

FANTASY PRESERVED: THREE MOVIE

PALACES IN OREGON

by

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This thesis focuses on three case studies of 1920s fantasy architecture movie palaces in three distinct Oregon communities. Typical characteristics of movie palaces are presented as well as discussion of the national trends in movie palace rehabilitation. A historical overview of the movie palace phenomenon provides an understanding for the evolution of each case study. Specifics to each case study focus on its past and present relationship to its community as well as present crucial issues. The conclusion provides comparisons between the theaters as the work of one architect, Lee Thomas, as well as providing suggestions for the revitalization of movie palaces, specifically in terms of continued movie projection.

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DEDICATION

To my family for their ever present encouragement, support and love.



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores fantasy theater architecture through a study of three movie palaces built in the 1920s in three distinct Oregon communities. The case studies represent the work of Portland architect, Lee Thomas, and provide the opportunity to research the architecture and architectural detail typical of early fantasy motion picture theaters in Oregon. The research is intended to; determine how the case studies related to their communities through historical research; analyze the case studies in their present state; and provide discussion and suggestions for their future preservation. In addition to these goals the case studies are discussed in terms of their similarities as examples of the work of Lee Thomas. Investigating the specifics of each case study will enhance the limited information available concerning the architecture of Lee Thomas. Basic introductions to each of the case studies follow:

The Egyptian Theatre (1925), located in the small coastal community of Coos Bay (Figure 1), retains much of its original decoration, including six original vaudeville drops and the functioning Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra pipe organ. The Egyptian has suffered a typical fate of being spatially compromised. During the 1970s the balcony was divided into two smaller movie projection spaces. The main auditorium remains one

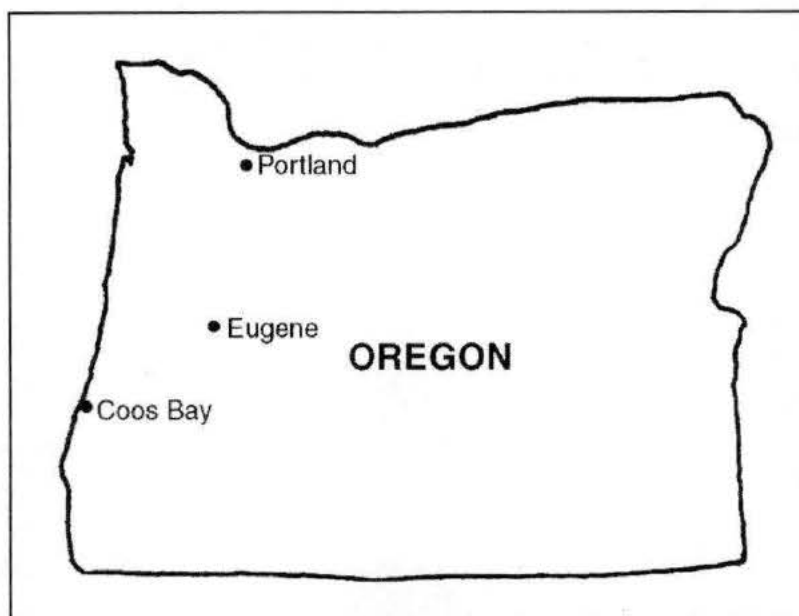


Figure 1. Locations of the Three Case Study Theaters.

viewing space. Serious concerns facing the theater include deterioration and damage to the structure due to water. Maintenance and preservation of the applied decoration, drops and organ are also important issues facing this theater which is currently owned by Act III Theaters.

The McDonald Theater (1925) is located in Eugene, the third largest community in Oregon at the time the theater was built. The main stylistic features represented are Mediterranean and Spanish Revival motifs. The McDonald has remained a one-screen theater and is currently owned by Act III Theaters. Much of the theater's original interior decoration has undergone significant change. The original interior relied heavily on applied decoration including murals depicting Norse epic tales, and Mediterranean and Spanish Revival motifs. The majority of the original applied decoration has been painted,

and in some cases plastered over. The McDonald was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

The Bagdad Theater (1927) is located in Oregon's largest city, Portland. The theater is intact spatially as well as in its interior detail. McMenamin's Restaurant and Brewery, who has adaptively reused the theater as a restaurant, recently returned the main auditorium to one unified space. Every other row of seats has been removed so moviegoers can dine on McMenamin's cuisine while watching second-run films at a low cost. The Bagdad was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.

In regard to the spelling of "theater," since the "er" ending is much more commonplace today than "re," it has been utilized throughout the text. Exceptions to the "re" ending are used for historical references or the name of a theater such as the Egyptian Theatre in Coos Bay.

A historical overview of the American movie palace phenomenon, which includes the fantasy architecture theaters of the 1920s, will preface the case studies to provide the necessary background for understanding the evolution of the movie palace. Movie palaces were a national phenomenon in which architecture played a major role by creating a fantasy world to which the everyday person could escape. Unlike traditional theater, the movies were accessible to a widespread audience and appealed to the common people not only in content, but also in affordability. Protection of movie palaces is vital to our understanding of the phenomenal impact motion pictures had on American society.

Certain terms are integral to the understanding of the research within this thesis as well as to the preservation profession in general. These terms include preservation, restoration and rehabilitation, which are defined below according to the office of the Secretary of the Interior:

Preservation is defined as the act or process of applying measures to sustain the existing form, integrity, and material of a building or structure, and the existing form and vegetative cover of a site. It may include initial stabilization work, where necessary, as well as ongoing maintenance of the historic building materials.

Restoration is defined as the act or process of accurately recovering the form and details of a property and its setting as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of later work or by the replacement of missing earlier work.

Rehabilitation is defined as the act or process of returning a property to a state of utility through repair or alteration which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions or features of the property which are significant to its historical, architectural, and cultural values.¹

Neither preservation nor restoration are appropriate terms, in their strictest sense, for the adaptation of movie palaces for modern use. It is unlikely that a movie palace has been consistently preserved and maintained throughout its history since it would have to adapt to modern technology to compete. Technological changes came to the movie palaces as early as 1927 with the marketing of "talkies." Similarly, to restore a theater in the strictest sense would mean a return to the original technology that is no longer competitive in the modern world. Rehabilitation is the most appropriate term for the use that many movie palaces have evolved to as performing arts centers. The key to applying the term rehabilitation appropriately is remembering that the subject of the rehabilitation

must retain its significant historical, architectural and cultural values. The term adaptive reuse is also integral to the understanding of this research meaning that a building's use is different from that for which it was originally intended. Revitalization is the final term meaning "to bring vitality, vigor, etc. back to [a building] after a decline."²

It is the attempt of this thesis to provide understanding of the movie palaces continuing to function as movie theaters to encourage sensitive treatment of the architectural and spatial features that retain the historic character of the buildings while allowing for future adaptive reuse. Many preservation and architectural publications have featured the adaptive reuse of motion picture theaters as performing arts centers. Although it is popular today to revitalize the larger palaces as performing arts centers, this is not necessarily practical for smaller venues. Many of these smaller community movie palaces continue to function as movie theaters. The Egyptian, McDonald and Bagdad are typical examples of community movie palaces that still function primarily as movie theaters. In the effort to compete with modern movie theaters, the integrity of many community movie palaces and smaller theaters has been compromised to accommodate modern sound systems, increase the size of the concession stand, and subdivide the auditorium space for multiple screens. Interior spaces, finishes and motifs were often "modernized" in attempts to attract more customers.

