

Nostalgia sells: Northampton's Roxy still going strong

By **BRENDA LANGE**

Special for Lehigh Valley Business

The neon art deco marquee welcomes visitors to The Roxy Theatre on Main Street in Northampton every day of the week.

Its colorful facade has been doing so since 1933.

And if owner Rick Wolfe has his way, it will keep doing so for many years to come.

From the painstakingly restored lush velvety interior décor, to the organ music, to the price of the movies and snacks, The Roxy is a throwback to an earlier era.

"The old movie palaces have always been my favorite buildings, places of wonder and excitement, where anyone can forget about their lives and be transported to another world by both the architecture of the theater and the movie on the screen," Wolfe said.

GOING ON 100 – SORT OF

The Roxy got its start a dozen years before 1933, in 1921, as the Lyric Theatre – a nickelodeon, showing several, short moving pictures – a relatively new phenomenon.

"People had never seen pictures that moved, and they paid a nickel to see several minutes' worth of trains leaving their stations, people on the beach and so forth," Wolfe said.

"Storefronts were converted into theaters with folding chairs and a sheet for a screen. There was no plot, no sound, but they were very popular."

RESTORATION ACT

The Lyric suffered during the Great Depression and was sold and closed for renovations, which included adding the existing art deco style facade. When it reopened several months later as The Roxy, a variety of live acts – vaudeville, wild west and minstrel shows and local plays – were featured.

Soon, however, movies took over and live acts dwindled.

Television and the rise in popularity of shopping mall theaters nearly extinguished the marquee's lights for good in the 1960s, until it was bought in 1970 by Wolfe and business partner Paul Angstadt.

The pair began restoring the building bit by bit, renovations which continue today. New second-floor restrooms are next in line.

PERSONAL TOUCHES

Wolfe said he always had a love of architecture and studied to be an architect, but was sidetracked by getting into the theater business.

Nostalgia is cultivated at The Roxy in the pricing – a \$3 per ticket at all times – in the live shows that Wolfe books several times a year – the next three include the classic rock group, Desire; At The Hop, a doo-wop band; and the Swingtime Dolls, similar to the 1940s Andrews Sisters – and in the fun personal touches he and his staff add.

