

It's the TALK OF THE TOWN

Magic Returns to Playhouse Square

BY JOANNA CONNORS

On Good Friday, six weeks before next Saturday's grand opening of the restored State Theatre, Playhouse Square was deserted.

Driving into the area the Playhouse Square Foundation hopes to recreate as Cleveland's entertainment district was as quick as the spring breeze coming in off the lake.

No marquee lights flashed in the square; the Ohio and Palace theaters wouldn't have bookings for several weeks. Most restaurants had closed for the holiday. In those that stayed open, waiters folded napkins and talked about going home early.

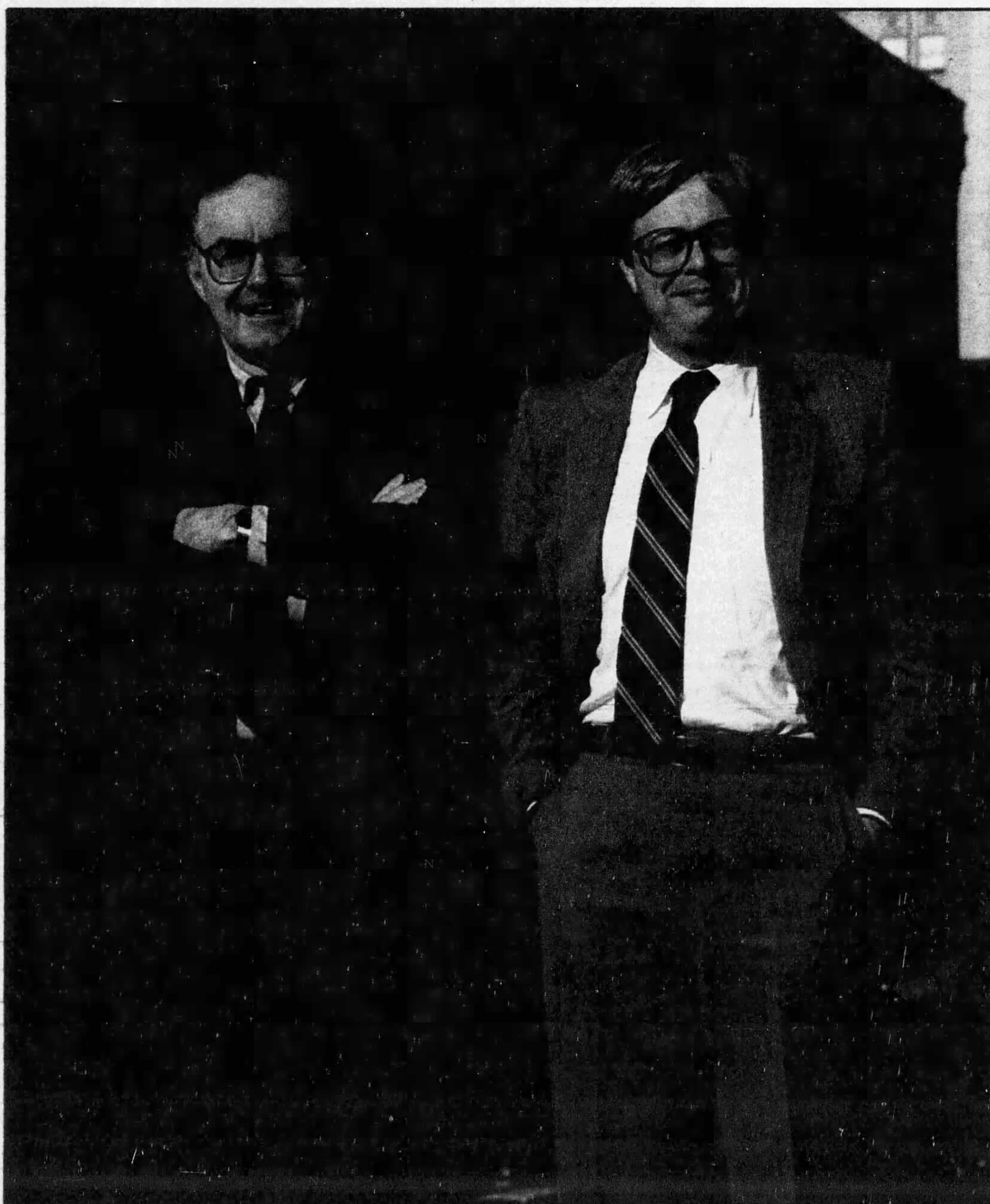
April drizzle fell. In the gray light, it seemed that a neutron bomb had hit overnight, until we entered the offices of Playhouse Square Foundation, that is. Secretaries had the day off, but everyone else came to work on the June 9 opening night.

