



In April, only steel beams and girders framed the future orchestra section, below, where a worker cured just-poured concrete. In September, painters worked on the theater's ornate ceiling dome, which was salvaged from the Apollo and installed directly over the orchestra.

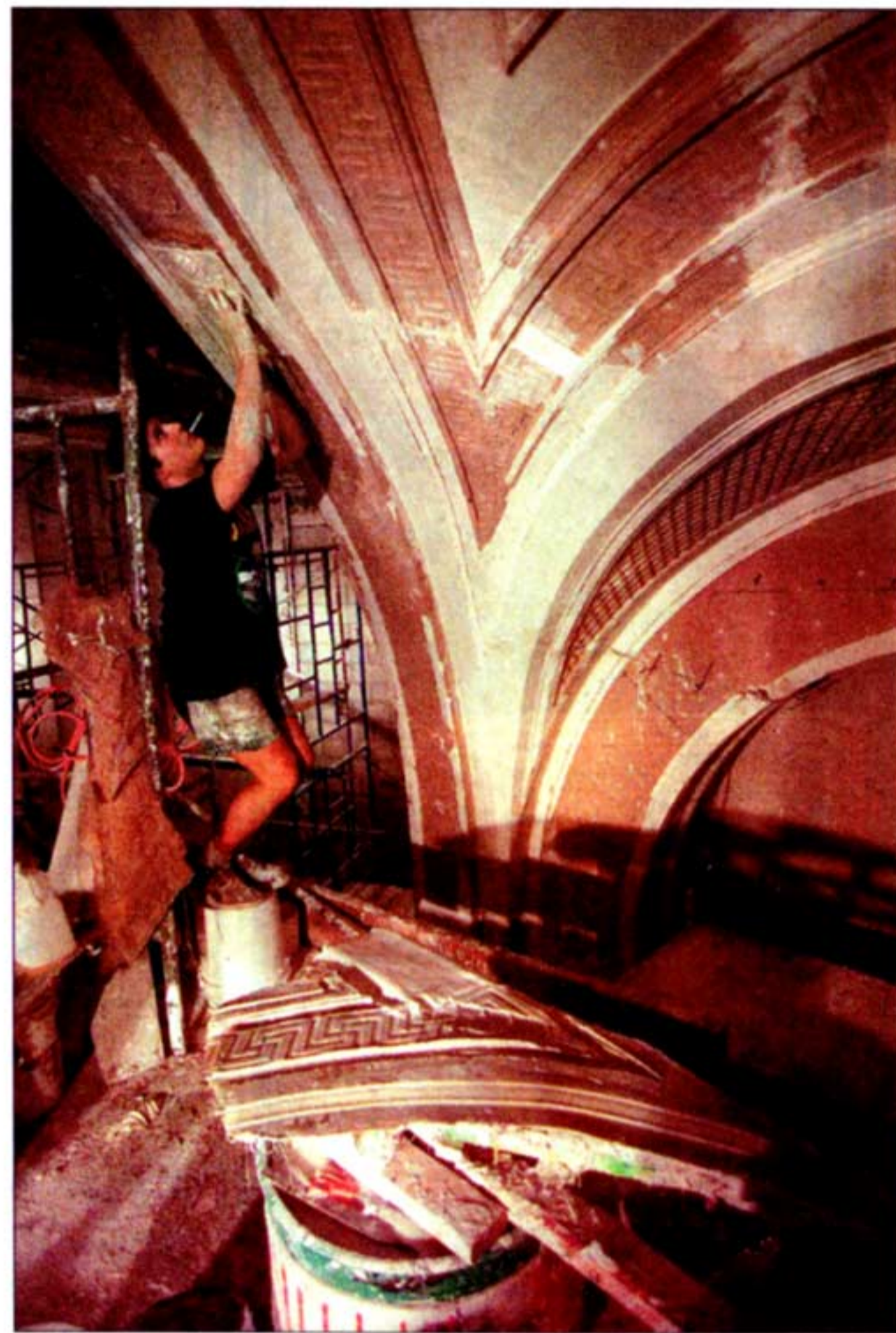


(Walls and)

When 'Ragtime' begins previews Friday, so does a \$30-million performing-arts center. Newsday photographer Ari Mintz watched it grow, from the ground up.



