



**Liberty Restoration Inc (dba Liberty Theatre)
Capital Campaign
Capital Construction Sub-Committee
April 19th, 2019**

“From rocky, raucous beginnings in 1811, Astoria grew exponentially, yet citizens were still decrying its rough atmosphere a century later. One resident wrote in a letter to the Astorian Evening Budget in 1915 that it was a city of “mass contradictions and magnificent possibilities...” That magnificent possibility would eventually come to fruition, though at a terrible cost. The fire of 1922 decimated Astoria, obliterating nearly 30 downtown blocks.

But the fire became a rallying cry to rebuild, and by 1925 the construction of the Astor Building complex, with its offices, stores, dance studios, and centerpiece – The Liberty Theatre – not only signified the city’s revival, but created an architectural gem.” –*MJ Cody, Our Coast Magazine*

By 1992 the Liberty had fallen into great disrepair after decades of neglect. A group of civic leaders stepped in to save the theater by forming a nonprofit organization, Liberty Restoration Inc. Once again, the renovation of the Liberty was the spark needed to reignite Astoria’s economy, encouraging small businesses, hotels, restaurants, and breweries to take root in our downtown.

We are now poised to take the next step in the Liberty’s comeback: the renovation of our backstage and stage support areas to bring musicals, dance, opera, and large ensembles to Astoria for the enjoyment of our locals and visitors.

The following documents demonstrate both the need and support for this renovation and the full legislative request of \$1,000,000.

- Legislative Testimony
- Campaign Overview
- Letters of Support
- Campaign Leadership
- Media Coverage

Legislative Testimony
4/19/2019
Capital Construction Subcommittee

Diane Tiedeman

Honorable Chair Girod, Honorable Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee:

My name is Diane Tiedeman, President of the Board of the Liberty Theatre, and I am a lifelong resident of Clatsop County living in Astoria for 33 years. We are here to ask you to fully fund our \$1,000,000 request so that we can renovate the stage and back of house of our Astoria downtown icon, the Liberty Theatre.

In early 2000 a group of citizens who saw the Liberty as a gem purchased the building from its owners and along with the City of Astoria's help began the work of renovation. A non-profit corporation was formed in 2002 and the theater has been changing for the better ever since and so has the Astoria economy with increased tourism.

Our Liberty Board has researched what we can do to increase ticket sales by enlarging our public offerings and is committed to renovate our 1925-stage and back of the house, the only part of the building that remains untouched. In addition, we will improve our concession areas to enhance the theater experience overall. We recently raised \$300,000 at our first fundraiser proving community support. We have come to you today to ask for \$1,000,000 which will give our Liberty Theatre the ability to be more competitive in attracting larger stage productions that will increase regional and national interest to the Astoria Liberty Theatre as a destination point.

At this time I would like to let you hear from our Board Treasurer, Miriam Rose.

Miriam Rose

Honorable Chair Girod, Honorable Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee:

My name is Miriam Rose, a lucky transplant from San Francisco 3 years ago. I am a passionate volunteer, Treasurer of the Liberty Board, and member of the Liberty Building Committee. I have often heard Astoria called "Little San Francisco." Our forests, foggy weather, and maritime roots fuel the creative output of our area artists. We have many galleries and a thriving art walk that showcase our town's graphic talents. In the center of our downtown, amidst all of the art galleries is the Liberty Theatre. Although we are sustainable with almost 100 event days and regular uses of our ballet studio and banquet hall, we can only fit live music on our stage. Unable to hang scenery, provide dressing rooms, and accommodate large ensembles, we struggle to attract the

125,000 visitors that pass through our town each year. These visitors are coming from more urban areas and expect a level of theatre that we cannot currently provide. Renovating our backstage and stage support areas means wider programming to attract those tourists. Plays, musicals, symphonies, and dance are more enticing and would provide an additional quarter to half million dollars in economic impact to our downtown. To accomplish this we are requesting full funding of our \$1,000,000 request to renovate our stage house and supporting areas.
Thank you for your consideration.

Jennifer Crockett

Honorable Chair Girod, Honorable Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee, I'm Jennifer Crockett, Executive Director of the Liberty Theatre.

17,000 people came through the Liberty's main doors last season. Many of them bought tickets that included a night in a local hotel and dinner at a local restaurant. I know that if you want visitors to drive 2+ hours to your event you need to provide them a place to stay and eat. Because of this, Liberty's economic impact to our town is \$850,000 per year. With almost 100 public shows, daily ballet classes, choir rehearsals, and countless private events we are open and we are sustainable.

