

https://www.herald-dispatch.com/features_entertainment/keith-albee-turns-90-years-old/article_bbb9dc89-f50f-558b-945f-dc23ea0839ee.html

Keith-Albee turns 90 years old

By DAVE LAVENDER The Herald-Dispatch
May 7, 2018



Sholten Singer/The Herald-Dispatch The Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center has undergone extensive renovations in the past few years, including new roofs, waterproofing and a new HVAC system. Now, the Keith-Albee Foundation is set to launch a campaign to replace the theater's 88-year-old seats.

Sholten Singer

HUNTINGTON — When music icon Tony Bennett performed at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in 2016 as part of the Marshall Artists Series, he put down his microphone before he broke into a night-ending, spine-tingling send-up of "Fly Me to the Moon" and had a little heart-to-heart talk

with the audience.

"This theater is perfect for performing," Bennett said then. "I heard they were talking about cleaning it up, but now don't clean it up too much because the acoustics in here make beautiful sounds."

Don't worry, Tony, the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center still has its impeccable acoustics, but as a 90-year-old should, the Thomas Lamb-designed ornate Spanish Baroque-style theater has been getting quite a bit of love and TLC as the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center Foundation is in the midst of several renovation projects.



Courtesy of West Virginia Humanities Council
The Keith-Albee Theater opened May 7, 1928, in Huntington. The opening program featured a comedy called "Good Morning, Judge," a newsreel, and five stage acts. But the theater itself, with its elaborate interior, clearly was the star of the evening.

To help fund those and to fully restore the Keith, the Foundation is kicking off a new campaign, "Giving the Arts to Tomorrow: A Campaign to Sustain the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center," to establish an endowment fund for the theater, which was opened 90 years ago on May 8, 1928.

"We decided that for the 90th birthday instead of focusing on a single event to celebrate, we would focus on the year. So for its 90th year, our goal is to start an endowment so we can work on and focus on certain projects that will really transform large pieces of the building," said Shaleena Ross, who is the general building manager for the Keith-Albee.

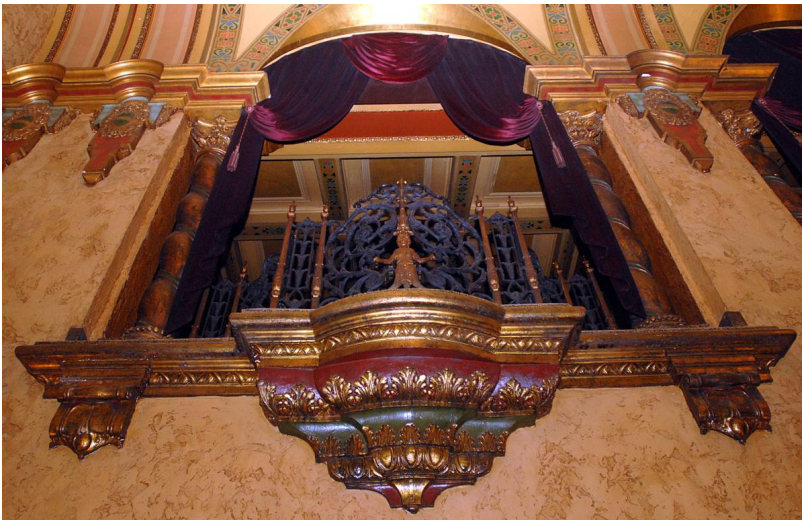
Ross said the endowment will help the Foundation build a reservoir of matching funds that are usually always needed for grants.

"Our goal is to build a legacy that this generation can lead to the next and that to celebrate its 90th birthday, the Keith-Albee would start its real journey to be completely restored by its 100th birthday," Ross said. "It is about renovating the Lounges and the Suites in the building so that people who have public access that their experiences get improved and restored to what it was in 1928."

Let's Get Visible

Ross said it has been exciting for the Foundation to begin making headway on tackling more visible projects, such as building managers Junior Ross and Gary Cooper repainting the floor, the orchestra pit's wooden floor, as well as restoring the wood framing and footlights along the front of the stage.

