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Becoming Kings again

By Max Jaeger
The Brooklyn Paper
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Photo by Steve Solomonson

Just buff it out: The elaborate decorations inside the Kings Theatre are starting to sparkle after one year of restorative work.

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Photo by Steve Solomonson

Buried treasure: Restorationists did not know six cameos like this one were engraved in the stage's proscenium arch until they started peeling back layers of old paint.

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Community Newspaper Group / Nathan Tempey

Bright lights: The Kings Theatre's director says to disregard the nearly all-white social scene depicted in this rendering.

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This blockbuster renovation project is running ahead of schedule.

One year after breaking ground on a massive restoration of the Kings Theatre in Flatbush, restorers with Ace Theatrical Group say the picture palace that had sat abandoned since 1978 is actually less messed-up than they first thought, and that it could open in November, a month earlier than anticipated.

“We thought it was going to be harder,” said Ace president David Anderson. “It’s been a derelict building for 35 years — just sitting on Flatbush Avenue, gradually crumbling.”

The Brooklyn Paper took an exclusive tour of the construction project, which is meant to make the iconic theater look like it did when doors first opened in 1929.

When it reboots, the theater will host live music, theater, and dance acts, as well as several concession stands and a basement lounge. But first, Ace has to bring the venue back from the dead.



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Ace inked a deal with the city in 2012 to restore the theater and operate it for 55 years, with more than half the \$94-million project's funding coming from taxpayers.

Water damaged much of the interior's decorative plaster, so workers made molds of remaining embellishments to make recreating them easier, Anderson said.

Mildew destroyed much of the theater's drapes and carpeting, but restorers found unharmed swatches in the basement and will use them as a pattern for copies, he said.

The theater's ornate wood carvings were in better condition than Ace anticipated, too.

"There was an incredible amount of life and luster left in the wood," Anderson said.

The theater group is looking into restoring the massive pipe organ that once accompanied silent movies, he said.



Moviegoers last entered the cinema in late 1977, but some of the details restorers are uncovering would only be familiar to the theater's earliest patrons.

"We're peeling back layer after layer of paint and exposing things that you could have never known were there," Anderson said.

Workers discovered portraits carved into the stage's proscenium arch that no one knew existed because they were covered in thick, black paint, he said.

Restorers aim to bring the theater back to its 1930s look, but there will be some modern-day improvements.

For one, there will be stadium seating — a departure from the original arrangement that required contractors to raise the floor.

Ace is also installing new heating, cooling, and fire-suppression systems, and bringing the back of the house up to date.



"There used to be this rabbit's den of dressing rooms behind the stage," Anderson said. "That will be replaced by a state-of-the-art facility."

The football field-sized theater will be 1.5 times larger after the restoration, and the backstage area will take up most of that additional space. Ace also bought an adjacent commercial property, which it will turn into a box office, Anderson said.

There will be food and drinks — including alcohol — but management has not yet selected a vendor, said Matt Wolf, the theater's newly minted executive director. There is no kitchen, but the theater may bring in caterers for special events or private parties, he said.

And do not let the sea of white faces on the architectural rendering outside fool you. Anderson said Ace will make sure the theater programming is affordable and appropriate for the predominately Caribbean and African-American neighborhood around the theater, where the median income is about \$40,000.

"There is incredible variety in the population within a quarter mile of the theater — not to mention the whole of Brooklyn," he said. "Ticket prices will be affordable for the local community for virtually all shows."

Musical acts will include such genres as pop, reggae, and gospel, and the space will be available for events like high school graduations, Wolf said.

“We’re building a relationship with the community,” he said. “We want to create a sense of ownership.”

Reach reporter Max Jaeger at mjaeger@cnglocal.com or by calling (718) 260-8303. Follow him on Twitter @MJaeger88.

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Reader Feedback

Michael from Bay Ridge says:

Wonderful to se this old movie palace being repaired.

Couldn't care less about the neighborhood being involved - these are the same people who drove the theater into disrepair. the theater is only one of many beautiful buildings that have gone into ruin together with the demographic changes that happened there in the 70's and 80's.

March 6, 2014, 8:09 am

Tim from Boerum Hill says:

I was lucky enough to tour this palace a few months ago. I was blown away by it's opulence! This will be a real jewel in the fabric of Brooklyn. I can't wait for it to open.

March 6, 2014, 8:53 am

Tim's Uncle from Boerum Hill says:

I raised tim, his two older brothers, and little sister, and I can tell you with 100% certainty he IS talking about gem sweaters.