Last spring, decorative elements of the Apollo sat in a Bayonne, N.J., warehouse, left, to be restored under the eye of master plasterer Jean-Francois Furieri. Below left, Furieri carved a copy of a detail from a ceiling frieze made from a mold of the original. In the fall, Chris Costa, below, installed ornamentation in the sail vault.



Lurtain Going Up

BY BLAKE GREEN

STAFF WRITER

TO TAKE A STROLL down 43rd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in Manhattan these days is to witness a serious revision of the old axiom that two are better than one. The crumbling Lyric and Apollo Theaters, next-door neighbors rich with theater history but down-at-the-heels like most of the Times Square area, have been transformed into the sparkling new Ford Center for the Performing Arts.

Vision helped. So did expertise. And \$30 million.

Three years ago when Garth Drabinsky, the Canadian entertainment mogul who heads Live Entertainment of Canada (Livent), was scoping out sites for a New York beachhead, he was shown several possibilities in the redevelopment plans of the nonprofit New 42nd Street Inc. For several years Livent has been producing glitzy musicals in existing Broadway theaters — “Kiss of the Spider Woman,” “Show Boat,” “Candide” — and, like the Shuberts of old (and the Disney of new), Drabinsky wanted his very own showcase.

The result of that search and the project that ensued is a 1,821-seat theater that is part history — the Greek-columned and bust-studded facade of the Lyric was preserved, and many of the Apollo’s ornate decorative elements were restored or replicated — and part state of the art. This latter aspect includes the name — sold, a la sports stadiums, to the automobile manufacturer — and “VIP suite service” for top-price ticketholders. The Ford Center opens just in time for “Ragtime,” which begins previews the day after Christmas.

“It was right up there in terms of its challenge,” says Peter Kofman, the structural engineer who visited the sites with Drabinsky and, as head of Kofman Development Group Inc., is responsible for the development of the new space, as well as of other theaters built by Livent in Canada.

Neither man is from the United States, but both were sensitive to the traditions beneath the rubble and dust they poked through (the Lyric was built in 1903 and became a moviehouse in 1934; the Apollo was built in 1920 and had two

stints as a cinema) — partly because, Kofman says, both are “passionate” about live theater, and partly because they had to be. There were historical architectural guidelines to be followed. “We were under the watchful eyes of everyone.”

They settled upon the two theaters, Kofman says, because of the layout — among other things, entrances on both 42nd and 43rd Streets — and the “absolute space” their side-by-side location afforded. Besides its lobby, auditorium, stage and backstage facilities, the complex includes

Livent’s administrative offices, rehearsal and choreography halls, and the posh suite in the bowels of the building.

