

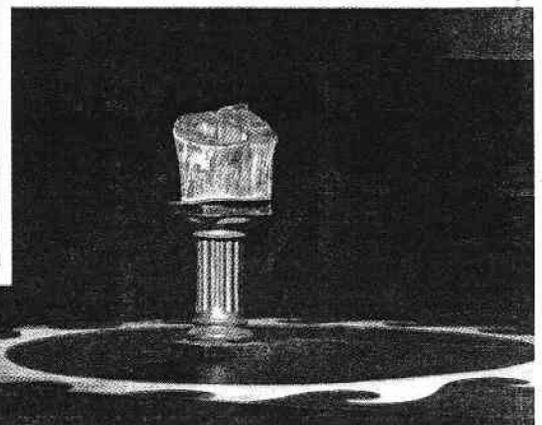
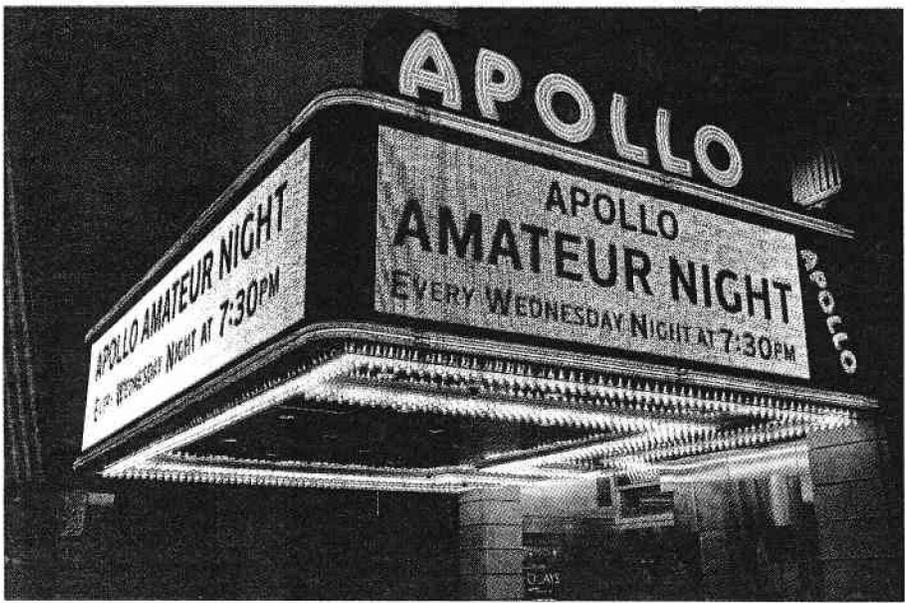
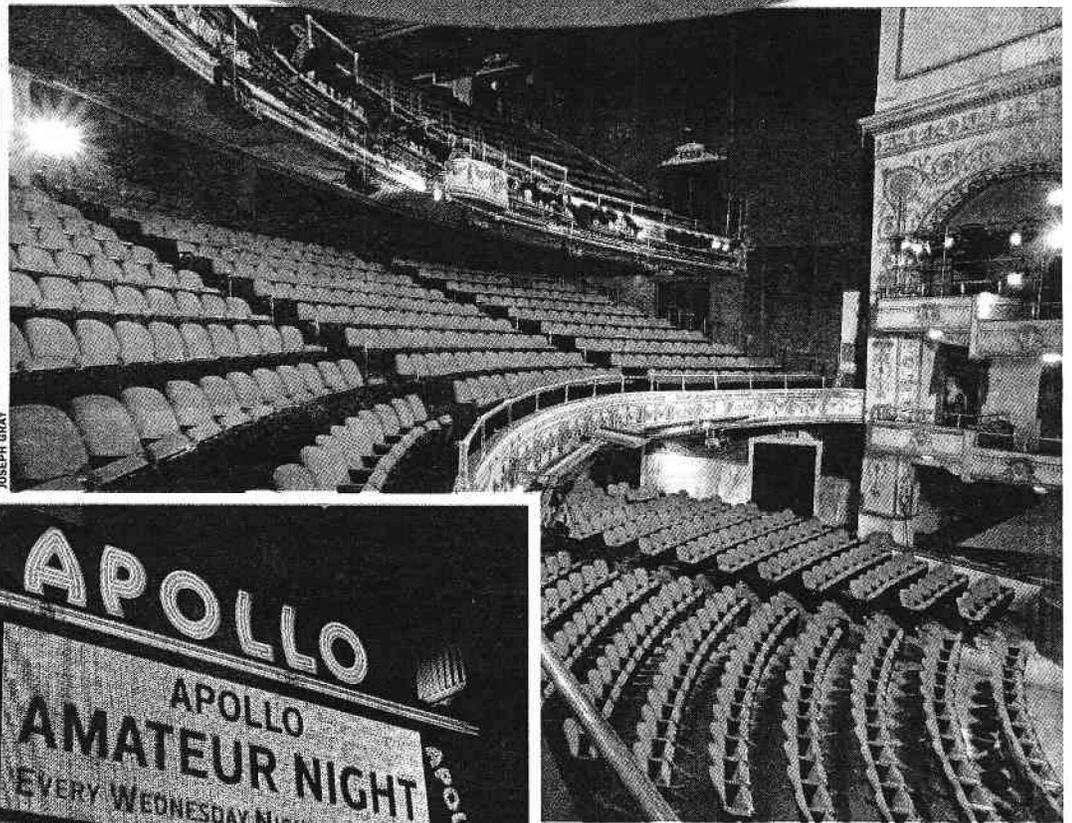
THE APOLLO

