

# STAGE FRIGHT

by Seth Fletcher

## Can supporters turn a vision into a reality?

What can you get for \$5 million? Here's a childish list: a small fleet of Ferraris, a Learjet, an island called — what else — Money Key off the southern tip of Florida. By American standards, it's not that much money, even for the arts. *Poetry* magazine, after all, just received \$100 million from the pharmaceutical heir Ruth Lilly.

What can the Missouri Theatre get for \$5 million? It can get Center status, with all the physical and bureaucratic trappings that most Centers have. It could become a low-key Midwestern Lincoln Center. Right now, the Missouri Theatre is in disrepair and can't compete well with the handful of other venues in Columbia. Just about every act that comes through town goes to The Blue Note or Jesse Auditorium. Indie films, with few exceptions, go to Ragtag Cinemacafé. Five million dollars, though, could change this.

But there are problems. There is no architect yet, for one. The renovation coalition dropped from three organizations to two in January when the Columbia Entertainment Co. bailed, leaving only the Missouri Symphony Society and the Columbia Art League to raise the money. All this during the year of the theater's 75th anniversary. To make things worse, jobs are scarce, war seems imminent, and the government is urging citizens to stockpile food, water and duct tape. The Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts is a bunch of optimists, but still, the timing could be better.

## The Vision

The plan is wildly ambitious: to oust all the tenants of the theater's quarter block, including Allen's Flowers to the north and Acorn Books to the south; to build another story on top of the existing structure, which stretches north to Locust Street and south to the alley behind Shakespeare's; to move the Missouri Symphony Society and the Columbia Art League — and possibly other organizations — under the same roof; to totally renovate the interior and exterior of the Missouri Theatre; and to book events at the theater 300 to 325 nights per year.

Most of those pushing this project are Columbia natives who remember the glamour of a night at the Missouri Theatre at midcentury, who went on dates there as teenagers. Some of them remember the more sinister aspects of the theater's history, such as the five windowless flights of stairs that climbed to the "crow's nest," the segregated seating in the upper balcony, where the "Negroes" sat on wooden benches and stayed out of sight.

"The Vision," as the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts calls its plans, will cost \$5 million, and there are certainly Columbians who don't realize that the project goes beyond strict restoration. Not that the MTCA is playing bait-and-switch; an annotated rendering of the proposed complex appears on the cover of the Sep. 26, 2002 issue of the MTCA's newsletter, *Collage*. But the money for the core of the project, the gutting and restuffing of the old building, is nearly there. Phase one of The Vision, which would restore the theater proper, will cost \$1.2 million, and approximately \$850,000 has already been raised. Another four phases would follow, and the result would be a quarter-block compound of the arts, at a cost of \$3,668,170, plus \$831,830 in contingency funds and a \$500,000 endowment.

This project is necessary, says David Griggs, who retired in January as president of the as-yet theoretical Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts, to ensure the economic vitality of downtown because nearly all the retail and housing development scheduled for the next five years will happen on the outskirts of town. Why should downtown retain its vitality? "Have you ever driven through downtown St. Louis at night?" he asks.

This is probably not the best analogy for downtown Columbia. The university virtually guarantees a steady flow of people willing to spend money in the city's center; St. Louis doesn't have that draw. Still, Griggs' point is clear. When the Missouri Theatre is at its best, downtown is the place to be. Last fall, for example, people filled the Missouri Theatre for the Sing-a-long Sound of Music, which is perhaps the only thing that could appeal equally to church moms and young families, hipsters aging and young, and stoner college kids with a sense of irony. By all accounts, it was a beautiful madhouse. Flat Branch poured beer in the lobby to get the crowd lubricated for the singing. Champagne poppers circulated freely. One woman in New York City was jealous of her younger sister in Columbia because the widely hyped show, which premiered in London, skipped them and stopped here. Anyone who was there, or at last week's Valentine's Day showing of *Some Like It Hot*, or at the September 11 memorial concert last fall knows that the theater brings this community together in an oddly blissful way. It's a place where Mayberry and Metropolis intersect, where people who live in the pricier housing developments south of town come and drink wine with college kids. The Vision might not happen, and Columbia might not need The Vision, but many feel that Columbia needs the Missouri Theatre.

