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Grand restoration sparks downtown renaissance

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JOSEPHINE MATYAS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

KINGSTON, Ont. – Limestone is back in the limelight at the Grand Theatre. And that's as it should be in a town nicknamed the Limestone City.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Davies lounge at the Grand Theatre in Kingston. (Sept. 9, 2008)

The theatre's original limestone walls date back to 1879 – the early days of Confederation when Sir John A. Macdonald walked the streets of the city, perhaps taking in a show at what was known as Martin's Opera House. And after being covered over for years, the interior walls have been now stripped back to the original material as part of a major, \$17-million revamp.

"It really has been a top-to-bottom renovation," says Brian McCurdy, the cultural director of the Grand Theatre. "It started off three years ago with the idea of just being a few cosmetic changes, but as they got into it we discovered structural problems that needed to be addressed."

[Grand Theatre, Kingston.](#)

1-613-530-2050.

The 2008-2009 season includes headliners like Natalie McMaster, Arlo Guthrie and the Second City Touring Company; the Kingston Symphony; Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal; and stage

Describing it as "a new theatre within the historic shell," McCurdy is quick to explain what he feels is unique about the newly re-opened Grand.

"There's a real nice feeling of the history of the building, but there's also a contemporary feel to it.

"We took the plaster off the walls and went back to the original limestone; the feature wood on the trim and floors is mahogany; and there's a new, deep red carpet from France. Together, it creates a contemporary take on the history of the building."

And there's a bonus. Exposing the limestone and adding the rich wood has improved the acoustics.

Today the original opera house is divided into two theatres, with the main theatre seating 776. "The stage area has been improved and the equipment has been updated with all the current technologies," explains McCurdy.

"The seats have been replaced with new, wider comfortable seats and there's a new hydraulic orchestra pit that can seat about 40 musicians. But the actual space still retains that nice historic feel."

The smaller space – know affectionately as the Baby Grand – seats up to 110 people in a black-box format.

"It's a totally flexible seating configuration. It's kind of an experimental type of space where you can set the seats any way you'd like."

The Grand is leading the renaissance of downtown Kingston as an eastern Ontario destination for arts and entertainment. The space is booked through the 2008-2009 season for music, theatre, dance and business meetings.

"We literally do not have an open weekend this season," says McCurdy. "And the performances are world-class performers, and quality performances."

Dinner and theatre is a dream-date combo, and on a warm fall evening Kingston's many patios fit the bill. The city is rich in restaurants set in historic buildings.

Outdoor patios sit cheek-to-jowl along sections of streets named in the

productions such as Rick Miller's *MacHomer* and *Wingfield's Inferno* by Dan Needles.

United Empire Loyalist tradition: on Princess St., the traffic-free, patio at Amadeus is just steps away from the Grand Theatre; Chez Piggy – a city landmark known locally as "the pig" – has a secluded courtyard and an eclectic menu.

Brock St. is home to Sipps Coffee & Dessert Bar (java, teas, wraps and baked goods), Casa Domenico (unbeatable Italian), Le Chien Noir and its sister property, Atomica.

Along King St., The Pilot House serves casual fare (known for the fish and chips and meat pies) in a neighbourhood pub-style setting. Dessert after the show should be the enormous Sizzle Sundae at the King Street Sizzle. Just around the corner, the Kingston Brewing Company pours mugs of Dragon's Breath Pale Ale made in its microbrewery. It goes perfectly with the lamb burger topped with a thick slice of sharp blue cheese.

Josephine Matyas is a Kingston, Ont. - based freelance writer.