The landmark theater's got a brand-new stage (and more)

BY MICHAEL GILTZ



JOSEPH GRAY



A CHANGE IS GONNA COME (Clockwise from top) In 2004, Takahiro honors the venue's good-luck charm, the Tree of Hope, at the Amateur Night Super Top Dog Finals; the revamped seats; the Tree of Hope, a stump dating to around 1934 and which was once located at 131st St. and Seventh Ave., known then as "The Boulevard of Dreams" because of its theaters; the new marquee; Capone, who will host Amateur Night this Wednesday.

RELAUNCHES

Though the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty come in just ahead of it, the Apollo Theater is still one of New York City's most popular tourist sites and a national landmark — so it's time Harlem's grand shrine of rhythm and blues got an extreme makeover.

The performance space reopens Wednesday after a summer hiatus with the return of a 72-year-old tradition, *Amateur Night* at the Apollo (now hosted by Capone), a welcome by New York Congressman Charles Rangel and a performance by hip-hop violinists — and previous *Amateur Night* winners — Nuttin But Stringz.

The theater, built in 1914, was in need of more than just a quick touchup, says tour director and longtime Apollo mainstay Billy Mitchell.

"When people walk past, they see the new marquee," says Mitchell, who began working at the Apollo when he was a kid running errands for stars like Redd Foxx, Ray Charles and Moms Mabley.

"Inside, the audience will see plasma screens on the walls, a brand-new stage, new seating and new stairs. We've taken a beating from fans for the way the place looked in the past. Now, when one comes to the Apollo Theater, they say, 'My God, look at this place.'"

It's the latest step in a multiyear, top-to-bottom revamping of the Apollo, where "*Amateur Night*" has reigned every Wednesday since 1934. Certainly everyone has noticed the new marquee. But president and CEO Jonelle Procope says the changes are the most significant since the Apollo's doors were reopened in 1981 by Percy Sutton, the businessman and one-time Manhattan borough president.

"We replaced all the seats, [but] they're still a replica of the original ones," says Procope. "We've completely redone the stage, as well as our greenroom, which will make it better for cocktail parties and other pre-concert events."

Upcoming shows include Dionne Warwick's return to the Apollo on Sept. 21 after many years, the solo debut of "American Idol" winner Fantasia Barrino on Sept. 22 and Queen Latifah on Nov. 11. And a new batch of shows for the syndicated series "Showtime at the Apollo" (which launched in 1987) will tape at the end of September.

Sometime in the next two years, the theater will briefly shut down again for more interior restoration. But even during that work, the Apollo will forge ahead with plans to raise money for an endowment (it's a nonprofit organization), continue the recently launched internship program for high school students, and prepare for its annual fund-raisers as well as a 75th-anniversary celebration that will last from July 2009 through the end of 2010.



Despite all the ambitious plans, it's impossible to forget the history of the place.

"When they cut up the stage, I was in tears," admits the 56-year-old Mitchell, who tells stories about everything from his grandparents seeing the debut of Ella Fitzgerald to the night comedian Bill Maher asked for the air conditioning to be turned off and the crowd sweated and drank and laughed like crazy.

"I was crying when they tore up that floor — I know all the greats that have performed on that stage," Mitchell says. "I had the construction guys give me a piece of it. I'm going to have it framed."

"The rest of it was thrown away. People have come in and said, 'You could have put that on eBay.'" ♦



REFLECTIONS Among the thousands of performers to shake, rattle and roll on the Apollo's storied stage are James Brown (above), Diana Ross and the Supremes (left) and then-Little Stevie Wonder (below). The Apollo back in the day (l.), advertising a show by Otis Redding and the Marvelettes, among others, on its old 125th St. marquee.



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