



Bertie Selvey and the Byrd Foundation are planning to restore the Byrd Theatre to its 1928 glory, back to a time before the Great Depression, before the atomic bomb, before the chicken nugget.

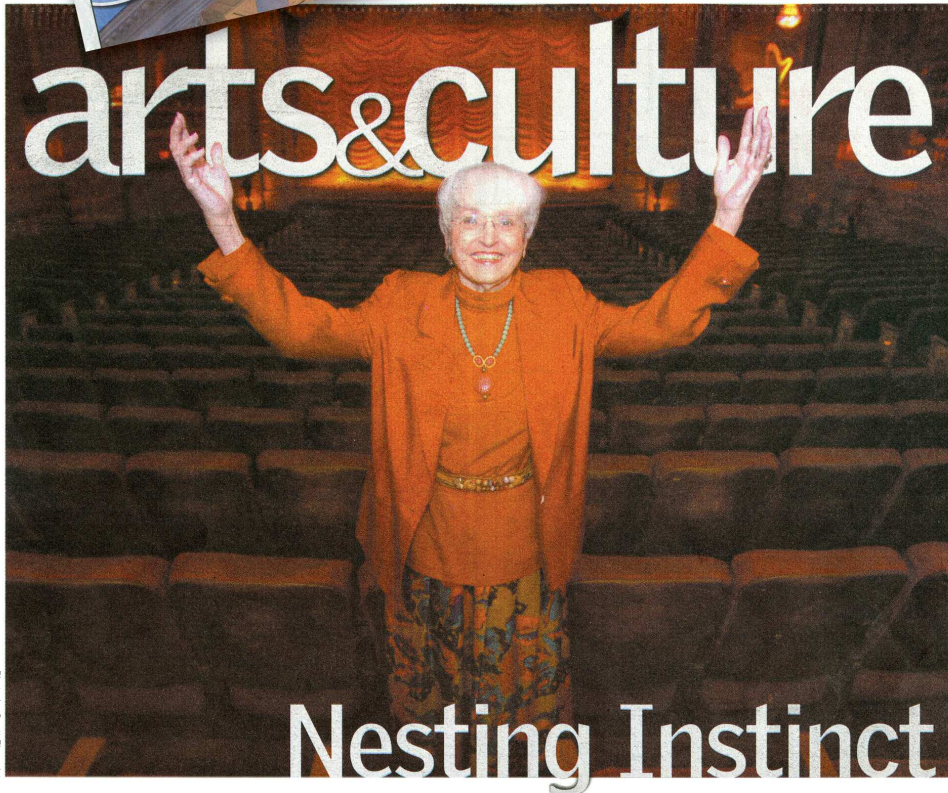


Photo by Scott Emquist

The Byrd Foundation has big plans to restore the historic movie house.

by Brent Baldwin

Several years ago, the city called in national renovation experts to repair the Landmark Theater. Then they took a side trip to the Byrd Theatre, and the verdict was unanimous: "They all agreed that it was the finest intact movie palace in the United States, bar none," says Bertie Selvey, executive vice president of the Byrd Foundation.

The community group she represents seeks to raise \$6 million to purchase the building, undertake major renovations and return the theater to its original, 1928 glory. The Byrd is one of a tiny handful of historic theaters around the country that still show only movies and have not been turned into performing arts centers.

In the last three years, the Byrd Foundation has received 501.3(c) nonprofit status — which means donations are tax-deductible — and it has a purchase contract in place with the estate of Samuel Warren, which owns the building. The foundation's now waiting on lawyers to finalize the deal, Selvey says.

"It's been a long, drawn-out process," she

says, "and frustrating at times. But we're working with the lawyers to get it together."

Still, the group is gearing up fundraising efforts, including the first major weekend event: "A Closer Walk With Patsy Cline," a musical play by Dean Regan starring Julie Johnson and Steve Barcus, with four shows May 18-20.

Richmonders may remember the acclaimed production from its successful run at TheatreVirginia in the mid-'90s, when Johnson and the locally based band that accompanies her played to more than 24,000 people through six sold-out weeks.

"I'm thrilled that we're doing it at the Byrd, because it's like stepping back in time," Johnson says. "The artistry and opulence of the building make it feel almost like a European opera house. ... The sound is wonderful as well."

The show recounts country legend Cline's life beginning in her teen years and ending with her appearance at Carnegie Hall — all by way of a DJ tribute show set in 1961. Crowd response has been enthusiastic from Texas to Palm Springs, Johnson says, but Richmonders seem to embrace Cline on a different level.

"[Being from Winchester], Patsy's a hometown girl. Virginians tend to feel like they own a little bit of it," Johnson says.

"Performing in Richmond is like playing for a thousand members of your extended family."

Once during a performance here, Johnson says she received a "lovely" complimentary letter from Cline's niece who lives in the Richmond area.

She adds that attendees often tell her that what they love about the production is getting to know Cline better as a person. Johnson, who is an established stage and film actor, says that each song is like a monologue that presents a story about the legendary musician.

"There is a mournful curiosity about her since she died [in a plane crash] right when she was becoming a star," Johnson says. "But her voice is timeless on any level. She sang with her heart and soul, and you can tell she had a relationship with the songs. Her phrasing, her lilt, her occasional yodels — they all have meaning."

Johnson repeatedly applauded the grassroots spirit behind the impulse to restore the Byrd Theatre. For her part, Selvey says that she got involved with the Byrd Foundation after her work ended with TheatreVirginia.

"When that project died, I got very sad," Selvey says. "Many of us took it as a personal loss." But a few months later, after catching a movie at the Byrd and seeing that it desperately needed help with fundraising efforts, she and others channeled their energy into the new restoration project.

Most of the plaster is in good condition, Selvey says, because the theater has been in almost continuous operation, 365 days a year — with a brief exception in the '80s, when the building was renovated. The roof, on the other hand, is in dire need of repair and will be the first order of business when renovations begin. Selvey says there are about 20 buckets in the theater's attic to collect rainwater.

"We're calling this one the 'raise the roof' show," Johnson notes.

After the roof is fixed, the foundation plans to address electrical problems, heating and plumbing, seating and carpets, and perhaps restore the original marquee outside. It will definitely restore the old Mighty Wurlitzer organ, the dazzling centerpiece that's still played Saturday nights.

"The organ still has all its original parts from 1928, but about half don't work," Selvey says. "If you think it sounds good now, wait until it gets fixed up." S

The Byrd Foundation presents "A Closer Walk With Patsy Cline" at the Byrd Theatre, May 18-20. Tickets are \$37. 358-3056.