

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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## DEVELOPERS HOPE TO RAISE THE CURTAIN ON A GEM DOWNTOWN

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Michael and Steven Roberts, who own the Mayfair Hotel next door, want a refurbished **American Theatre** to inspire a St. Louis renaissance.

It has been about 40 years since brothers Michael and Steven Roberts made their first attempt to become involved with theater.

They were among hundreds of fidgeting, excited children auditioning at the newly refurbished, newly renamed **American Theatre** downtown, hoping for a role in an upcoming production. They have vivid memories.

"This was the first time we had even been inside a true legitimate theater," Steven Roberts said. "I remember being on stage, with the bright lights overhead, looking out from the stage and seeing this big grand theater in front of me."

The brothers didn't make the cut as child actors.

But as adults, working as developers on a growing number of projects downtown and elsewhere, they're making a comeback at the 87-year old **American Theatre** in a much different role: They own it.

Late last year, the **American's** longtime owner, Charles Cella, decided to sell with what he said was "heavy, heavy sadness." The theater, along with others here and elsewhere, had been owned by his family for decades. His grandfather, Louis A. Cella, built the lavishly ornamented beaux-arts style **American** in 1917, originally as the **Orpheum** vaudeville theater. Charles Cella said it was the last theater his family owned.

"The final curtain has descended on a rich tradition. We were the oldest family owning legitimate theater in America," said Cella, president of Southern Real Estate and Financial Co. "But (the Roberts brothers) presented an offer we felt we couldn't turn down, based on sound economic considerations."

The parties declined to disclose the sale price.

For the owners of Roberts Brothers Properties LLC, a revival plan for the **American** remains a work in progress. The theater has been mostly dark and empty in recent years.

They've been talking with experts in the theater and entertainment business about putting mid-sized touring theatrical shows and local productions on stage at the **American**.

"We can see wonderful off-Broadway shows and plays there that need a venue of that size and have been bypassing St. Louis," Michael Roberts said.

Also, they've been talking with companies such as Clear Channel Entertainment and its competitors about booking music and other entertainment there. Michael Roberts said they don't want to see rock concerts there, though.

"We might do everything from jazz to doo-wop to Motown review music to attract older demographics," he said, "and I can see the Frank Sinatra crowd in there."

Meanwhile, they want to expand on the rental business, which has been the main reason for keeping the lights on. Of the 35 events booked there last year by Clear Channel, which leased the theater from Cella, five were music concerts. The rest were wedding receptions, meetings, fund-raisers and similar events.

"The **American** has been underutilized," Michael Roberts said. "We think it could be the spark that downtown needs."

The last theater of its kind left downtown, the **American** stands alongside two other historic gems the brothers are working to revive.

One is the 79-year-old Mayfair Hotel at 806 St. Charles Street, next door to the **American**. The hotel would be an integral part of what's being planned for the theater. It would provide catering for the **American**. In turn, the American would be a draw for hotel guests and meeting planners looking for nearby space and entertainment.

"My perception of the hotel business is that tourists and meeting planners no longer look at just how nice the rooms are. They also look at issues such as . . . the level of entertainment connected to the hotel," Michael Roberts said.

The brothers also have a \$13 million renovation under way at the former St. Louis Board of Education Building at 911 Locust Street. Renamed the Roberts Lofts, it's scheduled to reopen this year with 50 apartments and street-level retail spaces. Roberts Lofts, like the Mayfair and the **American**, are part of an area around the Old Post Office that the city and other developers are working to rejuvenate.

The brothers said the **American Theatre** remains in good condition. But they plan to freshen it with new paint and carpeting. "We'd like to bring it back to the way it looked as the **Orpheum**," Steven Roberts said.

Michael Roberts said no events are booked yet at the **American**. Clear Channel stopped booking late last year because of the impending ownership change. How soon that will change "depends on who we end up with on the management side, but we should be up and running soon," he said.

Activity at the **American** was down in recent years at least in part because of construction work for the Renaissance Suites and Renaissance Grand convention-hotel complex, Michael Roberts said.

"But that's all behind us now," he said, "so it's time to step things up and get activity back into the **American**."

On the theatrical front, the brothers believe the **American** will fill a niche that isn't served in the city. With about 1,600 seats -- some reconfigured 16 years ago into tiered, cabaret-style seating

-- the American is smaller than the Kiel Opera House, which has about 3,500 seats in its main auditorium. That venue is being revived by developer Donald Breckenridge and his associates for a variety of entertainment, including Broadway shows.

Clear Channel Communications would oversee booking the Opera House, and Fox Associates would present Broadway shows there. Fox Associates operates the 4,500-seat Fox Theatre in Grand Center. Breckenridge said putting on Broadway shows at the **American** would compete with the Opera House.

"Because of the way the Opera House is laid out," he said, "we could have 1,500 seats on the first floor, and that would be a full house."

Mike Isaacson, vice president at Fox Associates, believes what the Roberts brothers have in mind could work alongside the bigger Fox and the reopened Opera House. "The bread and butter" for those venues, he said, would be touring musical productions that would be too large for the **American**.

Dennis Reagan, president of the Muny, said competition builds audiences for everyone.

Theatrical productions worked well at the **American** from 1982 until 1987, when the Muny did a winter season bringing smaller theatrical productions to the American and bigger musicals to the Fox, he said. "I think live theater begets live theater. And the more we have, the better," Reagan said.

The brothers said they're "seeking advice" from experts in the theatrical and entertainment community to find the best approach for bringing theater back to the American and having it work with what others are doing. Also, they're talking with St. Louis theater groups "to see if there would be one or two plays they could do at the **American** outside of their regular season," Michael Roberts said.

"Our hope," he said, "is to be part of a renaissance of theater in St. Louis . . . bring the **American** back to its original glory and create a venue for all types of new upscale entertainment in downtown."

## **American Theatre**

Opened: 1917

Original owner: Louis A. Cella, who at the time had financial interests in seven other theaters and two vaudeville franchises in St. Louis

Architect: Gustave Albert Lansburgh, a San Franciscan who specialized in designing beaux-arts theaters and vaudeville houses

Cost: \$500,000

Seating: 1,800 originally; reduced to about 1,600 in 1988

## **Turning a page on the American Theatre's story**

1917: The theater opens as the Orpheum and becomes part of the Orpheum Theater Co.'s national circuit of more than 20 vaudeville venues.

1930s: It's leased to Warner Brothers for a movie theater. Later, it's leased to Loew's Inc.

1960: Cella family refurbishes the Orpheum, changes the name to American and moves in higher-quality productions from another theater -- also called the American -- on Grand Avenue.

1971: A production of "Hair" opens, packing the theater despite pickets outside protesting nudity onstage.

- 1974: Cella family leases the American to Frank Pierson, an entertainment promoter and producer who brought theatrical productions to the theater until his death in 1988.
- 1982-1987: The Muny brings in theatrical productions as part of a winter season at the American and the Fox Theatre in Grand Center.
- 1988: Charles Cella, the grandson of Louis Cella, reconfigures seating on the first floor to be tiered, cabaret style, for his daughter's debut party.
- 1989-2003: Cella leases the theater to Contemporary Productions, which was bought by SFX, which in turn was bought by Clear Channel Entertainment Inc. It books mostly music concerts as well as rent space for wedding receptions and similar gatherings. In 2003 the American was used for 35 events, including five concerts.
- Dec., 2003 Cella sells the theater to developers Michael Roberts and Steven Roberts, who own the Roberts Mayfair Hotel next door.