

Reclamation on 42nd Street

In an improbable dual feat of preservation and demolition, two Times Square theaters are combined to create the Ford Center for the Performing Arts.

By Sarah Amelar

In its heyday, New York's 1903 Lyric Theater resounded with the voices of Fred Astaire, Douglas Fairbanks, and the Marx Brothers. At the 1920 Apollo Theater next door, Ethel Merman and Jimmy Durante crooned, and Lionel Barrymore played Macbeth. But like many glamorous 42nd Street playhouses, the Lyric and Apollo grew derelict as pornography, crime, and prostitution disfigured their Times Square neighborhood after the Great Depression. By the early 1990s, when the city and state joined forces to reclaim the area, including seven legendary theaters, the Lyric was boarded shut and virtually gutted, its glittering gold leaf and stenciled lyres a distant memory, and the Apollo (renamed the Academy in 1987) was reborn as a seatless rock-concert hall.

During 42nd Street's recent renaissance, the New Amsterdam and New Victory theaters were restored through traditional preservationists' means, but the early 20th-century spirit of the Lyric and Apollo came back to life through an improbable combination of meticulous conservation and extensive demolition. Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners (BBB) replaced the two vintage playhouses with the capacious Ford Center for the Performing Arts, a richly detailed, state-of-the-art theater that reincorporates such key elements as the Apollo's cherub-adorned proscenium arch and the Lyric's elegant facades. "Clearly, something radical had to be done," says Partner Richard Blinder. "The decision to go from two theaters to





Signage on Beaux-Arts 43rd Street facade (facing page) bears name of Ford Motor Company, a major sponsor of new theater. Gold-leafed dome, floor mosaic, and illuminated column capitals (left) embellish elliptical lobby.

one was determined early on, given the client's programmatic needs," Blinder adds.

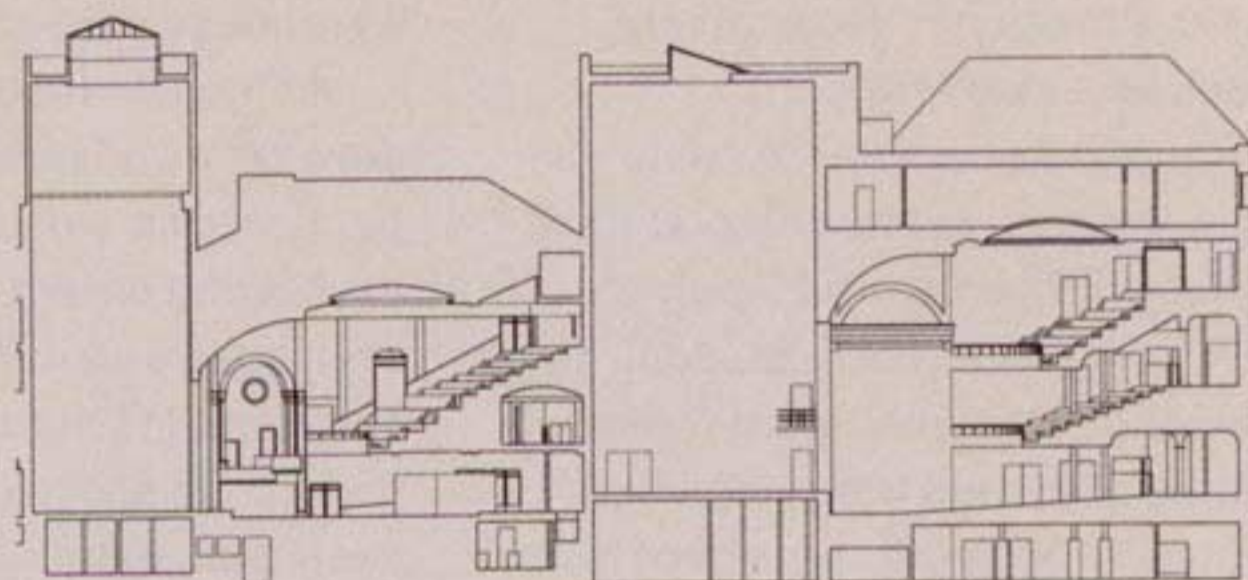
Client Garth Drabinsky, chairman and CEO of the Toronto-based theatrical production company Livent, envisioned staging spectacular musicals, which would require a 55-by-100-foot stage, a generous forestage area, 75 cast-member dressing rooms, a 100-foot-high fly loft, and the technological capacity for extravagant lighting and sound effects. Typical of their era, the Lyric and Apollo housed modest stages with minimal support spaces; in many traditional Broadway theaters, actors dressed in corridors or cubicles stacked in the wings, and during intermission, audiences simply overflowed from meager lobbies onto the sidewalk.

