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Restorations continue at the Keith-Albee



PHOTOS BY RYAN FISCHER | The Herald-Dispatch

Building manager Gary Cooper points to chipped plaster being repaired by the restoration workers on Tuesday, July 9, 2024, inside the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in downtown Huntington.

By **MARY MARGARET CLOUSE**
mclouse@hdmmedia.com

HUNTINGTON — Huntington's Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center is making progress on an extensive \$30 million restoration project.

The theater closed in December 2023 to begin the three-phase project estimated to reach completion at the end of 2024, with an aim to reopen in early 2025.

"If you can keep the vibrancy and the reality of this theater alive in people's minds, I'm hoping that it will allow people to understand why it's so important to Huntington," said Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center Director of Development Terry Deppner Hardin.

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Restoration workers continue to make repairs inside the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center on Tuesday, July 9, 2024, in downtown Huntington.

KEITH-ALBEE

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The Keith-Albee opened on May 7, 1928, as a vaudeville theatre, and is now the only fully intact atmospheric theatre designed by Scottish-born architect Thomas Lamb.

In the 96 years since, the Keith-Albee has seen performances by Taylor Swift, Tony Bennet, Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, John Legend, Smokey Robinson, Liza Minnelli, comedian John Mulaney and a number of touring Broadway productions.

Though its doors are currently closed, the theater is still filled with a different kind of music as construction crews tackle the plan to restore the building.

Phases 1 and 2 of the project are currently underway and include waterproofing, electrical and sprinkler service, dressing room renovations, handicapped seating and painting throughout the lobby and auditorium.

EverGreene Architectural Arts, the largest specialty contractor in the U.S. focused on the preservation of historic buildings, has taken on the painting portion of the project, overseen by Project Superintendent Chris Reeder.

Reeder's team cleans and repairs any damaged plaster or faded paint, restoring the theatre to its original luster while ensuring the original artwork stays intact.

"The whole goal here is not to give it a brand new paint job. They don't want it looking so commercial. It's atmospheric. They want it to appear to be outside, tarnished, weathered — so we're punching it up without making it look brand

new," Reeder said.

As part of the Downtown Huntington Historic District on the National Register of Historic Places, the nostalgic feeling of the Keith-Albee is being maintained even as it is updated. Historic Consultant Michael Gioulis advises all the decision making, Deppner Hardin said.

When it comes to sourcing the materials for this kind of restoration, "You just have to find the right companies to do it," Deppner Hardin said.

Axminster Carpets produced a new carpet in the original pattern for the stairs, mezzanine and balcony areas of the theatre.

Neighborgall Construction serves as the construction manager of the project, helping to stage each element of the renovation.

Investigatory construction work was necessary to determine the most efficient way to accomplish the goals of the restoration, Deppner Hardin said.

Gathering information about the project helped Deppner Hardin to develop a strategic fundraising plan.

While half of the funds will come from federal and state tax credits, the other half of the funding must be raised through donations and grants, which so far total about \$12 million. Deppner Hardin said the Keith-Albee still needs to raise about \$3 million to \$4 million.

"We are asking the community to donate a lot to this theatre. We have a responsibility — and Gary (Cooper, director of building operations) and Bob (Plymale, president of the Keith-Albee board of directors) and I feel this way — that we have a responsibility back to the community to make this accessible, to make the programming diversified and to contribute to the overall economic health of the city," Deppner Hardin said.

As the interior of the building is updated, Deppner Hardin, Cooper and others will work to plan events for after the theater's reopening, such as film festivals for seniors and programming for children.

Before outreach programs can begin, focus is maintained on restoring the grandeur inside the theater.

"Everything when you walk in off the street, from outside to all the way to the stage area, will look just like the day it did in 1928," Cooper said.

As the Keith-Albee's 100 year anniversary approaches, Keith-Albee staff and construction crews work to consider the experience of the generations that have admired the theater's twinkling ceiling and ornate golden proscenium.

"I really do love this theatre," Deppner Hardin said. "It is a slice of Huntington history."

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Building manager Gary Cooper, left, and director of development Terry Deppner Hardin on Tuesday, July 9, 2024, inside the Keith Albee Performing Arts Center in downtown Huntington.

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