

Beeville renovating faded Rialto Theatre

CORPUS CHRISTI CALLER-TIMES SERVICE

BEEVILLE — The vacant Rialto Theatre is silent but for the flutter of a pigeon's wings and the muted sound of the main street's traffic.

The bird flying from a hole in the ceiling is the only sign of life in the 75-year-old building, which once drew hundreds of South Texans with its silver-screen features and cool relief in summer, as air blew over huge blocks of ice.

"It was just divine to hit those doors," said Barbara Welder, a Beeville resident with memories of the then-state-of-the-art air conditioning.

That nostalgia has propelled Welder and other Beeville residents into action.

The Hall-Rialto Preservation Association, a group of private citizens, was formed in 1992 after the Bee County Historical Society decided against renovating the theater.

Now, the association is bringing to town a Broadway actor to raise money, just as the original theater drew the likes of John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart — in person. The actors, traveling during World War II to raise money for war bonds,

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visited only those well-established theaters where crowds were a guarantee.

"This was big. I mean, Beeville was on the map," Welder said. "Everyone drove from other towns to go to the movies here."

Beeville native Barry Hoff, a soap-opera and Broadway actor, is returning March 1 to perform in a play to raise money for the Rialto renovation.

And he's bringing with him star memorabilia to be sold in a silent auction: posters, clothing and other items autographed by or once belonging to Faye Dunaway, Julie Andrews, Liza Minelli, Tommy Tune and others.

But the drive to renovate the Rialto is not for the purpose of bringing Hollywood back to the theater.

"We have no theater that serves everyone. We don't have a place to have plays, concerts, symphonies," Welder said.

Welder, a Spanish professor at Bee County College and secretary of the preservation association, said the project's planners also

hope to revive community theater and to provide space for dance, drama and other art classes, as well as a downstairs room for historic artifacts from the community.

Welder credits Ida Dirks, owner of Dirks-Park Properties, for much of the project's legwork. Dirks initiated the project after seeing how the arts helped her son improve his grades in high school as he gained confidence by performing.

In order to get funding for the \$500,000 project, Dirks has also pointed out the renovation's economic and social benefits, which include stabilizing downtown property values, drawing in more than 125,000 people from the surrounding area and serving at-risk children, she said.

As explained in her mounds of paperwork for grant applications, "Rialto" is the principal bridge spanning the Grand Canal in Venice, Italy, and is mentioned several times by William Shakespeare as a rendezvous for all classes of people.