Drabinsky had revived the splendor of other antiquated theaters, including New York's historic Carnegie Hall Cinema, Toronto's 1920 Pantages and, currently in the works, Chicago's 1925 Oriental. But to justify a \$30 million investment in the Lyric and Apollo, this entrepreneur and impresario (and cofounder of Cineplex Odeon) needed to create at least an 1,800-seat house and virtually double the existing stage depth.

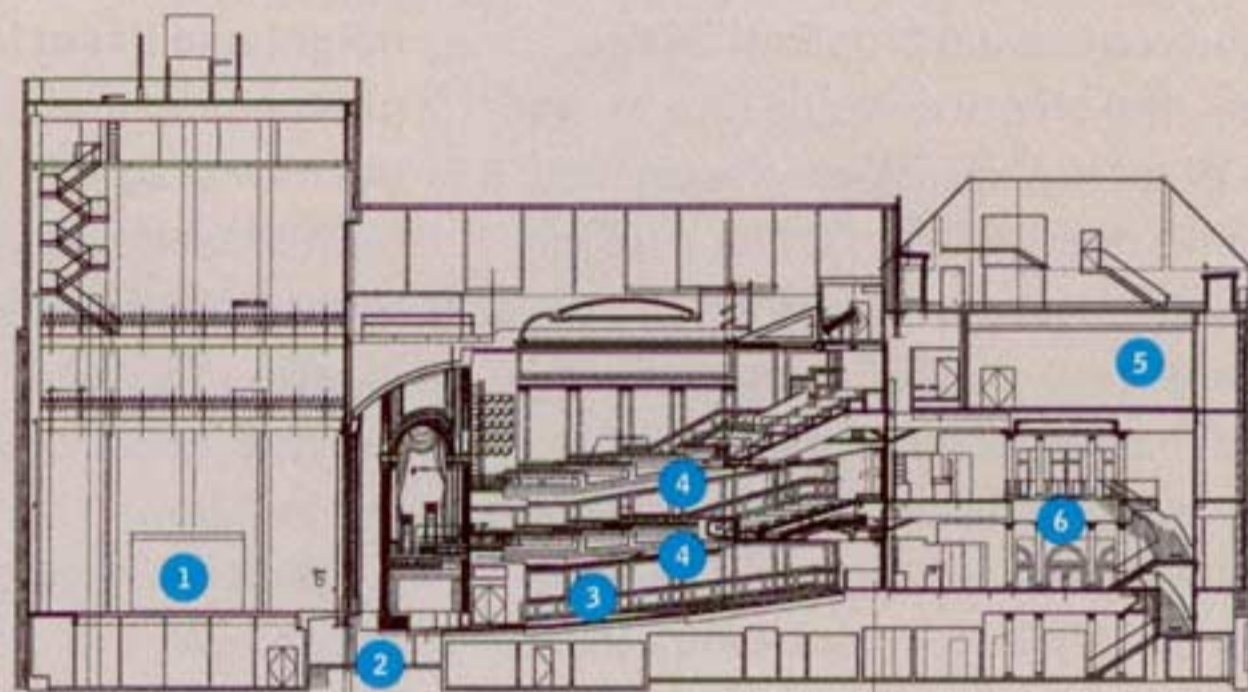
In combining the old and new, the project posed the classic preservationists' conundrum: How seamlessly should recent construction blend with the old or, conversely, how dramatically should contemporary additions contrast with period pieces? To complicate matters, the architect needed to salvage elements from two distinct epochs

and styles: the highly sculptural Beaux-Arts of the Lyric, designed by V. Hugo Koehler, and the Robert Adamsesque low relief of the Apollo by De Rosa & Pereira. As if the challenge were not great enough, the theater had to be in operation by the end of 1997—a mere 12 months after breaking ground for new construction—to qualify the client for investment-tax credits valued between \$4 million and \$5 million.