That area was used this past season of the Marshall Artists Series for seating, which included front-row pit seats for the Marshall students watching national act comedian Leslie Jones, a star of "Saturday Night Live" as well as other TV and films such as "Ghostbusters."



Chris Harris/The Herald-Dispatch
The newly renovated balcony overlooks the lobby area of the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center on Friday, February 22, 2008.

This season has also seen new improvements of a green room and backstage area makeover, as well as starting to renovate and re-paint and decorate the expansive basement dressing rooms.

The Keith-Albee Foundation had - in its 10 years of owning the Keith-Albee - completed more than \$1 million in renovations, including new roofs, a sign repair and, most recently, installing a new HVAC system. However, the current projects (such as the seat campaign) are much more noticeable and tailor-made for the community to jump on board and help sponsor, Ross said.

"You can't see the roofs, you can't see the HVAC system, but you can see the seats being restored and the furniture that had been in storage for decades coming back out into the theater," Ross said.

This past week, the Keith-Albee received its second row of 32 seats that have been restored by Diamond's Furniture Restoration in Russell, Kentucky. That is part of the Keith-Albee Foundation's \$2.6 million "Take A Seat Under the Stars" program.

Row by row, the 2,200 seats are being completely restored, including fabric matching the original seats from when the Thomas Lamb theater was first opened in 1928.

Adding to the Luxury With Restored Benches And Wi-Fi

As part of that campaign, Ross said they have been also restoring about 30 pieces of furniture, such as benches and chairs that had been in storage.

"We have had more than 30 pieces done. Most of those pieces had been, and I when I say in shambles, I mean they were ripped up with hardly any fabric on them, and stacked in the basement," Ross said. "Since we had parts of the year where we had shows that were too close to take out seats, to supplement that we said why not get the old furniture out because this is also part of the Keith-Albee, so we are slowly getting those pieces to our restorer and so we have already brought back four benches that probably hadn't been in the theater for three decades or more."



Sholten Singer/The Herald-Dispatch
The first row of refurbished seats were installed in mid-September at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington as part of the center's ongoing Take A Seat Under the Stars campaign. Row by row, the 2,200 seats are being completely restored, including fabric matching the original seats from when the Thomas Lamb-theater was first opened in 1928.

Several of chairs and benches are in the lobby. Ross said she thinks it really makes a statement and sets a mood when folks walk in and perhaps sit for spell on the regal looking furniture.

"I think it adds or returns to the building that idea of luxury. Having chairs that are original to the building as a statement piece that says, 'Welcome to the Keith-Albee. We value you, not just for the seat you occupy inside, but for your presence in the building.' "

Rolling Out the Red Carpet

Beyond the seats, Ross said this summer will also see the entire Keith-Albee's carpet replaced.

"The big thing is our carpet is done and ready to be delivered - almost 14,000 pounds of carpet," Ross said. "Everything that has carpet in the theater will be re-done, including the lobby, the mezzanine, all of the bathrooms, the stairs, the main auditorium as well as the balcony. We also

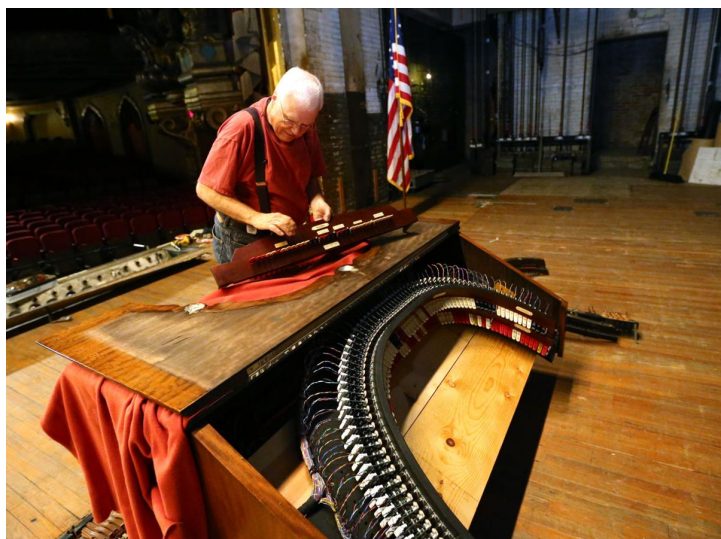
purchased extra carpet so that if we have any issues we need to fix we have additional carpet we can use in other areas."