As a native Columbian, Griggs has a personal attachment to the theater; it's where he went on his first date, for one. "Fifty years ago the Missouri Theatre was the place," he says. "If you were going to a movie at the Missouri Theatre, man, you were stepping out." He has already been involved in maintaining the theater — his business, Dave Griggs CarpetMax Flooring Center, has donated labor and material to keep the theater going — but now, his commitment is much deeper. He has taken it as a personal challenge to make this idea a reality, at least in part because he's one of those people who can't say no.

Griggs, a perfect salesman, urges potential investors and skeptics to picture the possibilities of the old theater. "Just imagine," he says, as if it were the MTCA's motto. The sales pitch on the MTCA's Web site encourages one to do the same. In places, it reads like a script for hypnosis: "You feel inspired, moved, excited. Waves of melodies, dialogue and laughter from long-forgotten productions wash over you like echoes of time past in this historic hall. You feel proud, and privileged, that you were part of this building's rebirth as the city's Center for the Arts. You have helped pass to future generations the gifts of art, music, theatre and history." It will probably take such opiate prose to move local moneybags into action, especially as they watch their portfolios stagnate and the nation inch closer to war.

But this doesn't concern Griggs. He's aware of the problems yet sees only sunshine for the future. For instance, during the Missouri Theatre's fund-raising drive last summer, a marathon of performances and speeches in front of the theater, Mayor Darwin Hindman came downtown, Griggs says, and climbed up on the marquee where Griggs was perched.

(Don't accuse him of name-dropping. It's just the salesman talking.) "He said to me, 'You know Griggs, we did a lot of research for the Rec. Center, which was the biggest nonchurch, nonuniversity, nonpublic project in the city, and it was about \$1-1.5 million. So, how you gonna do that?' And you know what I said to him? 'I am the eternal optimist.'"

Once work begins, Griggs believes, the rest of the money will pour in. Right now, though, would-be donors are skeptical because a few years ago others were burned. The Missouri Symphony Society had hired a professional fund-raiser who collected nearly \$30,000 in six months, which is to say he raised nothing, and the restoration project ended there. Now the MTCA is looking for a "project director," a multitasker extraordinaire, who, judging by the job description, will not sleep often. This person, they say, will make all the difference. The hiring of a full-time employee will let people know that this project, which still lacks blueprints, architects and the majority of the necessary money, is serious. Like a politician, Griggs invokes the state slogan to make this point. "There are these businessmen



NINA WESTERVELT

COURTESY OF THE MISSOURI THEATRE

saying, 'Show Me,' and then we'll talk." Once they are shown, Griggs believes, they will follow.

## Beneath the beige

From Ninth Street, the Missouri Theatre looks like a cheap movie house from the 1950s that, as time would have it, audiences abandoned for gigantic screens and THX sound. This is not quite true. The obelisk that houses the theater itself stands farther back from the street than the lobby, so the unknowing eye will associate only the marquee and the front of the house with the theater, and, to speak diplomatically, the marquee hasn't been fashionable for decades. But this isn't the real Missouri Theatre. It was once more elegant, and The Vision is designed to make it so again. Restoration, though, is not a simple process. The building is structurally sound, but there is one big problem: No one knows what is underneath the building's concrete veneer. Too many layers of makeup, thick, pasty stage makeup, conceal the real thing. This much is certain: When contractors begin tearing layers off the walls, there will be a lot of crossed fingers and anxious stomachs waiting to see what's beneath the beige.

David White, the executive director of the Missouri Symphony Society, knows quite a bit about what should be underneath. He knows, for instance, that the theater's lobby lies where a brother of Mary Todd, Abraham Lincoln's wife, once lived. He can gesture out the lobby doors toward Ninth Street, where an octagonal ticket booth once stood. On Friday, Oct. 5, 1928, the theater's first attendees bought tickets there. When they stepped in the door, they set foot on a shiny marble floor that is now covered in 1950s-style flecked concrete. Black Belgian marble runners climbed a foot up the wall; now, only the marble on the north wall is real. Its counterpart to the south is a plastic replica.

