

WALL STREET THEATER

A comeback story



Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

Artistic Director Billy Blanks Jr. performs during the Wall Street Theater gala opening performance "8" A Night With Broadway's Best on Monday in Norwalk.

By Mike Horyczun

NORWALK — You never know what you can learn from a visit to your local library.

I'll give you an example. I went to the Norwalk Public Library recently to do some research on the history of the "new" Wall Street Theater. The renovated theater located at 71 Wall St. in Norwalk celebrated

its grand opening on Monday with an official ribbon cutting ceremony followed by a live performance featuring a number of Broadway stars.

Thus began the latest chapter in the colorful and illustrious history of a theater which opened in 1915 as a vaudeville house, transitioned into a movie theater in the 30s, and much later become a rock venue and a dance club. It's had several names, begin-

ning with The Regent and The Norwalk in its earlier days, and more recently The Marquee, The Globe and The Roxy.

Judging by the large, enthusiastic crowd filling the seats on opening night, and the top-notch talent performing on stage, the Wall Street Theater is off to a good start. Programming looks strong with Macy Gray on Wednesday and Betty Buckley on

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June 3. And its website — wallstreettheater.com — is chock-full of information including a detailed history of the building.

In its very early days, The Regent featured live vaudeville acts and “talkies” (early movies with sound), according to the website, with performances by Mary Pickford, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, John Barrymore, and even John Philip Sousa. The history also states that community and political events took place at The Regent, and on Oct. 29, 1920, Sen. Frank Brandagee, Connecticut’s senior member of Congress, “enthusiastically spoke to a record crowd concerning his opposition to the League of Nations.”

I was curious to see if there was any news coverage of the event, so I visited the Norwalk History Room at the Norwalk Public Library, met the very helpful staff, including Norwalk historian Ralph Bloom, and looked up the Norwalk Hour’s Oct. 30, 1929, edition on microfilm. What I found was a front-page story about an appearance in Norwalk on Oct. 29, 1929, by another visiting statesman, Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was then the Assistant Secretary of the Navy and Democratic nominee for vice-president. He spoke at Hoyt’s Theater in South Norwalk and was strongly in favor of the League of Nations.

So I asked Bloom if he thought it was possible for two politicians to be in Norwalk on the same day appearing at different theaters. “No reason why not,” he said. “It was a short distance between theaters.” There were several theaters in Norwalk at the time, he said. The Hoyt was located on Washington Street and is still standing. There are restaurants there now and



Alex von Kleindorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

Siobhan Dillon performs during the Wall Street Theater Gala’s opening performance “8” A Night With Broadway’s Best on Monday in Norwalk.

condos upstairs.

“For years, Norwalk was always uptown, South Norwalk was downtown, and they were thought of as different cities,” explained Bloom, who was sitting at a table in one of the back rooms on the ground floor of the library’s Norwalk History Room among archived material and stacks of historical books.

“South Norwalk was larger in scale than Norwalk. It had The Empress, The Palace, and The Rialto, which was the Hoyt Theater originally. Uptown only had one theater, and that was The Regent on Wall Street. They were all vaudeville theaters, and they were all then converted to movies. In South

Norwalk, we had another institute called the Music Hall designed primarily for music. That building structure-wise is still there but is totally changed today.”

Bloom explained why theaters proliferated at the time, particularly in South Norwalk. “You had a larger population in and around the South Norwalk area,” he said. “You had a lot of factory workers, you had a bigger population, and the theaters could be supported by a larger population. Most of the ‘bigwigs’ who operated factories lived in Golden Hills, which was within walking distance of the South Norwalk theaters. Also, you had transportation, which was a big thing. South

Norwalk had the railroad depot and the trolley line. Norwalk was a little more off, when it came to services.”

I thought it ironic that the current Wall Street Theater is the only structure that remains a functioning theater among the many that existed locally more than a century ago. And I asked Bloom why he thought that was. “It’s the one that remained basically intact,” he said. “It was never converted to condos or any other use. No matter how badly used, it’s always been a theater or performing center. In this last renovation, it was totally re-gutted and rebuilt again. It’s really a brand new building.”

After a remodeling in the 1930s, The Regency was transformed into a movie house and renamed The Norwalk, screening movies for the next 50 years. A Norwalk Hour issue from 1939 had an ad for a double feature consisting of “Juarez” with Bette Davis and Paul Muni and “Panama Lady” with Lucille Ball. Back to 1920, when The Hour covered Roosevelt’s appearance in Norwalk, I didn’t see any story about Senator Brandagee’s speech at The Regent. But listed on the back pages, under the heading “On the Stage and Screen,” readers were told that The Regency was presented the last day’s run of Constance Talmadge in “The Perfect Woman.”

Fast-forward to the 21st century and the Wall Street Theater official’s debut last Monday night. In the crowded theatre lobby at intermission, I asked Mayor Harry Rilling how he felt about Wall Street Theater’s opening night events.

“I am blown away. This is more amazing than I could ever imagine,” he said. “The talent, the sound system, the audience engagement. There’s nothing we can’t do here, and I’m here to support this theater every way that I possibly can. I lived up around the corner when I was just a young lad, and I used to walk down here to the movie theater, when it was called the Norwalk Theater. So this is very special to me for that reason. It’s like a theater rebirth. I will be back all the time. You won’t be able to keep me away.”

Bloom is equally optimistic. “It’s marvelous to see they have reached this point in development,” he said. “The more it happens that people are really making a commitment, it’s going to cement this town coming back to life. It’s going to make a tremendous difference. It’s not farfetched for the theater to be the catalyst for getting other things started.”

Those were Rilling’s thoughts, exactly. “We’ve been talking about the rebirth of Wall Street,” he said. “We have residential units. We have restaurants opening up. This is going to help push us over that threshold. We’re going to have an amazing, vibrant Wall Street again.”

Special thanks to Norwalk historian Ralph Bloom and to Paul Keroack and Lynn Hildenbrand from the Norwalk Public Library’s History Room for their help in gathering historical material for this story. Mike Horyczum’s Sound Surfing column appears every Saturday in The Hour. Mike can be reached at news2mh@gmail.com.