

The Business

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Can This Eyesore Be Saved?

Bill Morton won't let the old Adelphi Theatre go without a stink.

By Deanna Isaacs

Bill Morton was looking for a space in Rogers Park for his fledgling label, 4X Records, when he googled *Rogers Park* and *auditorium* and "the first thing that came up was the Adelphi." He hiked over to Clark and Estes to take a look at the 1917 brick-and-terra-cotta edifice and says it was love at first sight. The doors were locked—the theater, most recently known as the North Shore Cinema, showing Bollywood films, was vacant—but Morton says he got the owners to give him a tour of the place and then pestered them for months to give him the key so he could clean it up and try to get it open. In April 2004 he set up shop amid the peeling paint and water stains, held a few events, and launched a quest to turn the old place into a movie, performance, and music venue. He had to move out when temperatures began to drop in November—"the owners weren't going to heat it," he says. "But we had every intent of coming back in the spring." By that time, however, the Adelphi had been sold to developer Chad Zuric for more than a million dollars. Last week the city's zoning committee approved a variance that will clear the way for a five-story condominium (taller than anything around it) on the site. The proposal will go to the City Council for approval later this month.

Morton, however, hasn't given up. He's formed an organization, Citizens for the Adelphi Theater, launched a Web site (adelphitheater.org), and collected more than 1,000 signatures, many from folks too shy to include a last name or address. Last week, Morton says, Citizens for the Adelphi "actually had the opportunity to meet with Mayor Daley" to plead their case. The meeting—a surprise to the mayor—occurred as Daley left the stage after giving a speech at a Metropolitan Planning Council lunch. "We had a letter for him, and we gave him a gift of a framed picture of the Adelphi interior from 1917," Morton says. "He seemed genuinely concerned. He said, 'Oh, this is nice.' We told him it's scheduled to be demolished. He said he'd look into it and give us a call."

Designed by John E.O. Pridmore as a neighborhood cinema and vaudeville house, the Adelphi got a makeover in



Bill Morton, the Adelphi (top), the proposed condo building (bottom)

the 1930s that included a row of arching deco lights in the lobby and trios of terrazzo ushers saluting patrons from the entrance floor and sidewalk. A few of the ushers are still there, along with a plaque honoring onetime owner Ludwig Sussman, but the front of the building has been marred by seriously misguided face-lifts, and the interior bears the scars of what Morton says was a burst pipe and a bad paint job. The original gingerbread trim in the auditorium has been destroyed or obscured; what's visible now is a scaly, empty cavern with a huge screen at one end. The Adelphi originally had 1,500 seats; more recently there were about 900, but they've all been uprooted. Second-floor studio space, once occupied by Ed Paschke, is empty, as are all but one of four storefronts flanking the theater. Morton, who says he's trying to get landmark status for the building, thinks he'd need something like \$3.3 million to purchase it from the

new owner (who hasn't named a price) and restore it. According to him, the damage is "superficial."

Former owner Mark Magill, whose grandfather bought the theater about 25 years ago, calls the idea of reopening it a fantasy. "No one these days is serious about single-screen theaters," Magill says—especially one with no parking and a deteriorating building. Forty-ninth Ward alderman Joe Moore says Morton is coming forward at the 11th hour without a feasible plan and with no money on the table. The building isn't on the city's list of buildings worthy of being considered for landmark status, Moore points out, referring to a position paper on his Web site. "Its original facade was destroyed many years ago, and most old theaters are not economically viable—all you have to do is look at the Uptown. I'd be doing my community a disservice by turning down an attractive proposal in

favor of preserving the Adelphi, which has become a crumbling eyesore, on a hope and a prayer." As for the height of the proposed condominium—a contentious issue in the neighborhood—Moore says "current zoning permits a four-story building; this is only one story taller. We should also look at what we get in return." What's that? "The developer will provide four affordable units out of 32—over 10 percent." Moore says the affordable units will be priced at about \$160,000 each; the rest will be about \$350,000.

