



A PLACE TO PERFORM — Helena's Grand Street Theatre now has a new home. And it appears that the company couldn't have gotten a better place to perform had it designed the building itself. The former Lewis & Clark Library, which was originally built by the

Unitarian Church, was not built as a chapel as most people believed. Rather it was designed as a theater, a place to stage pageants and such—complete with a stage, dressing rooms, balcony and box office. It

was only after the library moved to its new quarters and renovations began on the old building that it was discovered it was designed as a theater. Above, renovation work was still underway last week as the

company rehearsed for its first production, "Man of La Mancha." When renovations are completed, Helena will have one of the most unique and colorful theaters in the country. See following pages for related pictures.

A grand place for a theater

A form huddles on the darkened stage awaiting the first strains of music.

Slowly, softly the sounds of violins waft through the air and arms extend gracefully upward as the lights grow brighter. The body sways as the full orchestra joins the violins and gathers forces for a crescendo.

As the tempo increases, legs that have been curled beneath the dancer's form gather strength until, in a frenzy of music, the dancer leaps upward and begins her dance.

Like the dancer, the graceful stone building at 325 N. Park Ave. has been waiting for the music to begin.

And now the soul of a theater, fettered beneath shelves of books for more than 40 years, has found release.

Hammers, Sanders, saws and drills provided the music that awakened a structure that had slumbered quietly as a library since 1933.

In a rare twist of fate, the old building is being reborn as a theater.

Just as the motionless dancer was prepared for her performance as she waited on the darkened stage, so was the building that was originally a Helena Unitarian Church prepared to be a theater.

The Grand Street Theatre, which gained custody of the building June 7, is reshaping the structure along blueprints designed in 1901 for the Helena Unitarian Church.

Similarities linking the theatre to a church are much more apparent than are any traces of the library in the new theatre.

UPON FIRST ENTERING the theater, your eyes are drawn skyward, up to the heavens.

It's incredible. A proscenium arch, once hidden by a shaky library mezzanine, separates the stage from the auditorium.

"When I first saw the arch after the library's mezzanine was torn out, I couldn't believe it," said Wayne Whitney, an architect with Crossman, Whitney and Griffin who drew up the plans for the Grand Street Theatre's renovation. "As an architect I'm supposed to envision such things; although I knew it was there, it was better than I had imagined."

THE ARCHITECTS had the original plans to follow when they grew up their recreated theater. Don Torgerson, who has been in several Grand Street productions, is involved in an architect's association and found on a list of old blueprints a notation that plans for the Helena Unitarian Church were in a Bozeman library.

On these plans, the architects discovered that the early-day Helena Unitarians must have had a whimsy in their worship.

Although the terms "stage" and "auditorium" refer more appropriately to a theater than to a church, the original blueprint, contained no pulpit, instead it gave outlines for a theater.

Story by Pat Murdo,
photos by Gordon Warren



PONDERING THE PLAY — During a late-night rehearsal, Director Carl Darchuk sits in the darkened balcony of the theater, silhouetted by the large, arched, second-story window located in front of the building.

There was a box-office where the new box-office will be; the library used it as a washroom behind the circulation desk. The church stage hid in a space between the reference and magazine rooms of the library before the theatre released it to resume its first purpose.

Dressing rooms, apparently used for church pageants, plays and recitals, became a magazine room for the library and will be used as an off-stage cast waiting room and storage room by the theatre.

Even the floor of the auditorium descends gracefully toward the stage so that people in the back rows can see over those in front. The library raised and leveled the floor for shelving. But now the theater has exposed and relaid the original floor. The whole floor, supports and all, came out under supervision of carpenters, and board by board, a new floor went in.

In some aspects the theatre is not returning the building to its blueprint design. Where the pastor's study once offered a place for quiet reflection (and later used by the library director as an office), seats will offer places for theater-goers to pause before a show or during intermission.

THE LOBBY will extend from where the circulation desk stood to the opposite side of the building (a wall had to be torn out).

Carl Darchuk, the theatre's executive director and driving dynamo, said the "green room," a traditional theater term, also will serve actors who are waiting to go on stage and will serve as a refreshment area during rehearsals.

The room will be directly under the lobby, next to the rest rooms, and will be the only smoking area.

Darchuk said he hopes that as a lounge the room will beckon satisfied theater-goers downstairs to share post-play excitement with the cast.

Such sharing was common at the theatre's former home on the second floor of the Placer Hotel.

In that small environment, actors and actresses had access to the dressing rooms along the same hallway that the audience used to leave the theatre.

Mingling between cast and audience became a personal touch of the theater.

For those who remember the theatre's year-long stay at the Placer, the contrast with the new theatre will be stark.

"I see a better aesthetic experience for both performers and audience" at the new theatre, Darchuk said.

"THE AUDIENCE will be more comfortable,

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