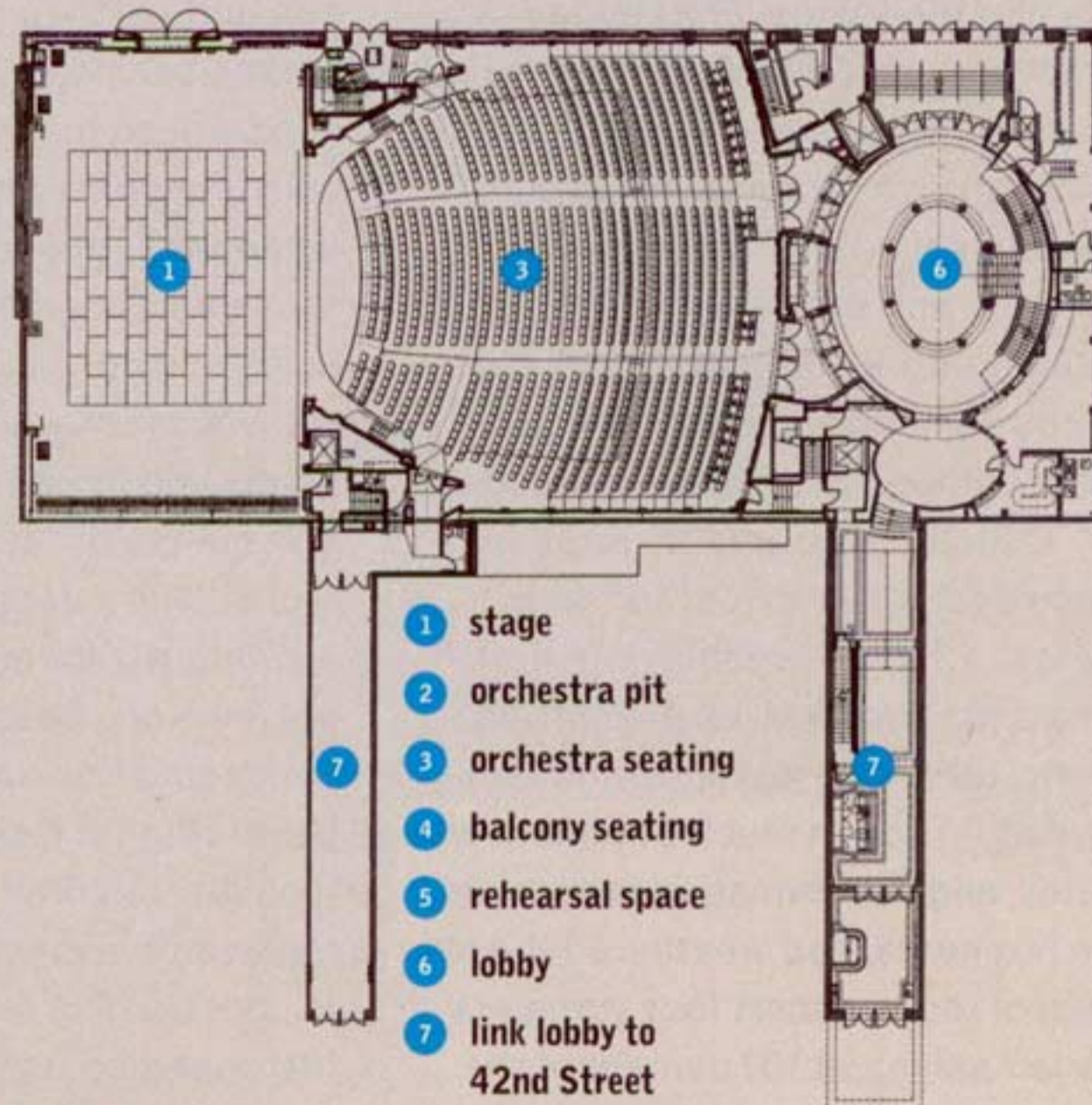
Lacking landmark status, the Lyric and Apollo were vulnerable to demolition, but not entirely unprotected. The 42nd Street Development Project, a division of the state's Economic Development Corporation, had established its own preservation guidelines, which obligated the developers to retain and accentuate historic elements of these theaters, without specifically requiring restoration of the entire buildings. As preservationists experienced in restorations at Ellis Island and Grand Central Station, BBB chose to exceed the guidelines. They kept not only the Lyric's sculptural terra-cotta brick-and-limestone facades, and the Apollo's 39-by-28-foot oval dome, proscenium arch, stageside boxes, sail vault, and ornate "link lobby," as required, but also three smaller domes from the Apollo and a 4-foot-wide medallion of Zeus from the Lyric's proscenium arch. The link lobby, lined in black and white marble and bas-relief sculptures, connects the original Apollo auditorium, sited on 43rd Street, with an entrance on prestigious 42nd Street. (The Lyric was also effectively a 43rd Street theater, and its corridor to 42nd