Crystallizing the A-List

PR pro Jay Kelly says Lookingglass Theatre consulted the League of Chicago Theatres' calendar before designating November 9 as the press night for *Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. The date was clear, Kelly says, but soon after the invitations

went out Lookingglass got a disconcerting surprise: it looked like neither the *Tribune's* Chris Jones nor the *Sun-Times's* Hedy Weiss would be attending that night. There was a conflict—Billy Crystal's one-man show, *700 Sundays*, at the Cadillac Palace Theatre. Kelly, who handles press for Lookingglass, says they'd already changed the critics' night once (when Lookingglass extended its previous production by a week) and had been feeling rushed. If there was a chance neither of the dailies would be there on the ninth, it made sense to give themselves a little breathing room. They decided to call everyone who'd received an invitation and tell them the *Saragossa* press performance would be moved to 3 PM on November 12.

Kelly says he called half of the 200-person list with virtually no "push back," but did get one strong response. That was from Jonathan Abarbanel, critic for *PerformInk*, WBEZ, and the *Windy City Times*, who found in Kelly's news two reasons to take umbrage. The first was Lookingglass's decision to "inconvenience the rest of the media rather than accept second-string critics from the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times*." In Abarbanel's view, "They're treating us all as second-class citizens." To make things worse, when he started asking questions Abarbanel learned that, in spite of clear indications that comp tickets for the press would not be available for the sold-out Crystal show (something he'd commented on in print), Jones and Weiss were, in fact, receiving free seats (as was *Reader* critic Albert Williams). "That's unfortunate," Abarbanel says. "It would have been fairer if everybody paid."

Kelly says Lookingglass is taking the flak for Crystal's snub of a significant portion of the press. "Critics are always complaining that we're all opening on the same night," he says. "The one time we tried to alleviate that, we're slapped just as hard as if we forged ahead. What would any other theater company have done when you're opening up against Billy Crystal?" **B**

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Discreetly located in a town house spitting distance from chef Grant Achatz's first employer, Charlie Trotter, Alinea is marked only by a valet's sandwich board at the curb. Inside, a dining room and glass-walled kitchen share the first floor; up a set of glass stairs covered by metal mesh mats are two more small, luxuriously spare dining rooms. The menu has changed since I went there in June, but the concept remains the same: three prix fixe tasting menus of experimental cuisine in 6 (\$75), 12 (\$110), or a daunting 24 (\$175) courses; wine pairings add about \$90 to the bill. Achatz's initial offerings included bacon mounted on a trapeze and the by-now-notorious PB&J amuse—a peeled grape slathered with peanut butter and wrapped in brioche and served, with stem, atop a wicked-looking wire contraption. His current menu seems to have mellowed with the change of season: the 12-course menu now includes earthier fare like cured opah with endive and orange rind, truffle-juice ravioli with brioche croutons and melted leek, and a bison fillet with multiple accompanying preparations of Iranian pistachios. The Alinea experience remains tightly controlled, with specific instructions as to how certain dishes should be eaten. Under less polished conditions this would be annoyingly pretentious, but the soothing rituals of fine dining can take the edge off the edgiest of cuisines. **Martha Bayne**

Bongo Room

1152 S. Wabash | 312-291-0100

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AMERICAN | BREAKFAST: SEVEN DAYS; LUNCH: MONDAY-FRIDAY; SATURDAY & SUNDAY BRUNCH

Last November a water main burst in the basement of the historic Somerset Hotel building, flooding the first-floor restaurant, Room 12. Ten months later the breakfast-brunch spot reopened as Bongo Room, also the name of its trendier twin sister in Bucktown. The food is the same at both places—a good thing when that means delicious, creative variations on brunch classics. The menu is anchored by omelets—the 25 options for ingredients include Havarti, smoked Gouda, and ten other cheeses—and a popular breakfast burrito. There are several over-the-top twists on syrup standards: pumpkin-carrot cheesecake flap-

This new late-night sushi spot in Uptown is a psychedelic fun house of aquatic-themed design. Bulbous columns rise from the floor like giant sea anemones; a video wash turns one wall into a prismatic waterfall; a wide flat-screen monitor embedded in the wall-size wine rack separating the bar from the dining areas screens an endless loop of aquarium porn. The brainchild of designer Jay Paik and executive chef Soon Park, **AGAMI**, located in the south tail of the rehabbed Goldblatt's building at Broadway and

