

THE POST-STANDARD SUNDAY, JUNE 18, 2017

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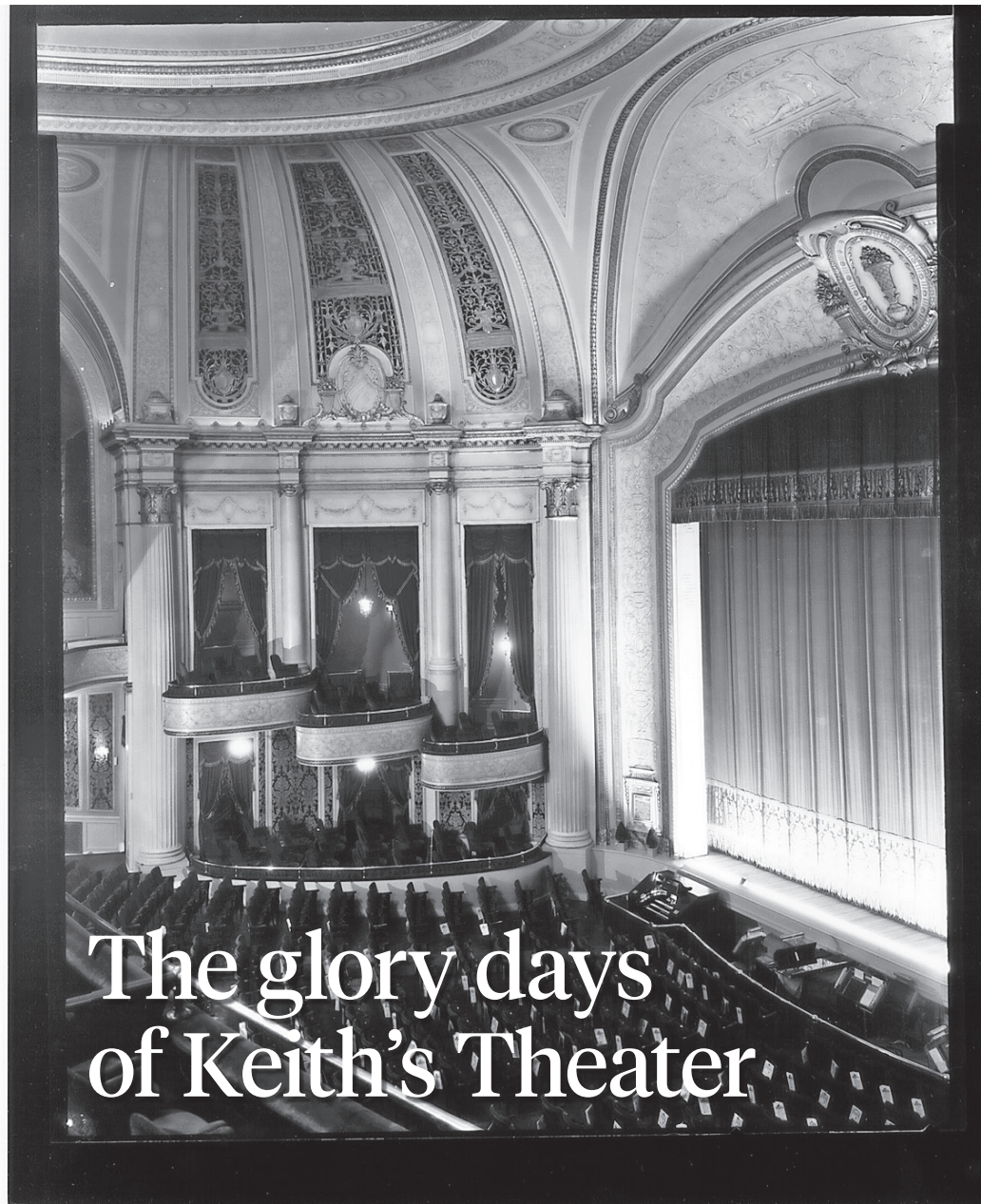
A LOOK BACK AT

SYRACUSE'S 'TEMPLE OF VAUDEVILLE'



THE **REDHOUSE ARTS CENTER'S** NEW SALINA STREET SITE
WAS ONCE HOME TO **KEITH'S THEATER**, DESCRIBED IN 1920
AS 'A STUDIED GEM OF COMMINGLED PERFECTION, PAGE 3

