

**VN****FEATURE OF THE MONTH**

SAN FRANCISCO'S HISTORIC CASTRO REOPENS WITH ANOTHER PLANET, SAM SMITH AFTER \$41M RENOVATION

BY TAMARA PALMER

What a difference a multi-million dollar makeover makes. Witness San Francisco's Castro Theatre, San Francisco, a historic landmark movie palace, reopened on Feb. 6 as a multipurpose concert, film and comedy venue operated by Another Planet Entertainment. With a capacity of 1,385 for standing events and 1,150 for seated affairs, the extraordinary \$41M renovation modernized the 1922 building and meticulously restored its early 20th century art and design grandeur. CAW Architects collaborated with preservation architects from Page & Turnbull to design the building renovation.

"The primary challenge of The Castro renovation was to allow the building to continue to honor its role as a sanctuary for LGBTQ+ culture and classic cinema, while adapting it to meet the demands of live performances and dance parties," said Chris Wasney, FAIA, Principal at CAW Architects. "The new bespoke movable floor system creates the classic raked seated orchestra, but can adapt quickly for a standing room live music event. Our goal was to achieve the highest standards of preservation and conservation for the beloved landmark theater, known for its remarkable architecture and artwork."

The Castro's new team in-

cludes general manager Garrett Blanchard, box office manager Lauren Pierro and operations manager Carissa "Snaxx" Hatchel. APE has a dedicated staff there, and are flexible as needed. The venue uses Ticketmaster for music and Ticketweb for film and community events.

The Castro's first event on Feb. 6 was a sold-out 35MM screening of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and a fundraiser for the Castro Community Benefit District's 20th anniversary. On Feb. 7, D'Arcy Drollinger, San Francisco's first Drag Laureate and founder of the city's Oasis nightclub and Oasis Arts nonprofit, hosted D'Arcy's Drag + Disco.

San Francisco is celebrating Drollinger's recent news that the Oasis nightclub was saved from permanently closing after New Year's Eve by a multimillion-dollar gift from a family who has gotten much joy out of its existence supporting drag queens and music artists. Oasis will be closed for several months as it

is renovated and booked anew, so it's powerful that Drollinger was among the first to present an event at The Castro in 2026.

Following those two special LGBTQ community events, UK multi-platinum crooner Sam Smith was first to perform a concert at The Castro. He began his sold out, 20-night run "To Be Free: San Francisco Residency" on Feb. 10, which goes through March 14. The extraordinary residency was booked by Kirk Sommer, the global co-head of music at WME.

"[Smith] blew out 20 shows, 28,000 tickets right away," says Allen Scott, the President of Concerts & Festivals at Berkeley's Another Planet Entertainment. "It's insane!" Scott expects that the venue will eventually be booked 300 nights a year.

Still owned by the original Nasser family that opened it over 100 years ago, The Castro will also host live standup comedy. The calendar presently includes appearances from Naomi Watanabe, Jessica Kirson, Jonathan Van Ness and Robby Hoffman into late May.



MASTERPIECE IN PROGRESS: Interior shot of the main theater space in the final construction stages. Courtesy Another Planet

The Castro is now a formidable competitor for The Regency Ballroom, the 1,400-capacity music venue operated by Goldenvoice located just over two miles away. It could help to fill a nightlife void felt after the 2019 closure of Mezzanine, a 1,000-person nightclub that hosted live shows and DJ-driven parties. And a rep for APE acknowledges that it'll be the "perfect place for an afterparty" for Outside Lands, the company's Golden Gate Park festival.

Ahead of the venue's blockbuster reopening, *Pollstar* took a hardhat tour of The Castro led by Mary Conde, Another Planet Entertainment's Senior Vice President (Production) and General Manager of San Francisco's Bill Graham Civic Auditorium.

Conde oversees every loving — and expensive — detail of this \$41M renovation. New sound systems were built in collaboration with APE and Meyer Sound, with consultancy from Bay Area

companies The Schalleck Collaborative (theatre consultant) and Salter Inc. (acoustics consultant). Coda and UltraSound provide integration and support services.

Meyer Sound designed new systems for cinema screenings and live performances. The latter P.A. system includes 12 LEOPARD M80 compact linear line array loudspeakers, eight LEOPARD compact linear line array loudspeakers, 12 900-LFC low-frequency control elements, six LINA very compact linear line array loudspeakers, four UPQ-D1 full-sized loudspeakers, three ULTRA-X40 compact point source loudspeakers and two GALAXY 816 network platforms.