125,000 visitors per year come to play on our beaches, take pictures of our sea lions, and take in the view from our Column. A quarter of our area jobs rely on tourism. The majority of these visitors come from more urban areas that expect a level of theatre that we cannot currently provide. Without rigging, lighting, curtains, dressing rooms, concession stands, or a real box office we are only able to comfortably host live music and are only able to capture about 2% of those tourists. Attracting just the industry standard would mean another quarter to half million dollars per year in our economic impact.

We debuted the campaign and project at our first gala in November. We expected patrons to be excited and contribute to a goal of \$100,000. What we didn't expect was the whirlwind frenzy of paddles being raised. That night we broke the Clatsop County single night fundraising record to raise \$300,000 toward our project.

We've hired theatre consultants to recommend improvements. We've done focus groups for input. We have the architectural plans to be shovel-ready. And we have a highly committed and engaged Building Committee and Board of Directors to keep the project within budget and on time. The project has been value engineered to \$1.86 million. To accomplish this we respectfully request full funding of \$1,000,000 from the legislature. We are alive and ready to take the next step with our community behind us.

Thank you so much for your consideration.

Campaign Overview
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Who We Are: The Liberty Theater is an icon of historic Astoria, Oregon. Last season 17,600 people enjoyed public events at the theater, 13% were students on field trips or in workshops, 27% attended free performances, and 60% purchased tickets to events.

Our Mission: As a vital community partner, the historic Liberty Theatre is a regional gathering place offering a variety of performing arts experiences and educational programs.

Our Purpose: To provide a center for: Community events; Local, regional, and national performing arts; Education and the development of the performing arts; Astoria's continued economic revitalization.

Our Priorities include:

- **Increase Marketing/Outreach:** Liberty Theatre has increased its educational outreach to over 2,500 local students over the last two years through a variety of workshops and educational programming.
- **Increase Fund Development:** The creations of a membership program and multiple fundraising initiatives have contributed to the success of the Liberty Theatre over the past year.
- **Enhance/Upgrade Facility:** Launch next phase of our restoration project to upgrade the back of the house (Stage Support), create better sustainability through energy efficiency, and preserve a local treasure that greatly impacts the economic vitality of our community.
- **Diversify Programming:** With an upgraded facility, begin to provide a greater variety of programming to Increase future attendance and become Astoria's premier performing arts center.

Project Scope: The principle objective of The Liberty's proposed facilities enhancement project is to sharply increase the Theatre's capacity to offer larger and/or more complex (enticing) theatrical, musical, and dance presentations. The envisioned flexibility and ability to stage bigger, more attractive shows will bring patrons to the coast and to the Theatre, resulting in a broader cultural scene in Astoria, and greater financial viability for the beloved historic Theatre. In order to convert the beautiful vaudeville house to a competitive and more marketable theatrical facility, aggressive work scope will be undertaken to meet or exceed the requirements listed below.

- The stage area and depth will be markedly increased, wing space optimized
- Performer and stagehand circulation will be direct and efficient
- Motorized rigging will support a myriad of drops, sets, light bars, and curtains

- New energy efficient stage and house lighting and controls will improve the theatrical product at a lower cost
- Control, communication, and safety systems will be state of the art
- Performers will have much needed Green Room and Dressing Room facilities
- Show “load-in” facilities will be direct, safe, and per production company specs

The Challenge: The Liberty Theatre first renovation was in 2006 focusing on restoring the public side of Liberty Theatre. The backside of the house has not been renovated in 93 years. The bulk of new renovation focuses on these areas but will have much larger impacts. Without stage rigging, lighting, curtains, dressing rooms, and loading areas the Liberty can only comfortably host live music. The addition of these items means a wider array of programming, including staged theatre, opera, and Broadway style musicals. Musical theatre attendance is growing by an average of 5% per year, while non-musical theatre attendance is flat or declining (The Broadway League Study 2016). If we were able to host Broadway style shows, they are proven to contribute an economic impact of 3.4 times the gross ticket sales to the local economy (The League of Historic American Theatres *The Impact of Historic Theatres* 2016). Last season, Liberty Theatre contributed \$850,000 to our local economy (American’s For The Arts *Prosperity 5 Survey of Clatsop County* 2017).