Original east-west section



New east-west section



First-floor plan

- 1 stage
- 2 orchestra pit
- 3 orchestra seating
- 4 balcony seating
- 5 rehearsal space
- 6 lobby
- 7 link lobby to 42nd Street



Street, though not decoratively intact, was also retained).

Before any demolition could begin, master plaster restorer Jean-François Furieri and a 25-person crew from his Toronto-based firm, Iconoplast Designs, spent three months painstakingly removing monumental plaster ornament from the Apollo. With fine masonry blades, they carefully cut the original 36-foot-high proscenium arch into 69 sections, the elliptical dome into 34, and the great sail vault over the orchestra pit into nearly 70 parts. The smaller circular domes were extracted whole. Labeled and cradled in protective steel frames and crates, these huge pieces of the final puzzle—190 tons of material—were trucked to a New Jersey warehouse where Iconoplast launched seven months of intensive conservation. “Obviously, this plaster was never intended to be removed,” observes Furieri, who had previously restored elaborate details in Canada’s historic Imperial and Pantages theaters. Backed with concrete and sand (an old-fashioned soundproofing method), these elements were massively heavy and often embedded with steel members.

“Usually, plaster is restored in place or simply replicated,” says Furieri. “This is probably the first time plaster was taken as historic fabric, removed, restored, and reinstalled.” Though much ornament was water- and fire-damaged and, around the box seats, had weathered the ravages of rock-concert foot stompers, Furieri salvaged 100 percent of the dismantled material. (Even the precarious journeys between site and

warehouse caused no casualties).

At the warehouse, Furieri and his crew removed layers of paint and debris using small sculpting tools, eschewing detergents, solvents, or even soap and water that can dissolve and damage plaster. With thousands of epoxy injections, they sealed small holes and cracks, and applied fresh plaster to chips and dents. Furieri added 5 feet to the height and 8 feet to the width of the proscenium arch to accommodate the new stage. Iconoplast also built steel armatures to support the reassembled pieces and cast new plaster to extend the arch and replace missing sections throughout the building.

With these treasures safely ensconced, the architect cleared away the bulk of the Lyric and Apollo, leaving a gaping 21,000-square-foot site and the Lyric’s 43rd Street facade backless, braced against the wind. Faced in red and buff brick, with limestone and cast-terra-cotta sculptures, this four-story facade presents a triumphal panoply of garlands and cornucopia, comedy and tragedy masks, human-faced rams’ heads and mustachioed gentlemen. The composition is punctuated by arched entry doors that soar toward exuberantly foliated corbels, columns and balusters, and globed lamposts flanking wreathed oculi. Beyer Blinder Belle cleaned the facades, repaired the masonry, and replaced the medallion-embossed copper cornice and cast-iron, lyrefestooned balustrade.

With a tight 12-month construction schedule, the architect needed

to enclose the building quickly to shelter interior construction. BBB opted for precast concrete panels—red brick-faced over the auditorium, and exposed over the fly tower. Though connected to the steel superstructure, the panels rest against synthetic rubber pads that reduce transmission of vibrations and street noise. Intended to play a “supporting role” to the “starring” Lyric facades, these economical, efficient panels are probably the weakest part of this finely crafted project. Vast and windowless by necessity, the visually thin walls lack a sense of solidity, especially noticeable where the junctures between panels read as seams, rather than expressed joints. But behind these purposefully bland walls lurks a jewel of an auditorium.

