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ROYAL REVIVAL LIGHTS BACK ON AT COLLEGE STREET REP

By SCOTT MACDONALD

When news broke several weeks ago that four of Toronto's Festival Cinemas movie houses would be closing down on June 30, the situation looked most hopeless for the Royal on College Street.

While the three other theatres – the Revue, the Kingsway and the Paradise – were simply slated to go dark, the Royal was immediately put up for sale by the owners, presumably because it occupied the most valuable plot of real estate.

Rumours abounded that the historic 1930s-era theatre would be turned into a nightclub or, worse, torn down for condos. But as it turns out, the sale of the Royal will almost certainly prove to be its saving.

Though the deal isn't official until July 5, the Royal, NOW has learned, has been purchased by a scrappy young company called Theatre D Digital, which also owns the art deco Regent Theatre on Mount Pleasant.

When Theatre D bought the Regent in 2002, they restored the 1920s-era theatre and began operating it during the day as a high-end digital post-production studio. (Directors like Atom Egoyan and Patricia Rozema have edited their films there.)

Meanwhile, in the evenings, they continued to screen films in the theatre. This ingenious business model has apparently proved lucrative for Theatre D, and co-founder Dan Peel says they plan to repeat it at the Royal.

"Our plans are to restore the building back to its 1930s glory," he says.

Furthermore, the restoration won't stop with just the building itself: when Peel and his two partners, John Hazen and Carlos Herrera, begin outfitting the theatre with their state-of-the-art post-production equipment, they'll also be bringing in what Peel refers to as "the absolute best" in digital projection and 5.1 THX surround sound.

"The projector I'm talking about is beyond what's been seen yet in North America," he says excitedly.

The only question now is what kind of theatre the Royal will be. It could probably carry on as it has for the past few years, screening mostly second-run Hollywood and independent films, but why bother? Wouldn't a better approach be to turn the Royal into a dedicated screening space for first-run art-house films?

In New York there are several independently run movie houses that continuously program decidedly non-mainstream fair.

The trick is to find some way of underwriting the programming. New York's Film Forum, for example, operates as a not-for-profit, soliciting 25 per cent of its operating funds from public and private sources.

This isn't New York, of course, but it's hard to believe we can't support at least one or two cinemas on this model. In any case, the underwriting will already be taken care of at the Royal in the form of the post-production business, so isn't this the perfect time to try an ambitious cinematic lineup?

Peel says he and his partners have yet to determine what kind of films they will screen, but they will definitely be working with distributors to see if they can get access to more first-run art-house films "I hope the programming will be different," he says. "I hope it will be better."

To this end, he's begun soliciting advice from nearby video store clerks, in hopes of getting a better sense of what the neighbourhood will support. "Ultimately, we're going to rely on the community to [determine] programming," says Peel, "because they're the ones who are going to support it." @

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