The Solution: Liberty Theatre has built solid partnerships with some of the top performing arts troupes in the Pacific Northwest. The partners who are ready and waiting to perform at our restored theatre include: Portland Opera, Oregon Ballet Theatre, and BodyVox-Portland, OR.

Upgrades to the new building will both reduce costs due to better energy efficiency and increase revenue due to increased ticket sales and concessions. The combination could add as much as \$106,488 to Liberty Theater’s operating funds through energy savings, increased concession revenue and increased attendance. This renovation will also help shift the current audience demographic from 70% local / 30% visitor closer to the industry standard of 50/50. Visitors tend to come from larger cities and expect a level of theatre that the Liberty cannot currently provide. Achieving the 50/50 goal would contribute an additional \$250,000-\$500,000 to our local economy per year.

Letters of Support
4/19/2019
Capital Construction Subcommittee

TIFFINY MITCHELL
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
DISTRICT 32



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

February 25, 2019

Dear Jennifer,

I hope this letter finds you well. Thank for stopping by my office to advocate for the Liberty Theatre in the heart of downtown Astoria. It is always wonderful to have people participate in the legislative process. Trust me, it has a strong impact.

I strongly support improving historic buildings and promoting the arts in Oregon. The Liberty Theatre has deeply and dramatically impacted the community in a positive way through bringing in tourism from across Oregon, having an unmeasurable cultural impact, and growing performance art in our district. Improving historic buildings allow us to connect the past to our future, and have a special impact on the people living around them.

I will use whatever ability I have as a state representative to aid you in the continued revitalization of the Liberty Theatre.

Again, thank you for coming by the office. I encourage you to follow our progress in improving our district.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tiffany Mitchell".

Representative Mitchell





CITY OF ASTORIA
Founded 1811 • Incorporated 1856

Liberty Restoration Inc
(dba The Liberty Theatre)
1203 Commercial St
Astoria OR 97103

To Whom it May Concern,

The City of Astoria is pleased to support and strongly endorse the Liberty Theatre's Stage House Project.

The Liberty Theatre's restoration has been one of the cornerstones of Astoria's renaissance and current economic success. The beauty and functionality of the theater, along with the excellent programming, have been instrumental in creating a vibrant tourist economy in Astoria and supporting a tremendous number of jobs. The Liberty's large base of volunteers, and its large number of local financial contributors to previous fundraising efforts, demonstrate its broad community support.

As Mayor, I have no doubt that the Stage House Project will result in tremendous growth in the Liberty's offerings, popularity, and impact on the community, to include increased visitation supporting the wide variety of local businesses (lodging, dining, etc.) who benefit from the Liberty Theatre's offerings.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Bruce Jones', is written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

Bruce Jones
Mayor of Astoria



Astoria Downtown Historic District Association

*Encouraging community involvement and investment in preserving
the character of historic downtown Astoria while promoting its health and future.*

P.O. Box 261 · No. 1-12th Street, Suite 114 · Astoria, OR 97103

Phone: (503) 791-7940 | office@astoriadowntown.com | www.astoriadowntown.com

Liberty Restoration Inc, DBA The Liberty Theater
1203 Commercial Street
Astoria, OR 97103

Re: Stage House Project

To Whom it May Concern:

Today we write to you on behalf of The Liberty Theater in downtown Astoria. The Astoria Downtown Historic District Association (ADHDA) was founded thirty years ago and has a membership base of over one hundred local merchants and property owners. The successful renaissance of our downtown district over the last fifteen years is in no small part due to collaborative efforts of private individuals investing in major restoration projects, must like the theater's earlier restoration focused on building preservation.

At this time, ADHDA is focused on building a multi-faceted business environment in the downtown core and see The Liberty Theater as a lynch pin in our goals to become the premier dining, arts, and culture hub for the region.

ADHDA selected a thriving cultural environment as one key area of focus in our economic development plans. This opportunity to build a cluster around the theater was highlighted in our 2017 Retail Cluster Analysis. To leverage our historic theater into the economic powerhouse that it could be, the Stage House Project must be undertaken as soon as possible.

We have worked with closely with Director Jennifer Crockett on ideas revolving around booking, marketing, and co-marketing. Tremendous gains have been made through community partnerships, and it is now time to make the physical changes needed to support traveling shows, large casts, and sustainability efforts.