The goal of this study is not to create a preservation plan for each case study theater, but rather to examine the evolution of each, discuss their present state, and formulate conclusions about their evolution. Summaries concerning the specific theaters are located at the end of their respective chapters with an overall conclusion in the final

chapter. Recognition and identification of each theater's historic merits is aimed at creating rehabilitation strategies appropriate to each. Defining these important historical characteristics and providing revitalization strategies may aid other communities with theaters in similar circumstances. Providing suggestions for sensitive treatment of these structures, to retain their defining historical characteristics and promote their value as examples of America's love for Hollywood and the fantasy of the silver screen, may advise theater owners of the marketable value of their historic holdings and result in their successful revitalization.

Notes

¹William J. Murtagh, Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1993), 19-20.

²Webster's New World College Dictionary, 3rd edition (1996), s.v. "Revitalize."

CHAPTER II

MOVIE PALACES

There are distinctive features that qualify a motion picture theater as a movie palace. This section pinpoints those attributes to assist communities in categorizing their theater as a movie palace or a smaller motion picture theater. In addition, the features that contribute to the integrity of a movie palace are discussed in regard to their importance. This section also looks at the impetus behind the trends of movie palace preservation to gain an understanding of this development. The national phenomenon of movie palaces created theaters that were typical yet unique in their own respect. David Naylor stated in American Picture Palaces that "Aside from the skyscraper, no building type is more clearly representative of twentieth century American architecture than the movie palace."¹ Although manifold palaces have been lost to the wrecking ball, there are many more that are extant and worthy of preservation.

By Definition

Many of the grandest movie palaces have undergone rehabilitation and are recognized for their architectural importance as a step in the evolution of motion picture theaters, a unique building type representative of changes in American entertainment culture. Going to the movies was an event and before the marketing of "talkies"

audiences were treated to a variety of entertainment such as vaudeville performances and concerts on the grand organs used to musically accompany silent films. Although many well known and excessively grand palaces are receiving their due historical recognition, there are many more small town movie palaces and theaters which remain unrecognized as cultural markers of historical importance. The case study theaters are of lesser grandeur than many of the best known movie palaces, yet in nearly all aspects they each fall within the movie palace category by the definition below.

The features which distinguish a movie palace from a smaller motion picture theater are not absolutely definitive, yet there are some general characteristics recognizable of movie palaces:

Most movie palaces seat between 1,000 and 5,000 patrons. Other movie houses seat fewer than 1,000 persons.

Movie palaces have a stage and stagehouse with fly loft, rigging, dressing rooms, and orchestra pit. Many smaller theaters lack full stagehouse and orchestra facilities.

Movie palaces have a balcony, often supplemented with a mezzanine and additional seating levels. Many smaller houses were constructed without balconies.

Movie palaces and many smaller houses have a noticeable (if not dominant) decorative personality. Smaller houses, however, cannot claim the rich ornamentation found in the palaces.

Movie palaces were, by definition, designed to launch and promote new films. Smaller theaters generally were second and third-run outlets. Because the reputation of films was established in the downtown showcases, smaller theaters, capitalizing on opening promotional campaigns and favorable first reviews did not require the palaces' elaborate settings and grand-scale entertainment to attract moviegoers.

Movie palaces were constructed in the downtown areas of cities, and typically clustered in existing entertainment districts on turf already well established by vaudeville...Smaller theaters dotted the secondary commercial districts of outlying urban neighborhoods, small cities, and rural towns. By 1930, the smaller houses outnumbered movie palaces nearly seven to one.

Movie palaces appear in several development contexts, each of which can play a significant role in a theater's adaptive potential. The palaces were first constructed as freestanding theaters or as theaters sharing a wall with adjacent but otherwise unrelated commercial structures. Later, between 1925 and 1930, they were designed as a component - usually the central core-of larger, multistoried office buildings.²

Although often not as elaborate as the movie palaces in larger cities, motion picture theaters in smaller locales were equally, if not more important to their citizens and remain important to cultural history and the impact of motion pictures on American life. Simplified variations of the grand movie palaces sprang up in small communities throughout the country and were great sources of community pride. Movie palaces of the transitional period between the decline of vaudeville and the sweep of motion picture popularity provide particular appeal for adaptive reuse today since they are much more versatile than the theaters built strictly for movie projection. They provide stages with fly lofts, dressing rooms, and other amenities that cater to the performer and may serve a community in a revitalized way.

Important Characteristics

Although many historic movie palaces and smaller theaters are still in existence, it is not uncommon for these theaters to have had alterations made to the extent that they no

longer convey the characteristics that would identify them as a historic resource. Often changes are made to the interior applied decoration and spatial divisions in the auditorium. Before conclusions regarding a theater's integrity are drawn, preservation professionals must examine and weigh the feasibility of reversing previous changes. Restoration processes, such as paint analysis, may make it possible to reveal original colors, motifs and murals. The elements which are critical to a theater's integrity are outlined below and in some cases discussed with specific reference to theaters that are currently used as movie theaters:

Exterior - The main exterior facades of movie palaces played an essential role in their integrity. The exteriors of these buildings historically shared similarities. Their design was meant to draw patrons into the theater through the means of a highly visible entrance emphasized by a marquee and box office. Many movie palace designs incorporated storefronts with each space typically occupied by a separate business. In later efforts to "modernize" storefronts, inappropriate alterations, such as awnings and sheathing over the historic facades, created a disjointed appearance obscuring the unity that the historic facade once maintained. Efforts to respect the historic nature of the facade are important when applying awnings and signage. The design should enhance, and not overwhelm, the architectural details of the historic facade.

Marquee - It is uncommon that an original marquee is still intact on a movie palace. If a marquee is no longer present, it is advisable to incorporate a reproduction or a modern

interpretation of an early marquee for the theater that respects the historic phenomenon of marquee design which was often highly specialized. A replacement marquee should respect the original design intent. It is important that the marquee not obscure the building's detailing more than originally intended. The marquee was an effective advertising tool for the theater historically and is still an effective element for an adaptive reuse project.

Box Office - Movie palaces which still have their original box offices are rare. Most ticket sales are now transacted inside the foyer or lobby and the box office has been destroyed. If an original box office is extant, every effort should be made to retain it and utilize it. As in the past, a box office may serve as a draw to patrons. If it is impractical to utilize the box office for its intended function it should be maintained as an important part of the historic facade.