The Keith is also getting Wi-Fi.

"We just signed on today (Wednesday) to have Comcast to come and do Wi-Fi in the back of the building, for a building like the Keith-Albee any project involves a lot of planning and a lot of coordination because there are a lot of complexities to the projects," Ross said. "Everything is a challenge, even if like the organ is original, it is still a challenge to put it back as it was but in a modern era."

The Keith-Albee Organ Back In the Pit

One of the most exciting - and now visible - projects has been the return of the 1927-built Keith-Albee Mighty Wurlitzer (Opus 1780), which had been gone from the building since 1957.



Sholten Singer/The Herald-Dispatch

The first row of refurbished seats were installed in mid-September at the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center in Huntington as part of the center's ongoing Take A Seat Under the Stars campaign. Row by row, the 2,200 seats are being completely restored, including fabric matching the original seats from when the Thomas Lamb-theater was first opened in 1928.

Thanks to the continued efforts of Bob Edmunds and the Huntington Theatre Organ Project Inc., the 1,000-pound, three-manual console with its gorgeous tiger striped walnut console top was lowered back into its home in the orchestra pit a week ago. It had been gone for more than half a century.

For Edmunds, bringing the Keith-Albee's organ back home and restoring it has been an arduous labor of love. Organ Project members brought the organ back home in 2010 after buying it for \$30,000 from a fellow organ enthusiast in Greensboro, North Carolina.

The massive Keith-Albee organ was placed in the mezzanine until Edmunds could raise enough money to have it repaired and to replace the smaller Granada Theater organ, which Edmunds used at the Keith-Albee from 2001-10 when he sold it back to a restoration group in Bluefield, West —

Virginia, his hometown. Edmunds first found the Granada organ in 2001 when he bought it and moved it from out of state to the Keith. It has seven ranks of pipes, compared to the Keith-Albee's 13 ranks.

Edmunds said it was an incredible feeling this past week to be able to lower that original Keith-Albee organ back into its home, and to know they are in the homestretch. He is currently connecting all the wiring to the organ's myriad of components. He said the organ should be able to be played (though not fully connected to all the literal bells and whistles) in about six weeks or so.

"It is a feeling of elation. It is really quite breathtaking to get it back in place and to see it back together after it was all apart for more than a year and a half," Edmunds said Wednesday afternoon, climbing out from under the stage where he is connecting hundreds of wires.

During that time, Carlton Smith Pipe Organ Restorations in Indianapolis, Indiana, did a \$27,000 keyboard and manual rewiring and restoration that included adding more stop keys.

"There are 125 stop keys on it now, and there were about 80 before, so we have added quite a few things to it since it was the original," Edmunds said. "Basically, the reason we did it is that we, number one, had the parts from previous organs and, number two, had to re-build the stop rail so we decided to add more pitches and stops to the organ because we had some extra ranks of pipes in the process."

Although the original Keith-Albee organ only had 13 sets of pipes, Edmunds has installed 18 sets of pipes (about 1,500 pipes) to help power it up. Edmunds said the extra pipes were for things added to the theater organ, like a brass saxophone, as well as a set of English Post Horn pipes added in

Iowa. In 2005, they also purchased a set of pipes from the Smoot Theater in Parkersburg, West Virginia, and two more ranks from a theater organ in Florida.

Originally made for the era of silent films, the Keith-Albee Wurlitzer Opus 1780 has an arsenal of tones (from clarinet, trumpet and vox humana, to violin, oboe and tuba, tuned percussion such as chimes, a marimba and glockenspiel, as well as the full gamut of silent movie sound effects including a Model T car horn, sirens, doorbells, ocean surf, sleigh bells, an English Post Horn and horses' hooves.

Edmunds said he is thinking of the days soon to come when they can showcase the glory of the new and improved original organ.