Keith's Theater, seen here in 1929, featured a classical style that contrasted with its later rival, the Landmark Theatre, which had a more ornate Persian theme. Keith's was demolished in 1967 during "urban renewal" efforts. Its organ, once used to accompany silent movies, was saved and moved to the state fairgrounds. Onondaga Historical Association



Redhouse's new site was once home to city's theatrical gem

Johnathan Croyle
jcroyle@syracuse.com

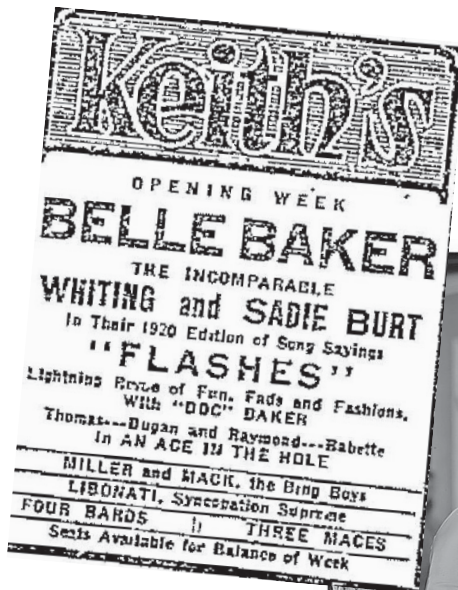
A building in the heart of downtown Syracuse is undergoing a transformation. However, it won't be something entirely new for that busy corner of Salina Street. Instead, it will be reborn as a spot where people can take a break, sit back and enjoy a show again.

Work has begun inside the former Sibley's Department Store to transform the abandoned building into the Redhouse Arts Center.

The arts center will include a flexible-space theater with seating for up to 400 people, a smaller theater which will hold up to 125 people and rehearsal rooms and classrooms.

Redhouse, which currently has a small theater in Armory Square, is spending \$10 million on the project and hopes to have a soft launch in March 2018.

SEE THEATER, 4



Singer and actress Belle Baker was at Keith's on opening night, Jan. 26, 1920. Library of Congress



Helen Keller, left, "hears" her teacher, Anne Sullivan, by feeling the vibrations on her lips. Keller performed her act, "Star of Happiness," in June 1920, later describing how much she enjoyed Keith's Theater, including the "shower-bath" in her dressing room. Associated Press

THEATER

FROM 3

The building at 400 Salina Street has been vacant for several years. Its last major tenant was Sibley's, which closed in 1989.

But back in the day, that Syracuse corner was home to Keith's Theater, described when it opened in 1920 as "the New Million Dollar Temple of Vaudeville."

The founders of the B.F. Keith's vaudeville theater chain called it "the most beautiful theater in America" and an article in the Herald-Journal in 1994 described it as "elegant, with its marble pillars, rich with its hangings and broad staircase, beckoning to the expensive loge, calling to the cheap seats in the balcony."

Through the middle of the 20th century, it — and other classic theaters — brought people downtown for entertainment. At first, there were vaudeville shows, then silent movies and "talkies," before radio, TV, and suburban mall movie theaters "stole awed audiences from the grandeur."

Here are some moments from the theater's past.

OPENING NIGHT HEADLINED BY BELLE BAKER

The opening night bill on Jan. 26, 1920, was headlined by "the incomparable" Belle Baker. Tickets started at \$1 for seats near the orchestra, and went down to 15 cents for the

far reaches of the balcony.

More than 3,000 people attended, and the night was considered a resounding success.

The Syracuse Herald described the theater as "a studied gem of commingled perfection," and went on to rave: "The thing beggars description. Its first night it was all lights, shirt fronts, gay gowns, waving programs, clapping hands, and intent eyes on the stage, where the best vaudeville specialists procurable held the boards."

The paper gushed that the theater was more beautiful than the Comedie in Paris, "pygmies the Worcester Keith by comparison" and was just as impressive at the Capital theater on Broadway.

The bill was called an "embarrassment of riches," and was heralded at the "best presented in Syracuse in the history of the business."

The Four Bards performed a gymnast show, Libonati played his xylophone, Miller and Mack performed comedy, George Whiting and Sadie Burt sang songs, and Belle Baker "was just short of genius."

The Herald speculated that ticket sales were so good that everyone in the city would see this show during the theater's opening week.

