

Behind boards, his star dims

TAMPA — The theater on Seventh Avenue in Ybor City is old red brick, but it should be green — the color of Bill Field's money, the money papered to the walls by a shy man's dreams for a theater and for himself.



Bill Field

\$400,000.

Before Field bought the Ritz Theatre in 1983, he had made money buying, renovating and selling property on the fringes of Hyde Park and Palma Ceia. He was a financial success, but acknowledges that he was a shy, introverted man.

And he was fascinated by the entertainment business. In the landmark theater then reduced to showing X-rated videos, he saw a chance to be noticed, to gain respect, to win friends.

"I was very insulated," he admits now. "I came out of my shell when I bought the Ritz.

"Did you know it was the first time I was ever in the newspaper?"

I did. If you spent any time at all in Ybor City that year, you likely saw Field, cigar in hand, standing outside the theater, staring into the television minicams, and talking about how his theater and Ybor City were on their way.

"You know," he says now, "I've given interviews on the street live. I love that. And I love being on talk shows. The Ritz did all that for me.

"Secretly, I want to be an entertainer."

The plywood on the windows and the red "No Trespassing" signs keep Field out of the Ritz Theatre now. And, on the sidewalk outside on a hot July afternoon, Field runs his hands down the smooth wood.

"Look at those boards," he says. "It's unbelievable how much I spent on this place." The figure, he estimates, is more than

And, in a sense, he was. There he stood, telling the cameras he wanted the Ritz to be an entertainment complex like Orlando's Church Street Station. But now, he says, he wasn't really the man to do the job: "I'm not the kind of person to work that hard."

There were some shows at the Ritz, but not with the big-name actors that Field had envisioned. Field couldn't talk any private investors out of their money for his projects. So he kept spending his own.

"I went in there with some money and I didn't care if I lost it. What happened was, I lost that and then lost money I did care about."

So Bill Field found himself in the headlines again. This time, because Freedom Federal foreclosed on Field and the Ritz.

As the boards went up the first week in July, some Ybor property owners said good riddance. Field had taken the "X" out of Ybor, but as the theater foundered, he had turned to punk rockers to fill the place.

"People said 'why are you putting the punkers down here?' I said, 'Nobody else will come down here. You want to do Shakespeare tomorrow night? Okay, nobody is going to come.'"

Field is also upset that the boards are keeping some of his former tenants from recovering their property.

Field says he doesn't want to sound bitter. He'd rather talk about the good things, like the party he threw for the cast of the HBO movie "Long Gone," and his bit part as a piano player in an obscure movie filmed at the Ritz called "Amateur Night."

"Besides," he concludes, "theaters are love affairs. They aren't for making money."

So now, Field plans to travel and rest his battered spirit. When he returns, he'll go back to his real estate business, where he earned the money he lost on the Ritz.

"You try this, you try that," he says, "and nothing works. So, it's on with the show."

Leaving the Ritz, Field notes a final bit of irony: "Do you know, the guy that built this theater went bankrupt. They foreclosed on him the day he opened."

Like that owner, Bill Field is now a part of the history of the Ritz.

Paul Wilborn's column runs Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday in BayLife.