

Holyoke's Victory Theatre renovation project gets \$13M infusion of state funds

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HOLYOKE MA **VICTORY THEATER** **MIFA**

HOLYOKE — Carlos Berrios, a tenor opera singer who lives in the city, has traveled to Italy and Germany, and seen many small-town opera houses that typically seat an audience of 300. Walking along the rows of the 1,600-seat Victory Theater, even in its current condition, Berrios said he is excited about what the future may bring.

“In my mind, I envisioned it the way it looked like in its prime,” said Berrios, who moved to Holyoke from Puerto Rico in 1989. He sings in musicals, theater shows, and concerts as well, and stepped into the Victory Theatre for the first time on Monday.

The once-burgundy chairs are covered in dust. The walls are crumbling, revealing the brick behind. The ceiling looks rusted and the air smells ancient. Yet Juan Anderson-Burgos and Paul Charette cannot help but smile as they look out to the stage and its torn white projector screen from the second floor balcony.

“I remember seeing the ‘Jungle Book’ and ‘Snow White’ here,” Anderson-Burgos said. “I still play ‘The Bear Necessities’ on my ukulele.”

The Broadway-style theater, built in the early 1900s, has sat silently for the past three decades on Suffolk Street after its doors closed following the theater’s final movie in 1979: a showing of “Every Which Way But Loose,” starring Clint Eastwood.

In Victory Theatre’s heyday, acts such as the Marx Brothers and Bing Crosby performed on the stage that was originally built for theatrical performances. The theater has a double-tiered balcony and murals on either side of the stage by muralist Vincent Maragliotti.



Holyoke Mayor, Alex Morse speaks at a gathering at Victory Theater in Holyoke to celebrate the renovation project being awarded \$13 million in bonds from the state on Monday, September 17, 2018. —STAFF PHOTO/CAROL LOLLIS - [Buy this Image](#)



The current owners of the theater, the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts (MIFA), on Monday shared their vision of reopening the theater in December 2020 with state legislators, Mayors Alex Morse of Holyoke and Nicole LaChapelle of Easthampton, and leaders of the Victory Theatre renovation project.

MIFA wants the theater to offer Broadway shows, a vocational training program for high school and college students, along with the establishment of a Latino theater company, and an international arts academy

State Sen. Don Humason, R-Westfield, Sen. Eric Lesser, D-Longmeadow, and Rep. Aaron Vega, D-Holyoke, were present outside the building's brick and mortar exterior for the announcement of Gov. Charlie Baker's authorization of \$13 million in state bonds for a project that is estimated to cost \$44.4 million to complete.

"We have fought so hard for this moment to happen," Donald T. Sanders, executive artistic director for MIFA, said to a gathered crowd of about 30. He said the bond will help get the first phase of the project underway, called "pre-construction," which involves the architects and contractors preparing their final drawings for the 98-year-old theater.

MIFA acquired the theater from the city of Holyoke in 2009, and since then, has raised \$28.2 million in various forms of donations and tax credits.

The theater opened Dec. 30, 1920, as a playhouse and movie emporium and was operated by The Goldstein Brothers Amusement Co., which used to run theaters from Springfield to Brattleboro, Vermont, according to MIFA. The Holyoke High School held its graduations in the Victory auditorium from 1925 to 1939. In 1931, the theater became exclusively a movie house until its closing in 1979.

LaChapelle, who grew up in Holyoke, said she remembered watching Disney movies as a child at the theater. Along with six other mayors, she signed a letter in support of the renovation project to state legislators.

"I know the theater will be magical yet again," LaChapelle said. "Western Mass. is stronger when we work together, and acknowledge the uniqueness of one city and the uniqueness of the other and work together ... The Pioneer Valley has a strong history and understands that talent, creativity, and commerce knows no boundaries."

Morse said he believed the project will be a great "catalyst" for the neighborhood, the community, and the entire region.

"It was with relative ease that all western Massachusetts mayors signed on to that letter of support to our state delegation, our governor, and state Secretary of Economic Development, Jay Ash, about the importance of this project," Morse said. "We've embraced the creative economy for generations —

that's our history, that's who our people are, that's what our buildings represent. I think today we still emulate that same spirit."

The Victory Theatre would be among the largest venues in the area, with double the capacity of the Academy of Arts in Northampton, and more than double that of the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield and the Mahawie Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington.

Lesser said the efforts of Sanders and the western Massachusetts mayors got the Legislature's attention. As co-chairman of the Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies, he said, he was able to put the project on state officials' radar.

"The arts and culture scenes — especially in the Pioneer Valley and western Massachusetts — are inextricably linked to economic development," Lesser said. He cited a study that came out of the Greater Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau that said for every dollar spent on arts, culture and tourism, there is a sevenfold return through the rest of the economy.

"They are jobs that are inherently local," Lesser said. "People come to the theater, they go out to eat, and they invest in other businesses around."

It only took one visit to Victory Theatre for Humason to be convinced of the idea that the theater needed to be renovated, he said.

Humason said he was sold on the idea that "this theater needed to be the artistic, cultural and economic center for Holyoke that we all know it can be."

Tourism and arts is the third biggest industry in western Massachusetts, Vega said.

"We need to and have to get this done," Vega said. "It is imperative that we continue to fight and work with this (Baker) administration and tell them how important it is."

The 1,600 seats that will be reupholstered will be done by inmates at the Hampden County Jail.

Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi provided a statement through MIFA that read: "The Victory Theatre project will give inmates opportunities for job-training and personal growth that will pay lasting dividends for the community."

Sanders said he is "fantastically excited" about the prospects of the theater's renovation and that "it is amazing how the power of the arts can unite all sorts of people."

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