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I have a fantastic muralist—Inga Belozeroва. She did my Egyptian Theater in Moscow [*shown below right*] and she’s doing my Byzantine Theater in Greece. She created a great design.

Theo Kalomirakis

The Ziegfeld: Then, Now & Beyond



Theo calls the Ziegfeld his first “real” theater—the first theater where his talents and the execution matched his aspirations. Almost 25 years later, HGTV considered the Ziegfeld dazzling—and contemporary—enough to feature on Theo’s second appearance on Million Dollar Rooms. Below, he muses on the genesis and history of his first gem and offers a glimpse of the new theater he’s creating for Ziegfeld owners Barry and Isabel Knispel—the Rugby.—Michael Gaughn

Theo Kalomirakis: The Ziegfeld was my third theater. But it was the first theater I did that I thought was worthy of photography.

Michael Gaughn: And it’s now being featured on HGTV, which means it’s stood the test of time.

TK: That’s mostly because people have become very stingy and don’t give up the space I need. If this theater was just the theater and nothing else, it would be nothing—especially since it has a very low ceiling. Back then, I didn’t have the guts to tell the client, “Excavate. Since you’re spending all that money, give me a few extra feet.” But I was like, “Who do I think I am to tell the client to excavate?” Now I don’t hesitate. But back then, I did, and I’ve lived to regret it, because that theater has a very flat ceiling—the only flat-footed ceiling in any theater I’ve ever done. And every time I see it, I say, “O my god. What did I do?” And Barry says, “Stop complaining. You don’t like it, but I love it.”

MG: I know the theater’s electronics have had four major upgrades over the years, but have you done anything to tweak its design?



TK: I recently brought in a team of artists to highlight the ceiling, which was originally painted with silver paint. We used some gold and silver leaf to highlight some of the flowers in the design. They were there over a month enhancing the ceiling and the decorative frieze around the room. I also changed the curtain. I didn't like it so I replaced it with one that goes up and down. And I changed the fabric on the walls. The fabric that was there was like bad quality Ultrasuede, which has no acoustical treatment, so we put acoustical treatment behind the walls and covered it with black fabric with a little sparkling design woven in.

MG: What makes the design still seem fresh after all this time?

TK: The detail, which referred to specific Deco design elements. I just had a fresher perspective on design then. Now, unless I'm challenged, I don't challenge myself.

I really put my heart into the millwork for the Ziegfeld because I was inspired by things that I couldn't own. I live vicariously through these theaters. The doors were based on [the doors to Bullocks Wilshire department store](#). I don't think I've done a door since that is even close to the quality, the look, the design that door has. I had more time on my hands to focus on the details. And like Frank Lloyd Wright said, God is in the details. That theater may not have been blessed with the best design decisions ever, but we had a fantastic crew of artisans that knew about quality like nobody else. That's why that theater has really stood the test of time. I was doing one theater at a time then. I'm doing forty now. So if I really focused on the details, I'd lose all my clients.

MG: You've told me the big challenge with the Ziegfeld was integrating the support columns into the design.



TK: One of the columns in the lobby is actually supporting the house. The other is a mirror image of the first so it looks like they are there on

purpose. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you I designed the whole façade of the space—if not the whole space—around that stupid column. I wanted it to be so well integrated into the design that you wouldn't even see it—which is why I wrapped it with aluminum.

But the Ziegfeld has a basic, basic screaming fault. Typically in a movie theater, what you see from the sidewalk is the box office and the marquee. Then you enter the big lobby. But the Ziegfeld is all over the place. I was so excited to have the chance to do a lobby and a neon marquee and a second neon marquee. But the space is very fragmented, very compromised. You should go from the box-office lobby to the inner lobby to the foyer, and from the foyer to the theater. But in the Ziegfeld, you have multiple choices what direction to take. It breaks up the natural flow. But the space works because there's excitement in every room.

I would have avoided some of the client's personal touches, like the neon signage in the inner lobby and all the Star Wars memorabilia, which kind of defaces the integrity of the interior design. But, you know, he loves them. And, after all, the theater is not mine. It's the client's. And once you go, the client has to enjoy it.

MG: The Rugby is also Deco—I assume that was the Knispels' preference.

TK: They love Deco—they love it. Their house is Deco, but they have a very eclectic sensibility so they have a lot of things mixed in with that. So when Barry bought a summer home, he said, "We have need for a new theater. We need new excitement." But it's going on the third year and it's not finished.

MG: But it's close. I've heard you're replacing the wallpaper.

TK: Yes. Isabel doesn't like the red, so I'm using black fabric with a little satin sparkle, like in the Ziegfeld.

MG: Since you were creating two Deco theaters for the same client, did you spend a lot of time thinking about how to differentiate them, or did you see each as having a life of its own?

TK: They're different spaces, and the space kind of defines what I do. We had to design the Rugby around the door. It took a lot of massaging. And there was a lot of agony because Isabel wanted a bar with a front counter, like in the Ziegfeld, where you go behind it to serve. But there was no way. Especially in such a small space.

