

Rebirth of the Victory

By Lynn Atkins Staff Writer ! lynna@nwanews.com

Posted on Sunday, April 12, 2009

URL: <http://www.nwanews.com/bcdr/News/72416/>



Sunday photograph by Sarah Nader The Victory Theater, at 116 S. Second St. in downtown Rogers, will offer the Rogers Little Theater production of 'Rumors,' by Neil Simon, on April 17-18, April 24-26 and April 30-May 3.

In the eight months since the city took over the Victory Theater, there have been three dinner-theater productions, two Second Stage productions, three concerts, a KidWorks production, the annual Gridiron show produced by the Society of Professional Journalists, special events for Christmas and Valentine's Day, a talent contest and two beauty pageants held in the building.

It's been a busy eight months, and that's exactly what the board of directors wants, according to development director Lisa Anderson. "Our goal is to keep things hopping all the time," Anderson said. That became easier last summer when the city paid \$500,000 for the building. The \$1.8 million debt that the nonprofit group, the Rogers Little Theater, owed for the building was finally retired.

The city immediately leased the building back to the theater group but retained the right to use the theater on occasion.

The right to use the building wasn't a major factor in the decision to buy it, Mayor Steve Womack said recently. He was more interested in saving one of the "bright spots" in historic downtown Rogers.

While the west side of Rogers has grown and prospered, downtown has lost some of its vitality, Womack said. Downtown isn't able to compete as a retail center, he said. Instead, it needs its own identity. The presence of live theater is one way to help downtown Rogers, and Womack didn't want to risk losing that.

When Womack consulted with other community leaders, considering how to help the theater group, they decided the best course was to retire the debt on the Victory Theater so future fundraising could focus on something else.

"People would rather give money to see something enhanced. They want to see their dollars at work," Womack said.

The only legal way for the city to help was to assume ownership of the building. Womack believes future donors will be reassured now that the future of the building is secure.

One of the community leaders who consulted with Womack was Arvest President Rob Brothers.

"I don't think I was at (RLT's) very first production, but I was at many of their early productions," Brothers said.

At some point, he went from a patron to an actor and performed in six or seven productions over the years. He was on the board of directors when the group purchased the Victory Theater.

The partnership that saved the Rogers Little Theater was an example of the public/private partnerships Rogers is known for, Brothers said. It involved not only the city and dozens of private donors, but also several banks, including Arvest, which helped by agreeing to discount the debt the nonprofit owed. The final piece was a challenge grant from the Walton Family Foundation for \$750,000.

With the building's future set, the theater's board of directors was free to look at programming with an eye toward expansion. One of the first places the board looked was children's programming - both performances and educational opportunities, said Ed McClure, chairman of the RLT board of producers. He recently directed a weeklong spring-break camp for teenagers with an interest in musicals. The students auditioned to be part of the camp and spent the week studying scripts and learning their parts for a performance that was the grand finale of the week.

Special productions are planned for holidays. Last year's "A Christmas Story" was one. It was part of the KidWorks series. In 2010, there will probably be a special production for Mother's Day, Anderson said. The Christmas production for 2009 may be "It's a Wonderful Life."

"The programming is our bread and butter," McClure said. "Without the debt, we're in a great financial position. We can go forward and provide what the community wants."

Open house will be April 19

The Rogers Little Theater will host a building dedication and open house from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. April 19 at the Victory Theater, 116 S. 2nd St. in historic downtown Rogers. A program will begin at 2:30 p.m. The public is invited to celebrate the dedication of the Victory Theater and the successful completion of the RLT's capital campaign. The campaign helped the nonprofit group finish paying for the renovation of the theater. The building now belongs to the city, but the Rogers Little Theater will continue to provide programming at the theater. A short dedication ceremony will feature Rogers Mayor Steve Womack; RLT Capital Campaign chairman Rob Brothers; RLT past president Dick Barclay; RLT Producers chairman Ed McClure; Pamela Cicioni, chaplain of Mercy Health; Father Mike Sinkler of St. Stephen Catholic Church; and RLT president Rusty Turner. Refreshments will be served, and building tours will be available. For more information, e-mail Lisa Anderson at lkander@sbcglobal.net.