Lobby - The lobbies of movie palaces were extremely important spaces that were magnificently designed and often highly decorated and articulated to create a sense of wonder in the viewer as they waited for the next show to begin. They were also an integral part of the architect's planning for a safe and efficient circulation pattern. These grand spaces are easily compromised by poorly located and designed modern concession stands. Concession stands were not originally part of movie palaces and were not incorporated into theaters until competition with drive-ins necessitated them. Since concessions were not an original component of the palaces they are difficult to retrofit

without compromising the spatial qualities of the lobby. Moviegoers now expect that popcorn and snacks will be sold at a theater that exhibits movies. A well designed and located concession stand need not always occupy the most prominent space in the lobby at the expense of the integrity of the original design. It should be as unobtrusive as possible allowing the spatial qualities of the lobby to remain intact. Placement of a concession stand is a delicate matter that needs to be carefully analyzed since it can have a commanding visual impact immediately upon entering the lobby. Its placement and stylistic qualities are important considerations.

Auditorium - The auditorium is often the most spatially compromised and altered among the elements of movie palaces. Adaptations to accommodate modern acoustical technology are potentially destructive to the original design and integrity of the space. The sound systems in historic theaters currently used for movie projection are a particular concern. It is unrealistic to expect that modern sound systems will function the same in a space not specially designed for this type of technology. The acoustic alterations that are necessary to accommodate the premium sound systems, such as THX, often require much of the historic decorative and applied detailing of the auditorium to be covered severely compromising the historic qualities of the auditorium. Technology is constantly changing and movie palaces are not capable of competing with modern theaters that are specifically designed for modern sound systems. Consultation with acoustical engineers is the most effective means of analyzing a movie palace's acoustics and the type of treatment system or systems most appropriate for the space. This consultation is best

done in conjunction with preservation professionals. Exploring these treatments with the assistance of the appropriate professionals will insure respect for the historical aspects of the movie palace as well as ensuring high quality sound for modern movie exhibitions. Any installations should have minimal impact on the historic detailing and are best applied in a manner that is reversible.

Balconies - To compete with multi-plexes in the 1970s and 80s, many movie palaces had their balconies divided into smaller theaters. These alterations severely impacted the spatial quality of the auditoriums. It is not always economically feasible to return the auditorium to one viewing space. If the revenue generated by smaller theaters in a balcony is crucial to the theater's very existence it is better to leave them intact than to threaten the theater with demolition. If spatial divisions are necessary, the owner should seek professional design advice. Always, any changes must respect the historic fabric and be ultimately reversible should the opportunity for the theater's rehabilitation for live performance become a possibility in the future. This also insures that any future profits generated by the historic significance of the property remain intact.

Proscenium - The proscenium arch was often an elaborately decorated aspect of the auditorium. Many prosceniums were adversely affected by the increased screen size necessary to accommodate CinemaScope that was popularized in the 1950s. In most historic theaters the larger screen was installed and changes were made to the proscenium decades ago. However, it is still desirable that efforts are made to maintain the original

proscenium form and decoration to allow for the accommodation of future live performances should they become an option.

Stage - Many movie palaces that continue to show movies no longer use their stages and have allowed them to become storage spaces. It is important to make certain that the items stored on the stage are not detrimental to the stage surface or other valuable components such as dressing rooms, catwalks, riggings, etc. The stage is a typical location for the placement of speakers. It is best to “fly” the backstage speakers in to the fly loft rather than bolting them to the floor. This avoids damaging the floor and allows easier access and change to the sound system as well as keeping the speakers out of the way if the stage were used again for live performances.

Architectural Decoration - Elements such as pilasters, columns, ornamental plaster work, terra cotta detailing, decorative railings, sculpture, etc., are integral to the overall scheme of a movie palace. Removal of any of these elements is detrimental to the historic integrity of a theater.

Applied Decoration - Many movie palaces relied heavily on applied decoration such as painted murals, stenciling, and faux finishes to create their interior effects. Unfortunately many palace interiors with this type of applied decoration were “modernized” at some point in their evolution and the applied decoration was often lost beneath new coats of paint. This is perhaps one of the most common and detrimental alterations since it is

difficult to reverse. To restore applied decoration to its original state, extensive paint analysis and restoration techniques are often required at great cost. Interpretation of the original decoration, gathered from photographic and written information, provides an effective means of combating this kind of loss. In the event that the applied decoration is covered, successive plans to repaint should incorporate color schemes which are representative of the original scheme.

Lighting - Anytime that original lighting fixtures are in place or are obtainable, they should remain part of the theater whether located in the lobby, auditorium, or ancillary spaces. Lighting fixtures and special effects are an important part of the experience of the movie palaces, particularly in the auditorium. The original drama produced by the lighting is an integral part of the movie palace's ambiance. Cove and atmospheric lighting effects create a magical sense that contributes to the original concept of the palace. Modern moviegoers would be entertained by, and appreciate these effects, as did moviegoers of the past.

Location - When considering the importance of rehabilitating a movie palace or other historic movie theater, location can play a factor. If the theater is the only one left in a downtown area or town, or if it was the only theater ever built in a community, its significance is heightened. If a theater is one of many in close proximity, questions related to its integrity in comparison with the other theaters are much more relevant in determining the importance of the theater historically. In any case, issues relating to a

theater's importance to its community are crucial determinants in the public support that may be rallied for its revitalization.

Components - An unusual ensemble of components can add merit to the case to pursue rehabilitation or National Register status for a movie palace or small community theater. In addition to the elements already discussed, important components include an intact, original organ, furniture, original vaudeville drops or other scenery.

Theme - Consistency of the theme is an important aspect to consider in pursuing rehabilitation for a movie palace or small community theater. If the theater is a particularly fine representation of a style such as Egyptian Revival, Asian, or Baroque influence, or a successful blend of styles, and has many of the previously discussed elements, it will likely be a worthy candidate for National Register status and rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation and Adaptive Reuse

Adaptive reuse of movie palaces began as early as 1936 when an Architectural Forum article reported that, "...the transformation of old theaters into night clubs began as an attempt to turn dark houses into profitable properties."³ It was not uncommon for some movie palaces to be called "cathedrals" and it was not necessarily a misnomer since many derived their stylistic influences from the Gothic cathedrals or other religious architecture such as French and German Baroque chapels or Spanish missions.⁴ These

influences have led to the adaptive reuse of many movie palaces as churches, including Thomas Lamb's Regent (1913) in New York.⁵

A great boost for the American preservation movement and the movie palaces came with the bicentennial in 1976.⁶ This created a heightened and renewed sense of American pride that helped to foster respect for history including the architectural past. The 1970s saw many theater revitalization projects fueled by unprecedented support for the arts as well as economic incentives, such as tax credits and grants, provided by early Federal preservation programs.⁷ With the new emphasis on preservation it became a gold star of civic merit for communities to restore their historic theater and bring new life to an abandoned downtown.⁸ Unfortunately, the majority of those economic incentives have disappeared or have been drastically reduced and funding must be generated elsewhere.

Now that movie palaces are gaining recognition as "architectural repositories of our cultural heritage" they often function effectively as downtown revitalization anchors.⁹ Many have become performing arts centers that, whether showcasing national or local talent, have strengthened local economies.¹⁰ Among the cities which have successfully revitalized their downtowns hinged upon a historic theater are Cleveland, San Antonio, Seattle, Atlanta, and St. Louis.¹¹ Points that highlight these successes and capture public interest include:

Design, as an art form, merits public and critical attention comparable to that paid such arts as opera, sculpture, and the dance.

