

Comedy about to be big business in Jamestown



The National Comedy Center: the \$50 million, 37,000-square-foot museum in Jamestown.

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In less than two weeks, comedy switches from being a laughing matter to a potentially serious moneymaker for Jamestown.

After years of planning, the curtain will rise August 1 on the National Comedy Center, the \$50 million, 37,000-square-foot museum that includes a restoration of two historic structures.

The museum is designed to be inclusive with artifacts from the vaudeville days mixed in with more modern acts like those from comedian Louis Black. There are extensive and exclusive collections from the likes of George Carlin, Shelley Berman, and Joan Rivers mixed in with “Seinfeld” scripts and props from movies like “Airplane.”

In all, there are more than 50 exhibits, many of which are interactive and play off an individualized RFID (radio-frequency identification) wristband and chip.

“I believe museums should be compelling for everyone,” said Journey Gunderson, National Comedy Museum executive director. “Comedy is not about appealing to some small niche. It means something to everyone.”



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Jamestown has a sliver of national acclaim for comedy, thanks to Lucille Ball being born in neighboring Celeron and raised in the city. The Lucille Ball Desi Arnaz Museum, which is also overseen by Gunderson and serves as tourist destination companion to the new museum, attracts 20,000 people annually.

“If the nostalgia of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz can bring 20,000 people a year to Jamestown, imagine what this building can bring,” Gunderson said.

But, Gunderson said, the complex is a comedy museum – not a hall of fame. There will not be annual induction ceremonies. There will be refreshed exhibits and new twists.

“This is a museum,” Gunderson said. “It is designed to showcase varied and various bodies of work. We deliberately took the higher road.”



The exhibit honoring George Carlin at Jamestown's National Comedy Center.

Early estimates, conducted by the museum and Empire State Development, predict the museum will attract 100,000 people annually, generating over \$20 million annually for the Chautauqua County community.

“If anything this will have a lasting impact on Jamestown for a very long time,” said Tom Benson, a Jamestown businessman and the comedy museum board chairman.

Opening weekend includes performances by Amy Schumer, Lily Tomlin and members of the original “Saturday Night Live” cast and writing crew.

The opening ties in with the annual Lucille Ball Desi Arnaz comedy festival, held each summer in Jamestown.

“Seeing the exhibits in place, seeing people walking around the museum, seems almost surreal to me,” Benson said.

Designed and engineered by Clark Patterson Lee, the museum complex flows naturally between the new building and the restored, historic structures including an early 1900s era train station.

The seamless design was deliberate, Gunderson said.

“I love the mix of an old building with new technology,” she said. “It flows. It works.”



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