MG: So how does the Rugby reflect your experiences since the Ziegfeld? What have you learned in the meantime?

TK: It was a little easier to understand the space. I didn't work as hard to do the design. I wanted to spend most of my time determining the decorative elements. But I'm not very happy with the floor.

MG: The floor in the lobby, with the inlay?

TK: Yes. It was possibly my mistake. We decided to use marble instead of a terrazzo floor because it's more luxurious. But it was a mistake. Marble has too much graining and texturing. It's not the color that upsets the design, it's the texturing. It takes over. And it's a bitch to cut. With terrazzo, you just pour it, and it flows into every niche with perfect alignment. That was a disappointment. So never again a marble floor.



MG: I love the screen cover. Are you happy with that?

TK: I love it, I love it. I have a fantastic muralist—Inga Belozerova. She did my Egyptian Theater in Moscow [*shown below right*] and she's doing my Byzantine Theater in Greece. She created a great design. I worked with her to figure out the visuals. I did research and sent her a lot of photographs—and when you have an artist that knows what they're doing, they'll put things together. Just like you—when you write a book, you synthesize all the elements you bring into it, you bring in your own personality.



MG: Did shooting the Ziegfeld for HGTV trigger any memories for you?

TK: Yes. I remember that before my first meeting with Barry, I called a friend of mine who was Joan Rivers' decorator and I said, "How do I charge this job?" He said, "You charge twenty five percent of whatever everything costs and you tell the client, 'I'll give you the design but you have to sign a contract first.'" So I drew up a contract and I went to Barry. And I was shaking. I gave him the contract and he said, "What is this? I never sign contracts. My word is my signature." I said, "But that's not how it works." He said, "That's the way it's going to be. So take it or leave it." So I took it, and we've joked about it ever since, because he is probably the most reliable person in the world. He shakes your hand, and it's done.

MG: You said before that these theaters give you a chance to do things you can't do for yourself—like the doors in the Ziegfeld—so you live vicariously through these spaces.

TK: Absolutely. These theaters are the best therapy for the things you want to do but you never have the money, so you do it for other people. You just live through their experiences.

MG: So you make an emotional investment in each one of these theaters.

TK: Absolutely—because they’re part of me. And I make an emotional investment in the actual work I have to do and in the opportunity to develop relationships with my clients. I have a new client and I cannot get rid of him. I get 50 emails a day. I tell him I just cannot respond, but he says, “I’m enjoying this so much. I’m so into it.” So at the same time I complain, I love them, because they have so much passion for what I’m doing.

Theo Kalomirakis: A New Theater is Born



I often complain about my job. Why do I need to travel so much? Why are some clients so difficult to deal with? Why aren’t all of my projects going smoothly? Still, I love what I do. I love seeing new places and meeting new people. And I especially love the creative challenges that come with designing theaters.

Unfortunately—here is more complaining—such challenges are rare. Slowly, home theater has turned from being a novelty to a commodity. Most people put a theater in their home not because they are pioneers, not because they see it as something they have to have, but because every house of a certain price range now has a home theater in it—just like a kitchen, a bathroom, or a bedroom. Such commoditization is creativity’s worst enemy.

Both designers and clients share the blame when something that could be fresh and exciting becomes routine and predictable. I am willing to take the blame for some of the work we do that falls under the category of “designing on autopilot.” If I had a choice, I would want everything to be unique. But there is not enough time to make every project truly creative. Instead, I wait for that special assignment to sink my teeth into. You know immediately when such an assignment comes along—and it always has to do with the client. If a project is expected to rise above the ordinary, the client needs to have the right amount of space, an adequate budget, and the interest—and enthusiasm—to want to get involved in the process. When all three of those conditions are met, magic can happen.



We are just wrapping up the theater in the southern part of the Peloponnese peninsula in Greece that [I wrote about on this site a few weeks ago](#). Inspired by the Byzantine architecture of the [Hagia Sophia](#) in Istanbul, the theater is located in the main residence of an estate that occupies a very large swath of land on a hillside framed by mountains in the west and the Aegean Sea in the east. The client plans to use this residence mostly as a second home away from his main residence in the cold northern part of Europe. There can be no more idyllic retreat from the hustle and bustle of an intense business life than this peaceful, warm, green seaside location in the Peloponnese.

With the theater in the house almost completed, I started thinking: What would the client do in the summer when he is in a mood for a movie? He certainly wouldn't lock himself in the theater. No self-respecting person in Greece does. They all watch movies outdoors. It's a tradition that started early in the 20th Century, born out of necessity—there was no air-conditioning to keep interior spaces cool on the hot Greek summer nights. For decades, theaters with the starry sky as their rooftops were staples of summer life in Greece. In the '50s and '60s, there were literally hundreds in Athens. Most are gone now but the few that remain are respected examples of Greece's cultural heritage.



Back to the present: What could be a more appropriate amenity than an open-air theater for this property? I would like to take credit for suggesting the idea to our client but the credit must go to my friend Yannis Roubessis, [the A/V integrator for the theater in the main residence](#). Last month, Yannis mentioned to me: “Wouldn’t it be great if such a beautiful estate had a place to watch movies under the summer sky?” “Wow!” I said, “I thought of it but it never occurred to me to bring it up.” I allowed the idea to percolate in my head for a few weeks as I was waiting for the right opportunity to mention it to the client.

