

Arts & Leisure

Section 2

HISTORIC YET NEW

The rich facade of the old Lyric Theater on West 43d Street has been restored and incorporated into the new Ford Center for the Performing Arts.



David Corio for The New York Times

With a Lavish Bow to the Past, A Broadway Palace Is Built

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

"TONY, ARE THEY GOING to pour the orchestra Thursday?" Peter H. Kofman asked one morning last February, the edge in his voice suggesting that there was only one answer he wanted to hear.

Mr. Kofman, an architect and engineer from Toronto, stood near Times Square inspecting an embryonic steel skeleton that was growing even as he watched, beam upon column etched against a pale winter sky. In the fanlike arcs of the balconies-to-be, the framework had begun to hint at its structural destiny. It was becoming a theater. A really big theater.

Concrete was about to be poured to form the auditorium floor. And Mr. Kofman sought assurance from the on-site project architect, Tony Tarazi, that this would occur the next day, as scheduled.

Every hour mattered. Mr. Kofman's client, Garth H. Drabinsky, chairman and chief executive of Livent, the Toronto-based theatrical production company, had told the world that he would have the theater, the Ford Center for the Performing Arts, open by December 1997. More than Mr. Drabinsky's reputation was on the line with this high-stakes goal; so were investment-tax credits worth \$4 million to \$5 million, applicable only if the theater was in operation by year's end.

As it happened, the orchestra floor was poured on schedule. Indeed, it seems that almost everything has gone right with the \$22.5 million construction project, including elements not susceptible even to Mr. Drabinsky's considerable influence, like a mild winter that barely interfered with progress.

And so its many doors — there are



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

COMEDY TONIGHT The timeless face emerges from a Ford Center mosaic.

entrances both on 42d and 43d Streets — are about to open, on time. This brings to a close the story of how a plush theatrical showplace emerged from what was a muddy pit only a year ago.

With a flourish, the Ford Center has appropriated the exuberant 43d Street facade of the Lyric Theater — a turn-of-the-century, four-story riot of richly sculptured detail. But it has replaced the actual structure of the Lyric and its handsome next-door neighbor, the Apollo Theater of 1920, bookends to the brief period when 42d Street was the theatrical hub of New York City, the giddy high-spirited province of Shubert brothers and Ziegfeld girls.

Two historic 42d Street playhouses, the New Victory and New Amsterdam Theaters, have already been reclaimed as part of the government-sponsored 42d Street redevelopment project. Twelve

days from now, when its curtain rises on the first New York preview of the musical "Ragtime," the 1,821-seat Ford Center will take its place as one of Broadway's largest theaters (rivaled only by the Gershwin and the New Amsterdam) and its first new playhouse in more than a decade. Opening night is Jan. 18.

Mr. Drabinsky is so proud of his theater that today he is inviting the public to an inspection tour between 10 A.M. and 6 P.M. Visitors will walk over the speckled mosaic faces of Tragedy and Comedy. They will discover as many chandeliers as a dowager has diamonds. Under the great elliptical dome salvaged from the Apollo and restored to Easter-egg perfection, they will find murals depicting music, dance and drama in ancient Greece. And everywhere they will spot lyres, emblems of the Lyric; painted, stenciled, cast in iron.

It took less than a year for the Ford Center to rise, melding technology and architecture from opposite ends of the century.

What they will not see is a restoration of the Apollo and Lyric auditoriums. Until a year ago, the Livent team artfully presented its plans to the public as a kind of combination and renovation of two old playhouses. Livent's annual report for 1995 described the new project as being built "within the existing framework of the legendary Lyric and Apollo Theaters."

In truth, the Lyric and Apollo were demolished. Yet key features were preserved and reincorporated in the new building: the Lyric's facades and the domes, proscenium arch, boxes and 42d Street lobby from the Apollo, which was designed by Eugene DeRosa.

"We're saving history and putting it in a much more practical environment," Mr. Drabinsky said. "The other theaters would have sat there and rotted. There's no point in talking about the conservation and restoration of history if it can't be savored by the public."

There is much to be savored in the Lyric facade, designed by V. Hugo Koehler, who was also the architect of a celebrated Harlem playhouse, the Lafayette Theater. Athena and Hermes gaze impressively on arriving theatergo-

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With a Bow To the Past, A Palace Rises

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ers while demonic ram's-head masks leer over their shoulders. Banded columns soar upward from a second-story balustrade, framing arches that contain the busts of three bewhiskered Edwardian gentlemen. The brickwork is punctuated by oculi and festooned with enough wreaths for an opening-night bouquet.