In regard to funding the Stage House Project, ADHDA will be applying for the Main Street Building Revitalization grant for the amount of \$138,000 to support the building maintenance and preservation portion of this project.

Funding the Stage House Project for The Liberty Theater means dozens of businesses and hundreds of employees will benefit from increased numbers in visitors, local foot traffic, and the power of performance art.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Sarah Lu Heath".

Sarah Lu Heath
Executive Director



To Whom it May Concern,

BodyVox has been performing at the historic Liberty Theatre for over 10 years. While the company has always found a way to make our shows work in the small theatre space, it does come with challenges.

Without overhead battens, our rigging capabilities are limited. We are unable to bring any scenic items to hang overhead. The lack of lighting battens also makes setting up lighting more difficult and time consuming. The current mechanics used to operate both the main curtain and projection screen are taxing on the operator and difficult to operate during a show. It is often more difficult to adapt the lighting for our shows at the Liberty as well. Our shows often require more advanced lighting than the Liberty is currently able to provide and we have to scale down the lighting effects featured in our shows.

BodyVox loves performing at the Liberty and has always enjoyed bringing dance to the city of Astoria. The staff and crew at the Liberty have always been helpful and wonderful to work with. It's clear to see the important role that the Liberty plays in bringing music, dance, and theatre to the city of Astoria. It has always been a pleasure to perform at the historic theatre and any technical improvements would benefit the work brought into the community.

Thank you,
Jenessa Raabe
Production Manager
BodyVox Dance

Campaign Leadership
4/19/2019
Capital Construction Subcommittee

Campaign Steering Committee

Honorary Co-Chair: Stephen Forrester

Honorary Co-Chair: Jeanyse Snow

Co-Chair: Susan Nielsen

Co-Chairs: Susan & Dan Stein

Committee Members:

Pam & James Alegria
Diane & Michael Tiedeman
Ted & Wendy Osborn

Building Committee

Chair: Ted Osborn, Architect

Members: William Rose, Builder
Larry Bryant, Liberty Theatre Technical Director
Miriam Rose
Graham Nystrom
Rosemary McGrath

Board of Directors

President: Diane Tiedeman

Vice President: Ted Osborn

Treasurer: Miriam Rose

Secretary: Ellen Frye

Directors: Ann Lederer
Michael Angiletta
Graham Nystrom

Advisory Board

Stephen Forrester
Israel Nebeker
Betty Smith

Media Coverage
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WINTER 2019 NEWSLETTER



Suzanne Nance (L) and Susan Nielsen (R) celebrating Nance's win of the Deadliest Catch auction item at our record breaking Blue Moon Gala on November 10.



RECORD FUNDRAISING AT OUR BLUE MOON GALA

BY JANET NIEMI

"Once in a Blue Moon," the Liberty Theatre's first Gala, was a thrilling success by all measures. Over \$300,000 was raised to kick off the Theatre's Capital Campaign which will fund improvements to the theater.

Gala patrons were first treated to an enchanting reception in the Theatre's McTavish Room, where shimmering blue lights reflected from hundreds of fresh carnations floating down from the ceiling. Guests sipped wine and strolled between tables laden with enticing morsels and pastries.

They then moved into the Theatre, where a video presentation described the much-needed improvements, followed by a live auction of luxury items, and a rousing special appeal led by Sen. Betsy Johnson.

CONTINUED ON BACK PAGE

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UPCOMING LIBERTY EVENTS



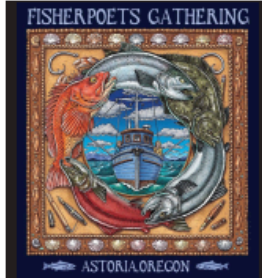
JAN 13
QUARTETTO GELATO
Classical, salon, and folk music full of the color and character of Europe.



JAN 9-11 & JAN 16-18
READER'S THEATRE
"The Fourposter"
A comedy exploring the ups and downs of marriage.

JAN 20
ASTORIA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
"Hidden Figures" in honor of Martin Luther King Jr Day

FEB 3
ASTORIA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
"A Star Is Born" (1976)



FEB 22/23
FISHERPOETS GATHERING
A celebration of the commercial fishing industry in poetry, prose, and song.



MARCH 2
BODYVOX
Breathtaking contemporary dance, music, and multimedia imagery.



MARCH 7
TRIO SOLISTI
"The most exciting piano trio in America" - *The New Yorker*



MARCH 9
WORK DANCE COMPANY
Fresh style and high energy Hip Hop, jazz, and funk dance.



