



# AN 'ELEGANT OLD GIRL' GETS A NEW DRESS

**STATE THEATRE NEW JERSEY CELEBRATES A CENTURY OF EXQUISITE SHOWMANSHIP IN STYLE**

BY MANNY IGREJAS

Photos courtesy of State Theatre New Jersey



above left: As she glides gracefully out of a tumultuous 2020 and into her 100th anniversary, the State Theatre seeks to remain the jewel in the crown of New Brunswick with a new marquee coming soon.



above right: During the shutdown, State Theatre staff have renovated the upstairs studio space, which will retain a raw feel and be used for classes, workshops, community meetings and more experimental work.

The rich, tumultuous history of the State Theatre New Jersey in New Brunswick reads like “Gone with the Wind,” romantic and action-packed with a beautiful heroine as its protagonist. Like many heralded beauties, the State Theatre has suffered her share of hardships: the ravages of time, neglect, cultural upheavals and several closures. But, like Scarlett O’Hara, she has survived through talent, grit, pluck and the kindness of benefactors. As she glides gracefully out of a tumultuous 2020 and into her 100th anniversary with ambitious plans for the future, the State Theatre remains the jewel in the crown of this historic city on the banks of the Raritan River. Thanks to a showman’s entrepreneurial zeal, an architect’s vision and craftsmanship, and the combined talents of thousands of artists, administrators and the goodwill of audiences, the State Theatre’s good bones and lively spirit (along with a little work) combine to make her look better than ever as she dusts off 2020 and looks to a brighter future.

Something about the State Theatre’s indomitable soul defies description as the theater has defied the odds. Sarah K. Chaplin, the dynamic president and CEO of the State Theatre, thinks of the theater as a romantic heroine as well. “As soon as you enter the

theater, the experience is electric,” Chaplin said, explaining the State’s enduring allure. “She’s an elegant old girl, and we’re putting a new dress on her.”

The State Theatre was born in December 1921 with this bold announcement: “On Tuesday afternoon at 2:30, I will have both the honor and pleasure of presenting to the

Citizens of the City of New Brunswick and surrounding territory what I consider to be the finest Theatre in the state,” theater impresario Walter Reade’s half-page ad proclaimed in the Central Home News.

Walter Reade, the Asbury Park-based “Showman of the Shore,” opened his pride and joy on Dec. 26, 1921 on 15 Livingston Ave.



The State Theatre opened in 1921 and was designed by Thomas Lamb, the preeminent architect of lavish movie houses across the country.



The State Theatre stage has hosted a who's who of the world's major artists in every discipline, from music and magic to theater and dance.

The sparkling new State Theatre was designed by Thomas Lamb, the preeminent architect of lavish movie houses across the country, built to accommodate the booming film industry. The first ticket buyer was 9-year-old Victor Levin, a local boy, and he, along with the rest of the audience in the 1,850-seat theater, were thrilled to see its opulent décor and superb acoustics.

That first matinee audience was treated to a new Western, "White Oak," starring William S. Hart, a live orchestra, a tenor singing the Star-Spangled Banner, five live vaudeville acts, a newsreel and a nature film. Prices ranged from 10, 20 and 30 cents in the afternoons to 30 and 50 cents in the evenings for all this entertainment. Later that week, the film would be Valentino's "The Sheik."

The Daily Home News raved, "Fun Lovers of City Give Royal Welcome To Reade's Million Dollar Playhouse." The State Theatre was off to a spectacular start on which it would coast for decades.

After its auspicious opening, the State Theatre changed hands twice in the 1920s and '30s, eventually becoming the RKO State Theatre, while continuing to show movies and some live acts, including Harry Houdini. Its first upgrade in 1932 was in the Art Deco style, and throughout the 1940s and 1950s the State was a primary destination for moviegoers and the keystone of downtown New Brunswick.

The RKO State Theatre thrived until the mid 1960s, when audiences started drifting to new suburban multiplex cinemas. RKO sold the building, and its new owners converted the theater into a roadhouse that occasionally showed adult movies along with an eclectic mix

of live acts, like George Carlin, Harry Chapin and the New York Dolls, while patrons had to contend with falling plaster and banging pipes.

In 1979, the building was purchased by the New Brunswick Development Corp. as part of New Brunswick's revitalization project.

Enter Johnson & Johnson: In a brave and historic move in 1982, the hometown pharmaceutical giant bucked the trend and decided not to relocate to a suburb but instead to invest in its home city with a new corporate headquarters. Established in 1886, Johnson & Johnson and New Brunswick grew up together.

