

Sandusky State Theater plans to return bigger, better as rebuild continues

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BY ISA DOMINGUEZ / THE BLADE



Chris Parthemore, executive director, stands inside the Sandusky State Theater, which is under reconstruction July 26, in Sandusky.

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SANDUSKY — On a recent weekday afternoon, Chris Parthemore, executive director of the Sandusky State Theater, walked into the venue, donning a hard hat and watching his step.

Construction workers sat down to take a lunch break. From the stage house, one could hear the sound of seagulls in the distance and, depending on where you stood, you could look toward the blue sky beyond the new and old brick and scaffolding.

The Sandusky State Theater has been in reconstruction since a storm on June 10, 2020, blew the roof off and destroyed the stagehouse and half of the auditorium. That same night, a community

vigil was spontaneously held around the back of the theater and the theater's operators announced that they would rebuild it.

"There was never any doubt from our board. They just said immediately, 'This is a treasure of the community. We have to have it.' And the community outpouring of support has been incredible," Parthemore said.

The 1928 organ and the iconic chandelier, which has hung in the theater for 40 years, were spared in the storm. "[The chandelier is] usually the first thing people ask about," Parthemore said. "The organ is second."

After the first eight months of putting the walls and roof back on the auditorium, there were 18 months of planning with architects. The theater received public input on what the community wished to see in the new and improved space and is implementing that input into the design. A few guiding questions they asked themselves: What is the future of theater? What does the future of theater look like? Are we building what the future looks like?

Old meets new

Though they are planning to honor the theater's 20th century roots through restoring certain elements of the building – including using "modern horse hair" or a fiberglass equivalent to the horse hair for the plaster, and using molds to recreate the caps on top of the pillars – they also plan to incorporate a few new touches into the design.

For instance, the four murals that once illustrated the four seasons were damaged beyond repair. Mr. Parthemore said the new murals will resemble the murals that were put in the early 1990s.

"They'll be something a little more familiar for people," he said.

"We're really focusing on bringing back the 1928 decor in a lot of ways," he said. "We had this kind of beautiful after storm sunset, and we wanted to capture that and tell the story of what happened that night in the design."

The interior design work is being done in partnership with DLR Group, an architecture firm based in Cleveland, and EverGreene Studios, based in Brooklyn, N.Y., is providing the artisan work.

"Between [DLR] and EverGreene Studios, they're helping with color choices and guiding us to be historically accurate and they're doing a great job just bringing it to life and helping pick out those jobs," he said.

"A project of this size with a theater is usually more of like a five to seven year project. But because it was a natural disaster, everything's being done out of order. But it just compresses the timeline," Mr. Parthemore said.

With a design plan in mind, they began reconstruction about a year ago, with about one year left. But it hasn't been without its challenges over the past three years.

Replacing the theater's roof was a race against the seasons. The stagehouse's red brick wall was broken down nearly halfway. Using mixed brick, which will be covered with plaster, they were able to re-cap the roof in December, but not before it had snowed once inside the auditorium.

Despite the challenges, the Sandusky State Theater is dedicated to restoring the historic theater and improving several technical elements as well that can accommodate a Broadway show in its entirety rather than cutting them down.

Tim Kostel, who has been the theater's technical and facility director for about 21 years, said the stage size would increase by an additional 20 feet, resulting in an overall stage depth size of 47 feet. There will be more fly lines to accommodate for the larger stage depth, and the lighting will be upgraded to LED lights to be more "environmentally conscious." They will switch to a digital form

of the audio network instead of copper, and have a service elevator backstage that makes it easier for shows to transport props and wardrobe to the dressing rooms, which will also increase in number.

The chairs will increase in size from 17 inches to 19 or 22 inches. The reason why they vary in size is for sightline purposes.

“Technology just keeps changing so much and we wanted to make sure we had the infrastructure that could keep up with technology. It's hard to predict what things will look like 50 years from now. But if you look back to what we had 50 years ago to today, it's a stark difference,” Mr. Parthemore said.

“Just through sheer volume of programming, we're gonna be able to have a larger impact on the community and bring theater to more people.”

“A lot of people come by and talk about [how] they had their first job here, or they had their first date here, met their significant other here. I have a friend, his grandpa helped paint the theater when it originally opened. And we just hear all those little stories about people's experiences here and how much it means to them,” Mr. Parthemore said. There is now a tab on the theater's website where people can submit their memories or stories of the theater.

Mr. Parthemore recalls seeing his first movie, Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, in the theater. He grew up in Sandusky and lived in Nashville, Tenn., for a decade before finding his “way back to the lake.”

Sheryl Connor, business manager of the theater, started working in her position in 2019. She lived right down the street from the theater. After the storm, she recalls that “there were days [where I] was looking forward to coming in, but then there were days that were sad and depressing too.”

On a particular day when she was feeling down, she recalls walking around the corner and seeing the chandelier lit up.

“And it's just beautiful. ... I looked at it and I was like, ‘Everything's gonna be okay, we're gonna reopen, we're gonna be better than before.’ And it was just more of like a beacon of hope,” she said. The theater is “gonna be bigger and better.”

Mr. Parthemore described the Sandusky State Theater as the “cultural hub for the whole region” and “living room of the community.” Apart from hosting various performances ranging from local youth theater, comedy sets, and Broadway national tours, the theater hosted community and city meetings.

“It's just the gathering place that everybody is used to coming to. So not having that has been hard on the community. But they've been very patient and understand that we're trying to build for a better future.”