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THE NEW VICTORY®  
THEATER

209 W 42<sup>nd</sup> St  
Just west of Broadway

A New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street project

## **An Old Jewel of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Reopens, Seeking To Dazzle Families**

**By PAUL GOLDBERGER**

When the big, glaring marquees and the sleazy, garish storefronts are taken down, the most astonishing thing turns out to exist on West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street: architecture. Tonight, the street's oldest theater, the Victory, reopens after an \$11.4 million restoration, the first stage in the fulfillment of a promise to reclaim all of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's historic theaters that goes back to the announcement of a major urban renewal plan for the area in 1981. And the effect is to transform the city's roughest street into one of its gentlest.

Renamed The New Victory, the 500-seat theater between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, an ornate, domed house that opened in 1900 as the Republic, will serve as the city's first full-time performing-arts center for children. It will be a kind of Lincoln Center for families, bringing a mix of plays, dance events, operas and film to a street that until recently was the last part of the city that anyone would associate with children.

The Theater will serve as New York home for children's programming by such organization as Theater for a New Audience, Theatreworks/USA, the Metropolitan Opera Guild and Cirque Éloize, the Canadian circus that will be the first company in residence, with performances from Dec. 19 through 31. The circus will be one of several groups on tonight's opening night bill. The show will also include performances by Patrick Stewart, Bill Irwin, Audra McDonald and the Muppets. It will be followed by a party next door at the Academy, the former Apollo theater, whose main entrance is now on 43<sup>rd</sup> Street.

The opening of The New Victory thus marks both the creation of a new cultural institution and the start of the long-planned reclamation of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's historic theaters: architectural treasures that had deteriorated into seedy showplaces for action films and pornography. It comes roughly six months after the Walt Disney Company agreed to renovate the New Amsterdam, 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's grandest theater, for legitimate use as a commercial Broadway house.

The New Victory will operate as a nonprofit performing-arts center under the auspices of The New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, another nonprofit organization that was set up in 1991 under the leadership of Cora Cahan to oversee restoration of several of the street's theaters as part of the ambitious 1981 urban renewal plan for Times Square and West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. That plan, widely criticized, called for the construction of four huge office towers around Times Square and a merchandise mart and hotel at Eighth Avenue as a means of paying for the restoration of the street's historic theaters.

After 14 years, the towers and mart have yet to be built, thanks to a complicated mix of political pressures and forces in the real estate market. But the tail of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's renewal is managing to come into being anyway, even without the dog that was supposed to wag it. The developers of the office towers were required to make good on a commitment to contribute \$18.2 million toward theater restoration even though the towers themselves have been indefinitely postponed. Restoration or renovation of seven of the block's nine theaters is now under way or committed. Some, like The New Victory, will be for nonprofit arts activities; others, like the Empire and the Lyric, will be integrated into commercial projects.

If the way The New Victory has turned out is any indication, the tail is clearly the best part of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street dog. To see 42<sup>nd</sup> Street with The New Victory's exquisite façade restored – and the gross marquee of the Lyric Theater next door removed to allow the historic New Victory some breathing space – is to rediscover not only a single building but an entire block. Suddenly the urbane quality of this whole block becomes visible.

Forty-second Street turns out to be less a street of signs than a street of faded, elegant buildings. The New Victory is the most striking, its façade a curious combination of the grand and the ordinary, with a stunning monumental staircase running up and down the dull brick exterior, lots of brownstone ornament and 10 elaborate globed standing lamps, each a work of sculpture. But two doors, down, the Times Square theater, with a long Corinthian colonnade, has an austere grandeur of its own.

The architect Hugh Hardy of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates has renovated The New Victory in a sensitive but not slavish manner, supporting its original architecture while allowing plenty of room for the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to show through. The New Victory, built originally by Oscar Hammerstein and extensively renovated two years later by David Belasco, is an exquisite jewel on a street of gems. Few who saw the building during its worst period, as a shabby theater showing pornographic films, or even as a Minsky's burlesque house in the 1930's, would have noted it, but The New Victory's domes auditorium is one of the city's most delicately detailed and joyously wrought public rooms.

It has now been reconstructed to look almost as it did in Belasco's time, except for the addition of modern lighting and sound and projection equipment. And except for the absence of an arched colonnade that once stood atop the cornice, the façade now bears a striking resemblance to what Hammerstein unveiled in 1900, when the theater opened as the Republic, with Lionel Barrymore starring in a play called "Sag Harbor."

Between the façade and the auditorium, however, Mr. Hardy has put aside illusions and inserted a series of modern lobbies and public areas, and built a new loading dock and dressing-room area on West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street behind the theater in space formerly occupied by a bar and a delicatessen. (The rear of the original theater was "landlocked," cut off entirely from street access, which is why small structures behind the building had to be removed.)

Mr. Hardy's approach to restoration is part archeological, part conjectural. He rejects the idea of bringing the building back precisely to its former appearance. "Even if you wanted to do that, what period would you restore it to?" he asks. "There is the original Hammerstein theater, then Belasco changed it all. And the building has to be made to work today."

Making the building work today involved not only adding the latest technological equipment and backstage support space, but also changing the nature of the public space that is not within the theater auditorium itself. Most of New York's older theaters, however elaborate their auditoriums, were tight, almost meanly wrought little buildings, and the Victory was as tight and mean as any. Its site was originally occupied by four brownstones, and there was virtually no lobby: the back of the auditorium was almost at the street. The theater was not only inaccessible to the disabled, the space was so tight it was barely accessible to anyone else.

The renovation reduced the number of seats from 700 to 500, eliminating the rear of the auditorium to allow for a small entry lobby. A lower-level concession area and lounge has been added as well, partly in newly excavated space. And since there was no space within the building for an elevator shaft, it was slipped into an alleyway at the eastern end of the building.

If the façade now comes fairly close to its appearance when the building was opened by Hammerstein, the two-balconied auditorium has been restored to more closely resemble the theater's somewhat more ornate Belasco phase. There are splendid carved putti covered in gold leaf surrounding the central dome; wrought-iron stanchions with carved bees, a pun on Belasco's initial, at the end of each row of seats, and ornate tiers of boxes topped by golden domes, little baldacchinos, in the front corners of the auditorium.

The colors are deep reds, gold, and tiny hints of purple and green. By pulling in the rear wall, Mr. Hardy has made the room, intimate to start with, feel even smaller. It is unusual in its proportions: at roughly 50 feet long, 50 feet wide and 50 feet high, this theater is almost a cube. And it is as sensual and lush a cube as exists anywhere in New York.

The overall idea, then, is to deal in architectural illusion on the street and inside the auditorium, where trying to approximate the original appearance has been the rule, and to keep things plain and straightforward in the lobbies and service areas, where there was little or nothing to restore in the first place. This creates the striking rhythm of walking through layers of time: the past in the street façade, then a pause in the present in the lobby, then a return to the past in the auditorium.

It's a rhythm that adds, rather than detracts, from a sense of authenticity. For part of the architectural notion here is to keep illusions in check – to have no illusions about illusion, so to speak. The New Victory is dazzling, yet no one will mistake it for a trip into the past. This is not 42<sup>nd</sup> Street as theme park, not a total environment designed to fool us into thinking that we are in a Times Square of the past. It is a restoration that uses the architecture of the past to create a viable 42<sup>nd</sup> Street for today, and that is a different enterprise altogether from the architecture of make-believe.