Linda Southam, the marketing director, was punching buttons on the receptionist's phone when we walked in. "This is crazy," she said over the buzzing and flashing of the phone.

One of the flashing lights signaled the appearance of Lawrence J. Wilker, president of the foundation and the man in charge of the festivities. He emerged from his office carrying a chair. "I'd invite you all into my office but there's a meeting going on," he said. "We're trying to figure out how to get a Ferris wheel on the State stage. Don't you think that'll blow people's minds?"

He offered around a bag of jelly beans and then vanished. From his office we heard the name "Michael Jackson" mentioned once, then again.

Soon Wilker returned, this time with a hard



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Above: detail, mezzanine wall and ceiling in inner lobby of the State Theatre. Left: outer lobby ceiling. Opposite Page: John F. Lewis, Playhouse Square Foundation chairman, left, and Lawrence J. Wilker, foundation president.

The Cover: stairway and ceiling of the main lobby's grand staircases. The lobby is said to be the longest lobby serving a single theater in the world.

hat. "This hat has been with me for years," he said, showing the stickers on it from his years as director of properties for the Shubert Organization in New York and head of restoration for the Grand Opera House in Wilmington, Del. Wilker put it on, and it sat above his round, boyish face like a fireman's hat. He grinned and popped a couple of jelly beans into his mouth.

Wilker was talking about the Ferris wheel idea — "It'll go up to the rigging and show people how big the place is" — when foundation chairman John F. Lewis made a windblown entrance.

"Say hi to the folks in my office and grab a hard hat," Wilker told him. Lewis and Wilker had set aside a few hours for a tour of the new theater, the restoration of which Lewis has worked on for more than 10 years and Wilker for almost 2.

As we rode down in the elevator, we asked about Michael Jackson appearing opening night. Wilker grinned. "No, no, no," he said. "I wouldn't even try for that one."

"Did you tell her about Phyllis Diller, though?" asked Lewis.

"Listen, even I wouldn't show up if she were

our headliner," Wilker replied. Lewis giggled. The president and chairman routinely play off each other like a comedy team, each playing straight man for the other.

"I told the governor — " Lewis started. Then he looked at us appraisingly. "Now, wait a minute. If I tell you this, you'll print it, won't you? OK, let's put it this way. If I had talked to the governor yesterday, I *would have* told him that I was trying to get the Michigan marching band in." Lewis is an alumnus of the University of Michigan Law School.

"What'd he say?" asked Wilker.

"He said, 'Why Michigan? Why don't you get the Ohio marching band?'" Lewis started laughing. "And I said, 'Why, I never thought of that!'"

"We'll get them one way or the other," said Wilker, laughing.

As we entered the outer lobby of the State Theatre, we could hear the banging and whirring of construction inside. Lewis stopped us just inside the doors and pointed up.

"That's all been redone. If you could see

what it looked like before — that represents hours of volunteer work. But people just don't look up when they walk in." He sighed and shook his head.

Wilker, by this time, already was into the second of the labyrinthine network of lobbies leading to the theater.

"This is where it all started," he said, his arms opening to encompass the long lobby. Construction material, cordoned off with a velvet rope, filled half the room. "They came in here 10, 12 years ago, cleaned up the Ju Ju Fruits and the dead rats, and opened with 'Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris.'"

Saving Playhouse Square was largely a volunteer effort for years, Wilker explained. He arrived two years ago to take on the newly created job of president. Now that restoration of the theaters is pretty much a given, though not complete, Wilker's job is to fill them. And keep them filled.

Lewis was there almost from the beginning; he remembers the night 'Jacques Brel' opened, in April 1973.

"We served dinner cafeteria-style right in this lobby," he said. "My wife and I saw 'Jacques

Brel' 14 or 15 times. You wouldn't believe it: A lot of people did that. It was almost a cult."

We followed Wilker and Lewis farther into the central lobby, catching a conversation about the camaraderie of the early days of Playhouse Square. By now the stories of the 11th-hour reprieve for the theaters — destined at one point to become parking lots — have become local legend.

