

St. Paul's World could meet need for medium-sized theater

By Mike Steete
Staff Writer

Somewhere, deep within the backstage corridors of St. Paul's World Theater, the nameless faded and faceless dressing room wall, John Barrymore once signed his name. Everyone knows he did. "Unfortunately," said Denny Hanson, manager of the World Theater properties, "no one has found it yet. And heaven knows we've looked. Some things you just take on faith."

Of course, when Barrymore played the venerable theater at 408 Wabasha (at Exchange St.) it was called the Shubert, part of that once proud chain that spread, tentacle-like, throughout the country. It was a handsome theater for its time with elegant opera boxes, two balconies, brass chandeliers, carefully crafted plasterwork and stenciling.

It was used largely as a vaudeville house until 1933 when movies moved in, a false ceiling was dropped over the second balcony and the name was changed to World Theater. There it remained until about 15 months ago when General Cinema gave up on it (and, apparently, downtown St. Paul) and closed its doors. It has been pretty much dormant since.

Not entirely so, however. Garrison Krillier has married his Prairie Home Companion troupe into the building for his weekly live shows. He also has put out various calls for volunteer clean-up crews to come on down and wash out. According to Hanson, the swabbings have held and the theater "is now surprisingly clean. They even got between the tiles in the bathrooms."

This week, however, things are taking one giant (or at least significant) step toward more life. The Walker Art Center and St. Paul/Ramsey Arts & Science Council is sponsoring a World Theater festival, three consecutive days of performing arts with three purposes in mind: to give visibility to the World Theater as a potential performing arts house and to dramatize the need for a medium-sized, flexible performing arts theater in the Twin Cities.

The festival schedule includes the Twin Cities debut of Barry, the dancer troupe headed by former Paul Taylor dancer Senta Druver, at 7 p.m. Friday; Garrison Krillier's Prairie Home Companion at its regular time, 5:30 p.m. Saturday; and Kenneth Delany's Dance Dance Company, fresh from its New York City debut, at 8 p.m. Sunday.

These are diverse groups, but the one thing everyone agrees on is the need for such a house. The World at present seats 550. If the second balcony were opened up it could hold about 1,000 people, the perfect size for small dance companies, musical ensembles, and even some theater troupes. At present there are few places available. The Walker's active performing arts program has been severely stuck for performing space for its dance and music programs, leading the Walker to put programs in such places as the Miller American Center, or, inasmuch, Answinn



Staff Photo by Art Hager

Manager Denny Hanson outside the World Theater in St. Paul.

School, the West Bank Firehouse and, almost, the University of Minnesota Armory (the latter fell through in a sea of bureaucracy). Companies like those have to build their schools around rare openings in existing theaters where they're available at all. Many groups end up in substandard space because of the lack of decent facilities.

The St. Paul/Ramsey Arts & Science Council has done a lengthy, year-long study on the possibilities of renovating one or another of St. Paul's downtown movie houses (at present there are no first-run movie theaters downtown). The study finally bore down on two likely theaters, the World and the Orpheum. The latter is a 1,700-seat house with one balcony built on a long, narrow fragment. Though the council carefully avoided making any choices between the theaters, almost everyone talked to agrees that the World is a more amiable space, better for audiences and better for the groups that need the space. The Orpheum has that hard-like quality that finally made the State Theater in Minneapolis so inhospitable to smaller companies.

The studies were conducted by Susan Anderson, director of planning for the council, who estimated that

the cost of renovation of the World, including replacement of opera boxes, opening up of the ceiling, replacing plaster work and bringing the backstage, technical equipment up to code, would cost about \$1.3 million.

Hanson, whose Multifarm Corp. now manages the theater and the Shubert apartments above and next to the theater, said it would take about \$200,000 to \$300,000 to put it on stage for continued use, without extensive renovation. The theater itself was owned by lawyer Robert Dworkin, who died a few months ago. Potential selling and leasing prices are thus not known.

Michael Smith, executive vice president of the arts and science council, said the council has done nothing about the question since its studies, but, instead, has deferred its decision to the St. Paul City Center Authority. The authority has been studying for some time now the feasibility of building a new City Center theater to replace its present crummy and dilapidated theater. No decision has been made. Many people, however, are concerned that if such a theater were built it would be another large theater appropriation for the majority of local groups needing space.

Smith said the council would be willing to run the World as a lake facility, if a program could be worked out similar to those for the Arts and Science and the Landmark centers. In other words, the city would own the building, the county would pay for maintenance and we would operate it. He simply doesn't have the money to run such a facility without a deal like that. He also knows that a house like the World could never pay its way. As far as he's concerned, the whole question is still in a study phase.

Nevertheless, the council has put some money, about \$1,300, into the festival, most of it to upgrade electricity and power sources and replace backstage equipment. The Walker is bringing in the lighting equipment and paying the labor costs of getting the theater ready for dance performances.

It seems clear that a theater like the World, well-managed and programmed, could easily be busy 200 to 300 nights a year. It would be of use not only to St. Paul but also to Minneapolis groups, not to mention touring companies. It's in the middle of an area being revitalized and could be a dynamic centerpiece in any downtown development.

Brought back to its original, turn-of-century beauty, it also could become an architectural gem in a city that prides itself on architecture, preservation and restoration. And, ultimately, it would eventually save us from raising the building and reducing to rubble a real John Barrymore signature, wherever it may be.