The exterior and lobby of the Missouri Theatre illustrate how, around the middle of the 20th century, economy trumped taste. By the 1940s, the old vaudeville house had become, in its function, a movie house, and when Commonwealth Theatres took over in 1953, the virtues of a low bottom line were sung in the halls, and the economization of the theater began. As a result, concrete, stucco and beige paint now cover the original marble, brick and gold leaf. Faux ceilings press down where barrel-roll ceilings once soared, tall and proud. Old photos and documents tell us what the place once looked like, but no one knows what state that mummified artifact is in now. It takes imagination, or X-ray vision, to see the beauty in the old theater. It is, so to speak, a fixer-upper.

At the west end of the lobby, a staircase reaches up to the balcony entrance. To the right, the lobby snakes north, then west, to the foyer. The original spindles, White explains, are still underneath the solid plaster wall that is the current banister. The banister was filled in, so the story goes, because certain MU frat boys on the ground floor would look up the skirts of Stephens College girls standing on the landing above. Someone complained, so plaster was brought in to stop the indecency.

In the foyer it becomes apparent how much work must be done to restore this place. The entombment of the original exterior and interior is so complete that only computer analysis can determine what color each beige panel once was. This process, known as colorization, will be one of the trickier parts of the restoration. Yards upon yards of once-gilded plaster relief must be restored. Everything that is now beige — that is, almost everything in the theater — must be studied and then painted. Historical photos don't help, of course, because they are black and white. Just as no one knows the condition of what lies beneath the stucco exterior facing Ninth Street, or the fake ceiling in the lobby, or the public school-style concrete covering up the inlaid marble floor that promenades from the entrance to the foyer, no one knows, at the moment, what color to paint the walls. Like an old film digitally remastered, the Missouri Theatre, once colorized and stripped down to its original core, should reveal details not seen for decades. The question is, how painful will it be to look?

The incongruencies of the auditorium are striking. Grand in design, surely breathtaking in its glory days, the theater appears both magnificent and melancholy. Stained maroon paint peels from the



This artist's rendering shows what the corner of Ninth and Locust Streets could look like, if the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts reaches its \$5 million fund-raising goal. COURTESY OF THE MISSOURI THEATRE

cracked concrete floor. Dingy maroon seats, the kind in outdated high school auditoriums, are held together by clashing red tape. Molding and paint hang from the ceiling. Water stains cut swaths down the length of posh draperies. And those draperies, which appear to cover the exclusive entrances to box seating, conceal nothing more than concrete walls. Last fall there was a photo in the Columbia Daily Tribune of the theater bathed in crimson mood lighting, like a make-out room from the Wonder Years. The place looked palatial, opulent, which disturbed those who are trying to raise money to restore it. Why would people want to donate money to something that they think is in great shape?

## The problems

The Vision took a serious blow in January when the Columbia Entertainment Co. left the MTCA. Because the CEC's space would have been on the upper floors of the envisioned building, it would have been the last organization to get into the building, and it wasn't willing to wait that long. Its current neighborhood, the semi-industrialized stretch off Paris and Nelwood, Griggs says, is in rapid decline. Theatergoers have complained of shady characters hanging around the building, vandalism and drug dealing. It's time, the CEC decided, to get out of the 'hood. And while MTCA members are trying to take it all in a cheery, PR stride, it surely hurt the organization's confidence. Even Griggs, the self-proclaimed eternal optimist, is disappointed.

There are also organizational problems, the inevitable result of autonomous organizations joining hands — especially when millions of dollars are involved. Questions need answering. How will the larger organization be arranged? Who will be in charge? As in politics, these debates almost always turn into a discussion of semantics. Will the MTCA be an umbrella organization? Well, that would imply that the MTCA is above its components. Will it be a foundation? No, that would imply that the Missouri Symphony Society and the Columbia Art League can't stand up for falling down. Will the MTCA be a pillar? Maybe, if no one objects to such a phallic metaphor.

Cradle seems to be the least-threatening concept being considered. Still, this metaphor ignores the fact that the MTCA will be, in effect, the landlord. It will run the facilities, collect rent, change light bulbs. Cradling really has nothing to do with it. And however objectionable the umbrella concept might be, it's what almost everyone calls the MTCA, including those who still have reservations about the term.