During that 10-year span, the Granada organ became a swirling, time-stamped staple at the Appalachian Film Fest and before special events such as the Marshall Artists Series events. Edmunds hopes the organ will again be a regular featured part of events at the Keith, and plans to play for film fests and hopes to have some regular organ performances including some concerts scoring silent movies.

A Living Historic Landmark

For everyone involved, it is exciting times at the Keith-Albee.

Marshall Artists Series executive director Penny Watkins, who is in the midst of booking the 82nd season of shows into the majestic theater, said she has never had a performer come to the Keith-Albee and not be blown away by the theater's design and its noted acoustics.

"They love it, and they always walk out on stage and say, 'Oh my God, you don't see these very often,' and they love the acoustics," Watkins said.

Watkins said the Marshall Artists Series appreciates the work being done on the theater, and tries to continue to book in the best shows to give the 90-year-old walls something to talk about.

"It is like having a great restaurant in that you can't have a great restaurant without a great chef and I think that is what people have to keep in mind," Watkins said. "It is great that the theater is turning 90, but you have got to have the programs that bring life to it. I often say to people who complain about it being a little dusty that, you know, that it is not a museum, it is a working theater."

Derek Hyman, whose grandfather Abe and uncle Sol built the theater and whose family maintained it from 1928 until 2006 when he handed it over to the Foundation, said it is great to see some traction going on various restoration projects.

And Hyman, whose family was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia in 2009, said his family is proud of the theater and the fact that it is still so alive with the arts.

"Obviously, we are happy that the building that my grandfather and great uncle built is still in use in Huntington," Hyman said, "And I am proud when I go in there for an event and look around and see how well it is being maintained. The thing I love the most is sitting in the audience at the Artists Series and listening to the people around us oohing and aahing about the building. That warms my heart more than anything."

Hyman said it has never been easy to maintain the grand building. In fact, when the two Hyman brothers finished the building, which took 14 months, 550 tons of steel and millions of bricks, it was a reported \$1.75 million over budget.

The Keith-Albee opened in 1928, just a year before The Great Depression.

"I know they had other theaters elsewhere and had to sell off other places to keep the Keith-Albee alive," Hyman said of the Keith's rough financial start. "They loved it and thought it was a beautiful thing they had done, but the timing couldn't have been much worse for them."

Shaleena Ross said the working theater that has transitioned through the years from vaudeville to a multi-screen movie house and now to a performing arts center, hopes to get an additional boost of respect - and funding avenues. The Foundation should hear in the next couple of weeks about the final word on its designation of a National Historic Landmark. The theater is already on the National Register of Historic Places.

"It is in the final phase, and we should hear back from them in the next few weeks," Ross said. "With that opportunity, it opens the door for different grants and tax credits associated with that designation."

Ross said that designation coupled with the new campaign should help them really transition from shoring up necessary elements to starting to transform large pieces of the building, and relying on the community to help transform and maintain this crown jewel of Huntington for future generations.

"One generation built this building, and several generations have used this building, and we want this generation to leave it as a legacy for the next because as a part of downtown Huntington it is central," Ross said. "Without the Keith-Albee, the downtown does not look or feel the same. Our goal is to open it up so that you don't just have the main auditorium but you have other parts of the building that people could come in throughout the day or could use for smaller events, so that it becomes a true performing arts center and to see it really transition from what was a movie house to a full-time performing arts center."

Helping The Keith

The Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center Foundation is starting a new endowment campaign called "Giving the Arts to Tomorrow." You can donate to the fund by sending a check to "Giving the Arts to Tomorrow," Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, P.O. Box 5425, Huntington, WV 25703 or by calling 304-696-3313, by email at ross@keithalbee.com or on the web at www.keithalbee.com.

Welcome to the discussion.

Keep it Clean. Please avoid obscene, vulgar, lewd, racist or sexually-oriented language.

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CAPS LOCK.

Don't Threaten. Threats of harming another person will not be tolerated.

Be Truthful. Don't knowingly lie about anyone or anything.

Be Nice. No racism, sexism or any sort of -ism that is degrading to another person.

Be Proactive. Use the 'Report' link on each comment to let us know of abusive posts.

Share with Us. We'd love to hear eyewitness accounts, the history behind an article.