MARCH 23
PIGS ON THE WING PINK FLOYD TRIBUTE BAND
An immersive, audiovisual Pink Floyd tribute experience.

MARCH 27-29
READER'S THEATRE
"Antigone" Exploring the great tragedy by Sophocles.

APRIL 3-5
READER'S THEATRE
"Antigone"

And more getting added every day! Details and tickets on our website:
www.libertyastoria.org



NEW Board Members



ELLEN FRYE is host of World of Bach on Coast Community Radio, a weekly two-hour program that airs music by Baroque master Johann Sebastian Bach and his contemporaries. A recent Astoria transplant, Ellen moved here in 2016 from Vermont, where she conducted a Bach cantata group for many years. She is also a retired music educator and technical writer/editor.



GRAHAM NYSTROM As a guitarist and pianist, making music is one of Graham's primary passions, but the technological side of the music industry has been his trade since 2003. Starting out as a live sound and recording engineer for bands and venues, he eventually turned to broadcast radio as Technical Director for Live Wire Radio and Oregon Public Broadcasting. Now, he couldn't be happier offering his skills and experience to Coast Community Radio as Station Manager. Graham also currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Liberty Theatre, and is Vice President of the Board of Directors of the non-profit Astoria Arts and Movement Center.

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TENANT FEATURE
Candy Skein Yarn & Crafts

Candy Skein Yarn & Crafts is an artisan yarn and craft company that focuses on small volume, high quality vibrant hand-dyed yarns and accessories. We feature three separate yarn bases that are milled exclusively for us by a cruelty-free mill in the heart of Italy. Each of our skeins is personally dyed by our company founder and we feature a brand new limited edition color every month. In addition to our own popular line of yarns, we also create a myriad of other items for knitters, crocheters and crafters such as hand sculpted stitch markers, craft themed enamel pins, cross stitch kits and knitwear patterns.

To accompany our own line of products, Candy Skein carries a selection of yarn from other indie dyers as well as spinning fiber, spindles, needles, yarn bowls, needle felting kits, and needlearts accessories.

Candy Skein Yarn & Crafts also offers classes and holds weekly and monthly events. Our classes will start after the first of the year and we welcome you to come learn to knit, spin and cross stitch with us!

Currently our shop is open Thursday from 11am - 5pm, Friday and Saturday from 11am - 7pm and Sunday from 11am - 4pm. More information is available on our website at www.CandySkein.com. We hope to see you soon!

ASB
ASTORIA SCHOOL OF BALLET
AT THE LIBERTY THEATRE

Providing exceptional ballet training since 2004

Offering classes for ages 3 and up

For information, call 503-325-3600
or visit
astoriaschoolofballet.com

Media Coverage
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GALA CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

The highlight of the evening featured a stirring dual piano concert featuring Thomas Lauderdale of Pink Martini and Hunter Noack of Classical Music in the Wild. The theme of "Once in a Blue Moon" came from their repertoire, which included George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." Thomas brought several surprise performers to further entertain the lucky attendees, including former Miss America and operatic soprano Katy Harmon Ebner, and the Von Trapp Family Singers.

The campaign will take place over the next several years with a goal of \$3.3 million. The renovations address three goals: historic preservation to preserve our asset, energy efficiency to lower our operating costs, and stage support to widen our programming and provide better service to our patrons. Many of our stage support items in the backstage areas have not been renovated in almost 100 years. The lack of lighting, rigging, curtains, and dressing rooms, for example, mean that the Liberty can only comfortably host live music and is unable to produce dance, opera, and musicals.



Thomas Lauderdale & Hunter Noack performing Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" at our record breaking Blue Moon Gala.

THANK YOU

The Gala's success was made possible by an army of volunteers and sponsors.

SPONSORS

Pacific Seafood, Northwest Natural Gas Company, Dan & Sue Stein, Lums Auto, Rickenbach Construction, Don & Renay Patterson Family, Holiday Inn Express Astoria, Life Flight Network, Autio Company, and Englund Marine.

IN-KIND SPONSORS

Ohana Media Group, Carruthers Restaurant, The Wine Shack, Table 360 Bakery & Bistro, Fort George Brewery, MossyTech and Spence Photo Design.

The Liberty Theatre's Board of Directors and Staff wishes to heartily thank all the volunteers, sponsors, donors, and guests who made the Gala such an exceptional success. We couldn't have done it without you.

