



The Colonial

Welcome reprise

Theater evokes both nostalgia, hope for future

By Benning W. De La Mater, Berkshire Eagle Staff
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PITTSFIELD — The yellow-brick performing arts palace on South Street was ablaze in an aura of electricity last night as the restored Colonial Theatre hosted its first paying crowd since Dec. 21, 1952.

The \$21.6 million restoration project to bring into the future the 1903 theater-turned-movie-house-turned-art-supply-store-turned-decaying-monstrosity drew a sold-out crowd of 800 for the first of eight shows of the Broadway hit musical "Rent."

Men and women of all ages dressed in tuxedos, gowns, baseball caps and golf shirts came to witness what Gary P. Scarafoni, president of the Colonial Theatre Association, called a historic moment.

"You can't help but feel a little bit of what the people in 1903 felt when it first opened," he said. "It's simply exciting. It doesn't accomplish anything unless people come and sit in the seats, and they did."

Scarafoni joined Executive Director David Fleming on stage to welcome the crowd. He said he saw senior citizens "with a tear in their eyes," looking at the restorations

Reopening night

The Colonial Theatre opened on North Street last night for its first show in decades.

Opening performance: 'Rent'
Show began: 8:17 p.m.

Attendance: 800

'Rent' schedule: Tonight, 8 p.m.; tomorrow, 8 p.m.; Sept. 1, 8 p.m.; Sept. 2, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sept. 3, 2 and 7:30 p.m.
Cost of renovation: \$21.6 million

Original opening: Sept. 28, 1903 (the operetta 'Robin Hood')

Web site: www.thecolonialtheatre.org.

Location: 111 South St., Pittsfield.

Tickets: Available by phone at (413) 997-4444 and at the box office from noon to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, and at least two hours before performances.

— the ornate ceiling, the plaster cherubs, the gold-touched molding — and remembering scenes from their youth.



Helen Briggs, 80, of Pittsfield, was one of 25 volunteers working the event. She strolled around the annex, selling drink tickets to patrons and remembering the times she worked in the theater as a teenager.

"I sold candy at the counter in 1945," she said. "I was 19. It's exactly the way I remember it, just beautiful. I think it's going to bring a lot of people in here. It's good for the economy and good for the restaurants."

The reopening ties a bow around a project that had been in the works since 1987. City officials view the Colonial as a linchpin to Pittsfield's renaissance, along with restaurants, art galleries and plans for a movie theater.

It has also been blasted as a money pit into which millions of public dollars have been sunk. But proponents say it has already increased property values in the city and attracted new development downtown.

August 29, 8:05 p.m.: The musical 'Rent' played to a sold-out crowd according to officials at the Colonial Theatre last night. The performance marked the reopening of the 103-year-old theater. Photos by Caroline Bonnavier / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Earlier in the day, a cadre of more than 60 carpenters, engineers and electricians worked to set up the stage and equipment. Jared "Head" Ullman, 31, a sound engineer from Portland, Ore., arrived at 8 a.m. to set up the

sound board. His day finished at 11 p.m.

"It's pretty hectic," he said. "That's how we like it."

He called the musical "more rock 'n' roll than Broadway." The crew left Pittsburgh Sunday night. They'll stay here until Sept. 3, and then it's off to Tampa, Fla.

"I'm thoroughly convinced I was a pirate in a past life," he said.

Around 5 p.m., Darlene Esposito, 47, received a call from her sister alerting her that there were last minute, or "rush" tickets for sale.

Esposito and friend Michelle Gamache, 24, both waitresses at Spice, rushed to the Colonial to get tickets. They were the first in line.

"I thought it was sold out," she said. "I'm so glad my sister called."

Fleming displayed a cool demeanor as controlled chaos reigned around him. Workers stopped him every minute, asking for direction.

"I saw our lawyer, Michael MacDonald, earlier," Fleming recounted. "He was running around here like a kid, saying 'Hey, there's really trucks out front. Hey, there's really actors backstage. Hey, there's really equipment in the back.'

"Many people saw this as a working project for so long and now it's a living, breathing theater," he said. "And now we get ready for the fun."

Flowers arrived throughout the day from friends and supporters across the county. As 6 p.m. rolled around, people started to arrive.

Twins Nicole and Katrina Paul, 14, and their grandmother Barbara Pratt, drove three hours from Brockton to see the show.

"They're big 'Rent' fans," Pratt said. "My doctor asked me where I was going for vacation and I said 'Pittsfield.' He was like 'what?' "

Nicole said she loved 'Rent' because of "the music, the story, everything."