Movie palaces, originally constructed to provide settings for live quality entertainment and the art of the cinema, once again are providing space for the performing arts.

Movie palaces, like many other older structures, represent an existing national asset. Their value, commercially and as urban amenities, is no longer a matter of speculation.

As concerned citizens and developers participate in the renaissance of movie palaces and other friendly Main Street properties, they and other community members will in turn reap the benefits of such projects: renewed vigor in town, new jobs created by possible movie theater renovation construction and citizens returning to downtown, and the positive community spirit fostered by those cultural assets which help to make a city "livable."¹²

Theater restoration projects are commonly undertaken when there is a group in need of a facility and a theater has the potential to fill that need.¹³ A town's centennial or a theater's anniversary often fuels the drive for theater rehabilitation.¹⁴ A well-known and successful theater restoration took place in St. Louis involving the St. Louis Theatre by Rapp and Rapp (1926).¹⁵ Located in the downtown and suffering since the 1960s, the theater was envisioned as a perfect home for the well-established St. Louis Symphony Orchestra who was in search of a performance space. The theater showed its last film, *The Sound of Music*, in 1966 and opened as Powell Hall two years later. The particular acoustic suitability of Rapp and Rapp's architecture led to several of their other theaters' restorations in Pittsburgh, Omaha and Youngstown, Ohio, however, only one of the projects is considered a restoration.¹⁶ Other successful symphony takeovers have occurred in Oakland, Columbus, and Vancouver, British Columbia.¹⁷

One of the most meticulous theater restorations began in 1972 at the Paramount in Oakland that now houses the Oakland Symphony. Every detail of the theater was restored in 1972 to revive the 1931 art deco palace.¹⁸ Nathan Light, the Paramount Publix

director for the theater in 1931, visited the Paramount after the restoration and remarked at the theater's excellent condition. Although the technology in terms of lighting and air conditioning were upgraded to meet modern standards, this was all done without changing the theater's original appearance. All of the original color schemes, carpets, and furniture were restored or replicated where necessary. The Paramount still transports people to its 1931 glory and was designated a National Historic landmark in 1977.¹⁹ An influential rehabilitation project is the Ohio in Columbus which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1978. The incremental restoration of the 1928 theater, and the opportunity for its rental when not in use by the symphony, has become a model and inspiration to movie palace rehabilitation throughout the country.²⁰

To restore a theater to a live performance capacity means an examination of the cultural interests of the community as well as the historical interests.²¹ If there are other performance facilities in the general area will this project have enough of a draw to compete with those other facilities? A performing arts center is not always the most effective reuse for a movie palace at a particular point in time. It is ideal that these spaces return live performances to their stages if possible, but if keeping a theater in existence means that it must serve another function for a period of time, this is certainly preferred to its destruction. When implementing an adaptive reuse plan, each step of the process should ensure the theater's architectural integrity and maintain its potential as a live performance theater. When designing for the adaptive reuse of these theaters all changes that alter the spatial characteristics, applied decoration, or any other important historic aspect of the spaces must respect their histories and be reversible.

Summary

Issues that face a prospective theater rehabilitation are not unlike those that were present at its creation. There is a continued concern for the appropriate functioning capacity for performers, the aesthetic draw for patrons, and the economic feasibility of operation.²² Some of the substantial challenges facing the restoration of historic theaters are the adaptation for modern technology, new building codes, accessibility requirements and comfort issues. All these are required and need incorporation with a sensitivity to the historic fabric of the structure both on the exterior and interior.²³ Changes may require interpretation and should remain within the spirit of the original. Taking into account the goals of revitalization, weighed against the economic goals, can produce a successful project.²⁴ The architectural integrity of the building can help inform and determine the appropriate action whether it is a rehabilitation or adaptive reuse of the theater.²⁵ There is a limit to a theater's adaptability without compromising its original purpose. It is advisable to engage the help of professionals to identify the important issues and develop appropriate responses.

To explore contemporary uses and provide for multi-use functions for historic theaters is not unlike their original purpose. Many theaters were used as community centers for town meetings, lectures, graduations, political rallies and other community events. Although reuse as a performing arts center is the most common, other possible modern revitalization uses may be a symphony hall, retail mall, church, restaurant, nightclub, or community or educational facilities.²⁶ It is economically wise and socially

responsible to leave as much historic fabric intact as possible. Gutting a historic theater should never be an option.

As is the argument for many preservation projects, revitalizing historic theaters is an effective form of re-cycling. Even the most modest movie palaces are not buildable today without astronomical costs. Reusing the theaters not only preserves and maintains history, but it is much more cost effective than new construction. Even with the increased awareness of the value of these historic theaters, some owners have lost their historic investment by changing the use of the building so drastically that only a shell remains in which they park cars or use in other inappropriate ways. Other projects that raise concerns about appropriate adaptive reuse are projects such as racquetball courts and gymnasiums. Much more subtle, yet common projects that are billed as restoration often use colors, lighting, details, or other construction which are stylistically in conflict with the original design intentions.²⁷ To remain true to the historic aspects of the theater the most effective planning considerations involve preservation professionals who can provide advice and guidance to ensure that the unique qualities of a theater remain intact.

Notes

¹David Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), 32.

²Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse (New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1982), 11.

³Naylor, American Picture Palaces, 209.

⁴Ibid., 201.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Valerio, 36.

⁷Ibid., 37

⁸David Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters (Washington D. C.: The Preservation Press, 1987), 31.

⁹"Member Programs and Activities," League of Historic American Theatres, brochure.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Valerio, 10.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 39.

¹⁴Ibid., 50.

¹⁵Naylor, American Picture Palaces, 182.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., 184.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Susannah Harris Stone, The Oakland Paramount (Berkeley: Lancaster-Miller Publishers, 1981), 9.

²⁰Naylor, American Picture Palaces, 194.

²¹Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters, 31.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 32.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 31.

²⁶Valerio, 13.

²⁷Ibid., 37.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY

The intent of the historical overview is to provide an understanding of the development of motion pictures as a popular form of American entertainment that led to the phenomenon of the movie palaces. The discussion also includes the social and economic circumstances that contributed to their success and decline. This section is not meant to cover the complete history of motion picture theater evolution since there is ample literature already available in the field. It is provided as a basis for understanding the case studies as they relate to the American movie palace development.