Both inside and out, Beyer Blinder Belle’s philosophy mandated that new should defer to old. Initially, their interior scheme was relatively modern and neutral, contrasting with the historic relics. “But we soon recognized that approach as too diagrammatic,” Blinder says. With theater design specialist Roger Morgan Studio as the interior designer, the architect developed a subtler distinction between original and recent details—a sensibility that lends this new building the haunting character of a magnificent old theater.

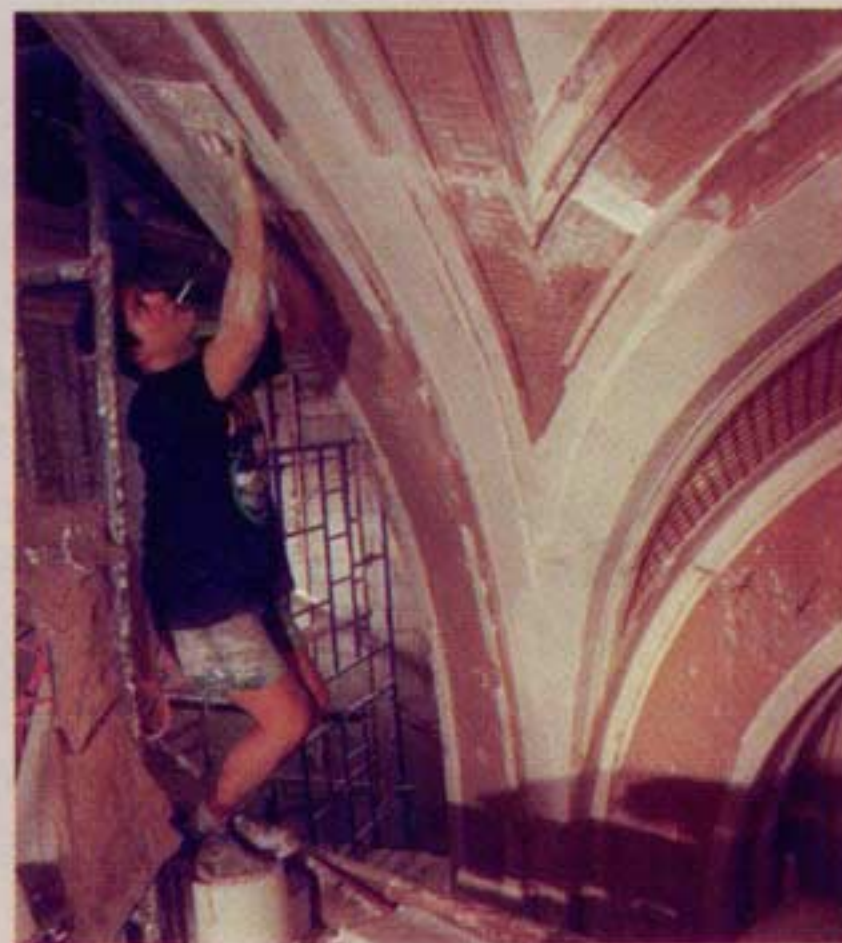
To give the historic remains a logical and metaphorically harmonious context, the designers took inspiration for the ample new lobby (entered directly through the Lyric’s north facade) from the Lyric, and inspiration for their auditorium from the

