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Historic North Theatre

## **Danville's Historic North Theatre owner keeps magic alive nearly 12 years after purchase**

**Charles Wilborn**

Dec 23, 2023

**E**ven after nearly a dozen years of owning the Historic North Theatre in Danville, there's still magic in the air for Wayne Alan.

The world champion illusionist wouldn't have it any other way.

Aside from keeping a Danville landmark alive, he's now a full-time resident, something that wasn't in the cards — even the ones up his sleeve — when he purchased the property on Jan. 13, 2012. Originally he planned to operate it from a far, only venturing from Annapolis, Maryland, a few times a month.

Now the transplant not only calls the River City home, but has become an ambassador of sorts and champion for Danville's rebirth and future.

He admits 12 years ago he was rolling the dice. It was a time when Danville virtually hit rock bottom following the collapse of textile and tobacco, both longtime economic anchors.

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However, there was a vibe he couldn't shake. While residents may not have been able to realize a true revitalization was afoot, Alan could see and feel it.

In those days, downtown's renewal was just starting with streets undergoing the first stage of a revamp.

“I could sense it,” Alan told the Register & Bee, seated in the star’s dressing room of the Historic North Theatre. “I could see and tell they were moving forward as opposed to continuing to fall back.”

That’s one reason he decided to take the leap and buy it.

According to a Register & Bee report, a board was established in 2004 to restore the theater that had sat vacant for years.

From the history that Alan has unearthed, the front part of the building was constructed in the 1920s. It was in 1947 that the auditorium part was added, transitioning it into a theater.

Sometime in the mid-1970s, the doors closed until a \$3.5 million investment, mostly fueled by Roy Gignac, brought it back to life for a short time.

“So they really did a wonderful job when they restored it in 2005,” he said.

It operated for about five years before it closed again, citing a lack of revenue.



Wayne Alan sits in the star's dressing room of the Historic North Theatre in Danville. January marks the 12th anniversary of Alan's purchase of the theater.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

## How it came to be

In 2011, Alan was in his Maryland office calling theaters to book his magic acts.

While looking through listings, he stumbled upon one theater that was for sale in Danville.

At first, he told himself it's a rather far-fetched idea. But he picked up the phone anyhow.

He called someone with the city of Danville asking if they knew who owned the North Theatre, as it was called then. Alan later rebranded it with the "historic" designation.

"I sure can, that's Mr. Roy Gignac," the voice says on the other end of the phone.

At the time, Alan was semi-retired and living in the waterfront community of Annapolis. Although he had managed a theater before, he had never owned one and wasn't sure it was a perfect fit.

Then late one night, something happened.

He described it as being "as close" to hearing the voice of God as he's ever come.

Out of the blue, something told him to make the call.

So, he did, even though it's was rather late at night.

Gignac answered and said it was still for sale, but he just received an offer. Alan would later find out that offer happened about five minutes before the "out of the blue" feeling hit him to phone Gignac.

"I went through the place and I was just flabbergasted," Alan said describing the first time he came to Danville to see his soon-to-be investment in November 2011.

He kept telling Gignac the restoration was "such an amazing job." They did everything correctly, from both the business and theatrical standpoints.

Simply put, Alan was impressed. So much so that Gignac jokingly said "You know, we're actually trying to sell you, not the other way around."

After spending the night at a hotel, the next morning Alan found out the façade of the building attached to the North Theatre collapsed onto the street.

Knowing a bit about construction, he realized it sounded much worse than it was, even though the hotel clerk told him the building "exploded and collapse."

He called Gignac and they met at the theater.

About that time, a reporter from a TV station walked over and said something to the effect of "from what everyone hears, this place is just ready to fall down."

That didn't sit well with Alan. "I said, excuse me, that's not true at all," he recalled, as he kind of took lead of the situation. He explained to the reporter the building was fine, only the brick façade — essentially the outermost exterior — had fallen.

After talking it over with his accountant, Alan bought the theater. His business plan was to focus on tour-bus trips.

That plan changed a bit.

Growing tired of making the Maryland-to-Virginia trip for four years, Alan moved here. But the hourslong drive wasn't the the real reason. He knew that he needed to be in Danville in order to make a difference.

"If I really wanted to do the best for the theater and the city, I needed to be here," he said.

He lives in one of the three apartments in the upstairs of the theater.



Wayne Alan demonstrates a magic trick at the Historic North Theatre in Danville.

## Making the magic

Magic caught Alan's eye when he was about 8-year-old. A friend had a magic set and showed him a trick.

Alan, amazed at the illusion, asked his friend how it was done. His friend clammed up, saying a good magician never reveals his secret.

"So I said, I'll find out," he said. "So, I've been finding out the rest of my life."

By the time he was 21, he was working for a utility company with another magician friend asked if he wanted to purchase his business.

His part-time magic gig was already paying more than the junior leadership position he had for the company, so after talking with his wife, he took the plunge into magic as a full profession.

"And so, I never looked back," he explained, ever though he never believed believed it would be a lifetime career, "because who thinks you're going to be a magician you're whole life."

