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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

# Theater Restoration Begins On Seedy Times Square Block

By **DAVID W. DUNLAP**

### An Appraisal

After an overture that lasted more than a decade, the reclamation of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street's neglected playhouses was officially declared under way yesterday with a ceremony at the Victory Theater, which is to reopen next year with performances and programs for children. The 94-year-old Victory, a delicately ornamented two-balcony house, would be the first of the historic theaters along the street to be renovated. So there were celebratory speeches yesterday and billowing cascades of balloons.

But there have been many speeches since 1981, when the redevelopment of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue was first announced. More important than rhetoric was the work permit from the Buildings Department that was brandished by Cora Cahan, President of The New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Inc., a nonprofit group overseeing the restoration and eventual operation of six theaters on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, including the Victory, that are now empty.

Equally important, Ms. Cahan said, was the fact that money for the \$9.2 million rehabilitation of the Victory is "beginning to flow" from the Prudential Insurance Company of America and Park Tower Realty, which are providing a total of \$18.2 million for theater-restoration as part of a deal under which they would build four large office towers at the Times Square crossroads.

### Wary Entertainment Industry

It may be just a matter of weeks before sidewalk sheds appear and the Victory's marquee is removed – the first palpable sign of reconstruction.

A skeptical public and a wary entertainment industry will be watching 42<sup>nd</sup> Street closely in coming months to see whether there is truly the momentum necessary to rebuild the street after years of failed promises and false starts. The Victory project is critical to that perception, as is the New Amsterdam Theater across the street, which the Walt Disney Company has agreed to lease and rebuild with the use of a low-interest loan from the government. Disney, however, has said that it will not be committed to the New Amsterdam renovation until early next year, after it sees who the neighbors will be. It has welcomed the transformation of the Victory.

"The tangible evidence of the turn-around, of new construction taking place, is a good first step toward bringing back the entire street," said David L. Malmuth, Vice President for Corporate Real Estate at the Disney Development Company, in an interview yesterday. "It makes us that much more comfortable that 42<sup>nd</sup> Street is going to be a great success."

From the street, the most obvious change at the Victory – whose marquee boasted "Best Porn XXX in Town" a few years ago – will be the re-creation of a grand double staircase on the exterior. The original was removed more than 70 years ago. Inside, seating will be reduced to 500 from 936, allowing for the creation of public space at the back of the orchestra. Dressing rooms will be built in two small structures at the back of the Victory, facing 43<sup>rd</sup> Street.

“We have the ability here to make old bones do new dances,” said Hugh Hardy of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, architects of the restoration.

Programs in the 1995-96 season are to include presentations by the Night Kitchen, a national children’s theater company founded by Maurice Sendak and Arthur Yorinks; a puppetry series curated by the Jim Henson Foundation, and a film series curated by Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese.

“This is the first ground breaking on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and there will be many, many more after this,” said Vincent Tese, Chairman, President and Chief Executive of the State Urban Development Corporation.

John S. Dyson, the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, said at the ceremony that there was some tenant interest in the office buildings that Prudential and Park Tower is to construct on land owned by the state along 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, Broadway and Seventh Avenue.

The office project was postponed two years ago in the face of a collapsed real estate market. Since then, the developers have been negotiating with officials over an interim plan to bring stores, restaurants and other attractions to the sites where the towers would eventually rise, after the market recovers. Those talks have not always gone smoothly, and agreement has yet to be reached.

Acquisition by New York City of the western end of the block, which is still under private ownership and where pornography stores continue to thrive, was proposed in the administration of Mayor David N. Dinkins. The \$35 million needed to condemn the property was kept in the city’s budget under Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

City and state officials have independently pursued the restoration of nine historic theaters along 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, including the six under the charge of The New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street group, which was established in 1990.

“The public has long grown weary of unfulfilled plans,” said Marian S. Heiskell, chairwoman of The New 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, shortly before she pulled a pink banner across the stage yesterday to rename the house The New Victory Theater.

“The New Victory is a high-stakes gamble where we have far more to gain than to lose,” Mrs. Heiskell said.

While the New Amsterdam is certainly the grandest theater on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, the Victory is the oldest. It was built in 1900, before Times Square was even known as Times Square, by the impresario Oscar Hammerstein, grandfather of the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II.

Perhaps the most astonishing feature in the auditorium is a central dome, around the rim of which are perched eight pairs of plump putti, their legs dangling over the orchestra seats far below.

Originally called the Republic, the theater was designed by J.B. McElfatrick and opened with “Sag Harbor,” which ran for 76 performances. A more celebrated tenant was “Abie’s Irish Rose,” which played 2,327 times in the 1920’s. In 1931, the Republic became a burlesque house, which it remained until 1942, when Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia banned burlesque.

Renamed the Victory in the middle of World War II, the theater showed second-run movies. In the 1970’s, its fare turned X-rated. Under lease to the Durst Organization, a real-estate concern, the Victory was the home in 1990 of the play “Crowbar” and in 1991 of “Romeo and Juliet.” It was taken over by the state in 1992.

The first performers in The New Victory yesterday were Audra Ann McDonald, who sang “America the Beautiful”; the Ghetto Original Productions Dance Company, which hopped, bounced and twirled vibrantly, and the general contractor, Frank J. Sciame, who played his own composition, “Fanfare for the Common Jackhammer,” on a jackhammer in the box at stage left as Mrs. Heiskell unfurled the banner.