

Grand Lake Theater returns to grandeur of its heyday in both film fare, architectural outfittings

Here is some good news for everyone who has shelled out \$4 to see a movie, only to find that all the wide-screen special effects, fancy Dolby stereo sound and special visual print process have been rendered meaningless because the flick (anything from "Apocalypse Now" to "Superman" to "Close Encounters") is being projected on a tiny screen in an acoustically horrible little cube that is being passed off as a movie theater.

By Larry Kelp
Tribune Music Critic

The Eastbay's largest movie house and one of its oldest landmarks, the Grand Lake Theater in Oakland had been neglected and allowed to run down by its previous owner.

Then Allen Michaan and his Renaissance Rialto Theaters company bought the six-story building at the corner of Grand and Lake Park Avenues, adjacent to the MacArthur Freeway.

Now, each night the 55-foot tall sign atop the Grand Lake again lights up the neighborhood with a 3,000-bulb show of its own. The flame pots at the bottom on either side seem to ignite, sending skyrocketing up the sign where they meet at the top and explode, illuminating the Grand Lake Theater logo.

Michaan has had a five-man crew working full time for six months to repaint and rebulb the sign, one of the last remaining rotary-contact incandescent signs in existence, and the largest piece of outdoor advertising in the county.

Theatergoers walk under the marquee, where Michaan, 28, has been ripping off and rebulbing panels that had covered ancient light sockets. Inside, they purchase tickets in a foyer that looks like it's been stolen from some 18th Century French mansion.

In the lobby the refreshment stand employees are making fresh popcorn, grinding Colombian roast for the coffee machine, and stocking gourmet candies.

Off to the side is an ancient projector decorated with a "Do Not Feed" sign. When it is fixed, the machine will once again project cloud scenes or starry skies on the Grand Lake's planetarium-like ceiling dome.

All of which is wonderful news to moviegoers, but what really counts is the largest theater screen in Northern California, and a sound system with speakers seemingly everywhere, that during the recent run of "Close Encounters" made the audience believe it was actually boarding the spaceship.

Gone are the family films that kept attendance low during the '70s. Michaan is planning a Saturday and Sunday afternoon kiddie's matinee series, but at night he wants to show the biggest and best flicks.

A double-bill with "Breaking Away" and "The Great Santini" is playing today, but what Michaan is really excited about are two films coming next summer: "Superman Part Two" and "Clash of the Titans," a film starring Laurence Olivier, based on Greek legends, with special-visual effects by Ray Harryhausen.

"What I'm trying to do is make this theater the absolute best there is," Michaan says as he scampers through the cavernous building, gleefully pointing out its features. While the Grand Lake doesn't have the art deco gaudiness of the nearby Paramount, it is an enormous and impressive sight, especially just as a movie begins, when the fancy cove lighting subtly dims and the two screen curtains open. One draws upward in a waterfall effect, the other parts like the Red Sea did for Moses.

"The guy loves theaters like certain people love stamps or worship trains," television personality Bob Wilkins said of Michaan.

Michaan moved from his Connecticut home 10 years ago to attend U.C. Berkeley, but soon was showing 16mm films at the Live Oak Park Theater. He opened the Rialto, in a warehouse on Berkeley's Gilman Street, where he showed old films and displayed various theater props and decorations he had salvaged from old movie houses being torn down.

Business improved and the Rialto eventually became four small cinemas specializing in old films.

"But the audience for those classics hit its peak four years ago," Michaan says. "Today people want art films and new releases. The Rialto is having the biggest success of its short history with John Huston's "Wise Blood," now in its fourth month there.

His Renaissance Rialto Theaters company has since taken over the El Rey in Walnut Creek, the Four Star and the York in San Francisco. "I'm already looking for more theaters, because in this business the more you have the better chance you have at getting the best films."



Tribune Photo by Roy Williams

Allen Michaan bought the Grand Lake Theater, refurbished it and refreshed its marquee fare.

But the Grand Lake is Michaan's real pride and joy. Where the others are leased, he purchased this one. "It came with seven stores on Grand Avenue, too, and their rent is helping pay the mortgage."

Michaan doesn't even blink at the thought of his \$2,500 monthly bill from the electric company. Since taking over the Grand Lake last January, he has added about 9,000 bulbs (many in sockets long since out of commission that were rediscovered by maintenance man Eddie Hansen, who has worked at the theater for 30 years). It's not the refurbishing cost but the thrill of seeing everything work that makes Michaan's eyes grow wide.

"Everyone else is into modernization, cutting theaters into cubes and quarters. We're into restoration and nostalgia."

Backstage a gigantic Wurlitzer pipe organ (which cost \$50,000 in 1926) is awaiting refurbishing. Next year Michaan hopes to have it operating before shows and during intermissions.

"The theater was built for a million dollars in 1926, so you can imagine what it would cost to duplicate today. There are no available theaters bigger or more beautiful. When it opened it seated 2,300, but when the seats were replaced in 1964 capacity was cut to 1,900, with more leg room between rows.

