

# ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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## ROBERTS ORPHEUM FINDS ITS NICHE; READY FOR PARTIES AS WELL AS SHOWS

Tavia Evans of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch  
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The sign still reads American Theatre, but the blinking marquee on the **Roberts Orpheum** Theater indicates that downtown's newest venue is open for business. The **Roberts Orpheum** will make its official debut April 10, with popular 1990s band the Backstreet Boys.

But it will see plenty of action this weekend, too. Two private parties will work in tandem with the NCAA men's basketball championships. Sporting-goods maker Adidas will sponsor a party there tonight, and former Blues hockey player Tony Twist will take over the space Saturday. The private events will become part of the theater's permanent operating strategy to turn a profit. In fact, 75 percent of the events won't be open to the public: Weddings, corporate events and private parties already have been booked through much of this year.

Other area performance theaters are taking the same route, booking a mix of activities to stay financially solvent.

The Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts Center at the University of Missouri at St. Louis announced it will decrease its roster of acts to 22 this year from 32 in 2004, its first year in operation. The expense of bigger, Broadway-style shows last year drained profits and yielded lower ticket sales, said Dixie Kohn, vice chancellor of university relations, who also manages the center.

This year, the center will have more student-sponsored events, speakers series and some Big Band acts, including the Duke Ellington Band and the Glenn Miller Orchestra. About 95 percent of the events at the Pageant are public concerts and parties, but the theater on Delmar Boulevard also is the site for private events. The venue seats about 1,500, but tables and chairs can be removed to pack in 2,300 for a rock or hip-hop concert.

The **Roberts Orpheum** joins the theater scene with an interior makeover and a diverse lineup of acts targeted toward a 30-something crowd. "If the Pageant is the theater for the kids, then the **Roberts Orpheum** is for their parents, said Mike Roberts, who co-owns the theater with his brother Steve.

The theater, built in 1917, originally was a vaudeville house and later a movie theater. The Robertses bought the building in January 2004 and have pumped about \$2.25 million into it for renovations. The entire building was rewired for electricity, and lighting fixtures were replaced.

New roll-away theater seats have been installed on the main level, adding space for more cabaret-style seating or open areas for standing-room-only concerts. The bathrooms have been redone, with additional sink space and mahogany woodworking, designed by the Roberts Co.'s custom furniture division.

The lobby and box office are getting a good scrub, too. Colored friezes, gargoyles and art-deco moldings had been hidden under nearly 22 years of dust; the original terrazzo-tiled floor and leaf trimming will also see updates. The 80-year-old elevator is still in operation, complete with a gold-hued grating fence and elevator lever.

The 2005 season lineup will be just as flexible as the seating: Backstreet Boys, April 10; Bill Maher, May 20; Spyro Gyra, June 9. Three weddings are planned in June, and the Seventh Day Adventists will have a film festival in July.

"We're marketing the theater to be many things to everyone, from cabaret-style to an intimate theater setting and concerts," said Michael Jennings, general manager.

That's a good strategy, area concert bookers say, allowing the theater to cater to a number of shows and events. The venue also could tie into additional meeting space for the Mayfair, a nearby boutique hotel, also owned by the Roberts Co.

Joe Litvag is vice president of Midwest operations for Anschutz Entertainment Group Live, which has exclusive booking rights for acts at the **Roberts Orpheum**. "The Pageant has the nightclub setting, the Fox has the cushy seats and upscale venue with high-dollar performances," he said. "We have an up-close-and-personal setting that you don't get in any other theaters in St. Louis." That's a niche that promoters say will encourage more touring groups to add St. Louis to their list.

That's how the **Roberts Orpheum** booked Rob Thomas, a singer from the band Matchbox 20. Initially, he planned to do just 10 to 15 dates across the country, and St. Louis wasn't one of them, Litvag said.

"He's a prime example of a show that wouldn't have come to the market because of theater size," Litvag said, "and with the Orpheum, we convinced him to play here." --- The **Roberts Orpheum** Theater Address: 416 North Ninth Street Opened: 1917 Original owner: Louis Cella Purchased by: Mike and Steve Roberts in 2004 for \$1.5 million Features: Seats 1,470, three bars, 30-foot-deep stage, renovated halls and bathrooms, remodeled party room beneath stage