This is a taste of the organizational issues facing those who are driving to restore the Missouri Theatre, and Susan Doroghazi, the new president of the MTCA who took charge the same month the Columbia Entertainment Co. departed, must deal with them. There's always the matter of the \$5 million, but no one seems too concerned about that. Dave Griggs is certain he can raise the money. He's taken it as a personal challenge. Ever confident, Griggs almost dismisses the challenge of raising the money. "I can raise \$5 mil-

## What will they get for \$5 million?

- Phase I**
- Theater Restoration: \$1,228,000
  - mortgage retirement
  - historic restoration
  - theater upgrade
  - new roof over seating area
  - new carpets and drapery
  - restroom renovation
  - organ restoration
- Phase II**
- Arcade and Offices: \$485,370
  - historic restoration
  - new roof over offices
  - new office interior
  - restoration of exterior facade
  - new box office
  - new marquee
- Phase III**
- Art Gallery, Costume & Scene Shops: \$653,800
  - exhibit gallery
  - gift shop and offices
  - educational wing
  - costume shop
  - scene shop
  - restoration of exterior facade
- Phase IV**
- Vertical Circulation Addition: \$230,000
  - restoration of staircases
  - installation of elevator
- Phase V**
- Second Floor Addition: \$1,071,000
  - construction of building shell
  - lounge and kitchen
  - rehearsal studio
  - gallery lecture hall
  - storage area
- Subtotal: \$3,668,170
- Contingency fee and equipment: \$831,830
- Facility endowment: \$500,000
- Total: \$5,000,000

SOURCE: MISSOURI THEATRE.COM

Grand in design, surely breathtaking in its glory days, the theater appears both magnificent and melancholy. Stained maroon paint peels from the cracked concrete floor. Dingy maroon seats, the kind in outdated high school auditoriums, are held together by clashing red tape.

lion," he says with a smile.

But everyone is concerned about language. Beyond the debate over the proper metaphor for the MTCA, there is much talk of synergy, that trendy, corporate-casual concept. It's the synergy of these organizations, says Kathy Walther, president of the board of directors of the Columbia Art League, that will make this project work. All this talk about language is to be expected because neither the money for the project nor the MTCA yet exists. As Kanani May, the Missouri Symphony Society's public relations director, said before the Columbia Entertainment Co. bailout: "The Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts is an idea. It will not be so until all three organizations are under one roof." In short, the project is still in the subjunctive, and for now, the only way to make it real is by talking about it.

