

The curtain's going up Friday on the New Regal Theater

By Chris Farley

At the moment the only music inside the New Regal Theater was coming from a portable radio, but an important piece of entertainment history was about to come alive again on the South Side of Chicago.

The Regal Theater was an institution for 45 years at the corner of 47th Street and South Park Way (now Martin Luther King Drive). On Friday the new Regal lives again in the refurbished Avalon Theater at 79th Street and Stony Island Avenue.

Edward Gardner was standing in the lobby of the New Regal Theater, 79th Street and Stony Island Avenue, which opens on Friday. Gardner and his wife, Bettianne, co-founders of Soft Sheen products, have backed a portion of the \$4.5 million project to renovate the building with a \$3.5 million investment of their own. The New Regal Theater Foundation, the non-profit group administering the theater, hopes to bring in further corporate sponsorship. The City of Chicago obtained a \$1 million Illinois Development Action Grant, and lent it to the Foundation.

"John Ebersson [an Austrian-born theater designer] was one of the foremost theater architects of his time," said Gardner, walking through the lobby, where signs warned of fresh paint. "Of all the theaters he built, this [formerly the Avalon Theater, now refashioned into the New Regal Theater] was one of his favorites. The beautiful mosaic tile is something you don't see today.

"The beauty of this theater... there is nothing in Chicago built with this style," said Gardner, referring to Ebersson's trademark "atmospheric" style, in which indoor theaters were built to give the feel of outdoor arenas.

The old Regal Theater, at 47th Street and South King Drive (then South Park Way), was built in 1928 and then demolished in 1973 in favor of a parking lot. A Tribune article in that same year noted that "the Regal Theater once lived up to its name" but was brought down by the poor economic climate of the area.

The New Regal Theater, which seats 2,360, will open with a black-tie gala Friday. On Saturday, there will be two shows by Gladys Knight and the Pips, at 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. (tickets are \$18 and \$20, available by phoning 559-1212).

Other events will include Stephanie Mills and the Whispers

Performing arts

on Aug. 21, Ray Charles on Sept. 1; a production of the play "Diary of a Black Man" is also in the works.

Dempsey Travis, author of "The Autobiography of Black Jazz," first suggested the idea of resurrecting the Regal in the Avalon Theater to Bettianne Gardner at a dinner party in 1984.

The Gardners picked up on the idea. "Our prime reason," said Edward Gardner, "was to continue to enhance the inner city and the city of Chicago, to bring opportunity to people who want to go into [any] aspect of theater. The many jobs we are going to provide here are greatly needed by the city."

The original plans for the Avalon were lost, so new ones were drawn up in 1985, and the first construction began in 1986. On a winter's day when Edward Gardner first walked into the Avalon to see how much needed to be done, he found a pitch-black building that needed "every inch" repainted, and that had three feet of ice in the basement. "It was just a dirty building," said Gardner.

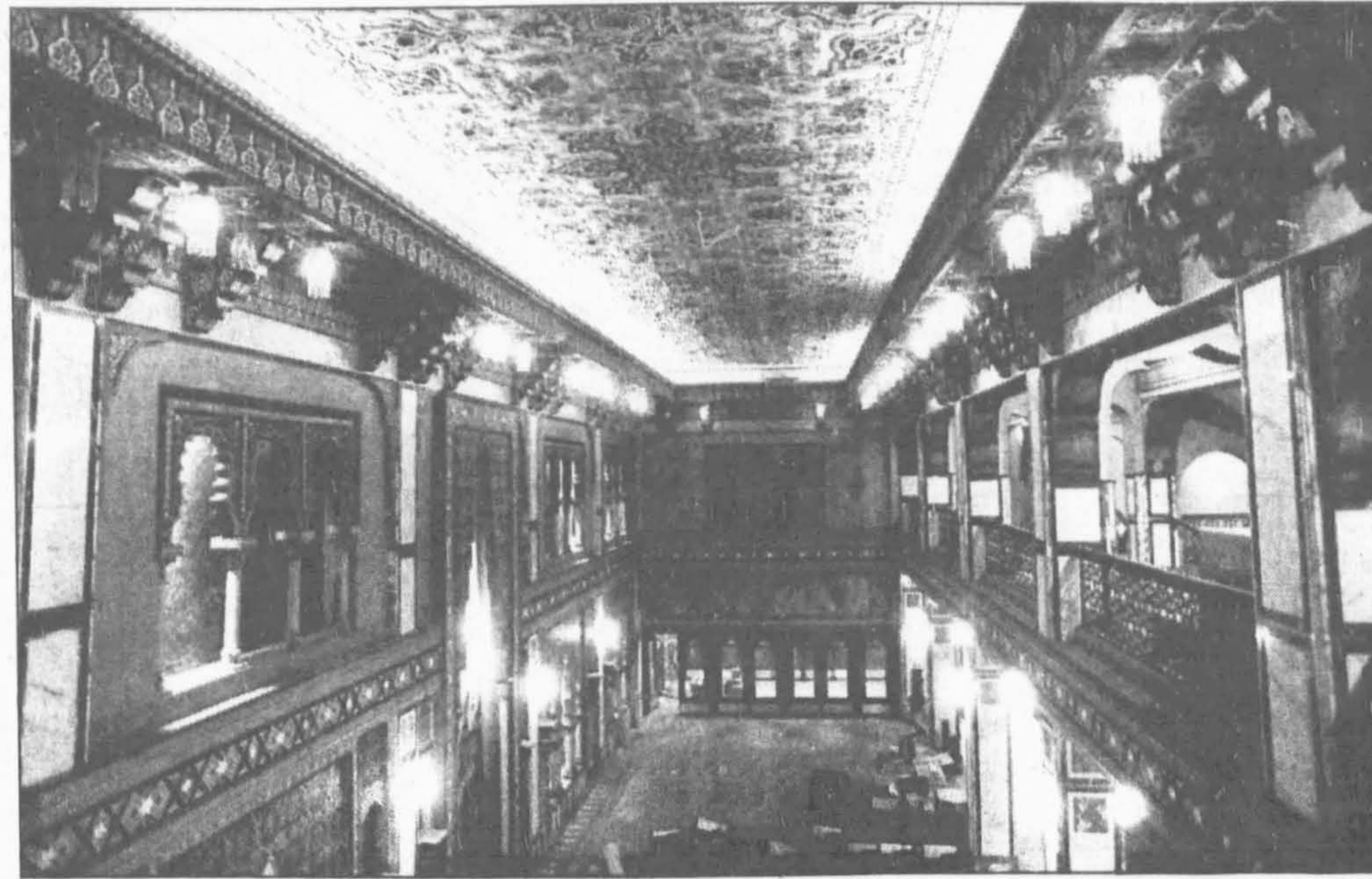
"But you could see underneath the beauty of a wonderful, wonderful building. It was so well built," said Gardner.