Be sure to watch for announcements of the 2019 Gala; you won't want to miss it!



The Blue Moon Gala began with a lavish reception in our McTavish Room.



As a vital community partner, the historic Liberty Theatre is a regional gathering place offering a variety of performing arts experiences and educational programs. Your generous donations support our mission and make a difference in our community.

Please donate on-line or mail in this form.
LIBERTY THEATRE
 1203 Commercial St, Astoria, OR 97103
libertyastoria.org

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Mastercard Visa American Express

Credit Card# _____ EXP _____ CVN _____

Donation Amount _____ Date _____

Learn more about our educational programs with area schools, restoration plans, and show details on our website:

libertyastoria.org



Liberty Restoration Inc (dba The Liberty Theatre) is a 501c3 Oregon nonprofit. Tax ID 87-0452722. Your charitable contribution may be tax deductible. Any gift to The Liberty Theatre is eligible as a match to the Oregon Cultural Trust.

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THE LIBERTY THEATRE'S COMEBACK

VENUE'S HISTORY IS A THREE-ACT DRAMA:
A RISE, A FALL, A RESTORATION

WORDS: MJ CODY ■ MAIN IMAGE: COLIN MURPHEY

From rocky, raucous beginnings in 1811, Astoria grew exponentially, yet citizens were still decriing its rough atmosphere a century later. One resident wrote in a letter to the Astorian Evening Budget in 1915 that it was a city of “mass contradictions and magnificent possibilities ... tasty homes hemmed in by a jumble of shacks which, in most places, would have been eliminated ages ago as fire traps.”

That “magnificent possibility” would eventually come to fruition, though at a terrible cost. As cynically predicted by the disgruntled writer, the fire of 1922 decimated Astoria, obliterating nearly 30 downtown blocks.

But the fire became a rallying cry to rebuild, and by 1925 the construction of the Astor Building complex, with its offices, stores, dance studios, and centerpiece — the Liberty Theatre — not only signified the city’s revival, but created an architectural gem.



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The Liberty Theatre's opening day in 1925 ■ COURTESY LIBERTY THEATRE

UP FROM THE ASHES

The Portland firm Bennes & Herzog, known for their extravagant movie palaces, combined elements of Romanesque and Italian-Renaissance styles to construct Astoria's ornate 700-seat vaudeville stage and motion picture theater.

Tuscan Doric columns, Moorish arches, gilded friezes, festooned pilasters, and a magnificent Wurlitzer organ with cathedral chimes weren't quite enough ornamentation. The architects also commissioned 12 large mural-like canvases depicting Venetian canal scenes by Northwest artist Joseph Knowles, and a breathtaking, 8-foot-tall, 1,200-pound, iron-framed paper-and-silk Chinese lantern-styled chandelier by Portland artisan Fred Baker — all glamorous touches meant to transport the audience to a more romantic world.

High school students worked as ushers wearing uniforms of yellow and black

blazers and slacks, complete with classic pillbox hats. Not a bad deal for young entrepreneurs who earned 27 cents an hour, plus tips.

Vaudeville acts and silent movies were staples of the new venue, which also drew big-band names like Guy Lombardo and Duke Ellington, and headliners that included Jack Benny. It is said that even Al Capone attended an evening's attraction.

During World War II, the theater was packed with viewers eager to watch newsreels and buy War Bonds. Vaudeville remained the core attraction for 25 years, but as movie "talkies" arrived, it lost its appeal. The original exterior glass canopy was replaced by a modern double-feature neon marquee, and the Wurlitzer, now obsolete, was removed. A concession stand was installed in the lobby so patrons no longer had to walk around the corner to Kildahl's café for popcorn, sodas, and candy.

Saturday matinees in the 1950s featured newsreels, cartoons, and serials like "Superman" or Westerns, a boon to parents to get the youngsters out of the house.

"Every Saturday my parents gave me 50 cents — 25 cents for the movie and 25 cents for popcorn and candy," remembered local resident Lois Barnum, who grew up in Astoria. "Upstairs were dance studios where most kids in town took tap, ballet, or jazz classes. In the 1960s, when I was in high school, there were rarely first-run movies, and the same feature ran for two or three weeks. If I had different weekend dates, I'd end up seeing the same movie twice, and sometimes three times. Going to the theater was really the only thing in town to do."