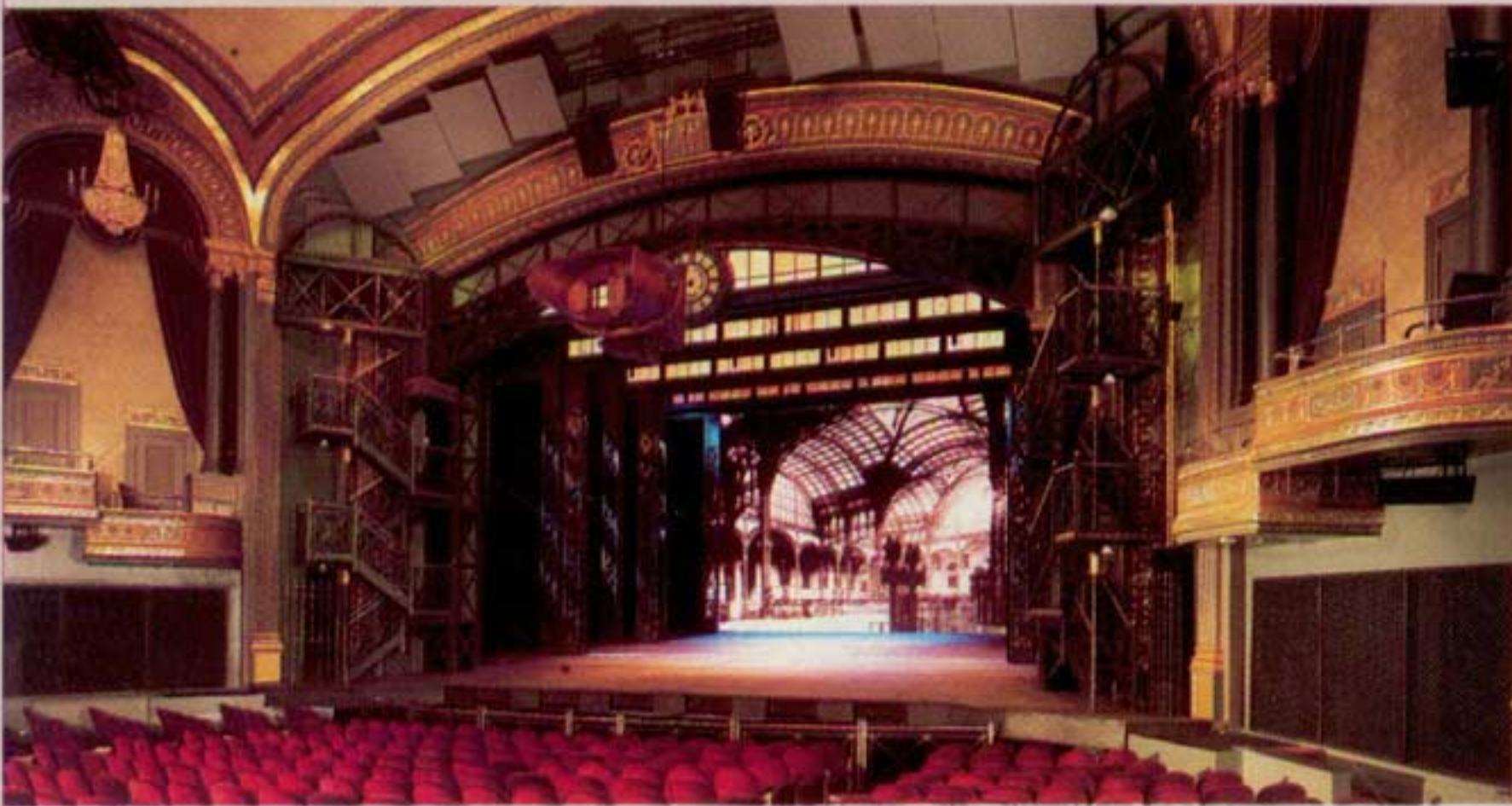


Conservators disassembled Apollo's proscenium arch (facing page, left) and elliptical dome and transferred them to New Jersey warehouse. New steel armature (facing page, center) was installed to rejoin dome. Lyric's dome (facing page, right) is a replica of damaged original. Reassembled and regilded Apollo dome (left) hovers over new 1,821-seat auditorium.

Plaster ornament from original box seating, proscenium arch, and sail vault (right) were refinished and replaced by hand.

ARI MINTZ / NEWSDAY PHOTOS





View toward Ford Center's new stage furthers perception of turn-of-the-century theater by displaying project's restored elements, including heightened and widened proscenium arch, sail vault, and boxes.

Apollo. Thus, an elliptical dome, based on the Lyric's damaged centerpiece, hovers over the Ford Center's elliptical lobby and mezzanine balcony, while the Apollo's great plaster mementos inhabit the new auditorium.