We came upon the new box office, the central ticketing place for all three theaters. The lobbies of the Palace and the Ohio feed into this lobby.

"Look at this!" Lewis almost shouted. "You gotta understand something," he explained. "This is a terrific, terrific excitement for those of us who remember this place as an outlet for egg foo yong and egg rolls. This was a kitchen in the old days, and the guy running it made chop suey back here and it stunk to high heaven."

Wilker ushered us into the new box office. No evidence of woks or deep frying remained: With its neutral colors and air of calm efficiency, the place looked like Hollywood's idea of a master computer center. People wearing telephone headsets sat typing at computer terminals.

"Someday this will be the fulcrum for all ticket sales, not just for us but for all the groups

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With work at the halfway point, construction officials survey progress on the State Theatre stage.

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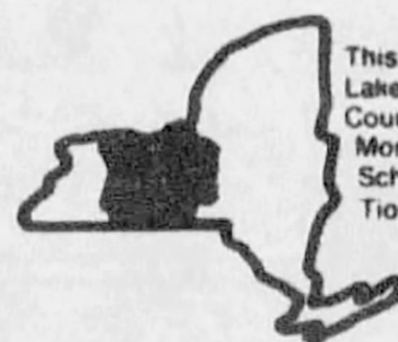
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Playhouse Square

A Short History

Feb. 5, 1921: The State Theatre opens with a gala. Marcus Loew, a partner in Loew's Ohio Theatres, imports two trainloads of movie stars for the opening. He shows the film, "Polly with a Past," and the Buster Keaton short, "Neighbors." The movie theater, designed by architect Thomas Lamb, cost \$2 million and seats 3,100. It is actually located on 17th Street, but one of the longest theater lobbies in the world gives it the prestigious Euclid Avenue address.

Feb. 12, 1921: The week after the State opens, the Ohio Theatre next door opens as a legitimate theater — also part of the Loew's Ohio Theatres group, also designed by Thomas Lamb. It seats 1,200, and opens with a performance of "The Return of Peter Grimm."

March 28, 1921: The Hanna Theater, built and owned by Dan R. Hanna, opens as a legitimate house with a performance of "The Prince and the Pauper."

April 1, 1921: The Allen Theatre, built by Jules and Jay Allen, opens with two movies, "The Greatest Love" and "The Hallroom Boys." The Loew's Corp. takes over the theater in 1922.

Nov. 6, 1922: Edward F. Albee opens his showplace theater, the Palace, built in memory of his friend and fellow vaudeville promoter, B.F. Keith. The Palace, designed by the architectural firm Rapp & Rapp, costs \$3.5 million and seats 3,200. It opens with a vaudeville show, starring Elsie Janis, "America's favorite mimic"; the Casinos; and Grace Hayes.

March 5, 1968: The Allen closes.

February 1969: The State and Ohio close.

July 20, 1969: The Palace closes.

February 1970: Ray Shepardson, a staff member of the Cleveland Board of Education, tours the theaters. He's looking for a meeting place, but after seeing the run-down and vandalized theaters decides to mount an effort to restore at least some of them.

July 1970: Shepardson and others form the Playhouse Square Association.

Nov. 21, 1971: The Budapest Symphony Orchestra performs in the Allen Theatre, presented by the Playhouse Square Association. Other shows follow during the next year.

May 25, 1972: The Milcap Co., owners of the Ohio and State theaters, announces plans to demolish the theaters for parking lot space. The city and volunteers rally to the defense; the Junior League donates \$25,000 to help save the two theaters.

November 1972: Playhouse Square Operating Co. formed.

1973: Playhouse Square Foundation formed to raise money for restoration work.

April 1973: "Jacques Brel" opens in the State Theatre lobby. It runs through June 1975 and becomes the longest-running show in Cleveland history. Other shows follow in the State and Palace lobbies.

1977: Cuyahoga County buys the Loew's Building — including the Ohio and State theaters — and leases them back to Playhouse Square Foundation.

1978: The county receives a \$3.1 million grant from the federal government to renovate the State Theatre auditorium.

1980: Playhouse Square Foundation launches a capital fund drive to raise the \$27 million needed for renovation of the theaters. The first phase raises \$16 million from local corporations and foundations, county and federal funding, and an Urban Development Action grant through the city.