A theater is more than a stage and auditorium. It is a place in which to experience a heightened sense of life. Two factors interact to establish this vivid sensation - the place and the performance. The function of art is to translate nature and life into terms of human expression...the theater is a record of the effort to transcend every-day experience.¹

Early Motion Pictures

Initially, motion pictures developed in the scientific realm for purposes such as capturing images to study evolution, or birds in flight, or to determine whether or not a horse lifted all four legs while trotting.² They may have remained a scientific endeavor except for the critical changes taking place in the American social structure and in the modern industrial city. The first two decades of the motion picture, from 1890-1910,

coincided with the rise of America as an industrial urban society.³ The middle classes moved out of the cities and into the suburbs. Segregation between the social classes became commonplace and divisions according to the type of clothes, kind of job, and country of a person's origin became the conditions that affected their social standing.⁴

It was the working class Europeans immigrating to the United States during the height of the industrial revolution who became instrumental in the success of the early American motion pictures. Particularly in America, motion picture theaters of the silver screen era were often lavish palaces designed to transcend everyday experience and transport the patron to another world. In Movie Made America, Robert Sklar stated that "the motion pictures came to life in the United States when they made contact with working class needs and desires."⁵ The flourishing of the motion picture among the lower classes had a great deal to do with the instant gratification afforded through this entertainment medium. Work often involved twelve hour shifts which left people too tired, and with not enough time, to participate in organizing their own recreation. In the early years of film between 1900-1910 the movies were cheap entertainment.⁶ For a nickel or dime, people could enjoy instant entertainment that required no planning.

The first motion picture was registered with the copyright office in 1893.⁷ Early motion pictures viewed by the public were made possible by Thomas Edison who was the first to place equidistant perforations on the edges of the film to aid it run smoothly past the lens in a projection machine. This superseded the inconsistent devices used earlier that caused the picture to flicker. This early invention led to the Kinetoscope, a machine that was exhibited at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Its popularity

lasted from 1893 until 1896 and it involved a machine that presented a type of “peep show” about one minute in length.⁸ Edison is often credited with being the forerunner of motion pictures. However, it is important to note he was a shrewd businessman who bought the inventions of other people and patented them under his own name.⁹ This is the circumstance that led to the rise of Edison as a leader in the motion picture industry and eventually resulted in an anti-trust case against him.

The first large screen motion picture created by Edison was called the Vitascope and premiered in a New York vaudeville house in 1896.¹⁰ This commercial venture escalated motion pictures as an entertainment form for the public rather than a scientific endeavor. The new silent films, although popular, remained little more than a sideshow that did not seem to threaten live performance. Within ten years, however, the movies had become a well-established fixture in working class neighborhoods in vaudeville houses and penny arcades.

Initially, the motion picture industry was hindered by disasters such as the Charity Bazaar fire that occurred in Paris on May 4, 1897 and killed 180 people.¹¹ Fires and panics in early movie houses were not uncommon and took place in the United States as well. These early fires were attributed to nitrate film that was highly flammable and the movies obtained a reputation for being dangerous. Other obstacles encountered by the young movie industry were from the established enterprises of the era such as saloons and vaudeville houses. Funds were being diverted from these venues and funneled into the burgeoning theaters. The low rents that movie projectionists were willing to pay for rental of storefronts for movie exhibition was also of concern to businessmen. These

economic factors fostered an attack on the dark projection spaces that became the breeding ground for rumors about the indecency of movies.¹² Regardless of all of these obstacles, the motion picture industry grew and became a permanent fixture in the American entertainment market. As Robert Sklar stated in Movie Made America:

“For the first half of the twentieth century—from 1896 to 1946, to be exact - movies were the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States. They were the first of the modern mass media, and they rose to the surface of cultural consciousness from the bottom up, receiving their principal support from the lowest and most invisible classes in American society.”¹³

Nickelodeons

Nickelodeons were the first commercial viewing spaces exclusively used for movie projection. The name originated from the nickel price for admission and “odeon,” derived from the Greek word for theater.¹⁴ These initial viewing spaces for film were not elaborate either on the exterior or interior. All that was needed was adequate space and a screen for viewing the films. Commercial storefronts with 20 x 80 foot plans, dictated by the general commercial lot configuration, became the first viewing spaces (Figure 2).¹⁵ The success of these early films was due in large part to the light-hearted themes that provided a release from the seriousness of every day life. Approximately one-third of the pre-1912 motion pictures recovered from the Library of Congress Paper Print collection were of a comic nature.¹⁶ Their popularity soared since the subjects generally poked fun at the means of oppression that the lower classes had to endure. The foolish characters on

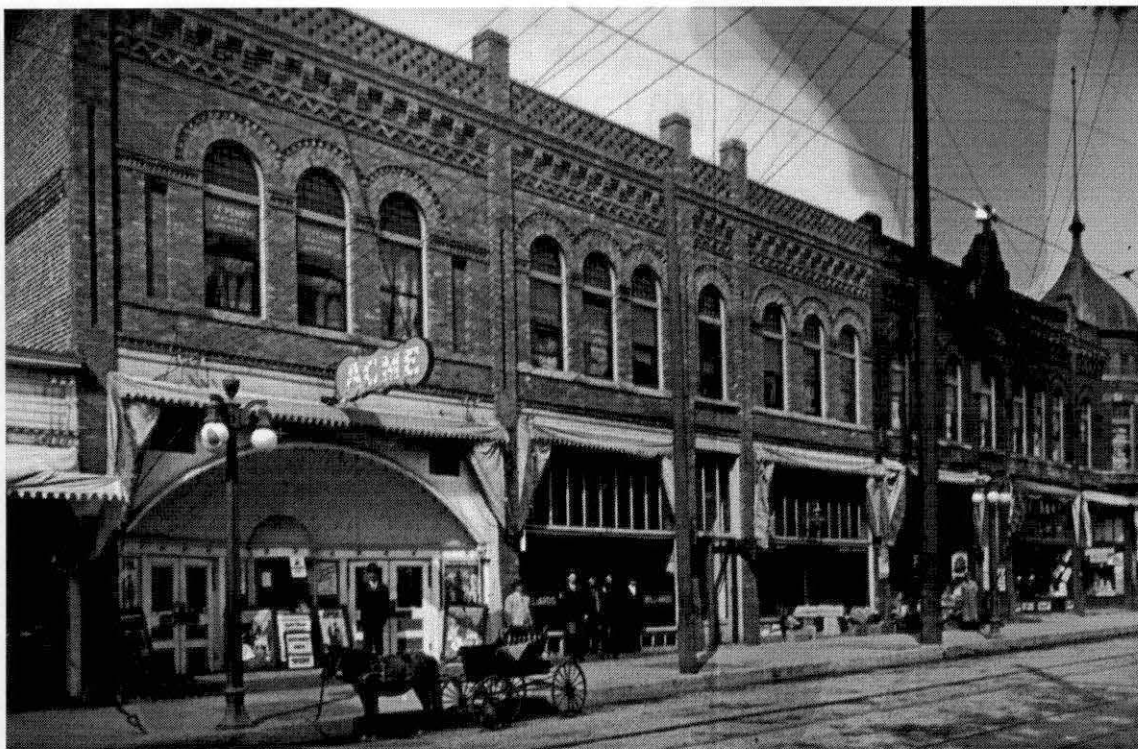


Figure 2. Acme Theater, 265 Russell, Portland, c.1915. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 49909 #0365P040)

the screen freely mocked the social order of cops, schools, marriage, middle-class manners, and all other social institutions.¹⁷

