



Theater

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New place for R.I. culture

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By Randal Edgar

Journal Staff Writer



Alex Rotella as Scrooge and Amelia Dexter as a young orphan girl rehearse a scene from "A Christmas Carol" by the Artists' Exchange and Black Box Theatre, playing at RICPA on Dec. 19 and 20.

Artists' Exchange / Christopher Alves

CRANSTON — The name is sure to grab the attention of would-be theatergoers. It's catchy, it's ambitious, it emphasizes a sense of place.

And yet, when the Rhode Island Center for Performing Arts at the Historic Park Theatre hosts its first stage production next weekend, the people who enter the state's newest live entertainment venue will find more than just a theater.

In its new incarnation, the building that once housed the Park Cinema is also home to a café, a nightclub and a 200-seat all-purpose area that can serve as a restaurant for theatergoers, a comedy club and a room for receptions and business functions.

The extras are part of owner Piyush Patel's plan to make sure the new theater at the corner of Park and Pontiac avenues does what any business sets out to do: make money.

That will not be easy. Even in good times, it's hard for theaters to make money, industry people say. And with the economy in tatters, it will be that much harder.

There's also the issue of size. With 1,050 seats, the new theater is relatively small in the world of live entertainment.

Patel, 69, a native of India whose business interests include real estate, hotels and personal care products, says that is why he has cast such a wide net.

"Every business plan has some kind of escape strategy, you know, what happens if it doesn't work," he said. "That's why I came up with the idea, a total entertainment complex."

This is not to say that Patel won't be trying to make money from the theater end of the business.

He has hired Jack Nicholson, a New Englander with a long history in managing sporting and entertainment venues, to oversee the theater operation. And Nicholson, like Patel, is casting a wide net.

For patrons who think theater means plays and musicals, the new venue will be working with the Stoneham Theatre, in Stoneham, Mass., which has been producing its own shows since it — like the Park — reopened in a historic former cinema. The Park will help subsidize those productions — this year's list includes "My Fair Lady," "Gaslight," "Always ... Patsy Cline," and "Hockey Mom, Hockey Dad" — and will host perhaps four or five shows a year.

Dates for those performances are still being determined, in part because Nicholson is also working to book live acts. Three will come to the Park during the late-winter/spring, though those dates are not set either: The Moscow Circus, the Rat Pack and the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

The live theater and live entertainment represent the jewels that the new theater plans to offer. Rounding out those offerings will be large-screen, high-definition broadcasts of sporting events — the Super Bowl, the World Series, World Cup soccer — and independent movies.

And one Saturday each month, the theater will broadcast performances by the Metropolitan Opera, based in New York City. The broadcasts are expected to start in January or February, Nicholson said.

Patel and Nicholson hope the variety, combined with a location that is central in Rhode Island — a point emphasized in the new theater logo, which features the letters RICPA over a blue image of the state — will bring people into the theater, which retains its art-deco charm on the outside yet is all-new within. The front lobby, once dominated by the smell of popcorn, features a bar. The theater area itself looks modern and features top-notch lighting and sound systems and plush, extra-wide red seats.

Other theater operators are watching with interest to see how the new venue fares.

“I think what we all compete for is people’s discretionary time and people’s discretionary dollars,” said Lynn Singleton, president of the similarly named Providence Performing Arts Center, an established 3,100-seat venue in the capital city’s downtown. “The question will be, given the state of the world right now, how big a seat will there be at the table?”

Still, Singleton was quick to distinguish between PPAC, an ornate, “world-class” theater that hosts national Broadway shows and some of the biggest names in entertainment, and the RICPA, which for theater will be focusing on local productions.

The RICPA’s approach makes sense, he said, given its size. “It has the lowest risk,” he said. “Because their costs are low, they can keep their ticket prices low.”

While most theaters operate as nonprofits, Patel and Nicholson say the RICPA has been set up as a for-profit business, largely because private money — mostly Patel’s — paid for the transformation from a second-run cinema into a state-of-the-art theater. Like other theaters, however, the Park is looking for volunteers to serve as ushers, and it may set up a nonprofit arm to seek the sorts of donations that often help theaters stay afloat, Nicholson said.

The new theater appears to have a strong ally at City Hall, just across the street. City officials lobbied the [General Assembly](#) to approve legislation to allow a liquor license, despite the close proximity to a public school. They also approved a lease that allows the theater to park patrons in the City Hall lot.

So while the new theater may be small, there is excitement.

The first production, scheduled for Dec. 19 and 20, will be “A Christmas Carol” — a production by the Artists Exchange, a local group that normally performs in the small Black Box Theatre, just a stone’s throw away. For most of the Black Box Players, the new Park will be the biggest venue they’ve ever performed in, said Rich Morra, Black Box Theatre’s artistic director. And already, the Dec. 19 show is sold out.

Readers who want more information about coming shows and events can view the theater’s Web site at www.ricpa.net or call 467-7275.

BY THE NUMBERS

Rhode Island Center for Performing Arts at the Historic Park Theatre — Cranston SEATS: 1,050

Providence Performing Arts Center SEATS: 3,100

Roberts Auditorium at Rhode Island College — Providence SEATS: 943

VMA Arts and Cultural Center — Providence SEATS: 1,900

Stadium Theatre Performing Arts Centre — Woonsocket SEATS: 1,088

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