

MC Center City[©]

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Beale St. Back To Life

by James Roper

George Miller couldn't help but think about his grandmother the other day.

He was standing in the spacious lobby of the Towne II Cinema at Beale and Fourth Streets, probably the first black-owned theater to open in Tennessee in more than 30 years.

"Her name was Eliza Miller," he said thoughtfully. "As early as 1916 she was playing piano backgrounds for silent movies in Helena, Arkansas." The Miller family is from Helena.

When a fast-talking white man came to Helena and persuaded Mrs. Miller and her husband to finance the building of a black movie theater, the Millers agreed. But the man skipped town before the theater was completed. Undaunted, the Millers opened the theater on their own. They named it the Plaza and it still operates today in Helena.

So the theater business is something of a tradition in the Miller family.

Miller Memphis, Inc., of which George Miller is president, owns the Towne II Cinema. Financing for the theater came from Miller Memphis, Tri-State Bank, First National Bank, the Small Business Administration, and the Presbyterian Economic Development Council of New York.

While Miller talked enthusiastically about his new theater, couples with children bought tickets for the late afternoon performance of "Impulse," a psychological thriller starring William Shatner (of "Star Trek" fame) and Ruth Roman. Teenagers with their dates waited to buy popcorn and candy at the theater's concession stand.

The theater management has decided that only

films with a PG (parental guidance suggested) rating will be shown at Towne II Cinema.

According to George Miller, Beale Street in downtown Memphis was the only logical choice for establishing a new black-owned theater.

"All over this country, what says racial pride any louder than just the words 'Beale Street'? Here at Beale and Fourth, we're around the corner from the site of the first black-owned bank in Memphis, Tri-State Bank. Across the street is First Baptist Church of Beale Street, one of the oldest churches in our city. The Venson Center for the elderly is down the street at Beale and Danny Thomas."

"If there is one place in the South or in this country, where the pride of ethnic identity is strongest, then that place has to be Beale Street."

Miller obviously didn't have to go into the theater business. A graduate of Michigan State University, he and his wife were the first black couple to graduate with law degrees from the University of Arkansas.

He carefully analyzed the downtown situation, and his own background, before deciding to open the theater.

"Here I am, a black man, 34 years old, from the South. I have a family tradition of doing what is in the best interest of the community, but I'm also a businessman. I felt our stockholders needed a firm economic base, and the city needed a rallying point, a kind of lighthouse in the storm."

This "lighthouse" is an ultra-modern one with an auditorium that seats approximately 800 persons. The red-carpeted lobby features huge glass windows with a beautiful view of the downtown skyline.

That many Memphians haven't seen that skyline in years and have avoided downtown because of

fear and prejudice is a factor that Miller and his staff take into account in the daily operation of the theater.

A major stockholder in Miller Memphis, Inc. is Ernest L. Troupe, Jr. The son of a St. Louis police captain, Troupe's main concern at the theater is security.

"We have a guard in our parking lot, and the police regularly patrol the area. We figure you have to stop problems before they start."

Fortunately, there haven't been any problems. Troupe says he finds people generally are cooperative. In other parts of downtown, theater owners aren't so lucky, according to Troupe.

"Most downtown theaters are madhouses," Troupe said. He feels one of their major problems is an "absentee landlord" who has blacks fronting his business.

"Why should these hired people care about what happens in another man's business? They just want to get paid. Here at our theater we think differently. Each one of us has put a lot of work and sweat and blood into this theater. It's ours and we're not going to let people abuse it."

The theater staff is made up of whites and blacks and Miller is pleased that a racially mixed audience greeted the first showings of "Impulse."

"Approximately 12% of our audience during our first three days of operation was white," Miller said. "We think this is encouraging."

Miller says he thinks fear of the downtown area is being played up simply for the advantage of some East Memphis businessmen.

"You know, when a child is young he's taught to be afraid of the boogeyman. When he grows up, he finds out he didn't have any reason to be afraid.