Before the advent of the film exchange in 1903, exhibitors had to buy the films they showed therefore money was directed toward purchasing a variety of films rather than on improving the viewing space. As business began to grow and screeners no longer had to purchase films, more emphasis was directed to the exterior treatment of the buildings to differentiate them from surrounding storefronts and attract customers. These early exteriors were exemplary eclectic models for their time and often included art nouveau elements.¹⁸ Large terra cotta pieces applied to the facades were commonly

ordered through catalogs and one of the main suppliers was the Decorator Supply Company.¹⁹ During the period of the nickelodeons architectural features evolved that became fixtures with later movie theaters including the centrally located box office which combined the ticket window of the legitimate theater with the ticket booth of the carnival encouraging spontaneous attendance.²⁰ Patrons were now encouraged to attend rather than stroll by passively. Development of the nickelodeon facade was instrumental in demonstrating to the public the permanence and respectability of the motion pictures. The early designers were likely young architects and the typical materials were incandescent light bulbs, pressed tin, stucco, plaster, burlap and pastel paints.²¹ Eventually exterior treatments became more elaborate and opulent to draw the public's attention and business as well as to create a unique facade representing each owner's establishment (Figure 3). Although the exterior became increasingly articulated the interiors remained relatively simple.

In 1910, a publication directed toward theater owners pointed out the most ideal location for the nickelodeons as "a densely populated workingmen's residential section, with a frontage on a much traveled business street."²² In addition to these location suggestions, other areas were discouraged such as areas with houses of worship or upper class neighborhoods. It also proved effective for the theater owners to locate in an area with multiple theaters where patrons could "theater hop" and see several different shows in an evening (Figure 4).²³ Shows generally ran for fifteen to twenty minutes and were accompanied by a piano. The relatively short show time allowed moviegoers to stop in after work, school or while running errands.²⁴ In terms of advertising, the nickelodeons



Figure 3. The Columbia Theatre, 106 6th Street, Portland, c.1915. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 17532 #1591)

typically displayed the name of the establishment in large letters across the facade. Banners, posters flanking the entrance, sandwich boards on the sidewalks, and carousel-like barkers were used to promote the films being shown.²⁵ Although electric lights were relatively new, nickelodeon owners quickly discovered that they were an effective advertising attraction. Not only did the lights animate and draw attention to the facade but they also enlivened the downtown after dark and provided a free show for people on the street.

Thomas Edison was still very much in control of motion pictures with the establishment in 1908 of his Motion Picture Patent Company commonly known as “The Trust.”²⁶ Using economic and legal resources, his company gained the majority of the

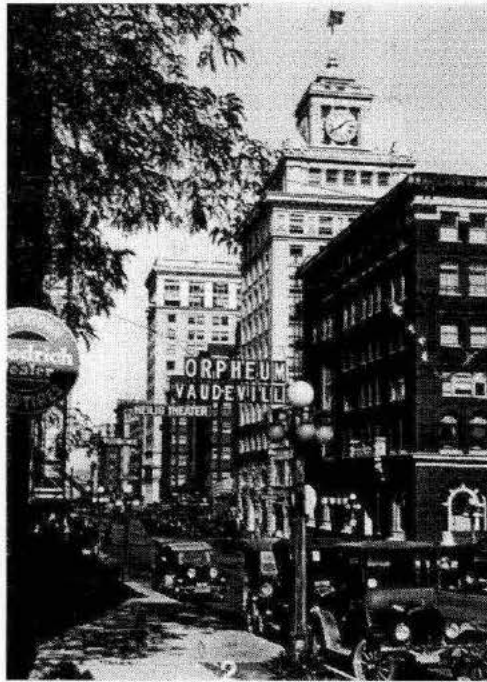


Figure 4. Portland's Broadway (Vaudeville Row), c.1915. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 84737 #0367P077)

patents for the equipment used in the making and showing of motion pictures. When these patents were in place, Edison had veritable control over the motion picture industry. This control ended when the courts found Edison's "Trust" in violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 and the monopoly was effectively dissolved in 1917.²⁷ As the nickelodeon era was coming to a close around 1909 there were 8,000 operating in the U. S.²⁸ Their decline began with the new safety standards for sanitation, ventilation and seating capacities that were being enforced as a result of earlier tragedies.²⁹ Their popularity had been a veritable overnight success since they appeared on the scene in

1905. By 1910 they were taking \$91 million nationally.³⁰ However, by 1916, the nickelodeon was nearly extinct and was being replaced by the movie palaces.³¹

Movie Palaces

Continued growth in the motion picture market and opportunities for profits created a highly competitive atmosphere in the young industry. As the movie theater gained in popularity a new period began to develop and movie theaters were becoming “palaces, castles, temples and shrines,”³² and enjoyed the prominence of opera with the patronage of the circus.³³ Movies in the U. S. were accessible to most everyone. The popularization of the motion picture became a force, and for many a symbol of the democratization of the American culture. As the American motion picture theater developed it became a unique building type that was both a product and symbol of its time. The pre-cursors to the movie palaces were breaking onto the scene as early as 1907 when entrepreneurs realized the potential profits available from integrating movies with live performances.³⁴ This was generally accomplished in large capacity legitimate theaters converted to accommodate film. By 1912 this “small-time vaudeville” combination of live entertainment with silent film was experiencing steady patronage.³⁵ The next step in the motion picture theater evolution was the construction of theaters with an opulence that had previously been accessible only to those of high social rank.³⁶

Prior to 1900 not a single structure had been built specifically for the showing of movies.³⁷ The success of movies in America became apparent during the years of 1915-1945 when over 4,000 movie palaces were constructed.³⁸ The first American movie

palace, The Regent, was constructed in New York City in 1913.³⁹ Its seating capacity was 1,845 and its stylistic motifs were derived from the Doge's Palace in Venice. This architectural reference to the Doge's Palace was significant because the movie industry was attempting to establish an identity with high culture. The Renaissance architectural masterpiece was recognizable by the educated middle class and therefore created a sense of respectability for the movie industry.⁴⁰ On opening night one reviewer wrote: "{The Regent has} an environment so pleasing, so perfect in artistic detail, that it seems as if the setting were a prerequisite to the picture, that to an educated audience the two would, and must hereafter, go together."⁴¹

Magnificent architecture was meant to entice audiences to enter as well as lend legitimacy to the motion picture theater that would appeal to the middle class. Samuel L. Rothafel ("Roxy") was the first to master the new marketable combination of entertainment partnering the value of live theater within a recognizably grand architecture.⁴² Although the Regent was the first movie palace, the Strand that opened in New York City in 1914, was the theater under Roxy's management that set the new standard for motion picture viewing spaces.⁴³ The New York Times likened the opening to a "a Presidential reception" and the theater:

"started a new style in motion picture theaters: comfortable seats, thick rugs, elegant lounges, velvet draperies, gilt-and-marble ornamentation-all the trappings of wealth that had previously belonged to a select few in the orchestra of a legitimate theater-and all for twenty-five cents."⁴⁴

The new architecture functioned as a draw that mixed the social classes as well as different ethnicities.⁴⁵ It is important to remember, however, that although these palaces

brought together many different ethnic and socio-economically diverse groups, many theaters remained segregated as late as the 1960s. Balconies were typically the spaces that were provided for viewers of African American descent.

