

# Variety Theater to undergo 8 million dollar restoration

by Frank Barnett

"We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."

Though he died in 1927, the year Cleveland's Variety Theater was built, national theater tycoon Marcus Loew once made that bold statement. It says a lot about the importance of consciously designing beautiful buildings that showed movies and vaudeville in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Part of the entertainment and escapism was the theater itself,

the package the movie experience came in. Many of these venues across the country have been torn down or drastically altered. The Variety at W. 118<sup>th</sup> and Lorain is one of the survivors. It is about to undergo an 8 million dollar restoration.

What kept it standing? There seems to be a balance of neighborhood nostalgia and it simply not being in the way of anything. While Playhouse Square is legendary for its restoration, a similar collection

of historic theaters at E. 105<sup>th</sup> and Euclid was demolished in the early 1980s, very simply in the path of the also legendary, forever expanding Cleveland Clinic. But developers could avoid taking the 1900-seat Variety. Once the movies abandoned the city for the suburban multiplexes, it was kept active until about 20 years ago with rock concerts, a charter school, a Halloween haunted house and even as a wrestling gym. It needs work but at least it was

kept from the wrecker's ball until its time came. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places (which in itself saves it from demolition), and a designated Cleveland landmark.

Within days of Gretchen Moore becoming Commercial Program Director of Westown Community Development Corporation 6 years ago, she got an unexpected call from the building's owner. He wanted it in the hands of someone who would finally give it the attention it needed. Moore is now also the theater's Project Manager. "Later this year they'll be hiring a development director to do the fundraising. I'm a community organizer, not a fundraiser," she said with a smile.

The ruins of Pompeii is almost a cliché, but you can't help but think that as you see crumbling plaster and flaking paint, which, instead of hopeless decay, suggests the unbelievable beauty it was and can certainly be again. Playhouse Square's longtime manager John Hemsath commented that the Variety's damage isn't as extensive as he had to deal with. Moore pointed out the paint and plasterwork is "all cosmetic work. The architects have told us that structurally it's really sound."

People in the neighborhood and further north in Lakewood were surveyed as to what they'd like to see, and dinner theater was the most popular response. A very diverse project, there is room for that as well as second-run movies, children's theater, comedy and private parties. The only thing for sure it will not be used for is rock concerts, as the neighborhood used to complain of the noise that generated.

"Since the beginning, we've been in contact with the Capital Theater restoration people (in the Gordon Square area)," said Moore. "We wanted to be sure we weren't replicating what they were doing." They won't be in competition at all since the Capital will be showing independent and foreign films. In fact, nothing else on the west side would compete with the potential uses the Variety will bring to the area. And proximity to Interstates 90 and 71 puts it a very convenient location.

The building includes 6 storefronts and 13 upstairs apartments, which will allow plenty of rehearsal and other support space. The Friends of the Historic Variety Theatre organization has acquired space across the street for the parking that is now lacking.

A new marquee has been built and will be installed in the spring when the initial fund drive is complete. A tornado in the 1950's destroyed the vertical part of the marquee that you associate with old marquees, rising above the canopy with the theater's name. The new marquee has that vertical part as well as a fully lit canopy. The project's website [www.varietytheatreleveland.com](http://www.varietytheatreleveland.com) describes a fundraiser, \$10 to sponsor a marquee bulb or \$500 for a marquee letter.

Along with the marquee, installing doors salvaged from a school of the same era to replace the old rotting doors will give the exterior a much more promising look as the interior is painstakingly restored over the next few years.

All in all, the Variety restoration will dynamically impact renewed economic activity in the area.



Variety Theatre in 1930, as viewed from the corner of W. 117<sup>th</sup> and Lorain Avenue: Photo obtained from the Friends of the Historic Variety Theatre website: [www.varietytheatreleveland.com](http://www.varietytheatreleveland.com).