(The theatrical historians Mary C. Henderson and Louis Botto both believe that the busts probably depict Reginald DeKoven, the composer for whom the Shubert brothers built the theater, and Gilbert and Sullivan, whose names were synonymous with musical comedy.)

Behind this facade was built an entirely new four-story structure housing the main lobby, a box office and two rehearsal halls.

On 42d Street, behind a smaller Lyric facade that was also preserved, is a renovated three-story structure containing another box office and a through-block link to the main lobby. On the second floor is an office, once used by the Shuberts, that will serve as Mr. Drabinsky's New York base.

Just west of the Lyric's facade on 43d Street is a new 94-foot-long, 70-foot-high box clad in red-brick panels that contains the auditorium of the Ford Center.

Rising beside the auditorium is the structure known as the stage house, which contains the stage deck, the fly loft into which scenery is hoisted and, below, the trap room into which the stage floor can be lowered. Reaching 100 feet, this structure is as tall as a 10-story apartment building. Atop it is a 40-foot-high rooftop sign.

At the pinnacle of the sign is the familiar logo of the Ford Motor Company, which paid Livent for "naming rights," as it has for theaters in Chicago, Toronto and Vancouver, British Columbia. Just how much, neither company will say. But Christopher P. Dixon, an entertainment analyst at Paine Webber who follows Livent, estimated that the New York theater commanded at least \$8 million to \$10 million. In return, Ford gets its blue oval in lights over Broadway and its name repeated in countless advertisements, posters, playbills and press accounts, including this one.

To justify the economic investment, the new theater needed 1,800 seats. Neither the Lyric nor the Apollo alone had that capacity. Combined, however, they offered a site that would accommodate such a theater.

But it took more than a little ingenuity to realize this vision.



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

BY HAND The dome gets a new coat of paint, gold leaf and glaze.



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

A BRAVE FRONT For several months, the Lyric facade had nothing behind it.

February: A Steel Skeleton, And Each Inch Is Precious

"Every patron has to have a full view of the proscenium," Mr. Kofman declares. "If you work from that premise, the rest of the geometry almost sets itself." Rather than a single deep balcony, the Ford Center will have two shallow balconies, each only eight rows deep; the lower one has been designated the dress circle.

The view from the back of the dress circle is stunning now, although it is nothing theatergoers will ever see. There is no proscenium, just the emerging framework of the south proscenium tower.

Overhead is a skeletal balcony, a latticework of steel beams.

Through the interstices can be spied the steep profile of the Hotel Carter down the block. Across the street, the gleaming terra-cotta facade of The New York Times building is visible, looking almost like a wall of the auditorium.

The only actual wall now standing is the 70-foot-high Lyric facade. Just three feet thick, it is braced by a scaffold built over the 43d Street sidewalk. The new structure behind the facade has a yawning hole in the center of its second story. This, Mr. Kofman explains, will be the lobby rotunda.

At the other end of the site is the stage house, which must be made as large as possible to accommodate changing theatrical technology. By tucking the steel columns of the stage house into vertical niches carved into the walls of the adjoining Selwyn Theater, the designers will pick up an extra eight inches of space. Ordinarily, such columns would be free-standing.

The goal at the Ford Center is a stage at least 55 feet deep by 97 feet wide; greater in area than those of the Lyric and Apollo combined. "Productions keep getting larger," Mr. Kofman explains. "The number of devices is becoming more significant, the electrical loads are growing, and there seems to be no stopping any of that."

