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Victory at last?



After decades of neglect, Holyoke's Victory Theatre is due to undergo a complete restoration thanks to the efforts of private groups. The theater, built in 1919 and closed since 1979, still has vestiges of its former grandeur, like the bas relief eagle over the stage, at top.

Restoring a grand Holyoke theater

By Rebecca Everett

When Helen Casey was a teenager in the 1940s, Holyoke's downtown was a hot spot. The streets and sidewalks were crowded with couples, friends and families looking for a night on the town — women and girls in party dresses and fitted coats and men in suits and fedoras.

"Then, the downtown was a destination," said Casey, 82, now a South Hadley resident. "The sidewalk used to be teeming on Thursday nights. Sometimes you'd have to step down off the curb to let people by, and that was all part of the fun."



Among the Victory's features getting needed TLC: the mahogany woodwork shown partially restored here.

Donald Sanders, of the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts, walks down the staircase of the Victory Theatre with Emily Mann, communications director for MIFA. In the 1990s MIFA joined forces with a group called Save Victory Theatre, Inc., to raise money to restore the venue, which is expected to reopen late in 2012.

And for many of Casey's peers, their destination was the corner of Suffolk and Chestnut streets, where the beckoning facade of the Victory Theatre glowed with neon lights, promising a showing of the latest film for just a dime.

"I remember when movies were in their heyday, in the '50s, and you'd try to get tickets at the box office," Casey said. "If it was full, there would be a line going down Suffolk Street and another down Chestnut Street of people just waiting to get in. And there were other

theaters, too, but they're all gone now."

Decades later, as the popularity of the theater declined and downtown businesses dwindled, the Victory's splendor faded. In 1979, the owners decided to close the 60-year-old theater. Today, plaster is falling from the ceiling and the sound of dripping water echoes throughout the cavernous building. Still, glimmers of the theater's past glory, from its mahogany paneling to marble staircase, remain.

The Victory and other Holyoke movie theaters were



This image, dubbed "Lady Victory" by theater supporters, is at the right of the stage.



Holyoke native Helen Casey, who now lives in South Hadley, founded Save Victory Theatre, Inc., in the 1980s. MIFA head Donald Sanders says, "Helen is one of those remarkable people with an eye to quality and as soon as the theater closed, she knew it had to be saved."



The front lobby has relics from the Victory's past: what may be an old ticket machine, left, and a sign advertising one of the theater's shows.

not the only ones suffering in the 1970s. According to the Motion Picture Association of America, starting in the 1960s, movie attendance began a drastic decline, and by 1975 less than 9 percent of the U.S. population went to the cinema weekly, compared to 65 percent when the Victory Theatre first began showing films in the 1930s. But when the other theaters in the city closed their doors, the Victory was lucky enough to have fans who held onto the hope of restoring it to its former prominence.

Casey, who along with her husband, Maurice, operates a vintage poster store, Posters Inc., was one of them. Thanks to her efforts early on, and later the adoption of the project by the Holyoke-based Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts (MIFA) and its executive artistic director, Donald Sanders of Belchertown, renovations will begin this spring. The Victory Theatre is scheduled to reopen as a live performance venue on Dec. 30, 2012 — its 93rd birthday.

"I think, oh my God, it's really going to happen," said Casey, who saw "Casablanca" at the Victory when she was 14. "It just took a long time — my gosh, my hair's turned white since then."

IN THE EARLY 1980s, when Casey started Save Victory Theatre, Inc., Holyoke, once an industrial boomtown, was already filled with empty mills and storefronts. Save Victory Theatre didn't have a plan other than trying to raise funds to purchase and renovate the theater, Casey said. The group did a feasibility study, but then efforts stalled. Casey found that there was little interest in saving a run-down movie house when so much of the city seemed to be on its way out, too. After more than 30 years, Casey has mostly retired from the rescue effort.

"And then along came Don Sanders," Casey said, grinning at the thought of the man who called her out of the blue in 1993, asking for a tour of the theater.

Sanders, 66, who has a home in Belchertown and one in New York City, said he had been in town to see a show when he "just kept hearing about Helen and her Victory Theatre."