The final cost of renovations was a lot more than initially projected, but Conde says it was necessary to be flexible.

"It was just a runaway train of like, 'Well, we want to do this

right.' No one was interested in doing a half-assed job. If we're here, we're here with all the best intentions and doing this as good as it can be."

Major improvements to the building to benefit the fan experience include a new heating and cooling system, bathrooms that are doubled in size, better ADA

access throughout the orchestra and backstage and asbestos removal. The orchestra level seats are retractable, and each tier of seating is now boosted six inches higher than the one in front of it, so sightlines are much better than in the past. The balcony seating provides an ideal bird's eye view of the whole venue.



BEFORE AND AFTER: The Castro Theatre originally opened as a crown jewel in 1922. Courtesy Another Planet Entertainment

THE HEART OF THE CITY: Exterior shot of the Castro Theatre, which lies at the heart of San Francisco's historic LGBTQ community.



“Having that [seating] flexibility means that we could do comedy, podcasts, community and dance events and concerts,” says Conde. “Managers, artists and agents are reaching out to us and saying, ‘I want to play this venue.’” Nick Barrie heads the APE team for booking music, while Rae Livingston and Raul Rangel are the booking agents for film, comedy and podcasts.

Longtime Castro organist and local treasure David H. Hegarty, who has played at the Castro since 1978, will return to play live before shows, this time with a dream organ built to his specifications. Over \$1M was crowdfunded for Hegarty to have this privilege, and APE also invested significant money in installing it into the theater pit.

The creation of new and mobile food and drink concessions will allow customers to stay near their seats if desired. The menu is expected to include treats from neighborhood artisanal food-makers, including the high-quality Pride chocolate collection from the LGBTQ-owned Kokak Chocolates.

The stunning restoration details enhance the original art and design aesthetics—1920s Spanish Colonial Baroque and 20th-century Art Deco—elevating this jewel of a historic building. EverGreene Architectural Arts worked on bringing back graffiti-etched clay murals and magically rejuvenated the breathtaking ceiling, which has never been seen by modern visitors. Phoenix Day restored the light fixtures, including the original 1937 chandelier.

There is no public parking available at the venue, but it is easily accessible by public transportation, with Muni Metro’s Castro Station located across the street. Muni connects with other local transit agencies such as BART, Caltrain, AC Transit and Samtrans, so it’s easy to get to the Castro from other Bay Area cities.

The Castro is, of course, known for showing movies. The room will resume a schedule of repertory films and continue to host large film festivals like the 69th Annual San Francisco International Film Festival (Apr.

24 and May 4), the 29th San Francisco Silent Film Festival (May 6-10) and Frameline50 (June 17-27). On Mar. 17, Frameline will present Trash Talk with director John Waters, featuring a screening of his 1994 film *Serial Mom*.

Peaches Christ, the acclaimed drag queen who has hosted legendary celebrity-studded events and screenings in the theatre (including *Serial Mom*), will present Waters with an award from Frameline, and will soon announce the return of a classic event.

“That’s my first real public event back, and that means the world to me,” says Christ of the Waters screening. “A deathbed memory for me, when I’m lying there, is going to be the night that Sketchfest did a roast on the Castro stage for my personal 45th birthday. I sat there and it was Elvira, Mink Stole, Clea DuVall, Jinkx Monsoon, Sister Roma, Heklina. And then as a surprise, the final roster coming down the aisle that the audience did not know had shown up was John Waters. John got up there and he was so sweet that it wasn’t

ABFAB: The late Heklina and Peaches Christ at a *Showgirls* event at The Castro Theatre.
Photo by Sloane Kanter / Courtesy Another Planet Entertainment

really a roast. It was more like a tribute to me.

“He said something later like, ‘Why would you ever agree to be roasted? I would never agree to that!’”

On April 2, Christ will bring back a popular screening of the 1995 camp classic *Showgirls*, this time with the help of the film’s Gina Gershon. Christ was the first to give *Showgirls* the midnight movie treatment, not long after it was released.

“I hope that people really enjoy it,” says Christ. “I really believe that APE has done a good job of this restoration, and I hope that it is affordable for those of us who are event producers to be able to go in and do things. A lot of folks didn’t know how much disrepair the building was really in, especially behind the scenes.” 🌟