Patrons purchased 'Rent' merchandise, things like CDs, T-shirts, coffee mugs, and yes, even a "Rent" stuffed cow.

Many mingled in the annex, sipping wine and beer and chatting about what the economic and cultural benefits the Colonial could bring to Pittsfield.

Former Mayor Evan Dobbelle said there were a lot of memories for him here.

"I bought a car for my wife right over in this corner, a bright little red sportscar," he said. "It's obvious that this is a positive thing. It's an opportunity for people in Pittsfield to enjoy theater. There's been extraordinary talent that has brought this back to life. It will make the city feel better about itself."

The musical started at 8:17 p.m. The intermission came at 9:40 p.m., and people filed back into the annex and purchased more beer and wine. Apart from a few lighting glitches, that occasionally had the actors singing in the dark, all went smoothly. The show ended shortly before 11 p.m.



People wait for the start of the performance at the Colonial Theatre during opening night. The people pictured here are sitting in the highest balcony.

"It was awesome," said Malcolm Frazer, 54, of Lanesborough. "There's been a buzz about it for some time, and it lived up to all the hype."

During intermission, Jenifer McAlpine, of Williamstown, walked up to the third-floor box seats to snap pictures of the ornate sketchings on the ceiling.

Her simple verdict: "I will be back."

The Colonial

City savors heavy crowds

By Scott Stafford, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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PITTSFIELD — Even though traffic was heavy with theatergoers before the Colonial Theatre's reopening on South Street, North Street looked normal for a rainy Tuesday night.



7:05pm: People arrive at the Colonial Theatre for opening night.

There were few pedestrians picking their way through the puddles and traffic was moving smoothly. But every now and then, a party of well-dressed folks huddled under umbrellas were seen coming and going.

City and theater officials have maintained for years that when the Colonial opened, the theater's patrons would fuel an economic engine that would become the cornerstone of a revitalization for Pittsfield's downtown.

For some places, that could be true. And with better weather, others could join them.

At Spice, owner Joyce Bernstein pointed to tables of six and eight that were eating before the opening night show. Both the dining room and bar/lounge were full. And the reservation book is packed for every night that "Rent" is showing.

She also noted that after-show visitors will probably stop by as well, judging from habits of recent attendees of Barrington Stage and the Bob Dylan concert.

"The effect is substantial," Bernstein said. "Three-quarters of our early diners are going to the show tonight. Anybody who doesn't believe in the cultural renaissance as an economic engine ought to come listen to my phone ringing — it's wonderful."

Michael and Susan Blackman were dining at Spice on their way to the show.

"Because they're all so new, we wanted to do both," said Susan Blackman, adding that this will probably become a habit for many. "Having the theaters and the restaurants makes people want to do both."

Further down North Street, closer to Park Square, Pancho's Burritos and Hot Harry's Fresh Burritos drew a few theatergoers as well.

"It's a bad night — it's raining — but we had a few people coming out anyway," said Jes Chairez, owner of Pancho's. "It's too bad nobody else stayed open. The reason I opened this place is because of all the projects going on in Pittsfield. And once the theaters have been open for a while, more people will come earlier."

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The Dodge family — all six of them — also showed up on North Street. They gathered over burritos at Hot Harry's. They came from Worthington and Amherst to attend the opening.

"I'm sure we'll probably do it again," said Holly Dodge, who grew up in Pittsfield.

The Underground Pub was also drawing some business.

"We had a couple eat, drink and said they were heading over there to meet about 20 people to see the show," said bartender Cece Williams. "It's so exciting — we're hopeful it will draw more people in here after the show."



Actors in the musical 'Rent,' including Benny, background left, Mark, center, and Roger, perform last night at the Colonial Theatre. Photo by Caroline Bonnavier / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Patrick's Pub on Park Square was packed. Debbie Depson, manager at Patrick's last night, said they expected to be busy and scheduled extra staff, but the turnout was even heavier than they expected.

"Just about everybody here is headed to the show," she said. "We've been packed since about 6 — which is unusual for a Tuesday night."

While the parking on South Street and the lot at the Colonial were full early, there were plenty of spots at the McCay Street parking garage, and at the Columbus Avenue garage. Some folks were also parking at the Crowne Plaza garage.

And walking down South Street, it was soon obvious that something was happening. The Colonial was well lit, the interior of the annex was crowded with people, and dozens of umbrellas bobbed and weaved their way through the rain, traffic and gathering darkness toward the theater — a sight that hasn't been seen in decades.