Agami

4712 N. Broadway
773-506-1845

Lawrence, is clearly poised to tap into the neighborhood's booming nightlife scene—the sushi bar serves until 1 or 2 on weekends, midnight during the week. It's the kind of place that normally terrifies me, but the food is pretty amazing. Under Park, who trained with Seijero Matsumoto at Kamehachi and put in time at Sushi Wabi, the extensive menu includes novelty items like the "spicy tuna rice crispy"—tidy rectangles of crisp buttered rice topped with spicy tuna tartare and a thin slice of jalapeno. The ginger chicken roll appetizer, a hefty battered-and-fried cylinder of white chicken, asparagus, and bell peppers in a sweetly smoky ginger teriyaki sauce, was practically an entree in itself, but the starters are doomed to play second fiddle to the sushi bar. A plate of sashimi was beautifully presented, with thin, firm, shockingly fresh slices of tuna, salmon, shrimp, octopus, and—my pet among the fishier fishes—mackerel, all grouped around a delicate rosette of fluke dusted with red tobiko. That old standby, the rainbow roll, was superb: tuna, salmon, and buttery yellowtail wrapped around rice and a core of spicy tuna. The list of signature makis is a little overwhelming—Park's concoctions seem as though they'd cram more tastes into one rice-rolled bite than one could possibly appreciate. But the Green Turtle maki we tried was a dense, sweet, rich construction of grilled eel, avocado, and tempura crunch topped with wasabi tobiko and shrimp. Arranged in a circle and outfitted with a smiling turtle's head of wasabi paste—complete with octopus-tentacle eyes—and a tail of caramelized eel, it was also adorable. Agami can be pricey; at least it's BYO for now. **—Martha Bayne**

Open just over a month, this sophisticated spot on the near south side is already drawing raves from Raters for its nuevo Latino comfort food. Handsome banquettes line the walls in the main room; a row of windows in a side dining area offers a display of autumn color that's especially stunning against the bold blue wall. Appetizers (seafood cocktail, empanadas, tamales) looked so tempting it was hard to

Cuatro

2030 S. Wabash
312-842-8856

make our choices, but the vegetarian ceviche was a good pick: crunchy hearts of palm, mushrooms, asparagus, avocado, and pico de gallo in a bright-tasting citrus dressing. *Flautas de barbacoa* were also mighty tasty, corn cigars stuffed with savory slow-roasted beef and served with deeply flavored red salsa. But the standout of the evening had to be the *moqueca do mar*, a seafood stew with a kick-ass tomato-coconut milk broth perfumed with saffron and served with a little silver dish of rice and a few tostones. Other main dishes include beer-braised beef short ribs, three more seafood preparations, an appealing-sounding chile relleno stuffed with



Agami, the Green Turtle maki

eggplant caviar and blue cheese, and a double pork chop, bone in and more like a triple—it was one gigantic hunk o' meat. After that it may be hard to believe we ordered dessert. But we did: couldn't say no to the Oaxacan chocolate mousse cake with sweet corn ice cream. **CUATRO** is BYO for several more weeks; take advantage of this to bring, as one Rater suggests, a Spanish red or a Malbec-based South American wine. **—Kate Schmidt**

Dragan Simic and his nephew Milos Milosevic named **FONTANA**, their spiffy new cafe and grill in Irving Park, for the north Belgrade neighborhood where they grew up. For their brethren emigres they stock dry goods from the Balkans behind a display case of sweet and savory pastries with names light on vowels. Another case preserves cheeses, meats, and patés for custom sandwiches made with bread baked on the spot each morning. These include the extremely adaptable

lepinja, a puffy, crusty discus of leavened glory that somehow encompasses the best features of pita and English muffins. For the past month I've been



exploring the palatable utilities of this bread at home—it's great with everything from tomatoes and olive oil to peanut butter and hot sauce—but none so far has equaled the titanic sandwiches Simic makes. He inserts grilled *cevapcici*—five fingers of unencased beef and pork sausage—or for the one-piece version a half-pound Serbian burger, between split and toasted buns. There's also a smoked pork tenderloin sandwich, one with pork kebabs wrapped in bacon, and a smoked sausage, a curious but delicious tube steak that would be reminiscent of a Slim Jim if those venerable snax actually tasted of meat. Simic puts a couple of hot specials on the board every day too, like a bowl of stuffed cabbage in sour peppery broth or paprikash, a soupy version with chunks of pork, bacon, and potato. Under a heat lamp there are gargantuan burek as well; available with cheese or meat fillings, they maintain their crispiness after reheating. Simic ran his own restaurant back in Belgrade, but Maria Micanovic, his nephew's girlfriend and the ever present face behind the counter, says establishments so sundry don't really exist back in the Balkans: "This is like a little bit of everything from back home in one place." **—Mike Sula**

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