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OF GREATER LOS ANGELES

Studio Secured to Create Spiritual Art

by Amy Klein
Religion Editor

On the small, darkened stage, a lone streetlight illuminates the façade of a front porch that, hours later, will serve as the set of Billy Crystal's Long Island home in his one-man show "700 Sundays."

But for now, the streetlamp throws a pale light out onto the empty Wilshire Theatre — an old-time art deco 1,900-seat venue in Beverly Hills with worn-down plush red seats, a fading red patterned carpet and walls painted a dark mahogany that obfuscates the intricate woodcut of the early 20th century, when the theater was built.

Soon, though, if all goes according to plan, the woodwork will be repainted, the stained glass cleaned and the seats refurbished to accommodate The Temple of the Arts, which recently acquired the venue in hopes of turning it into a full-service Jewish community performing arts center.

Reimagining the 24,000-square-foot property, which also includes a six-story office building and restaurant, is the vision of Rabbi David Baron, who views arts as means to a spiritual end.

"I am driven by an objective, a goal: to get more Jewish people who were disconnected to connect," he said. "*Kiriv*, or return — whatever you [choose to] call it."

His temple, he added, is an "exploration of Jewish mission through the arts."

The \$20 million project — which includes the purchase price as well as the renovations — also encompasses a state-of-the-art cinema and an after-school arts and religious program, with funds left over, Baron hopes, for an endowment. Think the 92nd Street Y in New York City, the half-block Jewish community center on the Upper West Side that hosts lectures, concerts, per-

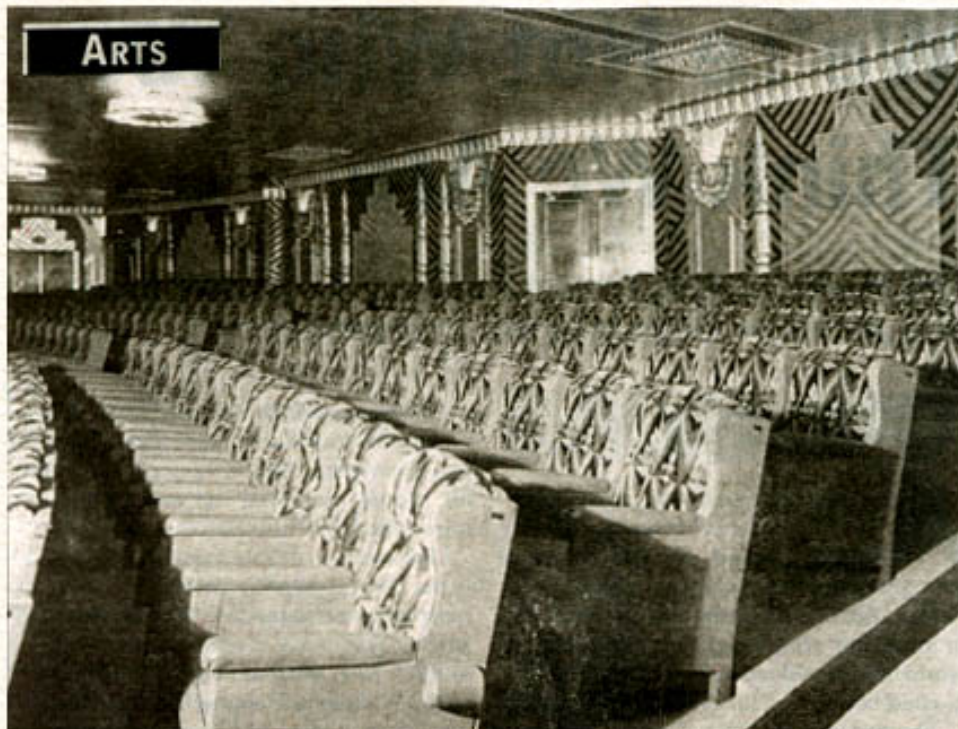
formances, a school and serves as a center for Jewish cultural life. Except that the Wilshire Theatre seats three times as many patrons and also will be the home for regular services for a 1,400-member congregation.

