

STATE THEATRE AT 100: Construction, COVID usher in new era

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“In an industry where the show must go on, it’s just so strange for all of us to think, ‘Yeah, but it can’t.’”

Sarah K. Chaplin, president and CEO of the State Theatre New Jersey, feels the effects of COVID-19 on the arts in her bones.

“She’s very dark and very sad,” she said of the historic New Brunswick venue, which shut down in mid-March as the country began to grind to a halt amid the pandemic.

But although there is no timetable for the return of live performance in the state — and largely around the country — the theater will soon spring to life, readying itself to help usher in a “wonderful renaissance of the arts” that Chaplin sees on the horizon.

At least that’s the plan. During shutdowns forced by COVID-19, a lot of people are spending time taking stock of their lives, working on self-improvement and making plans for what they want their future to look like.

And so has the State Theatre, recently announcing a \$26.5 million capital campaign, part of a larger fundraising effort, to help modernize the theater and increase its accessibility.

“I look forward to the beginnings of the project, because then there will be activity. Even if it’s not activity that we want to be doing in terms of performance, it will be activity that is paving the way for us to do performance even better in the future,” Chaplin said.

The Next Stage Campaign is well on its way toward reaching its \$26.5 million goal.

That’s thanks in large part to a grant of \$12 million from the Middlesex County Arts and Cultural Trust Fund and the “generosity” of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the theater said.

“Middlesex County has a long history of investing in the arts — it is a cornerstone of this community. The arts bring us all together, transcends color and economic background, and is a key facet of our identity,” said Ronald Rios, Freeholder Director of the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

“State Theatre New Jersey showcases world-class artists from around the world, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors each year — it is a significant economic driver for our county,” he added. “This investment is part of a long-term strategic plan to improve the quality of life for our residents both now and into the future.”

The venue, which is approaching its 100th birthday, is owned by Middlesex County and operated by State Theatre New Jersey under a long-term agreement.

‘An enhancement’

The State Theatre was built as a silent film and vaudeville palace in 1921. Patrons parted with 20, 30 or 50 cents and were treated to “a live orchestra concert and a tenor rendition of ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’ The first feature presentation was the silent film ‘White Oak,’ a western melodrama starring cowboy hero William S. Hart. There were also five vaudeville acts, a newsreel, and a nature film,” according to the theater’s website.

It’s gone through a number of changes over the past century, serving as an opulent movie house, live performance venue and even a run-down rental facility showing adult films.

Since reopening as a nonprofit performing arts center in 1988, the State Theatre has welcomed almost 6 million patrons, and it averages a total economic impact on New Brunswick and the surrounding area of more than \$18 million a year, according to the theater.

Make no mistake — the new project isn’t a restoration, but an enhancement.

“We’re a living, breathing theater that functions as much as possible,” Chaplin said. “What we’re trying to do is modernize the amenities, modernize the systems, upgrade our accessibility, while still honoring that beautiful richness that the theater has already. We’re enhancing State Theatre, we’re not changing her at all. She’s a lovely lady.”

Accessibility portions of the project include the installation of an elevator, making all tiers of the theater available to all patrons, and a renovation of the restrooms to create additional facilities and make them touchless.

The elevator also will make the theater’s studio space accessible. Chaplin envisions a multitude of uses for the space, from community gatherings to cabaret nights.

“Our main stage, we’re almost 1,900 seats, so that’s definitely a specific type of performance. But the studio space will allow us to do some of the more experimental (work). Events that don’t make sense for the main stage,

but that we feel are important for our curatorial vision.” Other parts of the project include a new facade, stage rigging system, new carpeting and seating in the auditorium, and upgrades to the inner lobby area.

The new rigging system will mean saying goodbye to a little bit of history.

“We are what is called a hemp house, which means we move scenery with rope and tackle and sandbags,” Chaplin said, adding that it is one of only a handful remaining in the country.

The new motorized rigging system will allow shows to load in faster, allowing the theater to have more flexibility in its scheduling and ideally increase programming.

Other parts of the project will work to bring the building’s 1920s Art Deco design together throughout the theater.

