

# Theater's superior craftsmanship continues

## Contractors refurbish chairs, floors, murals and a 2½-ton chandelier

By NATE DOUGHERTY

It may not be easy to take 800 seats from a concert hall, build large groups of box seats from scratch and renovate an entire lobby while maintaining the ambience of a theater built in 1922. But those were the tasks of contractors working on the Eastman Theatre.

Guy DiMatteo of Artisan Interiors took the challenge in stride. His firm refurbished 573 chairs in the theater, stripping off all the fabric, staining the wood and installing new lights on the aisle seats. Early in the bidding, when officials from the Eastman School of Music asked DiMatteo whether the original seats were worth saving, his response was enthusiastic.

"The seats are a well-made piece of furniture, and I wouldn't consider modern theater seats furniture, but each of these is a separate chair," DiMatteo said. "They had a lot of detail and used solid walnut, which is a very worthy wood."

After they were taken to Artisan Interiors' offices on Mount Read Boulevard, every chair got painstaking attention. Aisle seats needed the lights, but DiMatteo did not want them to look out of place. The solution was to mount walnut fixtures that held light-emitting diodes.

Artisan Interiors worked with a local company to make sure even the springs on the refurbished chairs closely matched the originals—a difficult task because modern



Photo by Richard Baker

Kodak Hall's most noticeable piece of "jewelry" is the massive chandelier that hangs over the main seating area. Fourteen feet in diameter and 35 feet tall, the chandelier has 546 lights and 20,000 individual pieces of crystal from Italy and Czechoslovakia.

springs are hidden in the chair while the originals were visible.

Even the seat known as George Eastman's favorite received an upgrade. Eastman sat in the first row of the mezzanine, all the way to the right. It afforded a great view of the theater and had a nearby private entrance.

Jeff Gambrill, president of Aloï Material

Handling, worked on a project modernizing one of the most recognizable features of the theater. His company replaced an archaic hand-crank pulley used to lower the chandelier with an electric hoist mechanism. Because of the delicate nature of the work and the value of the chandelier, his company had to take out a \$5 million insurance policy for the project.

"It was one of those projects we were excited to take on, but nervous because of the irreplaceability of that chandelier," Gambrill said. "If anything happened to it, we would be known as the vendor that destroyed the chandelier."

Before the electric hoist was installed, two workers painstakingly lowered the chandelier whenever it needed to be cleaned or repaired. Installing the new hoist was difficult for Aloï workers because conditions on the catwalks were hot and cramped.

Gambrill said he and his team took a great deal of pride from the work.

"You don't come across this type of work very often, and this is a very big part of Rochester," Gambrill said. "It's not like putting in a crane at a distribution center."

In all, more than 20 contractors worked on at least part of the renovation. One company, Tichenor Furniture Services Inc., refurbished some of the very same furniture it installed during a renovation in the 1970s.

"When we were working on the benches and settees, we saw our name on the labels on the bottom, and now we got to put our names back on there again," said Mary Tichenor, president. "It was very prestigious to do the work."

As he watched the project move to completion, DiMatteo was glad to see the effort that went into maintaining the original feel of the theater even as it underwent dramatic changes.

"Seeing it all come along, the theater has got an intimacy it didn't have before, and that really suits it well," DiMatteo said.

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