

The Imperial Theatre of its might and majesty

John Vollmar

In the midst of the ever-increasing rejuvenation of our Downtown, the people of Sarnia can take great pride in the centerpiece which is The Imperial Theatre. It was once the Capitol Cinema constructed in 1937 and eventually closed, only to lie dormant and derelict until 1995 when it was purchased with a \$600,000 mortgage from the City of Sarnia. The following two years or so of renovations brought to fruition a new modernized facility, boasting a 600-seat capacity for those who would experience the many joys of live theatre. Through the years, and under the recent stewardship of Theatre Manager Brian Austin Jr., hundreds if not thousands of various forms of entertainment have come alive on the stage. From drama to comedy, famous and local musicians as well as the International Symphony Orchestra (presently under the Executive Directorship of our own Anthony Wing), and world class entertainers continue to find their way to our Sarnia theatre to provide excitement and talent as they reach out from the stage to play to the many visitors occupying the rows of seating in “the house”.

Theatre Sarnia, the owners of The Imperial Theatre, operates singularly, relying solely on ticket sales, sponsorships, donations and grants. Theatre Sarnia itself, and the talented and energetic people that volunteer themselves to ensure the success of the theatre operation, offers up to six productions throughout the year. As has been witnessed from its beginnings, the productions, be they drama, comedy, or musical, have escalated in quality of workmanship, acting abilities, directorship, all of which continue to grow and improve. At the WODL Festival 2019 Awards Ceremony in Guelph, for instance, nine different awards were presented to the Theatre Sarnia contingent for their presentation of “Girls Like That”, ranging from “Best Co-Ordinated Production to Outstanding Technical Achievement. The show’s Director, Ms. Henri Canino won The Visionary Award for Outstanding Direction.

Life happens at The Imperial Theatre. It happens because of the dedication of management, set construction workers, box office personnel, actors and everyone who comes together to create what some describe as “magic” within the majestic edifice of our theatre.

There are wondrous changes being proposed and considered for The Imperial Theatre. A fundraising committee has been struck, and is under the chairmanship of Mr. Ryan Metzler, a 28 year old full-time student at Lambton College. Ryan sits on the Board of Directors of Theatre Sarnia, assists with the Theatre Junior Youth Group program, and in his spare time, does some acting, most recently as Ash in *Evil Dead*.

As the Chair of the Fund-Raising Committee, Ryan spoke to me about the state of The Imperial Theatre. There are renovation requirements required as a result of over 25 years of use. Ryan, who speaks of the Theatre Magic, the people of the facility and the all-encompassing demographics of the patrons, is excited about the joy that is brought into peoples’ lives, and the world class shows that continue to inhabit the theatre. He is also excited about the projects awaiting completion, and the paths necessary to bring them to reality. He led me through some of the needs. Priorities have been placed on a new HVAC system, and new, larger and accessible washrooms. Also on the list is the replacement of the present and well-used seats, and the re-location of the box office, to house state-of-the-art capabilities.

Of course, the magnitude of the projects demands financing, and that’s where Ryan and his committee come in. They are in the process of designing fundraising activities. Some of the ideas being suggested include naming rights to various sectors of the Theatre, such as the Balcony area, the Main foyer, the Beverage Bar/Art Studio, etc. Or perhaps a person, couple or family may wish to adopt a seat, giving a donation and having their name on the back of one of the 600 or so new seats to be installed.

The Imperial Theatre has weathered well this past era of its being. The hard working volunteers and company are prepared to see it continue as a first-class venue for both artists and patrons alike for another generation or two.

If you are a past sponsor, individual or corporate, or you might be considering becoming one, or simply might join as a member, there will be a satisfaction of participating in the re-building of The Imperial Theatre...the Jewel of Downtown Sarnia.