Until attractions in Seaside or Long Beach, Washington, provided competition, the Liberty Theatre was the main source of entertainment in the region, and regarded by many as "Astoria's living room."

Media Coverage 4/19/2019 Capital Construction Subcommittee

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Despite the Liberty's reputation as a valuable entertainment hub, within a couple of decades, the theater went into decline.

"The theater was in the wilderness for a number of years," Steve Forrester, former publisher of The Daily Astorian, said of the 1980s and early 1990s. "The absentee landlord, Edward Eng, used the complex as a tax break and let the theater go to near ruin. There was no heating and no cleaning, and people were living behind the stage curtain — you sometimes heard them, but you never saw them."

The upstairs balcony was partitioned into two plywood boxes with little sound-proofing, according to Brenda Penner, a 30-year Astoria resident. "At least a thoughtful carpenter protected the Venetian mural paintings by covering them with Plexiglas. There wasn't a single row where seats were not broken or missing. Your shoes would cling to the sticky floors, and the main screen had a huge blotch on it, probably the impact of a thrown Coke."

It was so cold in the theater, Penner recalled, that people had to bring their own blankets to stay warm. What's more, "there were peepholes in the walls of the women's bathroom. It was so gross, we finally quit going," she said.

Leslie Duling McCollom, a student of Astoria High School in the 1990s (and niece of this author), said the theater in her youth was "yucky and spooky." However, she said, "it was quirky and weird and fun, and one of the few places in town to hang out as teens."

The building suffered from neglect — the interior a wreck and the exterior an eyesore — and many residents feared the Liberty would become too dilapidated to save.

TAKING THE LIBERTY

In 1992 a group of civic leaders, including Forrester, Michael Foster and Hal Snow, stepped in to save the theater by forming a nonprofit organization, Liberty Restoration, Inc. They attained national status as a "Save America's Treasures Site," and purchased the theater in 2000 with \$1.3 million from the city's Astor East Urban Renewal District funds. And the monumental task of restoration began.

Volunteers began to clean and remove



The Liberty Theatre's original glass canopy was replaced by the movie marquee in the 1950s. This is the marquee in 1956 with a Plymouth Belvedere in front. • COURTESY CLATSOP COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

alterations — finding that, remarkably, no major structural damage had been done, and the restoration would be mostly cosmetic. Mounds of what Forrester calls "fossilized popcorn" were removed from the orchestra pit light troughs. Knowles' mural paintings were painstakingly revived from years of nicotine stains, the original exterior glass canopy was replicated, and the Chinese lantern chandelier was restored at a cost of \$100,000 alone. Emigrant Romanian artisans, experts in decorative plasterwork, restored and reproduced medallions that were later gilded by Clatsop Community College historic preservation students.

The challenge was not only restoring the theater to its former self, but simultaneously updating it into a contemporary performing arts center, a feat that required raising, as Forrester said, "only a few million more." Through grants and donor gifts L.R.I. did manage to raise the \$7.5 million cost of the renovation.

Finally, in 2005, the glamor and excitement of 1925 was replicated with a sellout crowd for the grand reopening night.

IN 1992,
A GROUP OF
CIVIC LEADERS
STEPPED IN
TO SAVE THE
THEATER BY
FORMING A
NONPROFIT
ORGANIZATION,
LIBERTY
RESTORATION,
INC.

Media Coverage
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The Liberty Theatre auditorium after restoration ■ COURTESY LIBERTY THEATRE

RISEN AGAIN

Today, the Liberty is once again considered “Astoria’s living room,” a premier theater for the arts featuring regional and national performing artists, including music, theater, dance, and diverse cultural performances, such as the widely popular FisherPoets readings.

More than 120 volunteers help to keep the theater running — from ticket-takers, to ushers, to the folks manning “Chez Jo’s” concession stand (though without the classic

blazers and pillbox hats). Theater Director Jennifer Crockett and Artistic Director Bereniece Jones-Centeno — who are musicians themselves — understand what widening the venue’s scope and bringing new sounds to the Liberty can mean.

A Classical Series has been launched, and free events every month pack the house. They’re passionate about fostering education in the arts and access to all types of cultural experiences, especially for children. The second-floor former dance studio spaces are used by visiting orchestra

members, musicians, and dance troupes, who work with local high school students at no cost. Crockett hopes to encourage locals and visitors alike to feel that the Liberty is not an elite venue, but a place for everyone.