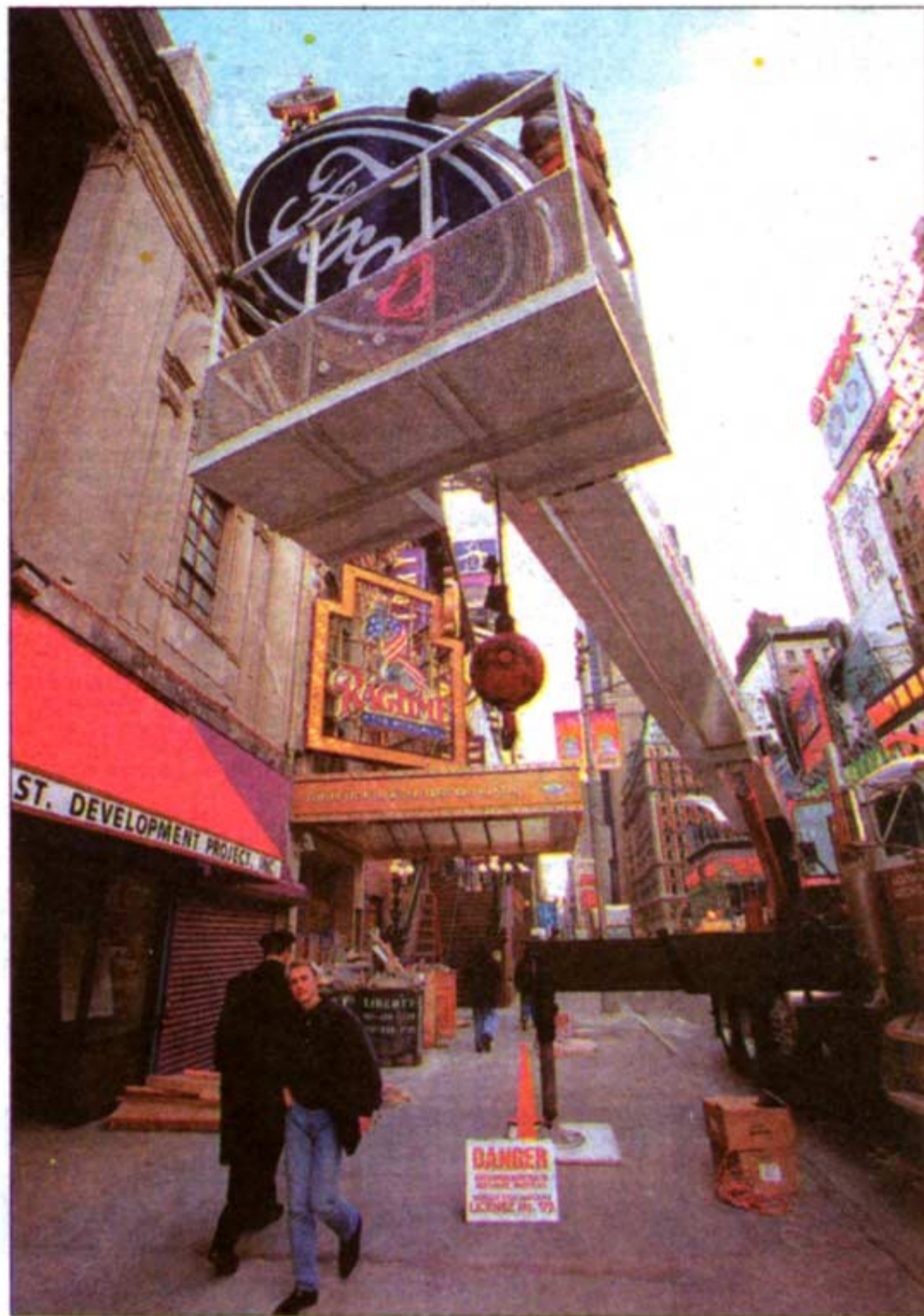
Virtually nothing was salvageable from the interior of the Lyric, abandoned in 1992, but there were what Kofman calls “historic elements” still intact within the Apollo: boxes, the ceiling dome, columns, arches and decorative motifs that could be — if not restored — re-created. What was dismantled was transported to Bayonne, N.J.,

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THEATER



In November, side boxes were painted and gilded, left, and the Ford sign went up on 42nd Street, right. This month, "Ragtime" production crews moved into high gear in the finished 1,821-seat auditorium, below.



Newsday Photos / Ari Mintz

(Walls And) Curtain Going Up

CONTINUED

where work took place under the direction of master plasterer Jean-Francois Furieri. Meanwhile, what remained in Midtown "very quickly became a demolition site," Kofman recalls.

Legends of the theater — Douglas

Fairbanks, Fred and Adele Astaire, the Marx Brothers, Lionel Barrymore, W. C. Fields, Ethel Merman, Jimmy Durante — appeared on the two stages. In the Lyric's earliest days, the Shubert brothers had their offices above the lobby. Live entertainment at the Apollo also included burlesque in the '30s and, recently, as the renamed Academy, musical concerts. ■