"Without Helen, none of us would be here," Sanders said. "Helen is one of those remarkable people with an eye to quality and as soon as the theater closed, she knew it had to be saved."

Under Sanders' leadership, MIFA bought the theater from the city for \$1,500 in 2009 and is more than halfway to its goal of raising \$27 million to restore it. MIFA is a 17-year-old arts nonprofit, which produces opera, theater, dance and music performances as well as film festivals and art exhibits. The organization has completed feasibility studies and construction plans, and has secured over \$19 million in grants, donations and state and federal tax credits for the restoration project. Sanders said that some small projects will begin this spring and major construction will be in full swing by fall.

The project is "right on schedule," said Sanders. "Now we're in the phase of finally choosing a contractor and working out the architectural plans."

Still, much like it did under Casey, the restoration effort is struggling to overcome Holyoke's status as one of the toughest, poorest cities in the state. MIFA has found significant support, however, from older city residents, along with former residents who remember



The Victory was once a destination in downtown Holyoke, which had a vibrant entertainment scene in the 1940s and '50s.

Courtesy of MIFA



This oval room, or oculus, is one of the unusual architectural features of the Victory, which was originally designed as a venue for live entertainment.

Kevin Gutting

Holyoke as it used to be — a fun and fashionable city where they had some of the best times of their lives.

"There's still a lot of people here who went to see movies there, and they have a really tactile and personal memory of it and what it represented," Sanders said last month from the MIFA office overlooking the theater. "I think people support the project partly because they know, on a practical level, that it will help business and the city, but I think for many it's more of a psychological, spiritual, human expression of these people's pride in the city."

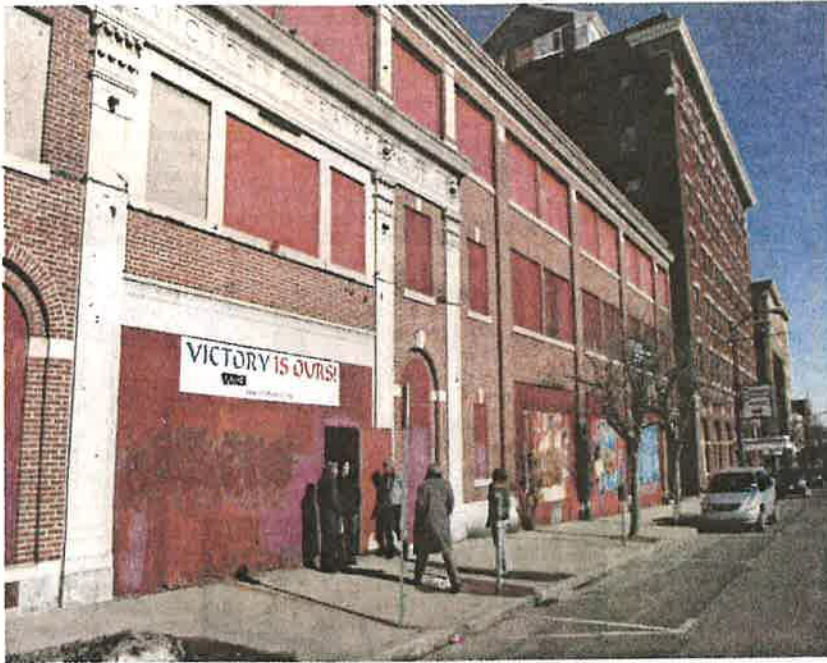
IN MARCH THE sidewalk on Suffolk Street outside the Victory Theatre was deserted, except for a man taking a nap at the base of the building — a red-brick structure with windows and doors boarded with

plywood. Over what used to be a grand entrance was a small MIFA banner proclaiming "Victory is ours!"

Sanders, standing on the sidewalk opposite the theater, gestured toward the building, and began describing it in terms that evoked high style and grandeur. It was as if he was talking about a different place.

Inside the theater, after your eyes adjust to the dark, it isn't hard to picture how magnificent the rooms must have been. The stage's proscenium has gilded gold paint, there is a huge, two-tiered balcony, the walls are made of Brazilian mahogany, the floors and grand staircases are Vermont marble and the windows in the stairwell have panes by Tiffany.