That opportunity came last week when I went to Greece to take care of some finishing details with the painting of the theater. I landed in Athens at noon on Thursday, a day before the scheduled meeting with the client. The drive from the airport directly to the property took about four hours. I arrived around 5:30 Thursday evening when the sun was still up. I was excited to check the progress on the theater and headed straight there. The client had just flown in too and was already in the house, surrounded by an entourage of designers, contractors, project managers, etc. He was checking the progress that had been made since his last visit there.

I waited a few hours until they were done with everything, and then I brought up the idea of an open-air theater on his property. His eyes lit up! “Where?” he said. “I have no idea.” I said, “I’m not familiar with the entire property.” “Then, let’s go check!” he suggested. He grabbed my arm and off we went, followed by his incredulous group—who I’m sure had no idea what these two crazy guys were up to. We walked up and down the various parts of the property, alongside serene herb gardens, through jasmine-covered stone-clad arches, past bubbling waterfalls and winding pathways, considering a few areas as possible candidates but rejecting most as not appropriate enough. Then, at the top of a gently rolling hill with a majestic view of the Aegean Sea, we both agreed we had found the ideal spot for the theater!

We talked about it for a while, tossing back and forth ideas about the design. We agreed that whatever I would recommend would have to respect the topography of the location. More specifically, it was decided that:

- We would not be tempted to go with any humbly nostalgic outdoor-theater design
- The design should echo the tradition of ancient Greek amphitheaters that were perched on hillsides like this one
- The curved rows of seats (possibly four rows) would be arranged to follow the slope of the hill
- The seats would be carved out of real marble—just like the ones in the ancient Greek amphitheaters
- There would be no proscenium, so the view of the Aegean wouldn’t be blocked
- Instead, the screen and the front speakers would be buried in the ground and would be raised mechanically when a movie started

- Seen from a distance, the theater would have to be “invisible,” blending completely with the landscape.

I am fortunate that I always seem to meet clients who are open-minded, encouraging, and willing to go places with me. Five days later, I haven't been able to stop thinking about this project. I plan to start the design process as soon as I am back in the States. How lucky am I indeed? This is exactly the type of project that makes a difference for an artist. When client and designer are on the same page from Day One, united by a common vision and eager to think outside the box, the sky is the limit . . . THEO KALOMIRAKIS

Comment [Inga Belozeroва April 12, 2013 at 8:50 am](#)

Sounds great!!! New exiting project for you and lots of work for DecorMarmi 😊
Congratulations, Theo

Theo Kalomirakis: A Progress Report from Greece

It was the worst rainfall in decades in Greece. As if the country had room for more misery, cities flooded, cars were stranded—it seems that there were even some casualties. But [Inga Belozeroва](#) and Louis Triverio, the decorative artists who are painting the frescoes in the theater we are working on in the southern part of the Peloponnese peninsula, were happily sequestered inside the project, working away day and night to make their deadline of March 18 for completion.

It has not been easy—things that were supposed to be in place by others so the workflow wasn't interrupted weren't done. As of last week, everything seemed to lag behind. I had to step in over the phone to try to speed things up. If you're not on the site, it's hard to assess the situation. But it seems the delay had to do with the marble columns that need to be installed so the painters can continue with their work.

In the meantime, I'm feasting on the images I receive regularly from Louis and Inga chronicling their efforts. What was in my mind just a blank space is beginning to come to dazzling life. The inspiration for the theater design was the basilica of [the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul](#), an imposing edifice that still impresses with its engineering sophistication. Considering that our space is vastly smaller, we tried to stay as close to the original as possible by using “scale” as the secret weapon.

Next week's challenge will be to make the best out of a bad situation with the location of the [Runco SC-50d projector](#). Our audio/video integrator, Yiannis Roubessis of [Home & Yachts Private Theaters](#), had been promised a room in the back of the theater to place the large projector, with plenty of space to access and maintain it. That didn't happen. The electrical demands of the project laid claim to that room, and we were left with just a small cavity with access only from the front. New custom moldings had to be ordered from Canada to trim a removable access panel, and a projector lift will be installed for easy maintenance.

Other than the unexpected but inevitable delays—always part of any complicated project—everything is coming along very well. The marble columns and the hand-carved marble capitals will be installed next. Then [Teknamat](#)—our GC—and its crew from Poland will come back to finish installing the acoustical treatments and tie up all the loose ends. With some luck, the owners will be able to watch movies by late April—which, in itself, is amazing because, although there were years of planning, construction didn't begin until last October. The average construction time of a large theater is the same as for a large house—two to three years. So the construction speed of this project is impressive, as are the efforts of everybody working right now to bring the design to life.

THEO KALOMIRAKIS



Louis has just sprayed the base coat in the theater



The proscenium border with some of the colors in place



The ceiling painting is beginning to take shape



The first coat of paint is applied in the proscenium