

## Fully Jacked

News: By JIMMY STAMP • February 4, 2016

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View east down 47th Street from Times Square. The Palace Theatre Building is the tall building at center-right.

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According to theatrical superstition, every theater has a ghost. At the Palace Theater in Times Square, the apparition of acrobat Louis Borsalino supposedly performs a nightly reenactment of his fatal 1935 fall. If that's true, Borsalino will soon be haunting from a greater height. In November 2015, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) approved a proposal to jack up the landmark theater 29 feet to add additional retail space.

When the 1,800-seat Palace, designed by Milwaukee-based architects Kirchhoff & Rose, opened in 1913, it was celebrated for its surprising intimacy, superb acoustics, and baroque

ornamentation. Touted as the “Valhalla of Vaudeville,” its boards were trod by performers like Sarah Bernhardt, the Marx Brothers, and Harry Houdini. With the rise of film, the theater was altered several times between the late 1920s and 1965, when current owner Nederlander converted the space into a Broadway theater.

In 1987, the LPC conferred landmark status to the Palace’s interior. In the original report, the commission wrote that “if one theater in New York’s Broadway theater district were to be named the most famous, the privilege would fall virtually uncontested to the Palace.”

The lift is part of a two-billion-dollar project spearheaded by Maefield Development, working with PBDW Architects and preservation consultants Higgins Quasebarth & Partners, that includes more than 66,000 square feet of new retail, 40,000 square feet of entertainment space, and a new hotel. Maefield has also acquired the adjacent 468-room DoubleTree Hotel, located at 1568 Broadway, which will be part of the project.

But it is changes to the Palace that have raised the ire of some preservationists and theater enthusiasts. The developers will move the theater’s current entrance, at Broadway and 7th Avenue, around the corner to 47th Street, freeing up valuable frontage on Times Square for retail.

One reason for the opposition is that the Palace helped make Times Square Times Square. Kelly Carroll, of preservation advocacy group the Historic Districts Council, told the commission that their decision “was indicative that our culture and art is merely secondary to a Times Square corporate chain store.” Preservation consultant Elise Quasebarth countered that the theater, which is essentially a separate building within a hotel tower, is already divorced from its historic context. In Quasebarth’s estimation, relocating the entry and adding a new 75-foot marquee away from the crowds, signs, and LED haze of Times Square, would strengthen the theater’s identity.

Beyond cultural implications, there’s concern that the architectural high-wire act will damage the theater’s deep-relief ornamental plasterwork. However, in 1998, the same engineers safely moved the Empire Theater 168 feet down 42nd Street to make room for a new retail complex. In their estimation, moving the Palace will be easier: The theater will be protected by temporary shoring and guided by the structural system of the surrounding hotel as hydraulic columns slowly lift the structure.

Renovation plans go beyond mere preservation of the plasterwork. Plans call for the comprehensive repair and restoration of the building ornament, an updated lighting system more seamlessly integrated into the historic interior, and improved egress and infrastructure on both sides of the stage. The LPC concluded that the changes would ultimately benefit the Palace, although they approve the plan on the condition that an independent engineer monitor the project, and they retain the right to stop the work.