

Virginia Stage Co. buys the Wells Theatre and donates it to the city

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If only the walls of the Wells could talk.

The theater on Tazewell Street in downtown Norfolk, which opened in 1913, has seen a thing or two in its 100 years. It was a road house theater until silent films took center stage in 1915 followed by talkies in 1927. By the '40s it had become home to burlesque shows, then went back to showing films in the '60s and by the mid-'70s devolved into pornographic films. As an X-rated theater, only adults 18 and older were allowed. But contrary to popular belief, it was never a vaudeville house.



"That's a misnomer," said Keith Stava, managing director of the Virginia Stage Co. "The Wells brothers had vaudeville theaters in town, but the Wells was not one of them."

The historic theater, built by Jake and Otto Wells, two cousins who became brothers by adoption, has changed owners five times. It now belongs to the city.

The Virginia Stage Co. purchased the theater for \$100,000 from its former owners, the Craver Investment Corp., on Dec. 28. The money was donated by Dollar Tree's co-founder J. Douglas Perry and his wife Patricia. The same day the nonprofit closed on the property, it turned it over to city.

"We donated it," Stava said. "An arts organization shouldn't own a 100-year-old theater."

Shows generate revenue for the city in parking, admissions tax, and food and beverage taxes, all of which help to offset the cost of maintaining an old structure.

Since the stage company doesn't receive those funds, Stava said it made sense for the theater to be city property. In return, the stage company will occupy the theater rent-free for 40 years, which was about the remaining time on the lease. The city will continue to pay for maintenance and utilities.

In 1990 the city partnered with the stage company, assuming responsibility for maintenance and utilities. As part of the deal, the city acquired the six-story Monroe Building next door at 254 Granby St., which had been donated to the stage company. With the Wells Theatre and the Monroe Building combined, Stava said the stage company was paying about \$48,000 a year in rent to Seven Venues, Norfolk's entertainment bureau.

Now without theater rent, the stage company saves \$12,000 a year.

In maintenance and utilities, Seven Venues Director John Rhamstine said the city spends about \$145,000 annually. It fluctuates, however, if there is a cold winter or no repairs are needed in a year.

"When the Virginia Stage Co. is doing an event, it helps the restaurants and other businesses downtown," Rhamstine said. "It's

one of the pieces of economic synergy that's important to the city."

Though the stage company still uses part of the first floor for dressing rooms and a scenery construction shop, the city is leasing the rest of the Monroe Building to the Governor's School for the Arts.

"We have five of the six departments within the space," said the school's executive director, Andrea Warren. "There are four dance studios, the musical theater department, the theater department and the vocal music, visual arts and instrumental music departments. The Governor's School has spent the last two years renovating the space. Total cost of construction is \$7.9 million and they're just about done."

"The city financed the project and we are paying back the renovations through our lease," Warren said.

The Governor's School leases the Monroe Building for \$360,000 a year.

As for the theater, Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim said the stage company's donation created an appropriate business structure.

"We pay the expenses for the theater in any event," he said, "so I think it makes complete sense for us to have ownership."

Fraim credits the stage company for being at the forefront of the downtown revitalization when the city was in rough shape.

He remembers a fundraising event the Virginia Stage Co. held at the theater in the late '80s to attract donors. They were still working to get the theater up and running. After the event, Fraim said the group walked out of the theater and up to Granby Street. Across the street, where the Tazewell Hotel is now, was a flophouse and a couple of guys were rolling in the street fighting over a bottle of wine. It was amazing, Fraim said, that anyone took stake in the theater after seeing that.

"It took some really dedicated people with the stage company," he said. "The theater is one of our great contributors to our arts scene and to the life of downtown."

And soon, the theater will undergo renovations to improve even further. Rhamstine said the stage company is in the midst of a capital campaign to raise money to renovate the stage and the theater's rigging system.

Stava would not release any further details. The campaign, he said, is in its quiet period.

The theater was last updated in 1987. At that time, the stage company raised \$3.5 million to expand to connect into the Monroe Building, install new bathrooms and replace the 18-inch red velvet seats with new seats 21 inches wide. The theater, which originally had 1,650 seats, 12 boxes and three balconies, now has 640 seats in orchestra, mezzanine and box seating.

Retail shops, including the original Doumar's, which once sat next to the theater, were turned into a lobby and box office. In its early days, Wong Ping's Chinese Restaurant served patrons on the second floor in a rooftop garden before and after shows.

The Wells brothers, who operated the largest theater circuit outside New York, owned the Wells only until 1926, according to the theater's history.

Jake Wells started building resorts in remote places down south. Unfortunately, he was a step ahead of the auto industry. People couldn't get to his hotels.

"He had a hard time financially," Stava said. "He ended up committing suicide."

He died in North Carolina, near the 10-story hotel he built in Hendersonville.

Otto Wells, who had purchased Ocean View Amusements from the railroad in 1905, worked as the general manager of the Ocean View Amusement Park until his death in 1940. The brothers are buried in Norfolk's St. Mary's Cemetery.

Walking out into the theater's carpeted lobby where concessions are sold, Stava pointed to the statues of the half-clad women surrounding pillars in the center of the room and lining the side wall, each with breasts exposed.

Years ago, he said the city came in and ordered the nipples be sanded off in good taste. But thespians being thespians, he said pointing to one statue to the far left, they left one just because.

Exiting through the doors into the rotunda entrance, all of which is still original, Stava stopped.

"Someday," he said, "I'll tell you the ghost stories."