

Curtain CALL

Group hopes to restore Orpheum Theater to its old glory

By Rhonda Holman

The Wichita Eagle

Some tiny pieces of Wichita's Orpheum Theater are off to California this week for analysis.

Not the lie-on-the-couch-and-talk-about-your-childhood variety, but a microscopic inspection to identify which paint colors and finishes will be needed to restore the walls, ceilings and corridors of the 1922 vaudeville and movie house at First and Broadway.

"The Orpheum was a very sophisticated building," said Ronald Reed, a conservator of decorative arts, whose Los Angeles-based firm has been hired to guide the analysis. "We have walls that were washed with Italian glazes. We have ceilings that are done in the very subtle French manner, with very subtle gilding. We found 24-carat gold leaf around the mirrors down the first-floor promenade that have all been painted over."

The historic color analysis is one step toward the goal of restoring Wichita's last movie palace, which was used steadily from Labor Day 1922 until November 1976.

Members of the non-profit, all-volunteer group that owns the Orpheum would love to see the theater repaired, restored and open again by its 75th anniversary in 1997.

Although a preliminary rehabilitation report released last week by the John Ash Group of Los Angeles estimates the cost of a complete restoration at \$4.8 million, the Orpheum Performing Arts Centre Ltd. is focused for the moment on raising and spending \$2.8 million to make the theater operable, safe and comfortable.

Still, the group remains far from even its initial goal of raising \$250,000 for basic repairs, although the group has pending applications for \$100,000 in grant money. It also sells annual memberships starting at \$35 each and holds occasional fund-raising events, and \$10,000 has been raised by "selling" theater seats as memorials.

The Wichita Jazz Festival held a concert at



Anthony Reed/The Wichita Eagle

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ORPHEUM

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the Orpheum last year, and other events are likely this spring, as soon as weather permits (the hall has no heat or air conditioning).

Lawyers from the Wichita Bar Association will bundle up tonight to haul donated seats from the stage to the balcony, to ready them for installation. The effort is in preparation for the Wichita Bar Show, the satirical song-and-skit parade to be performed at the theater June 5, as part of the convention of the Kansas Bar Association.

As volunteer board member Donna Dilsaver said, "We have to take the building out of hibernation. We've got to scrub the old girl down."

Reed and his partner, Juan Sequeira-Salas, poked and chipped away in the frostbitten theater early this week and may return as soon as May to finish a 3-foot-square section of ceiling, complete with molding and gilding, "so you can go in and actually see what it's supposed to look like complete," Reed said. "I think people are going to be really surprised."

Fingering one of a stack of letter-size envelopes, each containing paint chips from the theater and a pen sketch of the architectural detail from which it came, Reed explained how an ornate plaster decoration over certain doors was originally painted to look like carved, enameled wood in the elegant style of the Spanish Renaissance, with subtle tones of red and green and a golden polish.

Some walls were treated to look like carved stone. In some places, Reed and Sequeira-Salas found 23 layers of paint.

The Orpheum's "color family is very simple, but all the surfaces are very complex, and were very elegantly and marvelously done," Reed said, noting this is the first theater designed by Chicago architect John



Anthony Reed/*The Wichita Eagle*

Juan Sequeira-Salas collects paint samples from the ceiling at the back of the Orpheum's auditorium Wednesday.

Eberson that his firm has ever worked on.

More than that, concluded the John Ash Group report, the Orpheum is the first "atmospheric" theater anywhere, making it deserving of national recognition. Eberson invented the "atmospheric" design, intended to give the impression of being seated outdoors at night, with special effects creating the illusion of stars and clouds overhead.

Of the Orpheum, Reed said Tuesday, "Most of the original features are still in the building. We only found one or two walls that have been added upstairs. It really is in very good condition."

The recent report, funded through a \$2,500 matching grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, concluded that the building's high priorities include a new roof, repair of brick walls and concrete decks, new plumbing and toilets.

Reed said, "The backbone of conservation is cleaning and stopping deterioration. That is plugging up the holes. You stop the weather from coming in, especially water. And then you do cleaning."

To support the efforts of the Orpheum Performing Arts Centre Ltd., write 200 E. First Street, Suite 413, Wichita, Kan. 67202, or call 265-3241.