

A determined man takes over at the Park Theatre Complex.

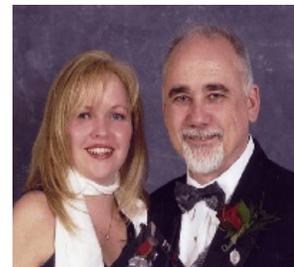


When he purchased the Park Theatre months ago, the owner, Rocky Varcoe, was determined to establish the building as a multi-use entertainment centre. In a wide ranging interview with Business Times he spoke proudly of the plans to expand

the existing business of special events and community theatre by adding the movie experience to the lineup of live entertainment.

The expansion into movies takes the building back to its roots. Built by a long-term summer resident of Cobourg, who also happened to be a member of the US based Durland Theatre chain it opened on December 22nd 1948 as the Park Theatre showing “June Bride”. The building was described as “one of the finest in its day”. Its art-deco exterior contained 750 seats, air conditioning and a vaulted ceiling that resembled clouds. Described in the Cobourg-Sentinel Star, at the time, “The building was virtually fireproof with solid brick walls, tile, metal lath, plaster and a steel roof.” However the building fell upon hard times in the 80s when it was converted into two cinemas and the neon signage was removed as part of modernization. When the movie industry tanked and the new ‘cineplexes’ put the building out of sync with the times the operators sold it. Entrepreneurs then moved in to convert the building into a series of nightclubs and a bar. That didn’t work either; enter Mr Varcoe and his Company.

Rocky Varcoe, a businessman from Whitby can be described as an original entrepreneur, capitalizing on opportunities as he sees them. His community roots are deep too. He is the president of Whitby Rotary and tried to make community hockey succeed by bringing the “Clippers” to Baltimore in the Ontario Senior A hockey league. With a background in restaurants and video stores, he was also a VP of Sprint in the US, he sold his restaurants ten years ago and moved to Lindsay Ontario to refresh



himself. In the year off, which he spent by renovating his period house, he saw an opportunity to establish a Dinner Theatre in Whitby. Establishing the "Class Act Dinner Theatre", in partnership with his wife - Claudie, he set out to establish the finest dinner theatre experience available. Describing himself "As a stickler for customer service, not taking customers for granted and always trying to exceed expectations" he set out to do just that. To that end a building, on Consumers Drive in Whitby, was converted into a 200 seat full size theatre with tables set up in varying sizes able to accommodate all groups. The repertoire presented was a mixture for all tastes - comedy/farce, special events and singing acts of all genres. "We get all the acts on the way up or the way down" Rocky explained referring to the status of the acts involved, new people entering the industry or those whose careers have peaked and can no longer command top billing. In the case of new acts Rocky cautions his clientele, "These acts are on the cusp, you will never see them again (in this theatre) in a long time!"

As he is now running a very successful entertainment centre in Whitby he sees a huge advantage in adding the Park Playhouse to his business. "The wonderful thing about having two theatres is that we can put high quality acts into Cobourg. Working with the agents we use; they don't send us acts that don't work." However he admits that due to the smaller markets planning the agenda to maximize bookings presents a challenge. "How many 'time and tried' acts are there out there? In 2009 we had 51 open days, this year we are aiming for 75 and with the addition of movies we should push that to over 100."

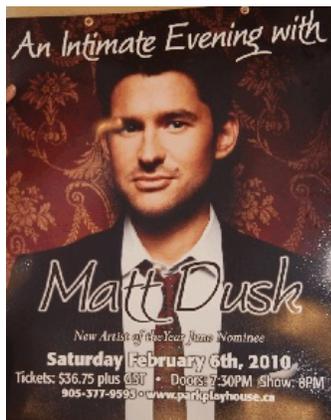


Rocky's son, Dallas, has been given the job of creating the movie business from scratch. Dallas majored in Film Studies at College and his last job was the Art Director of a movie that is in the final stages of pre-release. Arriving back from a stay in Hong Kong, where he was accompanying his wife whilst she was working on a fashion assignment, his father asked him to come to Cobourg to head up the expansion into movies. "I'm a movie guy and it seemed like a natural fit" he told Business Times. He has been in Cobourg three months trying to get to know the local scene. As his Dad says, "We now have someone local who will understand local conditions." But Rocky also cautions us all when he says, "The costs of the building are so high that a single purpose building cannot make it. I'd hate to see the building turned into a furniture store!"

So over to Dallas and the movies! The building has just been refitted to accommodate customer comfort. The stage has been extended outwards and lowered, providing a larger footprint for the

performing arts and a state of the art movie screen is being fabricated in British Columbia. This screen will be 33 feet by 17 feet high. Matched to a refurbished projection system that cost \$12,000 the seven sound speakers, capable of handling all bands including ear-piercing heavy metal bands, have been tuned to provide the best movie experience in the area. But systems alone will not put 'bums in the seats' the selection of movies will. Dallas intends to screen "Second Run Movies" these are films that have already shown in the first-run theaters and presented at a lower ticket price. The risk here is that the 'video window' (the interval between a first run movie's debut and the day it is issued on video) is getting smaller. Dallas sees no problem here as the Park Playhouse does not rely entirely on movies to be viable. And as the Booking Manager his knowledge of film will be invaluable in deciding what to bring in. He intends to re-screen the first movie shown and hold a Grand Opening, and sometime in April "June Bride" starring Bette Davis will once again appear on the big screen in Cobourg.

An aggressive marketing plan has been implemented. The combination of efficient and workable websites - parkplayhouse.ca and classactdinnertheatre.com, that announces box-office lineups well in advance of the date, with a comfortable subscription programme and an economical sponsorship package which invites businesses to get their name to an entertainment package and acts, all show that much thought has gone into the 'attraction' side of the business. There are four levels of sponsorship: from Title Sponsor for \$1500.00 to the lowest level - Bronze Sponsor at \$250.00. For customers the Park Playhouse has a membership programme available. Reduced prices are available if people sign up for the programme customers should contact the box-office for details.



As Business Times was being given a tour of the facilities Dallas regaled us with the quality of the acts that the Playhouse has hosted in the last year: The Fab Four, The Amazing Kreskin, Ron Sexsmith, Gordon Bamford, Karl Wolf, Magician Richard Forget and the many tribute acts: Johnny Cash, Neil Diamond, as well as the showstopping Mickey Rooney. But he saved his pride for last when he pointed out the poster for Matt Dusk. Juno award winning Dusk appeared on February 6th and crooned his way to the hearts of Cobourgers. As his Dad told us earlier in the interview, "You will not

see some of these acts again, in this theatre."

In closing Dallas told Business Times that he is eager to tap into the local scene, albeit local music or performing arts. "We know that the folks in Cobourg have fond memories of their Park Theatre experiences, we want to recreate those memories." He is always available on all social media: Twitter and Facebook as well as being not far away from the box office which opens at 12 noon most days. To check out all upcoming acts and programmes check out the website www.parkplayhouse.ca or phone the box office at 905-377-9595.