“We are really trying to carry the overall elegance and richness of the theater throughout the building,” Chaplin said.

“For example, if you walk into our outer lobby, it’s this beautiful arched ceiling with faux painting and some gold. And you walk into our inner lobby and it doesn’t feel at all like where you just were and it certainly doesn’t feel like where you’re going, which is into the auditorium. So we want to try to bring that element of design throughout the building to make it a lot more cohesive.”

And a familiar site will also be returning.

“We’re actually putting the blade sign back onto the theater, which is going to be really wonderful for our visual presence on the street.” The sign, spelling out “STATE” in lights from top to bottom, will be reminiscent of the building’s original design.

The pandemic’s impact

COVID-19 has had an impact on the renovation project. Its most major mark is in the timing of the work. Originally slated to be completed during a shutdown between May and November next year, surrounding the theater’s quieter months, the State Theatre now hopes to have the work completed by next summer and to reopen in time for its 100th anniversary in September 2021.

While the theater remains closed, “we’re trying to find ways to continue providing live performance to the best of our ability in such an unprecedented strange time,” Chaplin says.

The construction timing serves a dual purpose — both to avoid a second lengthy shutdown of the theater and to make the venue safer for patrons to return in the wake of the virus.

“We started learning so much about what the disease was, what the precautions were,” Chaplin said.

As she thought about the projects in the works, she came to the conclusion that a number of them would address COVID concerns. Those include the touchless bathroom fixtures, upgrades to the HVAC system and seat renovations.

Whereas replacing the bathroom fixtures would result in a utility savings, the touchless system now also means that surfaces will remain cleaner, important in cutting down the transmission of illness.

“We are going to make our seats slightly more modular than they are now. Right now our seats are all in one long row. They’re all connected together and what we’re looking at is doing sleds of about four at a time, so we could conceivably go in and remove four seats out of the middle strategically to allow for social distancing if we needed to do that in the future,” Chaplin said.

Also shaped by COVID was the choice of the new seat material, to make sure it is easy to clean.

In addition to the positive economic impacts that the theater has on the area, the power of arts is needed in these politically and socially challenging times, and this project will help the State Theatre be ready to help, leaders said.

“Investing in the arts drives vital cultural change,” said Kenneth Armwood, Freeholder Deputy Director and chair of the Business Innovation, Education & Opportunity Committee.

“Creativity and imagination empower our people to express their true selves,” he said. “It allows them to dream and aspire for a better world. In a polarizing time, the arts connects us all under one unified community. The Board of Chosen Freeholders is proud to be part of the modernization of this prestigious and historic institution in our county, the State Theatre — for generations to enjoy, celebrate and be inspired.”

Chaplin agrees.

“We as an institution are so central to the area in terms of New Brunswick and Middlesex County and the provision of the arts,” she said. “I personally believe so strongly in the need for people to be able to come together in celebration and live performance, I think that’s part of the healing process, particularly after a large scale difficult



A rendering of the facade of the State Theatre in New Brunswick after renovations.



Cars outside the theater in the 1920s.



The State Theatre in New Brunswick is seen in 1925.



Ushers stand inside the State Theatre in New Brunswick in the 1920s.



The State Theatre is decorated in New Brunswick in the 1920s.



Ushers at the State Theatre in New Brunswick in the 1930s.



The facade of the State Theatre in New Brunswick in the 1960s.



The State Theatre in New Brunswick in 1967. PHOTOS COURTESY OF STATE THEATRE

time like we’re having now.

“I wanted to make sure that we were the safest, most ready to provide that opportunity that I could.”

Other major donors to the Next State Campaign include the late philanthropist Betty Wold Johnson; Johnson & Johnson; Joan and Robert Campbell; the Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation; Andrew J. Markey; the Presser Foundation; the John Ben Snow Memorial Trust; the John and Susan Heldrich Family Fund; the Hyde and Watson Foundation; and Investors Bank.

For more information on the campaign, including naming opportunities, or to make a donation, visit stnj.org/nextstage. To keep up with the State Theatre, visit stnj.org.

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