FORD CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

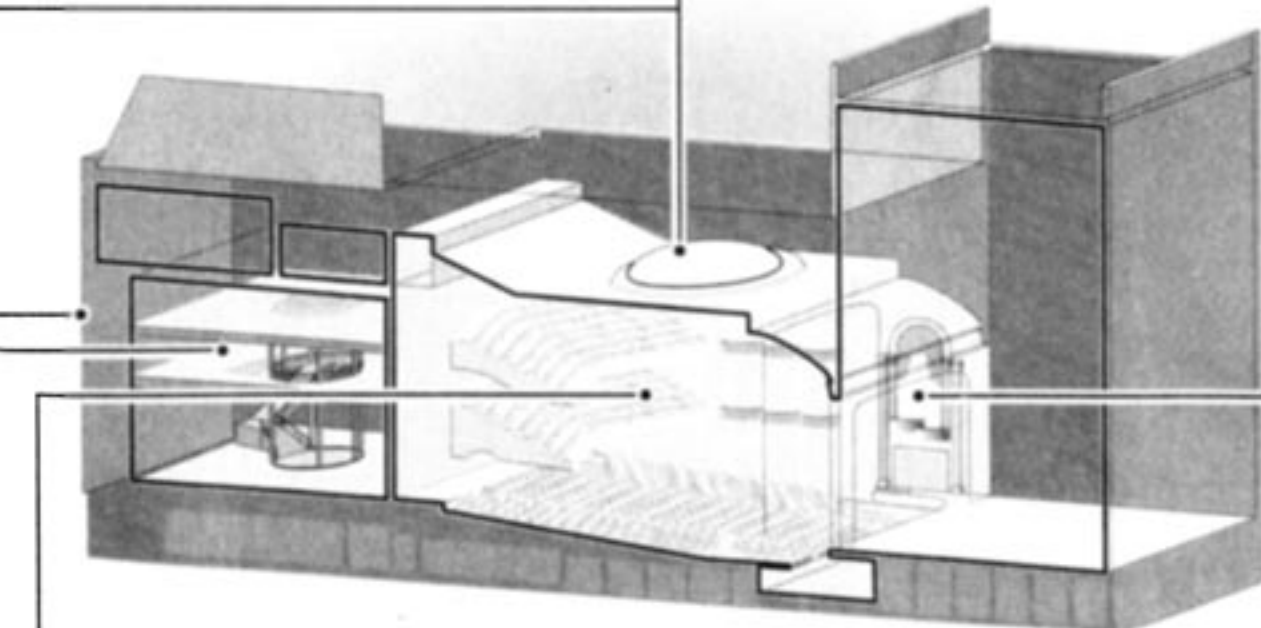
Developed by Livent, under a lease with the New 42d Street Inc.

WITH: Kofman Engineering Ltd. (project and development managers, architects); Beyer Blinder Belle Architects and Planners L.L.P. (architects); Roger Morgan Studio Inc. (interior designer); Structure Tope Inc. (construction manager); Jean-François Furiere (master plasterer); EverGreene Painting Studios Inc. (painters, muralists, plasterers); Mariuca Brancoveanu of Roger Morgan Studio and Gregory Muller Associates (mosaicists).



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

CROWNING GLORY Removed from the old Apollo Theater in 25 sections, the plaster dome has become part of the auditorium ceiling at the new Ford Center.

