

Visitors marvel at DeKalb's Egyptian Theatre

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DeKALB -- The Egyptian Theatre is comfortably familiar to many locals, which can make it easy to forget that the historic building really is a rarity.

Members of the Theatre Historical Society of America taking the place in for the first time marveled at the DeKalb treasure on Thursday.

"This is a beautiful, one-of-a-kind theater that doesn't exist anywhere else," said Richard Fosbrink, executive director of the Elmhurst-based nonprofit organization.

Two busloads of theater building enthusiasts rolled into the city Thursday, the first stop that day on their daylong tour of regional playhouses. They have been visiting Chicago-area theaters since Tuesday. The excursions are part of the historical society's annual conference.

Fosbrink said the theater society has been touring venues nationwide each year since the 1970s. The membership includes U.S. residents and theater-lovers from other parts of the world. They have interests in different aspects of theater, ranging from decor to audio and sound systems, from the building and stage mechanics to flooring.

The interests are "very eclectic," Fosbrink said. "But, in general, everybody that's here has a love of theaters and historic theaters. They're magic. There's just something special about them."

The Egyptian was chosen as a stop this year because the organization's conference is being held in Chicago this year, and some members had heard of the DeKalb theater. Alex Nerad, executive director of The Egyptian, also is a society member.

"It was a huge honor for us," Nerad said of being a stop on the tour. "It adds a lot of credibility to what we're doing here for a national organization like this to make it a priority to come out and visit us."

The theater society visitors were greeted with a "welcome" from a number of city officials and civic leaders, including Mayor John Rey. They got handshakes, "hellos," and popcorn as they stepped off the bus and into the theater's foyer.

"This is your home today, so wander," Nerad instructed the visitors after he gave remarks and invited the visitors to roam the two-story building.

Mary Bradshaw took lots of pictures as she walked around the building. She said she loves art deco and appreciated the theater's artistic embellishments. Bradshaw, who lives in Dublin, Ireland, said that a number of the playhouses there have shuttered – never to return.

"This is extravagantly beautiful," she said of The Egyptian. "We have nothing in Ireland to compare to this."

Hart Prochazka said nothing like The Egyptian exists near his hometown of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

"The Egyptian theme that is carried out, the detail, no one does that nowadays; and it's just breathtaking," he said. "To have a theater of this quality in a small town (like DeKalb) is exceptional."

When the tour wrapped up, the visitors were given blue goodie bags stuffed with information about DeKalb County, as a destination. The DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau provided the departing gifts.

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