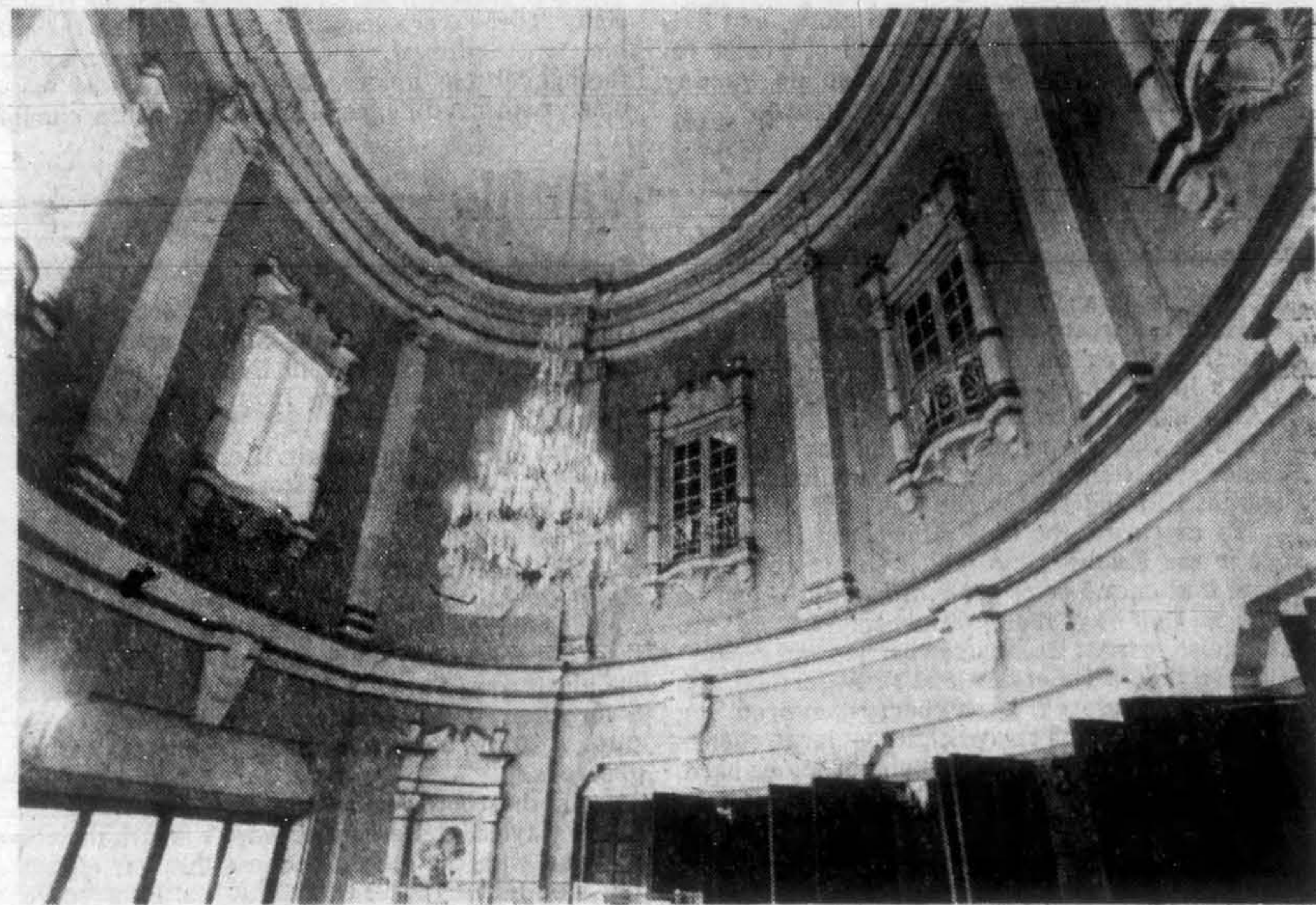
"There's a trend to restoring old theaters now. People are beginning to realize what fabulous structures they are, that they can't be replaced. Most were torn down. There's just a handful of survivors left. It's nice to see municipal government getting into the act, restoring a building like the Paramount. I'd love to see the old Fox-Oakland restored, too."

Upstairs in the projection booth Michaan shows off the latest in film equipment, including the Dolby CP200 sound system, a six-track stereo system that is the first to be installed in the Bay Area.

"It's the best that money can buy," Michaan says, "and the Dolby people tell us this is the best theater sound in California right now. It's designed for split-surround sound, which means that in addition to the stereo speakers behind the screen, it can send separate sound messages to the speakers on the sides of the hall, too. However, so far only one film, 'Apocalypse Now,' has used the process."



In 1926, women lined up for the 11 a.m. 'Ladies Matinee' on Fridays at the Grand Lake Theater.



Foyer of Grand Lake looks like it's been stolen from some 18th century French mansion.