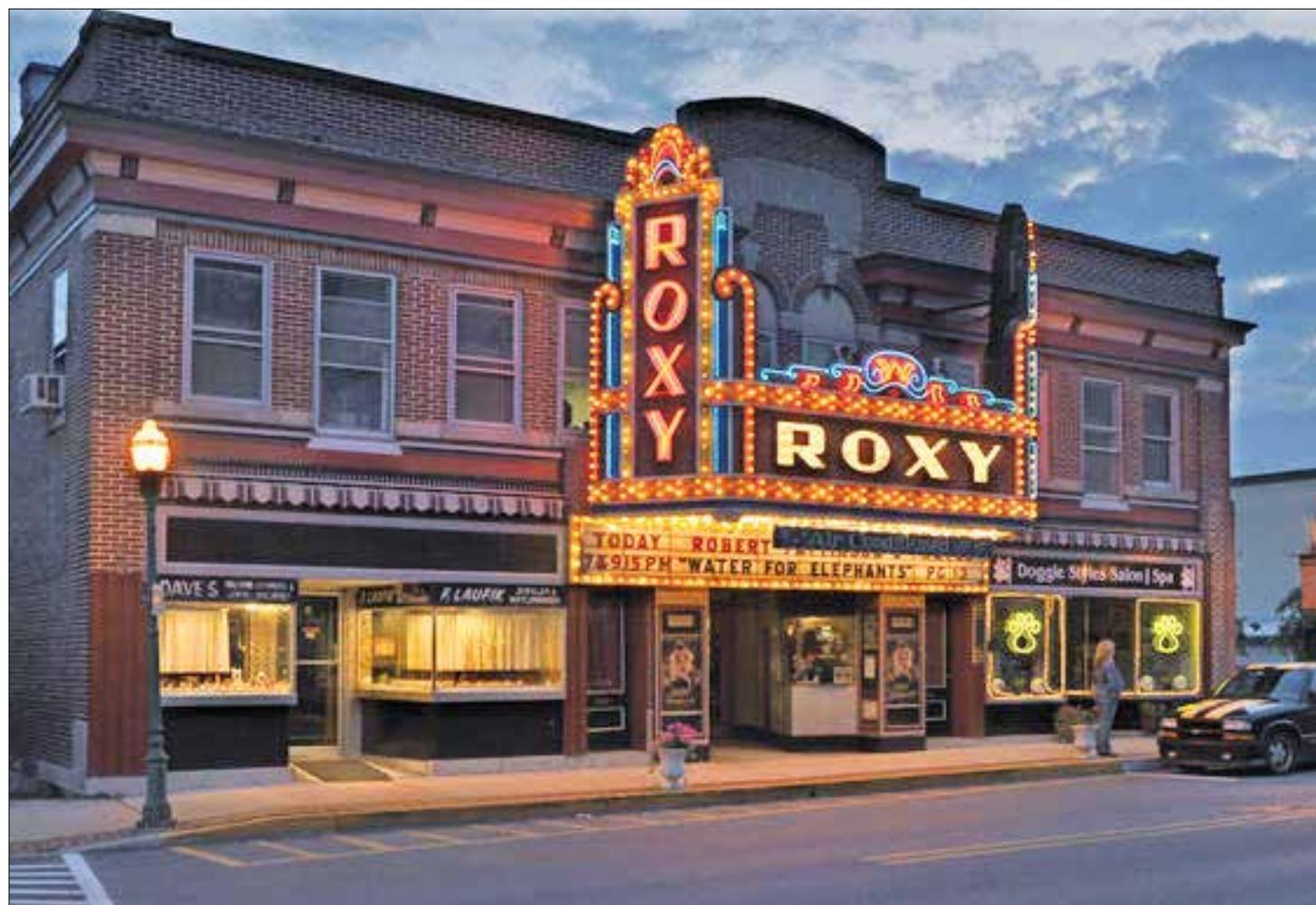


PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXY THEATRE

The 700 neon lights in the marquee are lit for every show at the Roxy Theatre on Main Street in Northampton.

ROXY THEATRE

- **What:** Movies and live shows.
- **Location:** Main Street, Northampton.
- **No. of employees:** 11.
- **Website:** www.roxytheaternorthampton.com

"When we showed 'The Greatest Showman' [starring Hugh Jackman as a circus ringmaster], I wore a silk top hat and had customers telling me I should wear it all the time," Wolfe said.

THE BUILDING AND THE STAFF

What is it that brings patrons back repeatedly from surrounding areas including the Poconos and New Jersey?

Although Wolfe advertises online and in seven print publications, and the price certainly helps, he believes it is the experience, itself, that makes the difference.

"They come for the experience of a restored old theater," he said. "Not just the physical building, but the staff and the way we operate."

"When you come here, you never get an ad on the screen, and you get only one or two trailers. You hear music playing before the show and see the closed curtain."

'LET'S ALL GO TO THE LOBBY'

The 1926 Wurlitzer pipe organ sits in front, in the orchestra pit. (The organ is being restored and should be returned to its spot in the fall, returning pre-show live music to the Saturday night movies.)

"Eventually, the lights dim and change colors. The Roxy logo shines on the curtain as it parts, and we play the old 'Let's all go to the lobby' cartoon right before



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXY THEATRE

The Roxy has been restored in stages, and improvements continue to this day.

the feature starts," Wolfe said.

"It's the way theaters ran years ago. The staff wear white shirts and bow ties. The doorman wears a uniform and I wear a tux. It's theater as a theme park, with lots of nostalgia."

'JUST SITTING THERE IS AN EXPERIENCE'

That attention to detail keeps patrons such as Tony Pristash coming back as often as possible.

He was born and reared just down the street from the theater, and, at 60, can remember when the theater was "broken down with a torn screen."

Pristash owns All Things Framed in town and is president of the Northampton Area Chamber of Commerce. He watched and supported the theater through Wolfe's renovations, including the new, spacious seating and art deco marquee.

"Just sitting there is an experience. And the 700 neon lights in the marquee that are lit every night and for every show make it an American icon," Pristash said. "The theater is an extension of Rick's personality and demonstrates his leadership

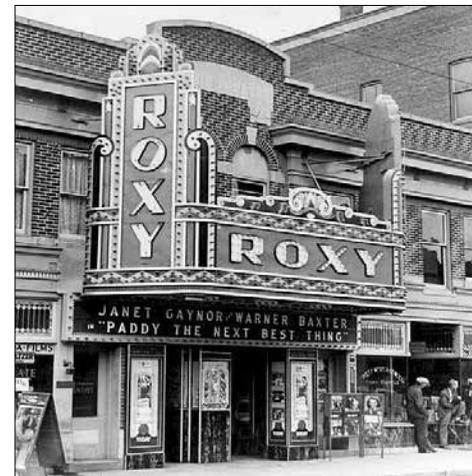


PHOTO COURTESY OF ROXY THEATRE

Undated photo of the Roxy Theatre: Rick Wolfe and business partner Paul Angstadt bought it in 1970.

in the community for keeping this gem in the forefront of people's minds."

CELEBRATIONS

The original theater will turn 100 in 2021, and Wolfe has no plans for a celebration.

"Most people know it only as The Roxy, and we had a big celebration for its 75th," he said.

But the theater is a prime venue for parties and celebrations.

Pristash said that every year at Christmastime, the Northampton chamber hosts a holiday mixer at The Roxy. The party doubles as a fundraiser and food contribution event to benefit the Northampton Area Food Bank.

"People line up to see the old-fashioned Christmas movie – a different one every year – and donate food to the food bank," he said.