The Avalon, erected in 1927, was designed to make visitors feel as if they were within a Persian temple, or vacationing at the summer palace of a Middle Eastern prince. "To be a successful theater architect, one must be a showman," Ebersson once wrote, to explain his architectural flair. Ebersson got the idea for the structure after spotting a Persian incense burner in a shop window in New Orleans.

A few changes have been made in the structure over the years. The lobby once contained a mirrored aquarium with 1,000 tropical fish; and the auditorium once contained a fountain, but the running water created the subliminal message for patrons to use the restroom, so they were removed, according to a Regal representative.

The New Regal Theater still has the rich atmosphere Ebersson wanted to create. On the east walls are sayings in relief Persian characters; on the west walls are the English translations. Above the lobby is a flying carpet—an ornate Persian Rug suspended from the ceiling.

The lobby balcony looks out onto mosaics that depict scenes of



Refurbished interior of the New Regal Theater: A \$4.5 million project.

Tribune photos by Charles Osgood



The New Regal Theater Foundation director Vickii McDonald: Bringing the excitement of live entertainment to the South Side.

Middle Eastern city life—traders bartering their wares, exotic travelers.

Gardner said he can still remember the old Regal Theater, which was built as a replica of a Moorish Castle, with Moroccan leather seats, and statues of slaves in the lobby. "The one thing I remember most is Duke Ellington's band," said Gardner.

"The Regal was where the big

bands went, where you had top musicians of the time who would be top musicians today as well. The young ladies who were the singers—you always had these beautiful singers in long sheer gowns. When they strolled up on the stage, the audience just lit up."

An advertisement for that opening read: "Never in your wildest dreams have you imagined such imposing beauty—such

romantic charm. Put everything aside! Come!" A 1928 Chicago Defender reported that the opening night saw a "hell-bent" line of patrons outside the theater who waited all through that rainy Saturday to get a glimpse of the new facility, and, of course, to see the show.

Robert Peters, an usher at the Regal in the '40s who has formed the Regal Old Timer's Club made up of former employees, said that when he was a 16-year-old living on the South Side in 1942, he used to sneak into the Regal.

A group of his friends who worked at the theater used to let Peters in free to hear the saxophones wail as Count Basie belted out "One O'Clock Jump" and watch performers such as Ella Fitzgerald.

Peters said that after many nights filled with stars such as Lena Horne, Nat King Cole and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, his friends at the Regal told him, "Why don't you get a job here? We get tired of letting you in." So he filled out an application and got hired as an usher.

"You see, my job was varied when I was here, so not only did I meet people coming into the theater, I got to meet the entertainers," said Peters. "I saw Jackie Robinson when he came here. I

met him when he came here in 1947, [when] he played with the Dodgers that first year.

When they knocked down the Regal, Peters said, "I felt like a part of me had gotten knocked down."

But now, looking around the New Regal in the old Avalon, Peters said, "It looks better now than when I used to bring my girlfriend here years ago."

A week before the opening of the New Regal Theater, the marquee, colored gold and red and covered with lights, had gone up.

The marquee could be seen from across the street in a coffee shop where author Travis, who had gone to the opening of the old Regal Theater as an 8-year-old, was sitting with Vickii McDonald, executive director of the New Regal Theater Foundation.

"This is the most important thing to happen to black theater in Chicago in this century," said Travis, who was obviously even more excited about his second Regal opening than his first, where he saw Cab Calloway sing "Memphis Blues."

Travis used to play piano at the Apollo in New York, but he thinks the New Regal is superior. "You could put the Apollo in the back part of this theater. This is a palace, a castle."

Vickii McDonald recalled how James Brown once shook her hand backstage at the old Regal. "I thought I was going to die. I went home, and I didn't wash the hand for a week." She said she wanted to bring that kind of excitement back to the South Side.

"If you look throughout the South Side of Chicago, there is no place that avails itself to black people unless we want to drive there, and [then] you have to drive miles," said McDonald.

Travis said opening of the New Regal is important because it will be a community project that is "community controlled."

The Regal Theater Foundation plans, in the long term, to reconstruct the area around the theater, adding shops and a black-music museum. The entire project, according to McDonald, will cost more than \$9 million. The area will be called the New Regal Theater and Performing Arts District.

"I used to say, 'Someday the black community would have its own 'Magnificent Mile,'" said Travis. "Now we have it. It will start at Stony Island and go east."