

The Providence Journal

The Curtain is about to rise on Park Cinema's Latest Act

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CRANSTON — From the outside, the former Park Theater looks pretty much the way it always did. The stucco façade still juts out at the corner of Park and Pontiac avenues, showing off art-deco angles and copper masonry that long ago became neighborhood fixtures. The ticket window still faces the sidewalk, lending an air of invitation to one of the city's best-known landmarks.

Oh, but inside this storied building, there is a lot that has changed.

Where there was once one floor, now there are two. Where there was once a row of shops, there is a café, a lounge and a restaurant. Where there was once dirt and a basement, there is a generous spread of cast dressing rooms. Where there were once walls that divided the theater for three movie screens, there is a stage with the height and floor space needed to put on full-scale plays and productions.

The changes came not from any grand scheme but through a slow process of trial and error.

Owner Piyush Patel bought the theater 10 years ago for \$300,000, thinking he would transform what had long been a second-run cinema into a draw for the latest releases. Two years later, as he realized the challenge of competing with modern mega cinemas, he tried to sell. When that didn't work, he changed direction and started talking about a dinner theater.

Only now, after many false starts and nearly \$12 million in renovations (by his count), is he planning to open — most likely in early to mid-October.

If things go well, he envisions a smaller version of the Providence Performing Arts Center, one with a restaurant and bars and music and dancing and comedy — an all-round mix that brings life back to the building and brings people back to the closest thing that Cranston has to a central downtown.

"It is a total facility," he says. "We can do theatrical concerts, have large-screen sporting events, have an orchestra. We can do almost anything."

To come this far, Patel, 69, has cleared many hurdles.

One of the biggest was getting a special exemption from the General Assembly to obtain a liquor license. The theater, located across the street from City Hall, is also within 200 feet of one of the city's high schools. As a result, his license forbids the serving of alcohol before 5 p.m.

Patel also worked out a no-cost lease arrangement that will allow theater patrons to park behind City Hall.

And though the theater is not in a historic district, Patel agreed to work with the city's Historic District Commission, meeting board specifications for the exterior.

"We had people saying to us, 'don't change it,' " says Commission Chairman Stephen Torregrossa.

City officials say they support Patel's plan and welcome it as a potential anchor for the faded Rolfe Square business district — as long as Patel runs a respectable, upscale operation.

There was some concern about that two weeks ago when the already-finished café and the adjacent lounge opened for business, and a third-party ad for the lounge appeared in a local weekly. The ad showed a scantily clad woman, says City Councilman Richard D. Santamaria Jr., prompting questions about whether Patel's vision and the city's still matched. Santamaria and Mayor Allan W. Fung met with Patel and were told that the ad was a mistake, Santamaria says.

Marketing mishaps aside, a recent walk through the theater suggests that Patel has not minced on details.

The upstairs restaurant is lined with hardwood floors, the central elevator is lined with mahogany and brass, the lobbies are lined with television screens so theatergoers who get up to buy drinks or use the spacious restrooms won't miss too much action. In the theater, where renovations continue, there is now a balcony, raising the capacity to 1,150. redgar@projo.com

Patel says about a quarter of his costs were covered by a Small Business Administration loan. The rest, he says, came from his own pocket.

After so much investment, he says he plans to make good by drawing first-rate shows, productions and concerts. He has theater people on staff and says he is talking with a Boston theater about cosponsoring productions.

"I think we have a business plan that is going to work," he says.

Patel is no stranger to the business world. A native of India, he has interests in personal-care products, computer software, hotels and industrial-waste treatment. He also owns a catering business in Westerly and a small cinema, now closed, in Narragansett.

The cinema is closed, he says, because the small ones simply can't compete — a conclusion that seems to be borne out by the Park Theater's own history.

Built in 1923 and 1924, the theater drew some small stage productions but functioned mostly as a movie house, enjoying its greatest success in the days before television, according to stories in The Journal archives.

By 1963, the owners were seeking permission to raze the building to make way for a gas station. A neighborhood petition drive helped to stop the plan. The Park Cinema, as it was then known, closed the following year but reopened in March 1965 under new management.

Fung, aware of the long history, recalls seeing his first movie — Star Wars — at the former cinema during the late 1970s. He is among those who see promise, not only for the theater, but nearby merchants.

"I think a lot of businesses are going to see the impact, that there is a business operating in that area," he says. "Hopefully that will lead to more businesses considering the Rolfe Square area."

For that to happen, the theater will have to once again draw people through its doors, into the historic yet all-new setting that Patel has created.

As Torregrossa puts it: "Everything's changed except the canopy."

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By Randal Edgar
Journal Staff Writer

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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.

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