A strange, serendipitous twist brought Johnson & Johnson to the State Theatre in 1982, when someone tampered with individual bottles of its popular Extra Strength Tylenol. There was a recall, and the crisis was handled, but Johnson & Johnson needed a place big enough to hold its 1983 stockholders meeting. The State Theatre was given a quick makeover: spray guns painted the walls white. This new coat of paint hid the theater's wear and tear and reminded people of its glorious history. In 1986, the New Brunswick Cultural Center acquired the State Theatre from DevCo, and by fall 1987 renovations were underway.

Then Johnson & Johnson, The City of New Brunswick Development Co. and Middlesex County joined forces to create an arts center downtown. As work began on the State Theatre, they discovered the long-buried design treasures of Thomas Lamb's meticulous original construction in 1921: stained glass, gold leaf and golden cherubs embedded in the walls.

A renovated State Theatre New Jersey opened April 24, 1988 as a nonprofit company

with a performance by the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. Since then, its stage has hosted a who's who of the world's major artists in every discipline: Tony Bennett, Aretha Franklin, k.d. lang, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Modern Jazz Quartet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Diana Krall, Itzhak Perlman, Bruce Springsteen and touring productions of Broadway shows, to name just a few.

Becoming a nonprofit opened the door for more involvement with the local community. In addition to its programming, the State inaugurated classes in acting and writing for children and adults, Artist-in-Residence programs with outreach to area schools, visits from students from all over the state and annual Family Days. Each year, over 40,000 people benefit from its outreach programs.

Sarah Chaplin is passionate about community outreach and sees it as an investment that pays big dividends. "It falls to nonprofit arts organizations to step in by providing programs where people get introduced to the arts and creativity and thereby, hopefully, becoming arts patrons themselves."

It's the edge that live theater has in a competitive market, where you can stream anything on a mobile phone. "We have to show a commitment to making people feel welcome, embraced and part of the State. "It's all about community. People feel that they have a stake in the theater, that it belongs to them." Chaplin said.

That commitment has paid off, and the State has become the anchor of a revitalized downtown New Brunswick that now includes a new, 24-story performing arts center that houses The Crossroads Theatre, George Street Playhouse, American Repertory Ballet and Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts.

A \$3 million renovation project begun in late 2003 restored the theater to its original glory; the renovation included detailed, ornamental plaster repair (including those original cherubs), decorative painting, replacement of house and lobby lighting, and installation of high-tech sound and lighting systems. The refurbished State Theatre was unveiled in October 2004 with a lovingly created approximation of the original chandelier installed. Since then it has welcomed 250,000 visitors each year and has been ranked the No. 1 entertainment venue in New Jersey. Since 1988, the theater has hosted 5.9 million visitors.

Having weathered the pandemic with an array of innovative virtual programming, the State Theatre rolls into 2021 with ambitious plans for innovative programming, further cultural inclusiveness, education and community outreach, with a vigor and agility that belies its age.

Like many organizations, the State Theatre shut down in March. But for Chaplin and her team, it was an opportunity to dive in with ambitious renovations, thanks to a continuing \$26.5 million capital campaign fund, with many contributions from loyal small donors. Among the innovations is the restoration of a "blade" (vertical) marquee in addition to its signature existing one and a redesigned lobby reminiscent of the Art Deco design of the 1930s. There will be new carpeting throughout, expanded dressing rooms and backstage areas, renovated restrooms with a new "touchless" system, and an upgraded HVAC system. In addition, the theater is rethinking and replacing the seating, with the idea of modular, adjustable rows should social distancing be required. (The day I spoke with Sarah Chaplin, there were no seats in the theater.)

The shutdown also was a chance to improve accessibility by installing an elevator for ADA compliance and easy access to the upstairs studio space, which will retain a raw feel and be used for classes, workshops, community meetings and more experimental work. The shutdown also was an opportunity to finally replace the old rope, tackle and sandbag method of moving scenery (one of the last remaining in the country) with a state-of-the-art, computerized rigging system that will speed scene changes and load-ins.

This yearlong anniversary celebration is a working one, a time for reimagining and for nuts and bolts restoration, but an actual 100th anniversary live celebration at the State is planned for September 2021, when things should be getting back to normal. Sarah Chaplin is excited by what she sees ahead but can't talk specifics just yet as discussions continue with major performers and Broadway shows that are as eager to get back on the road as the State's faithful audiences are to get back into their beloved theater.

Riding the wave of the "goodwill of so many artists, so many patrons," Chaplin said, the State Theatre New Jersey "will continue building community through the arts, opening minds."

Going into 2021, this "elegant old girl" sure will have many surprises up her satin sleeve. ❖

Photos courtesy of State Theatre New Jersey



top right:

The State Theatre rolls into 2021 with ambitious plans for innovative programming, further cultural inclusiveness, education and community outreach.

bottom right:

State Theatre President and CEO Sarah Chaplin is passionate about community outreach and sees it as an investment that pays big dividends.