"It seems to me that a number of persons in East Memphis have a lot to gain economically if the boogeyman thinking about downtown persists. Many of these people are using the boogeyman to their own advantage."

If George Miller can win his battle against the boogeyman then things may look brighter for all downtown.

"We think we have the finest theater in Memphis," he said. "We invite everyone to come down and enjoy it."

Candidates & Issues

As previously announced, persons running for a local office this year may utilize CENTER CITY to address our readers, that is, if they wish to answer one or more of the questions listed below. As we requested of our readers in asking these questions: please try to answer them thoroughly, but with a mind on being brief and committal. And candidates, please refrain from straying from the issues stated herein, for if you wander our scissors will certainly be the remedy.



Lyceum & Film Theater

Lyceum Film Theater returns to downtown Memphis on August 5.

The theater, a subscription film series, is the first project of Front Street Arts, a non-profit organization interested in revitalizing the Downtown.

The first movie of the 22-film season is "The Lion in Winter" starring Katharine Hepburn and Peter O'Toole.

The films are shown each Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. in the First National Bank Auditorium at Third and Madison. The bank is donating use of its facilities for Lyceum.

Subscribers pay a \$5 membership fee and \$1 for admittance to each film.

Other films scheduled to be shown include "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" with Catherine Deneuve, "East of Eden" with James Dean, "Adam's Rib" with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, "Jules and Jim" with Jeanne Moreau, and "Top Hat" with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

For more information about Lyceum Film Theater and how to become a subscriber, call 523-4353.

Readers, it is not too late to ask more questions, and you are invited to comment on the responses of candidates.

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CENTER CITY READERS WANT TO KNOW:

Several years ago our business community officially adopted the philosophy of "Better before bigger" for our city. Considering our low per capita income, do you subscribe to this philosophy?

What, if any, changes in Memphis public transportation could you recommend or support?

What do you think local government can do to stimulate housing in the downtown?

Do you favor the building of Volunteer Park on schedule?

Do you favor selling the public promenade on the river for private development?

What measures would you take to encourage citizen participation in government policy making? What measures for providing adequate foreknowledge of governmental affairs to citizens?

What steps would you have taken to prevent prolongation of the Overton Park situation?

Would you favor building a baseball stadium in the downtown area?

What, if any, local tax reforms do you suggest?

How could the City of Memphis persuade its business community to accept responsibility for the physical and cultural appearance of this city?

Would you institute bikeways?

What zoning reforms would you propose if elected?

How can the City of Memphis assist the entertainment industry of Memphis?

How could we best develop our river front?

Would you favor the city's owning a huge warehouse to be used (by renting stalls) as a permanent crafts' and vegetable market?

How would you go about organizing and utilizing the ideas and efforts of the neighborhoods in public affairs?

What would you do to stimulate small manufacturing and service industries in Memphis?

Do you favor a no-annexation policy - at least until we get the old city back in shape?

Would you favor the City using general obligation bonds to build a Convention Center Hotel?

Why aren't more people running for public office? And why don't the ones that are talk about the real issues at stake in this election?

What programs would you initiate to enhance the cultural and artistic atmosphere of Memphis?

Do you favor holding back on tax increases even at the expense of the public welfare and the qualitative growth of Memphis?

When is local government going to pressure the federal government to return a greater portion of the tax money it has pilfered from our city?

Would you favor the City using its power of condemnation to acquire properties for the Promenade Gateway project?

In your mind, what is the purpose of a city? And what would you do to move Memphis towards the realization of that purpose?

Do you think middle to upper income housing has a place in our central city? If so, what kinds of incentives would you initiate or support to make housing a reality?

Would you support a special tax to subsidize public transportation?

When are we going to repair these horrible streets in the central city?

How many residents are needed downtown before a new school will be built there?

When will Memphis either start collecting for traffic violations or cease wasting paper and police time giving them out?