The stagehouse for the State is planned after \$7 million is raised in federal and county

funds. The Reagan administration freezes the \$3.5 million in federal funds soon after; the money is not reinstated until 1981.

1981: Restoration of the Ohio begins in preparation for the 1982 season of the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival. Renovation costs about \$4 million.

July, 1982: The renovated Ohio reopens with Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival's production of "As You Like It." Other arts groups slated to use the theater include the Ohio Ballet, the Cleveland Modern Dance Association, the Ohio Chamber Orchestra and the Slovene Folklore Institute.

March, 1983: Work begins on the \$7 million State stagehouse. The 3,100-seat renovated theater is scheduled to be used by the Cleveland Ballet, Cleveland Opera, touring productions and the annual week of performances by the Metropolitan Opera.

June 9, 1984: The renovated State will reopen; \$4 million of the \$27 million needed for the restoration of the Playhouse Square theaters remains to be raised.

1985-86: Restoration of the Palace Theatre scheduled to begin. Renovation estimates set at \$5 million.

1990: Playhouse Square Foundation hopes to see a thriving commercial district to complement the entertainment district. Larry Wilker and John Lewis expect to see a developed shopping arcade in the Bulkley Building; shops, restaurants and bars in the area; perhaps a shopping area on Dodge Court, behind the Bulkley Building and next to the State Theatre stagehouse.

—Joanna Connors



1963: Playhouse Square lights were on, but they were to dim shortly. The Allen Theatre closed in 1968; the State, Ohio and Palace in 1969.

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using the theaters," Wilker said with the pride of a man who has bought state-of-the-art.

We returned to the lobby maze, going now into the cavernous, dark lobby where the first Playhouse Square shows were performed. Construction materials were scattered about here, too, and in the darkness and damp the lobby had the feel of a wondrously decorated basement.

A huge marble fireplace vied for attention with the magnificent wall murals painted in the early 1920s by the late James H. Daugherty, whose works hang in the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney and the Smithsonian. Elegant columns rose everywhere; intricate plaster work and detailed painting covered every available surface. A pair of graceful staircases at the end of the lobby led to the balcony.

As we walked to the theater, Lewis told us about the second big show, the WW II-nostalgia extravaganza called "Stompin' at the State." We asked him if he felt as cult-ish about "Stompin'" as about "Jacques Brel."

"Yes, and I'll tell you why," he said slowly, as though he was launching into a summation to the jury. "The war years were a time when everyone in this country was pulled together. We were all united in a common effort, there was a spirit of cooperation. And that isn't a bit different than what's going on here. Everyone is very much in favor of this development for the city. It's a very unified force — and for it to have been so unified for four years of intensive fund raising is amazing."

"I'll just point things out from here, OK?" Wilker was standing near the orchestra pit, where workers were hammering away at the flooring. Up on the stage, other workers were sawing and drilling; still others worked up in the boxes and balconies. Sheets of plastic covered the new red seats in the house. Dust filled the air; the rush to finish the State stagehouse created a construction cacophony.

"They go berserk when I go up on stage to talk," Wilker shouted.

Within a couple of minutes we were up on the stage, talking. And dodging workers.

Wilker executed a little bounce-jump on the stage floor. "This is a sprung floor for ballet," he said. "We

asked everywhere what the best floor for dancing is, and that's what we got.

"But now the opera wants to bring in an elephant for 'Aida.' Our problem is whether the floor can take that much weight."

"That's easy, Larry," said Lewis. "Just put tennis shoes on the elephant."

"Actually, I'm not so worried about the elephant's weight," Wilker said. "I'm worried about what it'll leave on our new floor."

Wilker looked up into the rigging. "How high is this, John? I know it's 10 stories outside, but I don't know what it is inside."

"That would make it 10 stories, wouldn't it?"

"No, I mean up to the rigging," Wilker said. "It's 95 feet, I know that."

"Well, that's 10 stories, today."

"Whatever," Wilker said. "Don't you think a Ferris wheel in here would be a mind-boggler?"

"Oh, yeah," Lewis answered. "What I want are bumper cars."

The night of the opening, Wilker told us, "There's going to be something going on everywhere, in every theater and every lobby. The philosophy of the party is to show the place off. Think of it: It's six acres of theater, 7,400 seats, plus the night club.