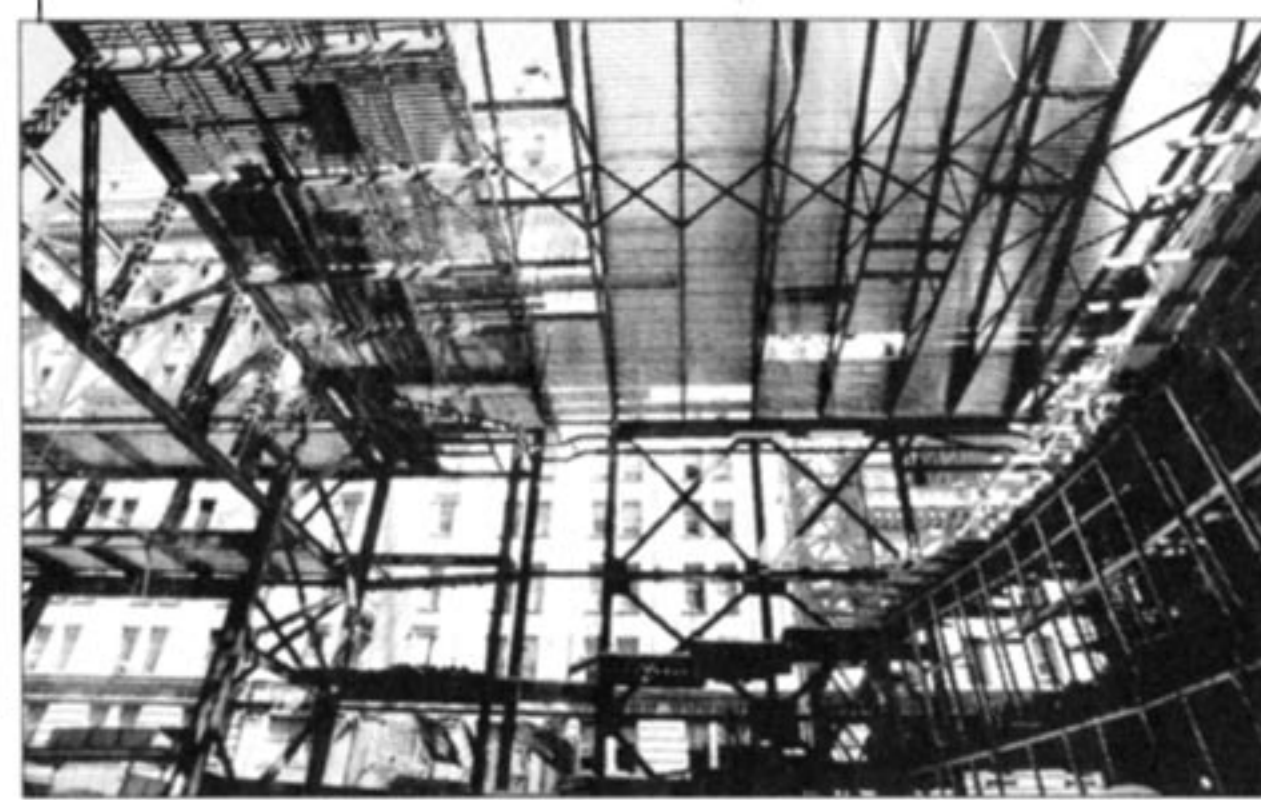


Cristina Rivetto/The New York Times

A Sum of Parts, Old and New

A cutaway view of the Ford Center along 43d Street shows the mansard-roof outline of the Lyric Theater framing a new four-story structure, which includes the lobby rotunda (left); the auditorium, where part of the Apollo Theater stood (center), and the stage house, with its towering fly loft.

Sources: Beyer Blinder Belle; 42d Street Development Project; Kofman Engineering; League of American Theaters; Livent Inc.; the New 42d Street



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

GOOD SIGHTLINES The auditorium once afforded a view of neighboring buildings.

are surfaced in red brick, those that envelop the stage house in precast concrete.

They arrive from Richmond Hill, Ontario, on flatbed trucks and are lifted into place by a giant crane. The panels are attached to the superstructure but are isolated from the steel by synthetic rubber pads that will reduce vibration and thus the transmission of sound from the street.

Now that it is enclosed, the stage house looks as if it could do double duty as a dirigible hangar. Filling the auditorium is a lacy forest of scaffolding, recalling in its delicacy the interior of a Gothic cathedral as if rendered by a Cubist.

On stage sit three plaster domes, the largest one eight feet in diameter, that were extracted from the Apollo. They have just returned to the site from a warehouse in Bayonne, N.J., where they had been kept since demolition. They will be inserted under the dress circle and worked into the new design. For now, they are encased in welded steel frames, their ever so refined Adamesque ornament looking incongruous in the midst of burly construction equipment.

Elegance is otherwise in short supply today. For instance, the V.I.P. room — for theatergoers who pay an additional \$49 — is filled with foil-covered duct work, metal-sheathed cables and insulation pads. No mahogany wainscoting yet.

July: Hearing a Pin Drop, And a Huge Alabaster Pie

"This is very important — very important," Mr. Drabinsky insists, as he conducts a tour of the Ford Center one sweltering afternoon. He is not talking about stage depth, sightlines or public spaces.

He is talking about a small wedge-shaped room between the auditorium and the lobby, with doors at both ends. The double set of doors in this vestibule will serve as a noise and light barrier. In theaters where only one set of doors separates the auditorium from the lobby, a patron who arrives late or leaves early can disrupt the darkness and tranquility of the whole house.

So Mr. Drabinsky insisted on vestibules at every entrance. It is just one way he has imposed himself on the design. "Everything matters to me," he says. That means the ratio of women's toilets to men's (two to one), the width of seats in the theater (22 inches, rather than the customary 18) and the distance between rows (34½ inches, rather than the customary 30).

That means studios with cushioned floors

and enough room for a full-scale rehearsal. "This is worth everything," Mr. Drabinsky says, "to rehearse people in air-conditioned, acoustically sound space."