“Things are going well,” Crockett said. “Donors are stepping up and sponsorships are filling gaps, although funding for a wide variety of performances, mounting productions, and workshops remains a challenge. But people seem really excited about the theater, and I hope that this is a start of a longterm love affair.”

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Israel Nebeker, from the band Blind Pilot, performs onstage in the Liberty Theatre during a recording of Oregon Public Broadcasting's State of Wonder.

JOSHUA BESSEX PHOTO

A SAVED VENUE

One person who shares Crockett's sentiment is Israel Nebeker, the songwriter and frontman of the indie rock band Blind Pilot who now serves on the Liberty board.

"I grew up going to movies there when it was spooky and cool," he said. "It's a building I've always known, and that first night playing there was a pretty big moment. Just like playing on 'Late Night with David Letterman,' performing at the Liberty was a dream come true. Every time we play there, even now, it's significant for me; it makes me so happy. And it's one of the best-sounding rooms I've been in: The sound is so alive and clear."

On the road, Nebeker has seen too many theaters that were once magnificent now shut down or demolished, he said. "It's heartbreaking, the stories about how towns have lost these places. But Astoria didn't let this happen. It means a lot to me that Astoria could save this great venue."

A century after that peevish 1915 letter to the editor, Astoria is once again striving to realize its many magnificent possibilities. One thing is certain: No cynic can complain about the splendid restoration of the Astor complex and the historic Liberty Theatre. 🌊

The Liberty Theatre is located at 1203 Commercial St., Astoria, Ore. 97103. For tickets and information contact the website libertyastoria.org or call 503-325-5922.

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Indie folk band Blind Pilot — including (from left) bassist Luke Witte, trumpeter and keyboardist Dave Jorgensen, lead singer Isaac Weisler, drummer Ryan Dubrovski, percussionist Ian Reid and multi-instrumentalist Kati Clubborn — kicked off Liberty Theatre's Sunset Series in 2018, part of an effort to draw a younger audience to the historic venue.

ASTORIA

By EDWARD STRATTON

BEST LIVE THEATER

Restored-ups Astor Street Opera Company, Astoria

Notable mentions: Coast Inn Theater Playhouse, Cannon Beach

BEST MUSIC VENUE

Restored-ups Port George Brewery, Astoria

Notable mentions: Inn/Wendler Lodge, Seaside, Wash.

The Liberty Theatre, the region's oldest concert hall, has taken home the Readers' Choice awards for Best Live Theater and Best Music Venue — two awards it won last year.

The theater, originally opened in 1925 after a major fire destroyed much of downtown, was restored and reopened in 2006 by local nonprofit Liberty Restoration Inc. The theater has since become the region's preeminent venue for classical

music, highlighted by the Astoria Music Festival entering its 17th year.

Last year, the theater hosted more than 17,000 visitors, including 10,000 paying customers, 4,600 attending free community events and 2,500 visiting students. Executive Director Jennifer Crockett credits the theater's popularity to its responsiveness to patrons, adding new events and dropping others that have fallen out of favor.

"We don't want to get too comfortable," she said. "We always want to keep engaging with our patrons."

In 2016, Liberty Theatre began the Sunset Series, bringing in more modern rock and folk bands such as Blind Pilot in an effort to attract a younger audience, along with a partnership with Ghana Media Group to bring in tribute bands. The theater has also focused more on dance groups such as Body Vix and free family events to get more people in the door, Crockett said.

The theater has expanded its role in the annual Fish/Poets Gathering, hosting

readings Feb. 22 and 23 this year. It will hold the Hollywood Awards Night, a live screening of the Academy Awards, Feb. 26. In May, the venue will host a Cinco De Mayo celebration in partnership with the Lower Columbia Hispanic Council featuring Mi Cultura ballet folklore and regional mariachi bands.

The original restoration of the Liberty Theatre took seven years and \$6 million, focusing on the building itself. Liberty Restoration Inc. is now in the midst of a \$1.3 million modernization of its backstage, concessions and other support areas. Its first annual gala in November took in \$300,000.

Over the next couple of months, the theater will roll out new LED lighting in its iconic sign on Commercial Street, along with other improvements to the facade and box office, to show that it is making progress and spending the money people have given to improve the theater, Crockett said. "Historically, it's just visibility and experience." 📸



Jennifer Crockett, executive director of the Liberty Theatre in Astoria.