March 6, 2014, 12:10 pm

Mark Bender from Miami now, Sheepshead Bay before says:

On March 6th 1988 The New York Times ran an article in the real estate section entitled "Movie Palace for Sale", and in it mentioned that a tour of the theater was going to be held. On that tour, I met Michael Rubinate and Bruce Friedman. The three of us teamed up and established a group "Save The Kings". We met with City agencies and had the roof replaced holding out the torrents of rain and pigeons. How rewarding it is for us now to see "Our Baby" learning how to walk again. A valuable lesson is learned here...."Don't give up on your dreams". May I also point out to Michael of Bay Ridge...Don't blame the demographics of the neighborhood for the Kings' demise. Blame technology. The Kings occupancy is 3,692. People don't go to movies as they did back in the 30's and 40's and you just can not sustain a venue that size showing movies. Last night I sat at home and watched Twelve Years A Slave in the comfort of my home at a cost of \$5.95 .

Max Jaeger, thanks for the great reporting, and I sure hope I get a chance of going home again when the theater reopens. I will gladly book a flight back.

March 6, 2014, 6:08 pm

old time brooklyn from slope says:

I saw dozens of movies there and had my HS graduation there. What killed the theatres on Flatbush Ave was not demographics but crime. The Kings or as we said in Brooklyn the Loweeeees - had a full fly system. The Flatbush Development Corp tried to get it running in the early 50's but it flopped (The fire did not help)

March 6, 2014, 8:36 pm

Alice from Flatbush says:

Marty Markowitz worked hard for years to enable this restoration to take place. It's where he took his first date many many many years ago.

March 6, 2014, 10:01 pm

RR from formerly Sheepshead Bay says:

I graduated from high school at the Kings..We were a class of 1100. That was the only theater large enough. It was an experience I'll never forget.....Looong time ago but when it opens I will come for a visit.

Brooklyn is getting better and better all the time. It's a happy return of many memories.

RR

March 6, 2014, 11:16 pm

sheldon f from flatbush says:

it is/was the theatre of renown...so huge, a real trek just going up to the balcony...the LOGE. It had a side entrance/exit where we waited for 'stars' to appear. I always took it as granted...the days of movie making...the things dreams were made of....for a poor boy in Brooklyn it was

March 7, 2014, 12:02 am

alex says:

i too graduated from high school there in the late 70's - what an experience -

lets hope they can keep it up and in good shape - movie goers of all stripes today do not appreciate the experience of a grand theatre - good luck with it

thanks from a TRUE Brooklynite!!!

March 7, 2014, 10:04 am

old time brooklyn from slope says:

Graduated HS there as well.

March 8, 2014, 2:06 pm

LES from FLATBUSH says:

I went to ERASMUS HALL H.S with Bruce Friedman and enjoyed seeing many great movies and remember seeing Jaws their. Can't wait for the grand opening.

March 9, 2014, 7:25 am

old time brooklyn from slope says:

The early 80's not 50's

March 9, 2014, 8:12 am

Christopher from Flatbush says:

Michael from Bay Ridge's comment reveals the ugliness that is often concealed in feel-good reporting on development projects like this. I live near the King's and welcome its restoration, but fear that it will ultimately serve an agenda of displacing the mainly West Indian community that surrounds it. Its true that technological changes led to the closure of many large theaters. It is also true that as the neighborhood became poorer and blacker it ceased to be profitable for many other businesses, including the Macy's that used to be a block up Flatbush, and that the theater and many businesses closed after the 1977 blackout sparked extensive looting. But to blame those developments on "the community" rather than on the conditions of peoples lives is grotesque. I am skeptical that the theater will actually cater to the community as claimed in the article, except in some token manner, because I don't think that is where the biggest profits are to be made. It is a tragedy that the improved accommodations the renovation of the theater represents will not likely be enjoyed for long by the people who presently live in the neighborhood.

March 9, 2014, 9:53 am

pookie da lion from slip slope says:

Michael is absolutely right. The current community displaced the previous dominant community and turned what was a fantastic middle class/working class neighborhood into a third world country. The looting that occurred during the blackout was the final coffin nail preceded by welfare, blockbusting, influx of cheap heroin. The people who used to be able to live in the neighborhood may like to enjoy it beyond the current dregs. By way of disclosure a friend was shot in the back by a couple of Rasta's back in 1980 on Ditmas and e 22.

March 9, 2014, 12:34 pm

Working Class Zero from South Brooklyn says:

What I don't understand is why do I as a tax payer have to pay for this! It is a waste of money! I work for the city and haven't received a raise in 5 years yet there is money to throw away on this!

March 17, 2014, 2:01 pm

Samanthia from Flatbush says:

The kings theatre reopening is the best thing to happen to our neighborhood! I am of Caribbean descent who purchased a home 15 years ago very close to the theater. A few of us care about our community however most of the folks don't give a "darn" and just destroy and won't even put their garbage in the trash therefore it ends up in my driveway. Uplift our neighborhood even if it means a little more diversity who will bring some positive living to Flatbush.

May 2, 2014, 3:59 pm

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