The interior is undeniably in ruin, however. Large chunks of ceiling plaster litter the floor, and seat cushions and silk wall panels are slashed and tat-



Holyoke officials hope that the restored Victory Theatre will be the anchor of a cultural district in the city.

Kevin Gutting



Donald Sanders, MIFA's head, says the restoration of the Victory will resonate with Holyokers. "I think for many it's ... a psychological, spiritual, human expression of these people's pride in the city."

Kevin Gutting

tered. Huge icicles hang over the left side of the stage. The icicles, caused by clogged interior rain gutters, Sanders said, produce a steady dripping sound, which makes the space seem almost cave-like. The floor in front of the stage is completely covered in ice, like a miniature skating rink.

"It's just plaster coming down, structurally it's absolutely sound," Sanders said casually as he shuffled across the ice. His own stylish duds — a fine scarf, a green plaid suit and his signature oversized black glasses — contrasted with the decay around him.

Upstairs, perched on the edge of the balcony's "dress circle," where the most expensive seats were located, Sanders gushed over the architect's design. "There's not an obstruction anywhere or a bad seat in the house."

The theater was built in 1919 by Nathan and Samuel Goldstein, owners of the Goldstein Brothers Amusement Company, which constructed many of the area's most notable theaters, including the Calvin in Northampton, the Garden in Greenfield, the Paramount in Springfield, the Casino in Ware, the Colonial in Pittsfield and the Mohawk in North Adams.

The brothers, originally from Holyoke, wanted to make their hometown theater their finest. "It was the flagship of the Goldstein brothers chain," Sanders said. "As you can see, they spared no expense."

The Victory was built originally as a "live house," to host plays, operas and other performances, but it was transformed into a movie theater in the 1930s.

MIFA plans to restore the theater to a combination of its original 1919 look and the updated version com-

pleted in 1941. It will restore the original seats, silk wall panels, murals and other features of the house, as well as the 1940s facade. The plans also include expanding the stage by at least 12 feet and increasing the height of the roof over the stage by 15 feet.

"We're doing the renovations with federal and state historic tax credits, so we've had historians come in and determine what needs to be maintained," Sanders said. "Now we know so much about the theater, since all these people went over it with a fine-tooth comb for three years ... It's truly been an archaeological dig."

BUT IT'S UNCLEAR how well a renovated Victory Theatre will be received if the city can't catch up. Holyoke is also in the process of getting a face-lift and officials are hopeful that a restored Victory Theatre will aid in that transformation. The city has been working for over two years to improve the area around the theater. Sanders said that the Victory will be the "anchor" of the new downtown, which the city has designated an Arts and Innovation District.

Kathleen Anderson, director of the city's planning department, confirmed the important role the Victory will have in creating a downtown that people want to visit. "People said they would like to see more arts and culture in downtown Holyoke," she said. "The Victory definitely fits in that plan perfectly. It's a key building downtown, it's beautiful inside and people have such fond memories of it; I know I do."

Her vision includes an "eclectic" mix of arts and business, which includes a canal walk, the Wistarhurst Museum and Heritage State Park. "It'll be centered around our beautiful architecture and the beautiful, historic canal system we have," she said. "I think it will mean new artists, new restaurants, new business and all the things that we've been trying for. The momentum is really started now ... We're on the verge of rebirth."

Sanders said that renovated theaters, such as the Colonial Theater in Pittsfield, have proven to be major factors in rejuvenating a city, and Holyoke is in a perfect position to benefit.

"I think the multiplier effect, because this is happening in a city like Holyoke, is going to be three times as great," he said. "I think it makes this even more powerful because there hasn't been a facility like it or a cultural center in the downtown that could bring people from outside and get them to come see the city's beauty and potential."

Casey is excited that "good things" are starting to happen in her hometown and she looks forward to seeing a little of the Holyoke she remembers from her youth in the new district.

Yet, she acknowledges that the Victory Theatre supporters and city planners still have a long way to go to convince people that the theater, and the city, will be great again.

"Certainly, there are naysayers, but once they see the hammers and saws going to work, I know they'll change their minds," she said.

"I just think about how the theater will look," Casey continued. "It's so grand, and it will be like that again. Going to a theater like the Victory will be an experience, an occasion." □

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