Would you support an amendment of the City Charter which would eliminate the seven at-large council seats and restructure the Council to nine or eleven members chosen by districts?

How would you alleviate the overcrowded and overworked Municipal Court?

Would you favor expanding the Court by adding to divisions?

Would you support a proposal to disencumber the Court of traffic offenses by creating an administrative board to handle traffic matters?

Would you favor the decriminalization of city offenses which involve consenting adults, such as prostitution, assignation, public drunkenness and gambling?

Would you favor a reduction, on a graduated basis, of the utility rates for Senior Citizens on fixed incomes?

Would you support the creation of a Senior Citizens' Card which would entitle Senior Citizens to a reduction in price for municipal activities?

Would you support an annual, up-to-date tax assessment of all real property parcels in Memphis?

Would you support a referendum to determine if Memphis should have horse racing with parimutuel betting?

Would you support a change in the state's "deadly force" law which now allows for the use of deadly force to stop suspected felons from fleeing?

Would you favor the establishment of municipal runaway houses to deal with the problems of runaway juveniles?

Would you support the creation of a municipal drug rehabilitation program which would utilize half-way houses and methadone substitute therapy?

If elected, would you vote for the immediate funding of the proposed criminal justice complex?

Would you support a change in the Tennessee Constitution which would allow for a state and/or city income tax?

Would you support some form of city income or privilege tax which would recapture a portion of the Memphis-created income now eluding taxation in the hands of out-of-town commuters?

What do you think about the City of Memphis converting that unsightly parking lot down on the river into a recreational area with tennis courts and a softball diamond?

LADIES AT TEA

*When Eve and Euterpe sit down to tea,
They whisper of many things,
Of jeweled couplets and cantos of froth
And quatrains of singing strings.*

*The table is spread with a gossamer cloth,
And the silver is gleaming bright,
The candle sputters a rainbow flame
As they whisper into the night.*

*They stir their tea and crumble a roon
'Til the dewey hush of morn.
And somehow, somewhere, while
sipping tea,
That's when the magic is born!*

Nell Gardner

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

*Serving from 11:30 to 1:00
First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue
PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink*

MENU FOR JULY 10 - JULY 18

THURSDAY, JULY 10

Fried Chicken, Rice w/gravy, Squash or Green Beans, Rolls

FRIDAY, JULY 11

Barbecue Beef/Bun, Baked Beans, Pineapple/Cottage Cheese Salad

MONDAY, JULY 14

Beef Stew, Tossed Salad, Corned Bread

TUESDAY, JULY 15

Pork Chops, Potatoes Au Gratin, English Peas, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, JULY 16

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, Rolls

THURSDAY, JULY 17

Fried Chicken, Rice/Gravy, Apple Sauce, Rolls

FRIDAY, JULY 18

Meat Loaf, Whipped Potatoes, Fruit Salad, Rolls

earthly delights

DOWNTOWN EXHIBITS

National Bank of Commerce (Lobby)

July - "The Freedom Shrine" - Downtown Exchange Club collection of historical documents*

FILM

Peabody Library

July 18 - "The Garden Party," "The Open Window," & "Happy Birthday Marvin" - 7:15 p.m.*

ACTIVITIES

Overton Park

July 15 - Memphis Federation of Musicians 8:15 p.m.*

July 17 - Combined Choirs of Memphis - 8:15 p.m.*

Jefferson Davis Park

July 12 - River Raft Review - 7:00 p.m.*

*Free

FORMATION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

The next meeting of the Downtown Photographic Society will be held July 14th at 5:30 p.m. in the 8th floor conference room of First National Bank, Madison at Third. At this meeting members will vote on their constitution and by-laws. A presentation will be made by Buzzy Boehme on "Outdoor Portraiture." Mrs. Patti Bradford will talk on "Color and Composition."

It is not too late to join. Call 523-4343 for more information.



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