Attention paid to the comfort of the patrons and considerations were given to safety, sight lines, maximum capacities, heating, lighting and ventilation.⁴⁶ Efforts were made in the motion picture industry to provide increasingly longer, higher quality productions with varied subjects and plots.⁴⁷ Star billing, adopted from legitimate theater and vaudeville, became an attraction for talented performers to cross into the movie industry as well as an effective advertising tool for the theater promoters.⁴⁸ Although the historical grandeur of the past was the inspiration for the movie palaces the technology was entirely twentieth century.

The draw of the theaters was not only the entertainment from the films and live performances, but the entire experience as Joseph M. Valerio points out in Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse:

“The flat grey images of silent moving pictures were enriched by pulsating marquees, white-gloved attendants and ushers in crisp uniforms, perfumed air, changing colored lights, and the stage production, accompanied by full orchestra, dancers, singers, comics, and actors filling the auditorium with the aura of classic theater.”⁴⁹

The forces which helped to propel the movie palace into the American culture included the post WW1 economic boom which saw incredible growth in American cities creating a large entertainment market.⁵⁰ As the magic of the palaces gained popularity, their elegance continued to increase with the economic goal of attracting patrons. With D. W. Griffith’s landmark film, *Birth of a Nation*, which premiered in Los Angeles in

1915, silent movies gained nearly equal, if not top billing, over vaudeville although vaudeville still remained popular.⁵¹ The length of films also changed during this period and became feature-length.

Successful spaces for the partnered presentation of silents and vaudeville were the so-called combination houses which provided stages, flylofts, dressing rooms and other accommodations for live performance as well as providing a screen for movie projection.⁵² However, the bulk of the comfort was directed at the viewers, not the performers since many palaces did not have appreciable backstage facilities.⁵³ During this period another form of live performance, the organ, gained popularity among the palace audiences. The organist was extremely important in accompaniment for the silent films as well as providing pre-show and intermission entertainment which sometimes involved sing alongs that included the entire audience or had variations such as pitting the patrons in the balcony against the patrons in the orchestra seats.⁵⁴ In many cases, the organists who played in these spaces were an attraction in themselves for their talent and many received celebrity treatment and were performers in their own right.

The organs were equally important and received due recognition in advertising. In the most elaborate palaces the organs would rise from the orchestra pit with their pipes booming. The Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawonda, NY was the best known organ manufacturer of the day. Their Hopes Jones Unit Orchestra could simulate an entire orchestra and provide a variety of novelty sounds such as cuckoo clocks, rain on a roof, galloping horses, canaries, swishing surf, train whistles, sleigh bells and a myriad of other sounds to enhance the silent film on the screen.⁵⁵ The impact of the organ was so

significant that even after the popularity of “talkies” took hold and organs were no longer needed, theater architects continued to design decorative screens on either side of the proscenium as though organs were still part of the entertainment.⁵⁶

The role of the palaces was quite significant in the growth of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Their opulence contributed to the feeling of glamour that was seen on the screen.⁵⁷ Great expositions of the movie era had a major influence on the architecture of the motion picture theater, including the Columbian Expositions at Chicago 1893, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904, the Panama Pacific Exposition at San Francisco in 1915, the Panama California Exposition at San Diego in 1916, and particularly the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes, in Paris, 1925.⁵⁸

In terms of materials, terra cotta became recognized in the 1920s as a valuable building material for its versatility as an imitation of more expensive building materials. It was also valued for its virtually fireproof and moisture resistant qualities.⁵⁹ The tones, textures and colors it permitted allowed the theater architects to carry out their exotic designs in colors such as purple, crimson, azure and gold.⁶⁰ Other popular materials were glass block, aluminum, Formica, decorative tiles, chrome plated steel and neon lights. In addition, new colors were developed and released in mass production that had not been available before.⁶¹

Designing a motion picture theater was an architectural challenge not only for the complexity of the number of rooms involved, but also for the typically irregular lots they filled since irregularity came at a lower cost.⁶² Important planning considerations for the movie palace architects centered on the management of large numbers of people while

ensuring safety and convenience. Effective circulation patterns were key to funneling patrons in and out of the theater as quickly as possible to maximize profits for film showing. Trained ushers in uniform were instrumental in expediting this circulation and providing the utmost in courteous service.

Many architectural critics gushed with complaints about the degradation of architecture as manifested in the motion movie palaces.⁶³ The architects of the palaces undoubtedly saw their creations from a much different viewpoint. Thomas Lamb, architect for the Regent and the Strand, was the first well known motion picture theater architect and stated that:

“To make our audience receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of the city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and freed from their customary thoughts. In order to do this, it is necessary to present their eyes a general scheme quite different from their daily environment, quite different in color scheme, and a great deal more elaborate.”⁶⁴

Architects were engaged to design opulent spaces providing the masses exposure to a world that had previously only been available to the wealthy. George Rapp of one of the most prominent architectural firms involved in motion movie palace construction, Rapp and Rapp, called the theaters “a shrine to democracy where the wealthy rub elbows with the poor.”⁶⁵ The movie palaces were generally the most elaborate and luxurious spaces the masses had ever witnessed. The spaces were overwhelming with large lobbies and varying levels. Inside the auditorium plush velvet or mohair covered seats welcomed the viewers.⁶⁶ Exhibitors strove to provide a variety of entertainment so if one aspect did not

appeal to a patron, there was plenty of other entertainment to provide satisfaction that the patron had received their money's worth.⁶⁷

Architects of the earliest palaces were often born or trained in Europe and they brought with them the European ideals of design and adaptations of such architectural wonders as Versailles and the Paris Opera House.⁶⁸ Aspects of the legitimate theater were evident in their work such as the proscenium arch that became a significant tie between legitimate theater and the movie theater. Italian Baroque and French Second Empire were models for many of the original palaces that imitated palatial interiors.⁶⁹ This type of motion picture theater, based on classical palatial architecture, became known as the "standard" or "hard top" and generally followed in the Beaux-Arts tradition of architecture.⁷⁰ The premier architect of the "hard top" style was Thomas Lamb, designer of the first U. S. movie palace, the Regent, and the theater which fueled the movie palace era, the Strand. His specific style was a representation of Robert Adams' neo-classical architectural style of the eighteenth century in Great Britain.⁷¹ Architectural style books with measured drawings of details from classical architecture as well as every age and culture provided the movie palace architects with the inspiration they could adapt to their creations.⁷² It wasn't until the second generation of theater architects that the traditional classical standards began to change.⁷³

For the lower class, the movie palaces not only provided exposure to an architectural world previously unknown to them, but also to a new cultural world. Classical music, opera and ballet were presented live, or in movie form, in an evening's entertainment. The movie palace era was in full swing during the 1920s and theaters

typically had patrons in excess of the seats available for a single showing (Figure 5).⁷⁴ During this period the number of moviegoers doubled from 40 to 80 million per week.⁷⁵ The idea of catering to the customer reached new heights as nurseries and cry rooms became typical features offered allowing housewives to attend a production without the added expense of hiring a babysitter.⁷⁶ White-gloved, uniformed ushers were trained to expedite the moving of people in and out of the theater. As early as the 1920s air conditioning was introduced to the theaters which started the tradition of summer matinees.⁷⁷



