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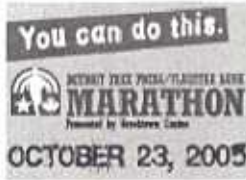
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FIGHT TO SURVIVE: Alger fights for a second chance

Fund-raisers will support restoration

July 21, 2005

BY JOHN MASSON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

There's no gold leaf, no flashy neon marquee, no imposing lobby. And there never was.

Which should be good news for the Friends of the Alger Theater, who have been working for years to save the art deco building on the corner of Warren and East Outer Drive on Detroit's east side.

After all, if Mike Ilitch was able to get his Fox Theater primped back to its original, over-the-top splendor, saving a place that's much more modest should be more than possible.

But maybe not so easy. That's why the preservation odyssey that essentially began the last time the Alger screened a movie -- in 1985, when one of the reels of the slasher flick "Friday the 13th Part 5" broke, sparking a mini-riot and fire that closed the theater for good -- continues next month. The second of three fund-raising concerts and buffet meals will take place at the Original Pointe Bar-B-Que on East Warren near Cadieux.

The Friends know it won't be easy to raise the nearly half-million dollars they'll need just to bring the building, which opened in 1935, back up to city code. But they can see a day when a reconstituted Alger screens movies, stages live plays and music, hosts community town hall meetings, and serves as a spark plug for redevelopment in one of the city's dwindling number of still-bustling neighborhoods.

"If we can tap into it, that whole East Warren strip could come alive again," said Phyllis Boles, a Friends member who helped organize the fund-raisers. "For me, it's about our youth. We're losing too many of our babies, partly because they have nothing to do."

This year's first fund-raiser, held July 11, featured blues from the Motor City Sheiks along with the Pointe Bar-B-Que's famous chicken and ribs. Turnout

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was lower than expected and the Friends only broke even, but Boles said those who came had a good time.

"The music was excellent, and the food is always great," said Boles, a former Morningside resident who now lives in Harper Woods. "The people who were there definitely enjoyed themselves."

At the next fund-raiser, to be held Aug. 8, the food menu will stay the same, with entertainment provided by the soulful blues of the Odessa Harris Group. And on Sept. 12, the Motor City Music Cartel will finish off the series with a Motown retrospective.

Similar fund-raisers, along with leasing space on the Alger's marquee for personal messages, the occasional grant, and the generosity of individual donors have allowed the about 200 members of Friends of the Alger to keep hope alive for the building that once helped knit together several east-side neighborhoods.

The Friends acquired the building at the end of 1986, according to board member Geoff Gowman, and have been trying to keep deterioration at bay while planning for future renovations. Gowman grew up going to movies at the theater, lives nearby, and has dedicated years to shoring up the building.

"There are so few amenities in Detroit neighborhoods these days," Gowman said. "People are just used to not having many things to enjoy in the neighborhood."

That's why Gowman and the Friends soldier on.

"I see boys and girls wandering up and down the street on a Saturday evening, with absolutely no idea how to enjoy life," Gowman said. "How wonderful it would be to have this neighborhood theater on a Saturday afternoon to enjoy, and not only to enjoy, but to stimulate their brains."

He pauses.

"We're going to get there."

*Tickets for the upcoming fund-raisers are \$25 in advance and \$30 at the door. Doors open at 5 p.m., with food available at 5:30 and music starting at 6; contact Karlene Trump at 313-882-2579 for more information. Contributions to the Friends of the Alger Theatre can be sent to P.O. Box 241183, Detroit 48224. Contact **JOHN MASSON** at 586-469-4904 or masson@freepress.com.*

 
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