"We're going to be making fresh chocolate chip cookies in one corner, there's going to be a cappuccino and espresso bar, a piano bar, Chinese food, a giant video camera with TVs everywhere so you can see what's going on in other areas, dancing, singing..."

"And don't forget..." Lewis interjected.

"What?"

"Eggs."

"Eggs?" Wilker asked. Lewis nodded.

"Oh, yeah, an omelet bar, with made-to-order omelets. Music everywhere."

Lewis pulled us aside. "He doesn't have any enthusiasm for this thing," he whispered.

We walked farther back on the stage. "Now, this was a parking lot, here," Lewis said. "Oh, boy, it's good to see this progress." Above the backstage area are two stage-sized rehearsal halls, each with windows on three sides, a sprung floor like the stage floor, a mirrored wall and barres.

New dressing rooms and storage spaces also were built.

Lewis pointed back to the balcony. "Can you believe that, Larry? It's done." He turned to us. "They did that entire balcony loge in one month's time."

"You have to picture the way this theater had been destroyed," Wilker said. "They had come in and painted over all that detail work there with purple paint. Purple everywhere. Then they stretched a Cinerama screen from one edge of the balcony to the other, covering over those boxes."

"Since 1980, we've spent \$3 million revamping this auditorium," Lewis said. He looked around, satisfied. "Look at that detail there," he said, pointing to filigree around a balcony

box. "This is something you won't find anywhere else in this country. It's like a European theater; it's elegant."

"Take a look at the theater opening night," Lewis went on. "And then think of Lincoln Center or Kennedy Center. Compare what we have — this grace — to the brashness of Lincoln Center. And that was the best that money could buy: In the case of Kennedy Center, five times the amount of money we spent. Ten times with Lincoln Center."

We stood looking at the theater for a minute; Lewis and Wilker were silent. Then Wilker raised his arms, taking in the whole stagehouse. "This is the first parking lot that's been turned into a theater, rather than a theater turned into a parking lot." ■



Wishes and Dreams

If you get John F. Lewis, chairman, and Larry Wilker, president of Playhouse Square Foundation talking about the future, they turn the conversation into a scat-song of wishes and dreams.

"The John Glenn NASA Space Museum," is what Lewis envisions. "I mentioned it to Sen. Glenn and he said, 'With a name like that how could I not support it?'" reported Lewis.

"We've gotta make this a people place, a people magnet for downtown," Wilker said. He wants to see a plaza or park space between Playhouse Square and Cleveland State University. He also likes the idea of a Museum of Light, which has been promoted by a professor from MIT who

would like to produce "fire in the sky" over Playhouse Square.

Wilker talks about little jazz clubs and restaurants, "everything from haute cuisine to Chinese and espresso places, so you can just wander around, picking and choosing."

Lewis wants to put in an omnitheater, with an immense dome-shaped screen on which movies are projected. And he has another dream: "I want a skating rink so badly downtown. I want ice-skating in Playhouse Square. They have one in Washington, D.C., and it's terrific."

Wilker thinks the area needs a place where parents can drop off their children while they go shopping or to the theater.

Lewis said that the area needs a department store. "They're starting construction next month on the Halle's building, which will have offices and shops," he said.

Wilker promised noon concerts and poetry readings in the square next fall.

"One of the points that we stress over and over again is that the renovation of the theaters is not the end," said Wilker. "It's the beginning. People thought John and his group were crackpots to want to raise \$11 million in the beginning." If they think Wilker and Lewis are crackpots to want skating rinks and parks and poetry in the streets, all they have to do is look at what's been done already.

"There's an involvement and sense of investment here, by the community," said Wilker. "That's Cleveland to me."

— Joanna Connors



Playhouse Square Foundation trustees and board members, left to right: James A. Samuels; Lawrence J. Wilker, president; Rena J. Blumberg; Victor J. Scaravilli, vice chairman; John G. Butler; Lois U. Horvitz; John F. Lewis, chairman; James H. Bodurtha; Jon H. Outcalt; Henry G. Piper; David S. Knapp, vice chairman; John J. Dwyer; Lincoln Reavis; Daniel J. Dougherty; Lindsay J. Morgenthaler; Henry F. Eaton; James B. Wolf, Jr.; Donald T. Grogan and William B. Lawrence, secretary-treasurer.