Crystal chandeliers, styled after the Apollo's original fixtures, deck the Ford Center's auditorium. Its lobby glows with warm candlelike carbon-filament bulbs, reminiscent of the Lyric. Built in the early days of electricity, such theaters celebrated the light bulb, generously punctuating signs with these glowing carbon-filament globes and jubilantly mounting them sideways, upside-down—or in any direction denied to a flame. Keeping with this lighting theme, Roger Morgan Studio capped the lobby's columns with gilded capitals in a swirling guilloche relief studded with replicas of Thomas Edison's original hand-blown light bulbs. Though no such capitals lit the Lyric, Morgan identifies these features as "of the period."

A spectacular floor mosaic, as found in many turn-of-the-century theaters (but not in the Lyric), also enhances the new lobby. Designed by Mariuca Brancoveanu of Roger Morgan Studio, this mosaic borrows imagery from the Lyric facade's comedy and tragedy masks. The lattice-patterned Axminster carpeting, the auditorium's damask wall covering, and the gilded seat ends were not part of the Apollo's original furnishings, but are consistent with its era.

The feel of an old theater is so convincing here that one almost expects the balcony to creak and the upholstery to puff out small clouds of

dust. On the interior, the Ford Center is a sophisticated new theater masquerading as old. Though preservation purists might disagree, the building does not smack of falseness or sentimentality. Its remarkable detail and authentic materials take on a richness of their own. In homage to a glorious period in theater history, the level of craftsmanship is exceptionally high—not only for the plasterwork, but also for the mosaic and extensive decorative painting.

For the decorative surfaces, Jeff Greene and EverGreene Painting Studios gold-leafed the domes, hand-stenciled lyres (after the original Lyric design) on the lobby ceiling, restored cold-painted cherubs to the Lyric's 43rd Street windows, glazed the plaster with gentle Adamseque colors (ivory, blue, beige, gold and terra-cotta red) applied to accentuate chiaroscuro only in the original details. Subtly enlivening the surface textures, they spattered, sponged, stippled, and glazed the walls with multiple coats, and lined the lobby with hand-crafted faux-sandstone ashlar on canvas.

With the auditorium's wealth of historic elements, they were careful—albeit with a delicate touch—to keep new from blending indistinguishably from old. New components, such as the balconies, are more restrained in palette and ornament than the historic box seats. Along the upper register of the top balcony's side walls, EverGreene painted 50-foot-long allegorical murals—an old theatrical device which, along with box seating and small-scale embellishments, gives this 1,821-seat house

a more intimate scale.

So much detail on a rapid schedule yielded, as Jeff Greene recalls, "a wild ride on a bucking bronco—there was always a *'crise du jour'*." But remarkably, this new old theater was glowing and ready for its December 12th ribbon-cutting. "This project was in many ways like producing a musical," observes Drabinsky. "You never know if an artistic collaboration really works until everything comes together in the end." And like a good show, the Ford Center allows the spectators to suspend disbelief—imagining themselves in a 1920s theater—but only if they so choose.

FORD CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS NEW YORK CITY

CLIENT: Livent **ARCHITECT:** Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners, New York City—Richard Blinder (partner-in-charge), Don Lasker (project manager), Mariko Takahashi (project designer), Norma Barbacci (historic preservation), Tony Szekalski (job captain), David Virgil (field administrator)

CONSULTING ARCHITECT: Kofman Engineering **ENGINEERS:** Yolles Partnership; Robert Silman Associates (structural); Smith and Anderson; Atkinson Koven Feinberg (mechanical); Mulvey & Banani International (electrical) **CONSULTANTS:** John Swallow Associates (acoustics); Roger Morgan Studio (interiors); Quentin Thomas Associates; Jules Fisher/Joshua Dachs Associates (lighting); Higgins & Quasebarth; Jay Cardinal (preservation); Kramer Design Associates (graphics); William Dailey (building and zoning); Evergreene Painting Studios (decorative painting); Iconoplast Designs (plaster); Gregory Muller Associates (mosaics) **GENERAL CONTRACTOR:** Structure Tone **COST:** \$25 million **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Frederick Charles, except as noted