

URBAN LIFE

PAGE D10 | THE GAZETTE | MONTREAL | THURSDAY, APRIL 21, 2005 | EDITOR: DOUG SWEET | 514 987 2596 | dsweet@thegazette.canwest.com



PHOTOS: GORDON BECK THE GAZETTE

Theatre co-ordinator Eric Cazes in the Corona's faded, but still ornate, lobby: being used as a plumbing warehouse for decades helped preserve the building.

The refurbished Corona Theatre has helped breathe new life into a 'tough neighbourhood' that some say never recovered from the Depression

Synergy in St. Henri

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

When Arcade Fire, one of Montreal's international alt-bands du jour, celebrates a three-night homecoming this Saturday through Monday, they couldn't have picked a better venue than the historic Corona Theatre.

The scene and buzz will be theirs – enhanced by the 1912 pleasure palace enjoys in the rebirth of the old St. Henri manufacturing area as a magnet for young artists.

Abandoned for decades, the former cinema and vaudeville house on Notre Dame St. W., near Atwater Market, now luxuriates in a funky, faded peeled-paint rococo aura. The theatre gods might tell you the Corona is renewing its date with destiny and hip acts like Arcade Fire, Pierre Lapointe, Lhasa de Sela and Amon Tobin are paying homage.

"At last I am here, a place I've always wanted to play," said tri-lingual singer Lhasa tremulously at a recent three-night Corona seance. The occasion gripped her with magical thoughts: "I always had the feeling that these songs and this theatre were made for one another. And these songs and this theatre are all made for you."

It's the only remaining Montreal theatre with its original façade – a grand arched window that signified silent-cinemas in the early 1900s – and interior intact, if faded. Going to a show at the Corona is like stepping back in time. Once a respite from the hard-scrabble life of St. Henri, the theatre mirrors the neighbourhood's revival as an artsy "village" in the shadow of the big city.

Founded in 1685 as a leather tanning centre, St. Henri was incorporated in 1874 with 2,500 residents, and the advent of heavy industry swelled its population to 25,000 by 1905. Empty lots and factories are left from a time when sweatshops and child labour were the norm. The area, it is said, never really recovered from the Great Depression.

Life ran out on the Corona by the 1960s, and for more than 30 years it sat as a plumbing warehouse (occasionally used for film shoots). "The plumber actually saved the place by using it," theatre co-ordi-



Detail from a faded, chipped ceiling mural.

tor Eric Cazes said, referring to a threat of demolition. Its good condition prompted artists and citizens (led by Diane Dufresne and Yvon Deschamps, who was born in the area) to form the Institut des arts de la scène in 1997, with a federally funded restoration project that put the 668-seat Corona back in business on Oct. 5, 1998. In addition to its mandate as a haven

for chanson and music, it's a gathering place for neighbourhood schools and arts organizations.

"St. Henri has always been a tough neighbourhood," Cazes said. "But now there are a few more cafés, and the lights don't shut down at night anymore."

Cazes, who oversaw the renovation of the Outremont Theatre, adds, "The Outremont is like going to a museum. People come to Le Corona to really get into the atmosphere."

What a difference a century makes, and plus ça change. Whereas the Corona was originally a palace offering the mysteries of silent films – complete with tiny orchestra pit and dressing rooms for musicians under the stage – last month it was a palatial listening room for sampling wizard Amon Tobin's futuristic soundtrack CD for the hot video-game Splinter Cell (created by Ubisoft up in Mile End). The theatre's natural acoustics – and floors that still creak – did nothing less than serve the future of digital music.

You didn't have to be a postmodernist to feel that magic in the jammed joint.

Music seems irrevocably part of the 'hood. St-Henri, birthplace of jazz piano legend Oscar Peterson, is North American headquarters for the British hip-hop and beats label Ninja Tune. Nearby, the original RCA Victor Studio still makes wood-paneled recording history, cubby-holed in a corner of what was once the huge phonograph factory founded by European inventor Emile Berliner. Many a musician's takeout is from the original Dilallo's, purveyors of the greasiest and arguably best-tasting burger in town.

"Things haven't changed much on my (west) side of Atwater," said saxophonist Joel Miller, whose recent Mandala CD brings jazz into the 21st century. "It's like the neighbourhood is in another time."

When Corona patrons make it a night of music in the 'hood, they're apt to wind up a few blocks west at Le Va-et-Vient (3706 Notre Dame W.), a cultural bistro that has become the place that east-end musical luminaries (Les Breastfeeders, Fred Fortin, jazzman Jean Derome) consider their west-end outpost.

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Bonny's, a restaurant across from the Corona, opened last July.



The refurbished exterior: the theatre was built in 1912.

THE LOOK
MAXINE
MENDELSSOHN

'Lacoste is so over'

Punk-keen teen sees fashion in his future

Tahar Meridji looked cool as a cucumber, relaxing by the soccer field at Jeanne Mance Park. The teenager said he was already planning his summer vacation. "I want to get a job selling clothes," he said, flashing a fine-looking grin. "I'll have to lie and tell people they look good when I know they don't. I hope my conscience can handle it."

But Meridji also had more immediate plans: "I have to get psyched for the game," he said, eyeing his friends who were kicking around a soccer ball.

Name: Tahar Meridji

Age: 17

Nickname: Cougar

Spotted: At Jeanne Mance Park soccer field.

Time spent getting dressed: Three minutes.

Occupation: High school student.

Hobbies: "I love acting. I was in a play at school and I was supposed to be a sex symbol, you know like Austin Powers. It was so fun."

He can't live without: Soccer.

Celebrity he thinks should be stopped by the fashion police: "I think they all look pretty bad at one point or another."

Signature quote: "C'est cool."

His fashion hero: Brad Pitt.

Favourite smell: "Any perfume by Thierry Mugler."

Where we would most likely find him after dark: "On a school night, I'll probably be in bed, but on the weekend I'm out with friends."

Worst fashion trend: "Anything punky."

Favourite label: "I don't really wear brands but I'm wearing a Lacoste cap. Lacoste is so over. Like, who would be caught dead in one of those polos with the little alligator on it?"

Favourite restaurant: "I'll eat anywhere they have shish taouk."

Favourite drink: Orange juice.

Last song he had stuck in his head: I Shot the Sheriff, by Bob Marley.

Favourite TV show: The Simpsons.

What he's wearing: Red Lacoste cap, \$20, bought on St. Laurent Blvd. Ernesto (Che) Guevara T-shirt, \$20, bought on Mt. Royal Ave. Beige baggy shorts, bought in France. Adidas runners, \$130, at Foot Locker in Place Vertu mall, 3205 Côte Vertu Blvd., (514) 335-2042.



MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE
Tahar Meridji in Jeanne Mance Park. He loved playing a sex symbol in a school play.