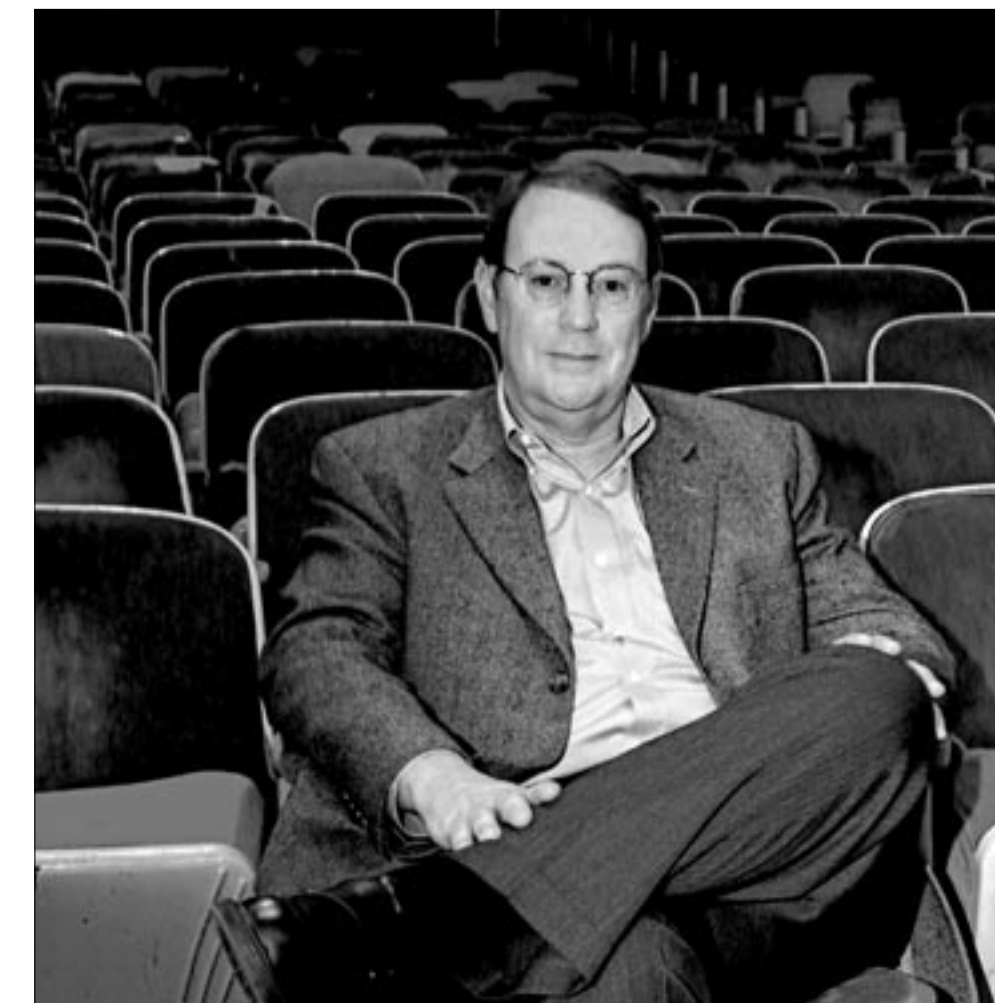
## The Vision in flux

As with most stories set in the future — 1984, 2001: A Space Odyssey — the author of the MTCA's sales pitch got hasty with the date, which is listed on the Web site as October 2003. There is no way the project will be finished by then. Renovation is tentatively set to begin toward the end of this summer, but like everything else about the project, that could change at any time. The schedule is flexible, as it must be. Construction will occur in phases. First the guts of the theater need to be replaced. The wiring and countless other unglamorous nuts and bolts must be brought to par before the decoration can begin. Here again, the members of the MTCA are worried about publicity. It would give donors a much greater



ALISA BOOZE TROETSCHEL

Beneath layers of beige paint lie remnants of the Missouri Theatre's original grandeur. During renovations, the walls will undergo colorization before they are repainted.



ALISA BOOZE TROETSCHEL

Dave Griggs, former board president of the MTCA, says he thinks the Missouri Theatre's restoration project will ensure lasting economic vitality in Columbia's downtown area.

sense of satisfaction to see a renovated exterior than to be told they must be patient; the theater is being fixed so that it won't burn down. But this behind-the-scenes work is necessary. It is how construction projects must go.

All kinds of details will arise in the process. For instance, the original octagonal ticket kiosk was almost certainly not heated or air-conditioned, but the new one had better be if anyone is to work in it. Problems like this are what make historical restorations so complex. "That's the kind of thing most people don't think about when they get on the historical bandwagon," Walther says.

"I would like to get street appeal first, but that's not how you do a building project."

At the moment, the MTCA is looking for a new partner, preferably a theater organization, and though there are potential candidates in town, at least one of whom has expressed interest in The Vision, the MTCA won't name them yet. While the MTCA is trying to look on the bright side of the CEC bailout, it has changed things significantly. Griggs, for instance, has toned down his talk since last fall. The Vision may shrink, depending on money and the space needs of any group that might join the coalition. "In hindsight, with the economy such as it is, this may be a good thing — a regrettable good thing. It may shrink from a two- or three-story thing to a smaller facility. We could substantially reduce the fund-raising goal. But this may not be the case. We may find a new partner."

Right now, the money hinges on a demonstration of seriousness. This is a bad time to raise money for anything that can be called frivolous, and judging from the newspapers, everything that costs money is now considered frivolous. A completion date is not likely to be set soon — "I'm not going to venture to say whether it will be three, five or 10 years," Walther says — but at least the first phase will happen. Restoration of the auditorium is certain. The great unanswered question is whether, after the first phase or two is finished, the rest of the money will come. It is a gamble, but the worst that could happen is a merely modest project that would recharge the tired, well-worn, but well-loved auditorium.

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