



Lukasz Marona, left, and Alex Janko clean the brass on the main fixture of the Duchess, the 22-foot-tall, 2.5-ton chandelier that hangs in the rotunda of the Rialto Square Theatre. DAVID PIERINI/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Duchess gets royal treatment

Rialto Square Theatre's grande dame, a massive crystal chandelier, gets its first deep cleaning in 84 years along with its entourage of 31 other fixtures

By Mary Owen
TRIBLOCAL REPORTER

Joliet's Duchess shines again. After getting their first deep cleaning since the Rialto Square Theatre opened in 1926, the theater's crown jewel — an eight-arm chandelier called the Duchess — and 31 accompanying chandeliers are shining twice as bright these days.

"It was hard to read your program in here before," said Randall Green, Rialto general manager. "Now we can safely say you don't have to squint or tilt toward the light."

Restoration started in June, but last week the Duchess, made with thousands of Czechoslovakian crystals, was lowered from the ornate rotunda ceiling. Weighing 2.5 tons and 22 feet tall, it is one of the largest crystal chandeliers in the country, according to theater officials.

"For somebody like me, this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience," said Pete Janko, whose Marengo-based specialty lighting company, Lumenelle, is doing the cleaning.

Janko and his team, who have worked on chandeliers at the Palmer House Hilton and St. James Chapel in Chicago, have painstakingly dismantled all of the chandeliers and cleaned them with jewelry cleaner and dish soap. In some cases,



Chera Baruffi rehangs crystals on a small fixture that is part of the Duchess. Thousands of pieces of glass and crystal were removed, cleaned and rewired.

The dirt on the Duchess

22

Height in feet

2.5

Weight in tons

\$50,000

Cost of cleaning

they numbered the pieces and took photos to ensure that everything was reassembled correctly.

Typically, the Rialto's chandeliers get a surface cleaning twice a year by the in-house maintenance staff. During those cleanings, the Duchess is lowered and it takes eight to 10 hours to dust and clean.

The surface cleaning can't reach many points within the fixtures, leaving dust and even cigarette residue (from the days when smoking was allowed in the theater) to build up, Janko said.

After the cleanings, theater officials said patterned reflections on the ceiling above the chandeliers were revealed.

"I was like, 'That wasn't here before,'" Green said.

The Duchess was the last piece to be completed, but more than two dozen chandeliers line the walls of the Rialto's Versailles-inspired lobby, rotunda walkways and inside the theater. In addition to Czechoslovakian crystal, the chandeliers are made of Steuben glass, copper and bronze, and all were hand-cut by the Victor S. Pearlman Co. of Chicago, theater officials said.

In addition to stage productions, the Rialto also hosts events such as weddings in the rotunda. During those events,

Please turn to Page 4

CHICAGOLAND EXTRA

Duchess is ready for her close-up

Continued from Page 1

people would often ask to have the lights turned on.

"We'd have to say, 'No, they're on,'" said Annette Parker, Rialto's director of marketing.

The \$50,000 chandelier cleaning is part of a \$5 million initiative by the theater to restore the building on Chicago Street in downtown Joliet to its original grandeur.

The theater, which is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, was built as a "vaudeville movie palace" and incorporates architectural styles from the Italian Renaissance, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Rococo, Venetian and Baroque periods.

The carpet was replaced a few years ago with one whose pattern matches that of the original from

1926 — thanks to an employee who saved a swatch in 1981 when the theater was renovated.

It was during that renovation that workers nicknamed the grand chandelier Duchess and gave the smaller chandeliers nicknames such as Sophie and Dorothy.

The renovation initiative started in 2004 and has resulted in a new roof, exterior windows, stage lighting, elevators and dressing rooms.

Green said the project is an effort to preserve Joliet history and "knock off the 25 years of wear and make the theater ready for the next 25 years."

Tours of the Rialto are available every Tuesday.

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Lukasz Marona cleans the brass on the main fixture of the Duchess. The chandelier, which dates to the Rialto Square Theatre's opening in 1926, has never had a deep cleaning until now. DAVID PIERINI/TRIBUNE PHOTO