

Butler Eagle

If the print dialog box does not automatically appear, open the file menu and choose Print.

Article published June 20, 2009

Strand slates grand opening

ZELIENOPLE — After 25 years of darkness and nearly eight years of construction work, Zelenople's historic Strand Theatre will reopen July 16.

A weeklong grand opening celebration is planned that will culminate with three performances, July 24 to 26, by the legendary Debbie Reynolds.

The theater's opening also coincides with the Zelenople-Harmony Business Association's 46th annual Horse Trading Days Crafts & Music Festival from July 16 to 18.

Ron Carter, president and executive director of the Strand Theater Initiative, the nonprofit group that owns and operates the theater, said it has been a long road since he took on the project in 2001, but the group has finally made it to its opening night.

"Everything we've been doing for the past eight years has been working toward getting it done. It's been a ridiculous process with all the construction delays. It took so long to put everything together," Carter said.

"It's been a ride on the wild side, but I wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

The reopening of the theater marks a new era of entertainment for the area.

"I couldn't be more thrilled that The Strand will finally reopen its doors after all this time, and in such a way that we could attract a headliner like Debbie Reynolds to perform as the final act for our Grand Opening Week," said Ron Slanina, a board member and artistic director for The Strand, who arranged for Reynolds' performances.

Originally from the area, Slanina has been living and working in Hollywood for the past 15 years.

"They done a marvelous job. It's a great thing for the arts. It's a great thing to this town," said Donald Pepe, Zelenople borough manager.

"People thought it was never going to happen, and it did. They really did a heck of a job."

Pepe said the group's effort will help bring more people into town in the evenings and might encourage others to piggyback on its successes to create businesses.

Jack Cohen, executive director of the Butler County Tourism & Convention Bureau, said the reopening of the historic 1914 theater will have a big impact on both tourism and on the region.

"Just look who they are bringing in on their opening week (Reynolds). That's a pretty big name," Cohen said.

Cohen added that arts is one of the biggest reasons why people move and want to live in Butler County, and it goes back to the quality of life.

"Anytime we can add an old venue, it's a great opportunity. We're real excited about its (The Strand Theater) opening," Cohen said.

The Strand Theater was built in 1914 at 119 N. Main St. and shared space with Sapienza's Fruit Market.

The theater featured silent films and vaudeville performances.

The building was upgraded in 1939 with the addition of a large marquee, but has sat vacant since 1984. It has since survived two decades of attempts to tear it down.

The project wasn't a historic restoration but Carter included as many original pieces as he could. The theater will seat around 400 people.

Though the outside of the theater remains virtually the same except the marquee sign and some other cosmetic changes, the inside of the theater has been dramatically changed, though some elements of the old movie theater remain, including the two 1930s-area film projectors that are incorporated into the decor.

The seating inside the theater's auditorium has been turned 90 degrees toward a side wall that will now have a stage and film screen.

It is a half-moon, stepped seating area and includes a mezzanine.

"The worst seat in the house is only 20 feet from the stage," Carter said.

The look of the inside of the theater is a marriage of industrial and art deco styling along with the preservation of some of the theater's heritage.

Items preserved from the old movie theater include the ticket booths, the poster holders and display cases inside the theater along with the 1930s movie projectors, Carter said.

Carter said there is a wide array of possibilities for future entertainment, including stage productions, musical acts, comedy acts, lectures, classic films, second run bargain films, independent films and film festivals and even children's theater.

More work is slated at the theater.

A stage house is planned for the building adjacent to the theater now occupied by the Classy Lady Consignment Shop. A two-tier parking deck and cultural center that could host dance and art classes and could be rented out for receptions also is planned.

Carter said he hopes work on the neighboring stage house could be begin in the next few years. "It would be nice if we could have all of the work done by our centennial year in 2014," Carter said.

GRAND OPENING SCHEDULE

Here is a list of the events planned for the grand opening celebration, July 16 to 26, at the Strand Theater, 114 N. Main St.

Tickets for all programs, except the Joe Negri and Pop Rocks concerts, can be ordered through The Strand Web site: www.TheStrandTheater.org, or by calling 724-742-0400. Box office hours are noon to 4 p.m., Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Tickets for the Joe Negri and Pop Rocks concerts are free, but only will be made available on a first-come, first-served basis at box office the days of the performances.

- **July 16 — Mystery in the Library, A Children's Interactive Play.** The show starts at 7:30 p.m. and tickets are \$5 per person, plus a donation of a nonperishable food item to benefit the Southwest Butler County Food Cupboard.

- **July 17 — The Joe Negri Quartet.** The show starts at 7:30 p.m. and tickets are free. Negri will take the stage at 8:30 p.m. A special guest will perform beginning at 7:30 p.m.

- **July 18 — The Pop Rocks. The show starts at 7:30 p.m. and tickets are free.** The group of young musical students became popular regionally with fight songs for both the Steelers and the Penguins.

- **July 20 — A Night of Classics, Fashion Show and Wine & Cheese Tasting.** Tickets are \$20. The evening will be filled with classical music, a selection of wines and cheeses and fashions that could have stepped out of numerous classical movies. Several local shops, as well as owners of private collections, have loaned the garments that will be showcased.

- **July 21 — Silent Film Festival. Tickets are \$7.** In celebration of the entertainment

The Strand originally presented in 1914, the evening will feature classic silent films, including a Felix the Cat cartoon, a Charlie Chaplin short "The Pawnbroker," and Buster Keaton's classic film, "The General." The films will be enhanced by live piano accompaniment by Cy Fleming and Dave Bruce Smith and a performance by The Strand Community Choir.

• **July 24-26 — An Evening of Music & Comedy with Debbie Reynolds.** Showtimes are 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and a 2 p.m. Sunday matinee. Tickets are: \$75 for general seating; and \$100 that includes a reception with Reynolds after the show. Reynolds' entertainment career spans six decades, and her show will share song, laughter, film and other surprises. She was nominated for an Oscar for her role in "The Unsinkable Molly Brown," but is perhaps best known for her role in the classic film "Singin' in the Rain."

[Back](#)