John Breunig (opinion): Rebooting Stamford's Avon Theatre with 3rd screen, new seats, lobbies and more

John Breunig
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For a few flickering moments Wednesday night, the audience at the packed Avon Theatre in Stamford was mesmerized by a silent movie.

It was a sneak preview of the Avon of the future. Stadium seating, reimagined lobbies upstairs and downstairs, glass front doors, new screens, audio and HVAC systems and long-overdue ADA-approved lifts. A third screen with 48 seats for community events is to be cleverly nestled sideways, like a magic trick, beneath the projector for the main auditorium.

In cinema-speak, this is not a risky remake, but the remastering of a classic.

It also felt meta. The brief slide show focused on renderings by New York architect Lewis Jacobsen (who apparently is a Stanley Kubrick aficionado, using images from “2001: A Space Odyssey” and “A Clockwork Orange” in his images). It was a double feature of sorts, followed by “My Architect” (2003), which was the first movie screened at the Avon when it reopened on Feb. 13, 2004 after a span of more than four dark years. Filmmaker Nathaniel Khan hosted a post-film
discussion of his documentary, which focuses on the turbulent life of his father, 20th-century architect Louis Kahn.

The Avon might never have reopened if not for Greenwich residents Deborah and Chuck Royce, who have managed to retain its mission to spotlight independent, foreign, art house, documentary and vintage films over the past two decades. Deborah Royce announced Wednesday that the couple is donating the building to the Avon Theatre Film Center, along with a million dollars to launch the capital campaign. They will remain involved as directors emeritus, with their duties as board co-chairs taken over by Art Selkowitz and Susan Cullman.

Cullman flashed back to the theater’s origins in 1939, which is perennially held as cinema’s gold standard (“Gone with the Wind,” “The Wizard of Oz,” “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” “Wuthering Heights,” “The Rules of the Game,” etc. ...). Any history of the Avon reliably begins with mention that the first movie screened there was “It’s a Wonderful World,” starring Claudette Colbert and Jimmy Stewart.

But that’s not entirely true.

Before the main attraction at that 8:45 p.m. premiere on June 14, 1939, the audience was treated to a Fitzpatrick Traveltalk, a short from New Yorker humorist Robert Benchley, a “March of Time” newsreel on “War, Peace and Propaganda” and a Donald Duck cartoon (“Beach Picnic”). The travelogues by Shelton native and former journalist James Fitzpatrick were noteworthy because they helped bring color to the screen. Not bad for 40 cents a ticket (65 cents for a reserved seat).

No modern amenity will likely rival the Avon’s boast 84 years ago of providing “refrigeration” (aka, air-conditioning). It was also the first theater in the city to offer cushioned seats.
After 20 years of shepherding fundraising for Stamford’s chief outdoor attraction (Mill River), Selkowitz is shifting his focus indoors. He minced no words in proclaiming what he is most anxious to upgrade at the Avon (“let’s be honest ... the seats suck” he told Wednesday’s crowd). The audience, though, applauded the loudest at a different pledge, that the bathrooms would be expanded (that surprised me. “You haven’t been in the ladies room,” my wife later corrected me. I did not investigate further).

Selkowitz wasn’t the only cast member offering candor at the screening. Nathaniel Khan used only one profanity during a charming engagement with the audience, as he described walking around Stamford and seeing “an awful lot of @#$%^ architecture” (I will not argue the point).

Then he noted that there are also “gems.”

“Coming back here, I saw the sign for the Avon like a beacon in the night.”

The Avon has been Stamford’s beacon during most of the 21st century. But it also is a beacon for independent bijous. Most of its Stamford co-stars of 1939 are long gone (the Strand, the Stamford, the Plaza, the Rialto). The Palace no longer shows movies. The State has remained dark since 2018. When I documented that Greenwich closed its last theater in 2020, it didn’t draw much attention. But Deborah Royce had a captive audience when she stood in front of the Avon screen and pointed to the big picture: “Now there’s no theater in Greenwich. None in New Canaan. Or Darien.”

We all know the plot twists that got us here. Video games. Streaming. COVID-19.

The Avon’s fate has always relied on forward-thinking patrons. Its contemporaries were built for vaudeville, while it was designed exclusively for moviegoers.
Original architect William Hohauser is better remembered for his Miami hotels, though some of his theaters (such as the Normandie on West 57th in New York), still operate.

In the wake of ornate theaters of the 1920s and art déco preferences of a few years earlier, Hohauser’s blueprints used the name “The Colonial,” which likely explains the paintings of Pilgrims that will continue to decorate the walls of the main auditorium, and the entrance columns that greet patrons. It was constructed by Frank Rich, whose fingerprints are all over Stamford’s downtown. Total price tag: $150,000.

Like a heroic screen character surviving setbacks (see Jones, Indiana), the Avon has endured. In 1979 it went dark after a sale, and reopened in 1980 with a second theater. A decade later, it marked its 50th year in 1989 with an exclusive preview of “Ghostbusters II.” A friend and I were trying to summon the right adjective to describe its state just before it shuttered the last time in 1999. Longtime Advocate columnist Don Russell nailed it in a contemporaneous clip: “ratty.”

Adam Birnbaum, who has guided programming at the theater since the Royces hired him two decades ago, had an even worse impression when he first entered the theater in 2003. “The carpets were a mess. The walls were just completely disgusting,” he recalled. “If you looked up you could see the sky.”

How people cast an upward gaze is a how-full-is-the-glass exercise. Some just see a roof caving in. Others are able to see infinity (and yes, beyond).
“We have to raise a lot of money,” Selkowitz said when I approached him afterward, repeating a phrase he used on stage, and will summon frequently in months to come during the Avon reCreated campaign to raise $8.5 million.

He didn’t ask for any on this night. It reminded me of when the theater declared its return 19 years ago with a special event featuring legendary director Robert Altman. Then, and now, it was wise to remind the audience that the Avon is really about so much more than architecture.

I look forward to new seats, inviting lobbies and an intimate screening room. Still, when the work is done, my wish is that the first images on the new screen feature a certain celluloid duck. Like Donald, the Avon manages to remain classic, and provocative.

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