

His casting skills make it on Broadway

By ROBERT BURG
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BAYONNE, N.J. — Jean-François Furiere's Toronto-based business is as much his passion as his job. Like his father and grandfather, Furiere makes and restores fine works of plaster — from the smallest rosette to the largest haut-relief or column.

But these days you won't see Furiere at his Eglinton Ave. shop, Iconoplast Designs. While a small staff maintains the business, he works long hours restoring plaster in a warehouse in an industrial section of Bayonne, N.J.

Why Bayonne?

That's where Garth Drabinsky's entertainment company, Livent Inc., established a shop for Furiere and some of his craftspeople to work on a New

York theatre restoration project the Toronto artisan calls the most challenging and unique of his career.

"There has never been anything like it of its kind," said Furiere, a bearded, third-generation architectural craftsman who moved to Canada from Cannes in 1979.

For the past seven months, Furiere has been repairing at least 100 tons of works of plaster taken from the interiors of two classic, early 20th century, but badly deteriorated Broadway theatres, the Lyric and its next door neighbor in the Times Square area, the Apollo. In recent years, the Lyric had been vacant and the Apollo was used as a rock club.

The Apollo still had intact its original proscenium, which, in one of the few instances of new

work Furiere is being asked to do, will be restored and enlarged with additional plaster to dimensions of 10 metres by 15 metres.

The two theatres also still had arches, columns, and oval and round-shaped domes crafted with an old world eye for elegant design — delicate, neo-classical works inspired by the 18th-century British architect Robert Adam and more ornate baroque works.

Normally, a restoration would be carried out on site, but that was impossible for this project.

The pieces had to be removed while the buildings are being radically transformed from two medium-sized theatres into one large musical theatre.

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are with seating for 1,850 and the largest stage on Broadway. Also, there was a need to remove the plaster interiors to get to the dilapidated roofs, walls, plumbing, heating and electricity, for a complete overhaul.

A simpler option might have been to demolish the water-damaged plaster and, perhaps, reproduce a version of the original designs for the new theatre layout. But the 42nd Street Development Project, the non-profit agency that owns the property, wanted some of the two theatres to be preserved.

So Drabinsky's company, which has a 99-year lease on the new theatre, took the unusual step of hiring Furiere to carefully remove the artistic works from the walls and roofs of the theatres, cut them in pieces so they could be trucked to the warehouse for restoration, and then bring them back to be reassembled and installed in the new theatre.

Using this technique, Livent will be exceeding what the agency has required in preservation. A four-storey high terra cotta facade from the Lyric also is being preserved.

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The theatre, which will be called the Ford Center for the Performing Arts, is scheduled to be completed by the fall and ready to open in December with the New York premiere of Ragtime.

For New York City, the theatre is expected to be one of the catalysts to revitalize the Times Square area from its recent seedy history of crime and prostitution.

For Furiere, his outlook is that a successful restoration could encourage building owners with similar, badly deteriorated structures to save historic interiors.

"It is definitely a new step for plaster preservation," said Furiere, while sitting down amid the works of plaster at a small corner of the massive 400,000 square-foot warehouse.

"This is the first time in which plaster landmarks will have been removed and put back into their original fabric. I would like to see more done because then we can really salvage the original fabrics of buildings. We don't have to

destroy them."

The project has not been an easy one for Furiere.

For example, there was the anxiety of carefully removing plaster embedded in other coats of plaster as well as concrete and steel, and then shipping heavy, yet delicate, pieces through the harried streets of New York and New Jersey.

With that accomplished, the restoration at the warehouse had to take place without the benefit of a record of any prior restoration that would have been a useful reference. Restored pieces are only now being shipped back to the theatre for reassembling and installation — another cause for anxiety.

There also are long hours and strict deadlines to make sure all is completed on time for the opening.

"The stress is at an optimum level right now," said Furiere, who more than a few times let out a quiet sigh at the mention of deadlines. "Right now what I want is to be able to go for a long walk."

While the respite is not in the immediate offing, the diligence of Furiere and his crew appears to be paying off.

Richard Blinder, a partner in the architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle, said it was expected that perhaps as much as 20 per cent of the plaster would not survive the move to the warehouse. Instead, Furiere and his staff managed to protect almost everything.

Blinder gave Furiere high marks for the preservation work.

"There are other people who do this but I think Furiere is very special," said Blinder, whose firm has been involved in restoration projects for Ellis Island and the Grand Central Terminal concourse.

"There is a loving care for what he does. It is old-fashioned craftsmanship and it is wonderful. I mean you can see it in his eyes and how much he almost caresses these pieces of plaster."

Furiere is not a newcomer to theatre interior restoration. Soon after setting up his Toronto studio in 1986, he began working for Drabinsky, when he was associated with Cineplex Odeon, and Drabinsky's engineer, Peter Kofman, for two theatres, the Cinema Egyptian in Montreal and the Pantages in Toronto.

Other theatres he has restored include the Imperial Theatre in St. John's, N.B.; the Lucas Theatre in Savannah, Ga.; and the Virginia Theatre in New York, for which he won a prestigious New York City Landmark Preservation award.

Furiere's current project is almost

exclusively preservation of existing pieces, including making thousands of injections of plaster to repair holes, chips and dents, and carefully cleaning the dirt and grime of decades-old plaster.

But Furiere also is a master at making molds to reproduce existing works of plaster or create new works. At the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, for example, he designed in 1992 the Yale Simpson Lounge, inspired by the themes of the historic theatre's auditorium.

"He is an amazing craftsman," said Graham Hall, the Royal Alex's theatre manager. "It is in his blood. It is his passion and it shows in his work. He loves what he does and he gets everyone around him enthused about it."

Furiere is not permitted by Livent, which is privately developing the theatre without government grants, to disclose the cost of the plaster preservation.

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He employs about 10 to 15 people on the project, depending on what is needed during each phase. About 70 per cent of his employees are natives of Ireland, where the skills of a master plasterer are still being taught.

"It died out here in the States," said Sean McSharry, a project manager, originally from Ireland and who has worked for Furiere in Toronto and New York. "What happened was that sheet rock came in and that finished plaster. The craft work just went out the door and we lost a generation."

Like Furiere, McSharry is hoping that projects like the current restoration will rekindle interests from tradesmen as well as building owners to preserve old buildings and create new works using molds.

Furiere said he would like to take on more preservation work similar to the Livent project.

He also looks forward to returning to Toronto with his four daughters and his wife, Sylvie, a Canadian native whom he met in Cannes when she was attending high school there in the 1970s.

But Furiere said he can't predict when he will be pulled out of Toronto again for another project.

"I am nomadic," he said, smiling. "I am basically a nomadic plasterer. If it is interesting work, challenging work — either a restoration or something new — I'll go anywhere."