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## DEVELOPMENT

# In Cranston, a theater is reborn

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For nearly eight decades, until it closed its doors in 2002, Cranston's Park Theatre had been a cultural benchmark for those growing up and living in Cranston. Former Mayor Stephen P. Laffey remembers paying just 99 cents to see movies there when he was a child. Current Mayor Allan W. Fung remembers seeing "Star Wars" – the first film he ever saw in a theater – there when he was about 10 years old.

And although the name has now been changed – the theater in late October officially reopened as the Rhode Island Center for Performing Arts at the Historic Park Theatre, which will host live theater and movies – there is still a lot of hope that it will continue to serve as the cultural conscience of Rhode Island's third-largest city.

So what might seem strange – at first, at least – is that the financier responsible for the multiyear renovation with a more than \$10 million price tag isn't a Rhode Islander. Piyush Patel – a New Jersey resident and owner of another Rhode Island landmark, Narragansett's Village Inn – is a native of India.

At the theater's grand opening – an event that drew more than 200 guests – Laffey recalled meeting with Patel in 2006, when Laffey was mayor and Patel proposed the full renovation of the theater.

"We don't know why he had this dream [of reopening the theater], but that was what he wanted to do," Laffey said. "No one [else] could run the numbers and get a great return on investment."

Construction on the project, which was years in the making, was still under way all around the theater on the night before the Oct. 23 grand opening. Inside and out, construction workers were still cutting wood and adding final touches to the walls, floors and lights. And, on the roof, somebody was making sure all the light bulbs in the "PARK" sign were in working order. Inside, it smelled like new paint and flooring.

The stage is now a few feet deeper, but much of the theater's interior is original – including the walls and the balcony, Patel told the crowd during the grand opening. The approximately 1,150 seats are new, plush and red, complete with individual cup holders.

Patel continued, "This ... impossible journey began a long time back. There were many skeptics. ... A lot of people, I think, lost faith in it. I think we proved all of them wrong."

He called the finished product a "dream come true."

The real test for the theater, however, will be finding out whether a small city like Cranston can again support such a venue. In Woonsocket, The Stadium Theatre underwent a significant renovation that wrapped up in 2002 – at a cost of about \$1.2 million. That project was funded largely by donations from Woonsocket residents and other Rhode Islanders and the theater is doing well.

Derek Zoura, who is the marketing manager at that 83-year-old theater, said the theater's ticket sales have been strong since the reopening. Sales are down a little this year, although Zoura couldn't quantify exactly how far below last year because the busiest season of the year is now just starting.

Nationally, even with a recession in full bloom this year, people are still stepping out to the movies. According to The Numbers, a Los Angeles-based tracker of movie ticket sales, 2009 box office gross sales in the United States are projected at 1.38 billion tickets worth \$9.92 billion, slightly more than the 1.37 billion tickets totaling \$9.85 billion that were sold in 2008.



PBN PHOTO/DAVE LEVESQUE

A GRAND STAGE: Mike Carcieri, a sound and lighting engineer at the RICPA Historic Park Theatre in Cranston, raises a section of lighting at the recently reopened theater.

This year's projected increase in movie ticket sales, however, might not carry over to the live-theater market. At Woonsocket's Stadium Theatre, where the mix of live-action performances and movie screenings seems to be comparable to what Patel's new Cranston theater hopes to offer, this year's live-action shows haven't drawn as many patrons as expected, Zoura said.

For multiuse theaters, "I think it's a very foggy future," he said.

"With everything [happening with] the economy in the last year ... things haven't been as booming as we'd like them to be."

Whether tickets sell is, of course, also dependent on the type of shows that are brought in, he added.

At The Stadium Theatre, tickets for Loretta LaRoche, the PBS host and anti-stress speaker, sold out quickly this year - as it had done in past years, Zoura said. "But then we had 'I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change,' which is an off-Broadway musical, we thought it was going to be a sure thing. We had half a house and I was a little disappointed. The people here, of course, loved it, but I thought a bigger name like that would have had more of a pull."

Back at the RICPA, Jack Nicholson, a Boston-based consultant who worked on the renovation and has taken on the task of overseeing the theater's management, said the diversity of the renovated theater's offerings - along with the mid-sized theater, the building houses the 848 Martini Lounge, a 220-person banquet room and the Park Café - will bring it success.

"There may not be another theater in the country, that I know of, that has this kind of setup," he said. "There is also not a theater in the country that was built, in the last 10 years, with all private money."

Success will also hinge on management's ability to pull in "base tenant" performers for multnight shows throughout the year, along with national tours that will be "one-nighters."

Ticket prices have, of course, been raised since Laffey and Fung were kids. On Nov. 28, when "Lumberjacking," a movie filmed in Rhode Island, premiered, the price of admission was \$10 a seat. Tickets for "A Christmas Carol," staged Dec. 19-20, were \$15; VIP tickets for a night performance were \$75.

"When you grew up in Cranston, you kind of define yourself by how much you paid to go to the Park cinema," Laffey mused. "I was a 99 cent guy - there used to be a pile of pennies" on the counter at the cinema "and you'd give them a dollar and they'd give you back a penny." •