styles in the building are Adamesque and Skouras. Architectural consultants are unaware of any other American theatre exhibiting both of these styles in one building, which makes it unique.

In the downstairs main theatre, there was a beautiful curtain, made mostly of asbestos, showing the Statue of Liberty standing proud in

New York harbor. The initial purpose of the screen was as a fire curtain designed to protect the audience from the threat of fire.

Though the theatre was a jewel to the community, it closed in 1987. In December 2003, the owner donated the Columbia Theatre to the city of Paducah in hopes the city could facilitate the transfer to a for-profit business and undertake its restoration.

“The first challenge we had at the theatre was to restore and preserve the beautiful fire curtain,” said Darlene Mazzone, chair of the Columbia Theatre Restoration Board. “It had been damaged from years of neglect. We were fortunate to get a Kentucky Brownfield grant of \$49,000 for environmental cleanup at the theatre, but there is a timeframe tied to that funding. So in order to take advantage of the Brownfield grant, we had to complete the

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curtain restoration to encapsulate it and secure the asbestos before the rest of the abatement was done.”

Asbestos also had to be removed from pipe insulation, joint compounds, linoleum and window putty.

A highly respected restoration artist and two assistants coordinated the painstaking work of patching large holes that had been cut into the curtain and preparing it for the final work of repainting and restoring the classic harbor scene. They scraped away the layers and determined the original paint scheme and subsequent paint applications in order to create a palette that

will be used for the ultimate restoration of the theatre, Mazzone said. The curtain has been restored to its original grandeur.

A panel from the original stained glass ceiling inside the theatre was recovered and cleaned, revealing the coloration of the glass work, giving the restoration team further information about early interior color palettes.

There’s much enthusiasm for the project in the community and surrounding region. The theatre drew from a wide geographic area in western Kentucky so memories abound among those who were fortunate enough to visit the theatre during its years of operation.

Besides the grant from the Kentucky Brownfield Redevelopment Program, other grants were awarded from the Carson Myre Foundation in Paducah totaling \$50,000, a grant of

\$25,000 from the Community Foundation of Western Kentucky and a grant of \$17,000 from the Kentucky Colonels for the restoration of the curtain. A capital campaign will be initiated to raise the funds for the complete restoration of the building.

This project will allow the current programming that has been maintained by the Paducah Film Society to expand into the historic theater. Maiden Alley Cinema has been the permanent home of the PFS since 2001.

After restoration of the Columbia Theatre, it will reopen as a cinematic art house focusing on foreign/independent film and be supplemented with live entertainment, such as music, comedy and stage productions. There will be three theatres—the main ground floor theatre and two on the second floor. It will also be available for private rentals that will have the option to rent part or all of the building.



Left: The Columbia Theatre today



Right: Interior doors