Now 51 years later, he still puts on shows, including ones at his theater.

Over his life, he performed at the White House 13 times and holds the the gold medal for grand illusion at the International Olympics of Magic in Lausanne, Switzerland. That's a title no other American can claim.

He's a self-described quasi-one-man-band at the theater.

"What do you think my first official act was," he asked during an interview.

"Unclogging the toilet down the hall here."

When he needs help, he calls on folks he knows. For example, a friend comes by to help with the sound.

Beyond that, he'll hire someone when things get busy.

"I kind of do most everything I can do," he said.

That includes painting the lines in the parking lot and change the marque.

## What's his vision

For the last few years, Alan has laid forth a vision to turn the area around his establishment into a theater and arts district. "I think as Danville is doing all the right things," he explained of the other areas of development, including the River District. "Waterfront is a big deal."

But as an equal component, an theater and arts district could be a tourism draw, especially ahead of of the full casino opening at the end of 2024.

"Most towns like this do not still have a historic theater," he explained, pointing to another reason an overall district designation would work.

"We always appreciate the efforts that property owners put into restoring and maintaining historic properties," Diana L. Schwartz, the CEO of the River District Association said. "It is costly but very important to recognize and protect historic spaces and places in our community."

The association has mainly focused on areas south of the river, although it is branching to some aspects of the North Main Street area.

"I think the idea of an arts and culture district is interesting, and/but we also want to make sure that we are getting input from all residents in the North Main district and what amenities are most needed," Schwartz told the Register & Bee via email.

Joe Scott, who has owned a home on North Main Street in the vicinity of the Historic North Theatre, welcomes the idea of a culture district.

"I think the push for the area to be an arts and theater district is great," he said. "The North Main district has a lot of potential and its history is extensive."



Scott also works for the Danville Historical Society and has a passion for anything associated with Danville's past.

"The North Theatre is a staple of North Main Hill and is the landmark of the area," he said. "I have memories of when Carolyn's House of Flowers was there and can recall being in awe of the building from that time."

To expand his endeavor, Alan is using the building beside the theater to house multiple museums. Adding to the Virginia Christmas Museum that's already there, museums on magic; gambling; dolls, puppets and ventriloquists; and one dedicated to fake things.

It will be a "series of intricate, fascinating museums, in the theater and arts district," he said.

"I won't make much money from them," he continued. "But again, I'm trying to make this area into that."

With the full casino coming, an arts district could only enhance the tourism draw from Danville, he believes.

"One of the things that I learned is that people love magic and that they find it fascinating and interesting and unique," he explained.

He thinks when the full casino resort opens, Danville will become a vacation destination instead of just a day-trip as it is now with the temporary facility.

"When the casino becomes a resort itself, then they are going to come and stay a day or two or three and they are going to want to go outside and do something else," he said.

That's why other attractions need to be in place, albeit it small.

For example, he's planning to have a sculpture garden in his parking lot. When the old Schoolfield Mill was being torn down to make room for the casino, he salvaged old metal from the mill.

After talking with Danville Community College President Jerry Wallace, welding students are making some creations based on Alan's ideas.

One will be using rebar to form a tree and branches with eyeballs. He calls that snake eyes, going on the casino theme. Another will be a baseball bat over a pot with letters J-A-C-K dangling from above. This one will be themed "hit the jackpot."

Then there's something he's hoping to enter in the Guinness book: the world's largest magic wand. That's located on the back of the building, facing the parking lot. What was an ordinary drain pipe has strategically placed black paint to mimic a magic wand.

"I'm hoping people will come up and get a selfie," he said of the idea of such creations. "It's goofy little stuff like that I'm trying to do."



Wayne Alan shows off a trick in his Christmas show at the Historic North Theatre in Danville.

Charles Wilborn, Register & Bee

## His view on Danville

The day of the interview with the Register & Bee, Alan was in Home Depot when he heard someone say they hated Danville.

He had to stop to see why this person was complaining. Although not plugging his theater, he used the time to highlight the progress of the city. “Being from the outside, I see a lot of great things about Danville that other people don’t see,” Alan said.

For people who live here, the negativity can become ingrained in their brains.

Recently his daughter asked him if he was happy living in Danville.

“Yeah, I miss some things from Annapolis,” he told her. “I said, the people are really friendly and I have enjoyed all of the efforts I’ve made to revived the theater.”

He then recalled a time before the pandemic when he would stage an extensive Christmas magic show. As he'll often do, he went around to his neighbors to hand out free tickets for people to come see his show. He stopped on the porch and introduced himself to one gentleman and they struck up a quick conversation.

"Mr. Alan, I got to tell you, just seeing that marquee lit up at night makes us feel better about our community," Alan said the man relayed to him.

It also falls as no small emotion that Alan is the caretaker of a Danville landmark that otherwise could have been on the receiving end of a wrecking ball.

"I'm glad that the theater was saved as I believe the loss of that building would be detrimental to North Main," Scott said. "The theater's history of being a meeting place in North Danville is great."

The North Main Street homeowner said he looks forward to not only the future of the theater, but the the whole North Main District.

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