HELEN KELLER PERFORMS HER STAGE ACT

Helen Keller came to perform at Keith's during its first year.

She performed her stage act, "Star of Hap-

piness," for a week of performances in June 1920.

In a letter to her mother, Keller described Syracuse as "smoky and dirty," but said Keith's "was the most beautiful theater, of which everyone is justly proud." She went on to say her dressing room was a "real pleasure" with every convenience that she wanted, "even a shower-bath."

A short review in the Herald says the show was the most interesting vaudeville act that came to Syracuse that year and was "well-worth seeing."

It offers no specifics about what Keller's show was like, but performances in other cities give an idea. The performance lasted 20 minutes and began with Keller's teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy, giving a short biography of Keller's life.

Keller then demonstrated to the audience how she learned to speak, then answered questions using her teacher's "finger-spelling translation."

On the final night, Keller was given a Mutual Welfare medal for sending a kind message to inmates at Auburn Prison, who found her inspiring.

Keller, after receiving the medal, asked that a message was sent back to the prisoners: "Don't give up hope. Fight to the end and you will all gain happiness."

In its heyday, the Keith would see such famous acts as Houdini, Al Jolson, Milton Berle, Jack Benny and George Burns perform there.



Above: Little did Mr. and Mrs. John Zimmer, of Weedsport, realize that the two tickets they purchased on Jan. 6, 1967, at Keith's were to be the last it ever sold. *Carl J. Single.*

Left: Veteran screen character actor Charles Coburn arrives at Keith's on July 18, 1940, for the world premiere of the movie "The Boys From Syracuse." *Herald Journal file photo*

ROBBED! MASKED BANDITS ESCAPE WITH CASH

The Keith's made the front page on March 17, 1928, but it had nothing to do with anything on stage.

Instead, it was the scene of a brazen holdup during a busy Saturday morning that would lead to a judge yelling at a jury for its verdict.

It began with two masked, armed bandits, allegedly equipped with tear gas bombs, entering the lobby of the theater, slugging assistant manager Major Harvey Hobbs over the head with a blackjack and escaping with \$4,500 in a black bag, payroll for actors and the theater's employees.

The Herald called it the "most daring holdup in the city's history."

The pair managed to escape police on Fayette Street, and the trail went cold.

Vincent Budko, a former employee of the theater, was arrested about a week later, along with another man. A Keith's cashier identified him as being the same man who asked two days before the robbery, "Does the big fellow still carry the money?"

Despite four witnesses who identified him as one of the robbers, a jury acquitted Budko after five hours of deliberations.

Judge William Barnum exploded in rage first at Budko, then the jury.

He told Budko: "Go ahead. Go on out. Tell all your friends that Syracuse is a wide-open town for thieves and robbers."

He told the jury he was considering

removing them all from the jury rolls permanently.

THE MOVIE "THE BOYS FROM SYRACUSE" PREMIERES

One of the theater's most star-studded nights was July 18, 1940, when the movie "The Boys from Syracuse" premiered.

Chartered planes brought 42 people from Hollywood and Broadway to Syracuse, where they were greeted by Mayor Rolland Marvin and Police Chief William Rapp.

Constance Moore, Peggy Morgan, Charles Coburn, Abbott and Costello and the film's star, Joe Penner, were the headliners.

The stars rode in a parade from the New York Central Railroad Station to Salina Street, past stores with employees in togas and Grecian flags befitting the film's setting in ancient Greece.

The Herald Journal described what the scene at the Keith's was like: "The crush of fans became so great as screen celebrities appeared that a nearby shop window was broken, women's dresses were torn, buses were delayed and police were short-tempered."

It was said spotlights made night turn into day under the theater's marquee.

Joe Penner was the first to arrive, with Mayor Marvin. The crowd roared and shouted at Penner his catchphrase, "Ya wanna buy a duck."

Actress Constance Moore greeted Syracuse University summer theater player

May LaRoche, who had won a "Gateway to Hollywood" contest, with, "See you in Hollywood, darling."

The newspaper said, "It was a Hollywood party in every sense of the word, teeming with small talk of pictures and the more serious conversation of film executives."

The film itself was considered a bomb, and a critic from the "New Yorker" said someone "should be hanged for what they did to the celebrated Broadway show."

