

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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## THEN & NOW: THE ROBERTS ORPHEUM THEATER

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April 10, 2005, Section: A&E, Page F3

**To some, it was a place full of cherished memories of concerts. To others, it was a grimy palace run down by an overabundance of hard rock acts.**

A major rebirth is at hand downtown Sunday night, when the former American Theatre officially opens its doors as the **Roberts Orpheum** Theater. The name, appropriately, brings together the old and the new. When it opened as a vaudeville showcase in 1917 under the helm of Louis A. Cella, the building at 416 North Ninth Street was known as the Orpheum Theater; it was renamed the American Theatre in 1960. The other part of the venue's new moniker derives from current owners Mike and Steve Roberts, whose name is already attached to the Roberts Mayfair Hotel, Roberts Lofts on the Plaza, Roberts Village and Roberts Broadcasting Co.

The brothers bought the building as a Christmas gift in 2003 for \$1.5 million. The purchase represented yet another notch on the Robertses' belt of developments, but they say it was also significant for more personal reasons: Their mother was denied entrance to the theater when she was young because of segregation. No more Suicidal Tendencies The Roberts brothers have one main goal: Filling the Orpheum with concertgoers looking for adult-oriented acts in a theatrical setting. "When the property was going down and was poorly managed, they threw any type of group in there," Mike Roberts says. Hard-rock acts that stomped through the American included Pantera, Incubus, White Zombie, Suicidal Tendencies and Megadeth.

Booking at the reopened theater will be far more genteel, more in keeping with the venue's earlier history. The brothers, who like to refer to the building as the grande dame, remember seeing theatrical productions such as "The Music Man" when they were boys, and jazz and R&B concerts as young men. Joe Litvag of Anschutz Entertainment Group/Concerts West, which books shows at the **Roberts Orpheum**, says, "We won't be doing hard-rock shows. Those are the type of shows that work really well at the Pageant, and that's where they should play. We got so many calls for harder-rock shows, and we said, 'Call the Pageant.' I made a promise to Mike and Steve that I will not trash the place by booking too aggressive of a show." It's safe to say Insane Clown Posse won't be back for a return visit. Of course, given the theater's overall booking approach, it's more than a little ironic that the **Roberts Orpheum** kicks off its concert programming with a sold-out performance from one of the '90s top boy bands, the Backstreet Boys.

Despite its retooled programming, Litvag says, the Orpheum is not trying to wipe out memories of the American, which once hosted Red Hot Chili Peppers, Smashing Pumpkins and Pearl Jam on the same bill. Many concertgoers fondly remember shows by such artists as Lenny Kravitz, Tori Amos, Beck, Moby, the Indigo Girls and Counting Crows. "We want people to keep the good memories and erase the bad memories," says Litvag, who booked the venue when he was with rival concert producers Clear Channel Entertainment. "Plenty of people have negative memories. It was so rundown for several years. It was a mess. We trashed it with all the hard-rock shows over the years. But I don't want to erase the positive experiences people had of the up-close-and-personal shows. I've heard so many amazing comments from people who loved the experience of going there. It was always a party at the American." All systems are go once

more Before the party could start again, however, there was a lot of tidying to do -- not just cleaning up old perceptions, but giving the venue a physical makeover. "A lot of effort has gone into getting it up to code," Litvag says. "Our goal is to have people walk in the door and be amazed at the transformation."

The Robertses say renovations have totaled more than \$2.5 million and estimate that costs will reach \$5 million by the time they are finished. **Roberts Orpheum** retains the basic feel of the American, and the venue's ornate beauty remains. Concertgoers will note a new electronic-reader marquee, new paint and carpet, and remodeled bathrooms in the basement, with the women's bathroom doubled in size. Retractable seats, assembled on risers on the floor's three levels, can be removed for corporate and private events, meetings and receptions that don't require concert seating. General manager Mike Jennings boasts of new lighting, sound and electrical systems. The old electrical system, he says, looked like something out of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. Thomas Cooke, whose Image Technologies Corp. is handling the technical work, says everything is "high end, state of the art, designed specifically for the theater." There's also new plumbing, and the exterior will see some tuck-pointing and artwork restoration.

Even before the restoration, Steve Roberts was impressed by the venue's sound. "When you listened to the acoustic value of the facility, it sounded terrific," he says. "It didn't need the mega sound systems. It had a natural acoustic value. I remember sitting up pretty high at concerts, and I could see well but I could hear even better." The "up close and personal" feel is what moves Mike Roberts most. He says the most elevated seat in the rather steep balcony is closer to the stage than the mezzanine at the Fox Theatre. "Folks returning to the theater will find it exceptional," he says. Competitive visions Before tackling the renovation, the Roberts brothers first had to convince lending institutions that their vision was viable. One of the most important steps, Mike Roberts says, was aligning themselves with established, professional institutions such as Ticketmaster and AEG.

AEG's Litvag had his own hurdles: convincing artists' representatives that this isn't the old American. "That has been time consuming, but thus far we've been successful in convincing them," he says. **Roberts Orpheum**, with its capacity of 1,450, also will be challenged by the similarly sized Pageant, whose capacity ranges from 1,000 to 2,000. But Litvag sees it as a friendly competition and points out that **Roberts Orpheum** will have only about 40-50 concerts a year, far fewer than the Pageant. Pat Hagin, the Pageant's managing partner, says competition is healthy and presents more options to the consumer. He adds that his venue will continue to be aggressive in pursuing any act appropriate to the Pageant. When Litvag was at Clear Channel a few years ago, bookings at the American were phased out as shows were rerouted to the newer Pageant. During that time, Litvag wondered what niche he could fill at the fading American. "It was too special to sit there dark, but I couldn't ever come up with anything," he says. But wheels started spinning again when Litvag learned that the Roberts brothers had taken over. "When I laid out what I had in mind, they looked at each other and smiled because that's what they were thinking," Litvag says. "We saw a need for a more upscale live-music establishment of this size in St. Louis."

Mike Roberts describes the difference between the **Roberts Orpheum** and the Pageant this way: "We make the distinction that the other venue in town is for the children. We're for the parents of the children. We want adults to be happy to come here and see Joe Jackson or Mary Chapin Carpenter." Hagin is amused by Roberts' characterization of the Pageant as "for the children," given that the Orpheum's first show is the Backstreet Boys. "I just love that," he says. "Five years ago, they were all 14 years old. Now, they're 19 years old." However, Hagin readily

agrees with Litvag's assertion that the Pageant was built as a nightclub and does extremely well by operating as such. By contrast, Litvag says, **Roberts Orpheum** offers a theaterlike experience for concertgoers that the Pageant can't duplicate. The Orpheum, he says, is designed for the "adult concertgoer who prefers to sit in nice seats and have a theater experience rather than a nightclub experience. We want people who aren't price sensitive necessarily, who like the idea of getting dressed up and going downtown to a nice new restaurant and then going to see a great show." Mike Roberts says: "There are so many people moving into downtown St. Louis. Now they can walk to a venue and see a show."