

Richmond Times-Dispatch



The Best

WINNERS ISSUE

FEATURING:



Historically good

By Ben Swenson

To attend an event at The Hippodrome Theater – the site of this year’s “Best” celebration – is to walk in the footsteps of legends.

More than a century after its construction, The Hipp, as it’s affectionately known, stands as a cornerstone of historic Jackson Ward, paying homage to its illustrious past while offering a unique concert hall, event venue and dining space.

Located on historic North Second Street, The Hippodrome’s modern incarnation is the product of Ronald A. Stallings, owner and president of development firm Walker Row Partnership. Stallings’ father, the late James R. Stallings, was a well-known Richmond businessman who acquired numerous properties in Jackson Ward, The Hippodrome among them.

When Ronald Stallings undertook the \$12 million renovation of the theater and the adjacent Taylor Mansion around 2010, the building had been vacant for decades, and the project was intended to help breathe life back into Jackson Ward, a National Historic Landmark. Stallings said that he has accomplished what he set out to do, “and then some.”

A year after The Hippodrome’s renovation, Southern Living magazine featured Jackson Ward in its “Travel: Best of the South” section, mentioning a visit to the theater on a perfect day’s itinerary.

Today, The Hippodrome has four unique spaces – the Speakeasy and Speakeasy Balcony, located in the onetime mansion of community leader Reverend W.L. Taylor; the expansive Hippodrome Theater, which includes a bar, dance

floor and stage; and the Screening Room, located on the balcony of the theater.

Each space is designed to accommodate different needs and capacities so the venue can “right size” events, according to Stallings.

Corporations and community organizations, such as Altria and Virginia Commonwealth University, regularly hold functions at The Hippodrome, and private groups rent the venue for all manner of gatherings, such as weddings and banquets. One family came to The Hippodrome to host their engagement party and then returned to celebrate several times as life unfolded through marriage, anniversaries and baby showers.

Modern musical performances light up The Hippodrome’s stage, both well-known ensembles and notable events such as the Richmond Jazz Festival. Very often, Stallings said, The Hippodrome hosts multiple events in a single day.

Whatever brings them to The Hippodrome, revelers are steeped in history, and not just with the Art Deco-inspired furnishings that were the thrust of the restoration. When the venue opened in 1914, Jim Crow was alive and well in Richmond.

The Hippodrome was more than a theater. It was the cultural heart of Jackson Ward, pulsing with the richness of Black culture, hosting performers such as Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong and James Brown. The vibrancy of The Hippodrome, and Jackson Ward at large, earned this quarter a

nickname: “The Harlem of the South.”

As decades passed and the fortunes of Jackson Ward ebbed and flowed, The Hippodrome changed, too. Stallings’ father repurposed the venue as a single-screen movie theater in the 1970s, but that was done in by the rise of megaplexes. The theater eventually sat empty.

Stallings’ new vision brought back its former glory.

But less than a decade into The Hippodrome’s new life, the pandemic threatened the venue’s upward trajectory, or would have, had Stallings not heeded sage advice from his father.

“He said, ‘When you make money, you save money,’” Stallings said.

Because of that, and Paycheck Protection Program support, The Hippodrome was able to retain and pay greater than 80 percent of staff.

Stallings said that he knew The Hippodrome needed to be ready to resume operations, because “when we came out of the pandemic, people would be starving to get together.”

Stallings said the secret to making sure that The Hippodrome remains among Richmond’s most beloved event spaces is making sure that the experience is memorable. “At the end of the night, people ask, ‘Was the event fun and was the food good?’”

Stallings said he and his colleagues take great pride in preparing fresh food onsite instead of having to rely on an outside caterer. “That’s grandma’s house 101,” he said.

SMALL BUSINESS INSURANCE