Mr. Drabinsky also demanded a generously sized lobby. "I've been so cognizant of the claustrophobic nature of going to the theater in New York," he says.

The Ford Center lobby will have as its centerpiece a two-story rotunda, ringed by columns and a cast-iron balcony. A grand staircase will rise between the columns and branch out around the rotunda.

While the ceiling of the rotunda will be new, the auditorium will house the original 39-by-28-foot elliptical Apollo dome. It now sits on the scaffolding in two dozen sections that look something like segments of a gargantuan alabaster pie.

It is Mr. Drabinsky's turn to show off the vantage from the back of the house, encompassing the entire proscenium. "See it?" he asks triumphantly. "Needless to say, you're seldom playing to the top of the proscenium. If you do, you've got a director who doesn't know what he's doing."

August: Details Emerge As the Dome Turns to Gold

Finally, after all the talk about seeing the proscenium, there is a proscenium to see, framed in the ornamental arch recovered from the Apollo. Because it was too small for the new stage opening, the arch had to be widened eight feet across and lengthened five feet at the sides. Lighter-colored patches of plaster disclose its hybrid nature.

The main Apollo dome has been reassembled, and a crew of painters is revivifying it in a palette of slate blue, terra cotta, mustard and gold. Tiny flecks of excess gold leaf drift down and litter the work platform like glittering autumn foliage.

Subtleties are becoming evident. For instance, the auditorium walls are divided into panels that have a slightly convex shape, meant to spread sound more evenly throughout the house.

The most challenging work now is the installation of the 75-foot-long vault that spans the area in front of the proscenium. It is suspended in pieces from cables attached to the ceiling beams. Until the pieces are joined, the designers will not know exactly where it will meet the auditorium wall. "We're not sure at what angle the vault is going to hit the entablature, plus or minus an inch," Mr. Kofman says. "It's like a three-dimensional puzzle hanging out there."



Librado Romero/The New York Times

ABOVE IT ALL Boxes from the Apollo were preserved.

September: People-Gazing From a Perch in the Rotunda

The network of scaffolding has been removed from the auditorium, revealing for the first time its cavernous volume. Richard Blinder, the partner in charge of design at Beyer Blinder Belle, enjoys the astonished look on a visitor's face. After all, he says, this is the point of the theatrical experience: "You drop your jaw just a little bit."

Clearing the scaffold forest has also uncovered the side boxes. "They animate the theater by placing people on the side, instead of a blank wall," Mr. Blinder says.

Wherever he looks, Mr. Blinder already sees crowds in his mind's eye. "One of the most important things about intermission is people-watching, and that's the purpose of this balcony," he says as he makes his way through the lobby rotunda.

Under his feet, covered by protective planks, are mosaic masks of Tragedy and Comedy, made of 172,800 green, gray, black, brown and ivory marble tiles by 18 artisans in a studio in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. "We looked at having it done in Italy," Mr. Blinder says, "and we thought they could do it better."

Pointing to a spot just above the first landing of the grand staircase, he adds, "Zeus goes there."

October: Finishing Touches Add the Grace of Years

Zeus has arrived. His fierce, bearded visage glowers from the center of a four-and-a-half-foot circular plaster medallion that once crowned the proscenium boxes at the Lyric. The arrival of this piece, which sits for the moment like an archeological artifact on the steps of the 43d Street lobby, marks one of the final deliveries of salvaged material.

While the builders seem busier today than ever, the place has begun to turn from construction site to cultural hub, as the rough-and-tumble edges get smoothed. Within a month, the "Ragtime" set will arrive.

The auditorium still resonates with hammering, sawing and drilling, but the sounds



Ozler Muhammad/The New York Times

IMPRESARIO Garth H. Drabinsky visiting the theater in July.

are muffled by carpeting. It is the color of café au lait, with a burgundy check, and it blankets the poured concrete floor Mr. Kofman worried about eight months ago. The house is bathed in an ivory-tinted glow. Light glints softly off the newly installed brass railings along the balcony parapets.

Incredibly, the theater actually seems to be aging as it nears completion. Roger Morgan, the interior designer, says he hopes one day to overhear an exchange along these lines between a couple "of a certain age" arriving at the Ford Center for the first time.

"Alice," the husband will say, "this is where we saw 'Guys and Dolls.'"

"No," the wife will answer. "This is where we saw 'South Pacific.'"