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Landmark Toronto cinema gets a new life

College Street site to be a theatre by night, modern production studio by day

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

After months of theatre closings and speculation that repertory cinemas in Toronto are doomed, some good news for a change: The Royal Theatre, a College Street landmark, has been sold for \$2.2-million to a company set on keeping the projector running -- with a modern twist.

The buyer is Theatre D Digital, a Toronto-based postproduction film company that plans to restore the theatre's rickety red velvet seats and ornate moulding to their original charm. It will be used as a state-of-the-art production studio by day and movie theatre by night.

The cinema has been closed to moviegoers since June 30. Renovations are under way and a notice taped to the ticket box window reads: Soon the lights will be back on brighter than ever!

Theatre D co-founder Dan Peel confirmed the purchase and said the plan is to make it look as good as in "1939 when it opened." He and partner John Hazen declined to comment further, saying they'd rather wait until renovations are complete in September.

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The purchase and renovation plan gives hope to fans of the independent movie house after a series of announcements indicated the number of repertory cinemas in Toronto would soon be reduced by almost half.

In May, the McQuillan family, who owned three of five theatres in the Festival Cinema Group, announced that the Revue, Kingsway and Royal would close by June 30.

Two weeks later, Jerry Szczur, citing financial woes, said he was selling the Paradise and he was looking for someone to lease the Fox.

Problems for the independent theatres seem almost insurmountable: high taxes, declining ticket sales, the monster popularity of the multiplex. Even more crippling was the rapid transfer of films to DVD -- second-run movie houses capitalize on that gap to attract audiences.

"I think it just goes to show you that you have to do something a little more innovative with the space to make it work," said Kate McQuillan, whose father, Peter, opened the Royal in 1939.

Her family parted with the Royal for a half-million less than their \$2.7-million asking price. They're now looking for someone to lease the Revue and keep it running.

Meantime, Theatre D appears to have found a way to make the theatres work. In 2002, the company began operating another independent, the Regent, on Mount Pleasant Road near Eglinton Avenue.

The Regent, built in 1927, was revamped and modern film-editing suites added. Films such as *Where the Truth Lies* and *Being Julia*, starring Annette Bening, were edited there.

The concept allows filmmakers to walk out of their booths on the second floor into the main cinema and see what their edits look like on a big screen, the owners told The Globe and Mail last year.

On the other hand, locals appreciate being able to walk down the street and watch a cheap, second-run flick.

Lately, ticket sales have been "fair," says the owner of the Regent, Peter Sorok, who has 45 years experience running independent theatres.

"It's a tough business. . . . If we were a first-run movie house, we wouldn't need to do what we're doing."

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