The Temple of the Arts, unaffiliated with an organized Jewish movement, is one of three congregations locally that bill themselves as arts and religious communities. The first Synagogue for the Performing Arts, started some 30 years ago, has 700 members, and holds a monthly service at the University of Judaism; its High Holiday services are led by scholar and author Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. Rabbi Jerry Cutler served at Performing Arts Temple for six years, and then started the Creative Arts Temple, which holds a monthly service at Temple Beth Am on La Cienega Boulevard. Baron headed the Performing Arts synagogue from 1985-1992 until he founded the Temple of the Arts (formerly Temple Shalom for the Arts). Baron's temple, funded by donations and loans, is the only one of the three with its own permanent structure.

Baron incorporates drama, music, readings, paintings and speakers into different parts of the monthly and High Holiday services. The congregation's own prayer book is illustrated with paintings by Chagall and Matisse and includes both traditional and nontraditional inspirational readings. Congregants stage skits, and singers and composers perform original or relevant pieces. During the last High Holiday Yizkor memorial service, there was a medley of "I'll Be Seeing You" and "I Will Remember You." Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) also spoke on the topic of forgiveness.

"These things touch people in ways that traditional services don't," Baron said.

If you were going to casting central for a



Rows of plush red velvet seats line the inside of the Wilshire Theater, which The Temple of the Arts recently acquired as its permanent home. Photo courtesy California State Library Photo Archives.

Temple of the Arts

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rabbi to lead a Los Angeles arts temple, you'd probably choose the tanned Baron, who is in his 50s and has soft blue eyes and receding brown hair. He's got the debonair looks of an aging Pierce Brosnan combined with a subtle missionary zeal that pays scant attention to naysayers.

Baron was raised in an Orthodox family on Long Island and had always planned to be a lawyer — even though he got *smicha*, or rabbinical ordination, from his grandfather in Jerusalem. But a friend asked him to take over a Conservative congregation in New Jersey, and he later accepted a posting in

by a new assistant rabbi, Lynn Brody.

As a cultural center, planned projects include more shows like Crystal's as well as community events, such as Sinai Temple's 100-year anniversary party.

On March 17, the temple will host a pre-Passover gospel service, joined by Bishop Charles E. Blake, The Tova Marcos Singers and The Tabernacle Gospel Choir of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ. It will bring together Jews and African Americans to "rejoice in the shared heritage of freedom from slavery with songs of freedom and faith," according to the program.

Baron said that a Beverly Hills/mid-Wilshire center focusing on the performing arts "complements" a Jewish cultural mix of venues that already includes the Skirball

Miami.

When he first came to Los Angeles in 1980, he noticed that Jews were not connecting to services.

"A lot of Jewish people have minimal Jewish education. They suffered through their bar mitzvah and ran away," he said. "I could just see how synagogues — except the Orthodox — are empty. Unless you do something special."

Baron left the original Synagogue for the Performing Arts to, as he put it, "take it to the next level."

The Temple of the Arts attracts a few thousand worshippers on the High Holidays, less at other times. Besides, the monthly service, Baron intends to offer a second, smaller monthly service on alternate weeks, led

Cultural Center, the University of Judaism and others.

As Baron walks around the high-ceilinged lobby atrium, pointing out architectural beauties from the 1930s-era theater, it's as if he can actually see the old glory days of star-studded Beverly Hills premieres — even as he envisions the future of a Jewish gathering place.

Baron hopes to close the synagogue for the summer and be ready for his own premiere by the High Holidays.

"People say I'm a dreamer, but that's really why we're here."

Temple of the Arts will be holding its Gospel Service Friday, March 17 at 8 p.m. 8440 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills. For more information, call (323) 655-4900. ■