

In Bedford-Stuyvesant, Ready for ‘the Billie’ to Return

Works in Progress

March 15, 2017 by Helene Stapinski



The Billie Holiday Theater in Brooklyn is undergoing a \$4.1 million renovation and expansion, with a ribbon cutting planned for May. Credit: Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

When is the Billie opening?

That’s the question Indira Etwaroo hears these days walking down the street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. People wanting to know when the renovation on the neighborhood’s Billie Holiday Theater will be done.

The Billie has been a neighborhood institution virtually since it was founded in 1972, and once featured up-and-coming stars like Debbie Allen and Sam Jackson (before he added the “L”).

And it was in need of a major face-lift.

For the past two years, the theater at Restoration Plaza, a former Sheffield Farms dairy bottling plant, has been closed for a \$4.1 million gut renovation and expansion. Narrow seats removed and replaced. New air-conditioning. A new boiler, and new dressing rooms with showers. New catwalks and rigging installed, acoustic panels added and the stage extended and rebuilt, using maple. Right now, new lights are being installed, as well as new

red and black curtains, new railings and a control board inside a brand-new control room.

“It was long overdue; you’re talking about the first renovation in over 40 years,” said Ms. Etwaroo, who took over as executive director for the Center of Arts and Culture at Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation just as it closed its theater for renovation two winters ago. “With the renaissance that’s been happening in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Billie Holiday was poised for this project.”

The whole endeavor, from the concept by the former director Marjorie Moon to the groundbreaking in July 2015 to completion, has taken nearly 10 years.

Having a dozen construction workers and supervisors get along with a cultural staff is sometimes a big challenge on a project like this, Feniosky Peña-Mora, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Design and Construction, said.



Sandro Darsin, right, the superintendent of construction, with Feniosky Peña-Mora, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Design and Construction, discussing geothermal pumps underneath the theater. Credit: Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

“Sometimes you have everybody working on how to point fingers,” he said. “But on this project, we said, ‘Let’s all work together to overcome the challenges.’ At the end of the day, we don’t want to deliver a theater that the creative group cannot use as they need it. But sometimes perfection is the enemy of practicality. We wanted to deliver within the time frame they needed.”

A year and a half ago, a construction project manager, Antoine Hitti, was brought in to help complete the work on the theater, which was in worse shape than anyone had thought, its restoration growing increasingly complicated. Mr. Hitti has worked on cultural projects throughout the city, including restorations at Lincoln Center and the American Museum of Natural History.

“Parts of the theater hadn’t been used in a while,” he said. “It was kind of abandoned around and under the stage. It was all in shambles and not configured efficiently.”

Under Mr. Hitti’s direction, flooring was elevated. Storage areas and a greenroom were put in place. The project, which should have been done last fall, was delayed because of the changes, but everyone involved grew very attached to the project.

“I’ve never seen a team love a theater so much,” Ms. Etwaroo said.

One contractor found an old Billie Holiday picture and excitedly handed it over to the office upstairs. Drywall with posters dating to the 1970s advertising Ruby Dee were discovered and preserved. Mr. Hitti said he couldn’t wait to return with his family when the theater begins regular programming in October.

The renovation was an example of old school meeting new. Workers tapped into existing geothermal wells for the air-conditioning, which will help reduce operating costs by 25 percent.

“Even the curtains not opening on a rope is exciting,” Ms. Etwaroo said. A simple push of a button in the wings engages a heavy-duty pulley system.

Ms. Etwaroo said the new design would be matched by new programming: a full schedule not only of theater, but also dance, music, film and local programming. The Ronald K. Brown Evidence dance company, a fusion of African and contemporary dance and storytelling, will be in residence in the fall when the theater reopens.

Colvin Grannum, the president of the nonprofit Restoration Project, which houses the theater, said the Billie would serve an audience that couldn’t always afford to go into Manhattan and see a Broadway show.

For its ribbon cutting on May 9, the theater will present a short program that will include Sonia Sanchez, a poet who appeared at the Billie when it opened in 1972 (when admission was just \$2); the Tony-winning actor Roger Robinson; and Jason Moran, who composed the soundtrack to “Selma.”

“World class excellence has the ability to inspire people to reach beyond what they might normally see, to higher expectations,” Mr. Grannum said. It would also be a bridge between newcomers and old-timers, he said. “We want to bring folks together and build a stronger community.”

The Particulars

Project The Billie Holiday Theater

Cost \$4.1 million

Site Fulton Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

In the works Since July 2015

Driving Force Indira Etwaroo, executive director of the theater

Biggest obstacle Trying to figure how to spend the \$4.1 million. “We had 1,001 options,” Ms. Etwaroo said.



A wall plastered with posters from the original theater will be on display. Credit: Danny Ghitis for The New York Times