"WILMA," THE PIPE ORGAN, IS REVIVED

In the silent film era, theaters used giant pipe organs to add audio accompaniment to what was quietly happening on the screen.

For 42 years, Wilma anchored the Keith's theater with its 16-foot tall pipes.

Originally shipped to the theater from the Wurlitzer factory in North Tonawanda in 1925, it had become an afterthought when "talkies" redefined Hollywood.

In 1963, with the theater struggling, a group from Syracuse rallied to restore the organ, at its own expense, which was said to have rotted considerably as it sat silent for 20 years.

Its restoration was complete in 1965, and a crowd of 1,800 people came to the theater on March 21 for a concert on the organ.

Lucella Wickham played a selection of music from "My Fair Lady," and songs such as "Ain't We Got Fun," "Bye, Bye Blackbird," and "My Blue Heaven."

SEE THEATER, 6



Above: Rescue workers search for victims after the back wall of Keith's Theater collapsed onto Clinton Street on May 26, 1967.
Post-Standard file photos

Right: Customers wait for a Sibley's store to open on Oct. 9, 1969, on the spot where Keith's theater used to stand.



THEATER

FROM 5

The Post-Standard said it "thrilled the large audience of musically nostalgic Syracusans." After the theater closed, the organ was relocated to the state fairgrounds, where it remains.

A volunteer, Harvyn Tarkmeel, gave the famous organ its nickname a few years ago, naming it after Fred Flintstone's wife.

THE FINAL CURTAIN FOR KEITH'S

The final curtain for the Keith's theater began to fall on November 21, 1964, when Mayor William Walsh announced a \$9 million department store was to be built on top of a \$2 million parking garage at the property. The store would employ 500 people.

Keith's, as well as another theater, the Paramount, a drug store and several other businesses, would have to be razed to make way for a gigantic Sibley's Department Store.

Sibley's, based in Rochester, had been in business for 96 years. Its Rochester store occupied a city block and was considered the largest store between New York City and Chicago.

The Syracuse store would have 250,000 square feet of floor space over three floors and be built on top of a parking garage that would hold between 600 and 800 cars.

Mayor Walsh said the project was "posi-

tive proof that future growth and prosperity of our downtown area is assured for years to come."

The loss of Keith's was relegated to the 23rd page of the newspaper the day after the announcement. Reporter Nevart Apikian wrote that all ties to Syracuse's vaudeville past would be "completely erased."

The theater's final night was Jan. 5, 1967, featuring the Jane Fonda/Jason Robards' film "Any Wednesday" as the final show.

A Mr. and Mrs. John Zimmer, of Weedsport, were photographed by the Herald-Journal purchasing the last tickets ever sold at the 46-year-old theater.

Manager Dave Levin said there were several telephone calls concerning the theater's closing, but there was "no fanfare."

That was a far cry from the theater's opening night.

DEMOLITION RESEMBLES "BOMBED-OUT BATTLEFIELD"

Five months later, Keith's had one more role to play in Syracuse history, this time a tragic one.

On May 26, 1967, the entire rear wall of the theater collapsed while the building was being torn down, sending tons of debris down onto South Clinton Street.

Chunks of the building piled over 10 feet high and rolled up against the Fire Engine Company 6 building across the street.

A photographer reported that he heard "a

cracking, creaking noise, then the building wall buckled and collapsed with a roar."

An elderly man, Thomas Fahey, was killed as he drove by in his yellow Mercury convertible. Four other people were injured.

Firefighters dug away the debris with their hands to get to others trapped in their cars, and cut the tops off to get to them.

The Herald-Journal said Clinton Street "looked like a bombed-out battlefield."

SIBLEY'S OPENS IN DOWNTOWN SYRACUSE

Columbus Day 1969 saw the opening of the new Sibley's store, and the excitement was comparable to the feelings generated by the opening of the theater in 1920.

(The day chosen was not by accident. The holiday and Canadian Thanksgiving created a "shopping spree" throughout the city. Beautiful autumn weather did not hurt, either.)

A Boy and Girl Scout raised an American flag, and Mayor Walsh and Sibley management made short speeches before the ribbon was cut opening the store. Shoppers wasted no time jamming the wide aisles of the new store, and several times during the day the store temporarily closed its doors to relieve traffic congestion inside.

The store would last 20 years. In January 1989, the company closed the downtown location as it opened a new 85,000-square-foot store at Great Northern Mall.