Figure 5. Crowd outside the McDonald Theater, Eugene, c.1927.
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(LCHM #KE49)

Fantasy Movie Palaces

Glamour was the craving of Americans in the “roaring twenties” and movie palace architects responded. The development of the atmospheric theater by John Eberson in 1923 began a new trend in the treatment of theater interiors. His work can be attributed, in part, with inspiring the fantasy architecture trend that would sweep the movie palace industry.⁷⁸ In 1929 he described the movie palace architecture phenomenon:

“Here we find ourselves today creating and building super-cinemas of enormous capacities, excelling in splendor, in luxury and furnishings the most palatial homes of princes and crowned kings for and on behalf of His Excellency - the American Citizen.”⁷⁹

Atmospheric theaters provided the illusion of being situated under a sky amidst an outdoor scene such as a courtyard of a Mediterranean village. Treatment of the walls imitated idealized village scenes including doors, windows and rooftops even with exotic plants incorporated in some instances.⁸⁰ In Eberson’s own words, the atmospheric theater provided “a magnificent amphitheater under a glorious moonlit sky...an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian temple-yard,...where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of cloud drifted.”⁸¹ Atmospheric theaters were cheaper to build because of the reliance on lighting effects rather than labor intensive crafted details and ceiling decoration. Ceiling effects included pinpoint lights imitating stars on a plaster shell painted deep blue and sometimes there were novelties such as exotic birds perched or suspended in flight above the audience.⁸²

The exterior of the motion picture theaters often alluded to the fantasy the patron could find inside. As motion picture theater architect S. Charles Lee stated; "The show starts on the sidewalk."⁸³ Actor Gene Kelly reiterated this philosophy when he said that, "From the moment moviegoers arrived to buy their tickets, there was a sense of something special, a feeling that to stop inside was to enter another time and place."⁸⁴ In the early twenties there came a sense of boredom with the traditional movie palaces which were based on Old World Renaissance and Baroque styles.⁸⁵ The discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 and excavations of the Great Hall at Karnak created a public sensation.⁸⁶ It was the perfect incipience for the next popular phase of theater architecture that developed exotic theater decoration based on cultural themes. The Egyptian fad was only part of the craze for exotic revivals, however. In addition, Moorish, Chinese, Tudor, Dutch, East Indian, Islamic and nautical themes became popular cultures to emulate as well as Aztec and Mayan in the southwest.⁸⁷ It is important to note that many of these architects relied heavily on interior decorators to complete the grandeur of these theaters and many worked with professional decorating firms.⁸⁸ The repetition of a style was generally dependent on its success in its original location. The Oriental themes were repeatedly capitalized on and fostered some of the most elaborate palaces ever built.⁸⁹

Certain details were consistently important in motion picture theater architecture and lighting played a key role in the perception of the various spaces creating mystery and special effects. Treatment of the interiors was extremely important since the lights were not necessarily off for the entire evening in order to facilitate movie viewing.⁹⁰ Another

prominent feature of the palace interiors were the housings for the great organ pipes which flanked the proscenium.⁹¹ Grand curtains concealed the screen and stage area reinforcing the link between the movies and legitimate theater.⁹² According to law an asbestos curtain, generally hung directly behind the main curtain, was required to shield the audience in case of an on-stage fire.⁹³ These asbestos curtains were generally painted in a style that echoed the main theme of the theater and by law it was raised and lowered at least once a day to ensure its functionality.⁹⁴ The fears of early motion picture theater disasters were still prominent in the minds of the patrons, owners and lawmakers.

A shift began to take place that differed from the days of the Nickelodeon. Rather than striving to differentiate themselves from the surrounding businesses, theaters began to seek ways to differentiate themselves from each other.⁹⁵ Showmanship and advertising became a means of distinction between theater owners as well as comfort and luxury (Figures 6 and 7).⁹⁶ The intent of all of this extravagance was to gain a loyal following of patrons.⁹⁷ As Marcus Loew, the head of the largest movie-palace empire stated, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."⁹⁸ One of the best known Egyptian theaters was Sid Grauman's in Los Angeles. Grauman was also the owner of the famous Chinese Theater and he became known for his showmanship. He began exterior shows with a hired actor he costumed and placed on the parapet of the Egyptian Theater with a follow spot focused on the actor's movements.⁹⁹ This began a trend that other theaters soon imitated. Dancers and spectacles of varied types were now providing shows outside the theaters bringing life to the street and advertising the extravagance to be found inside.¹⁰⁰



Figure 6. National Guard Soldiers Advertising “Corporal Kate” at the McDonald Theater, Eugene, March 25, 1927. Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #KE420)

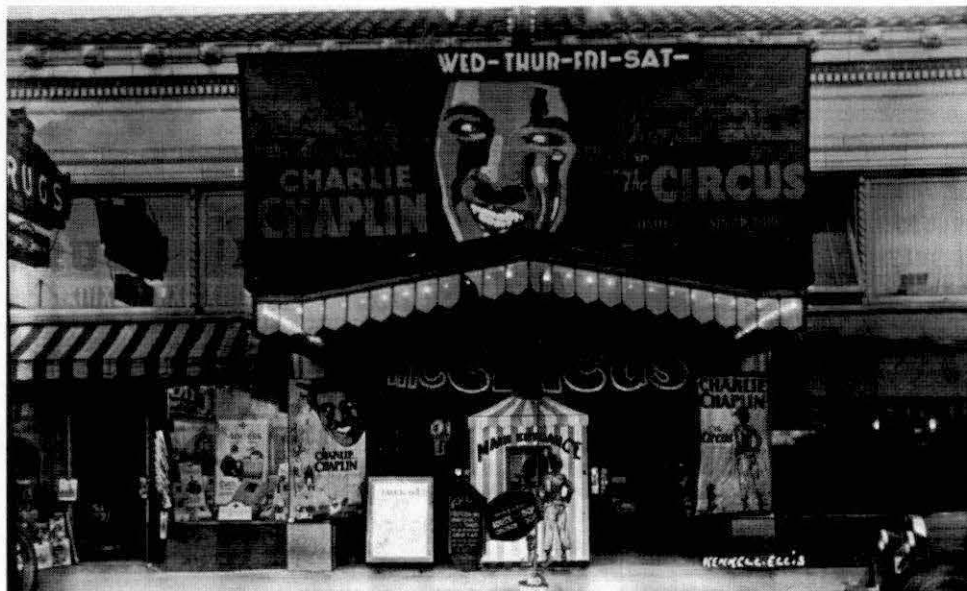


Figure 7. Promotional Display at the McDonald Theater, Eugene, c.1930. Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #KE59)

The period between 1925 and 1930 became the peak of movie palace construction.¹⁰¹ The frenzy to build was so great that even the largest palaces were generally completed within one year.¹⁰² The next stylistic influence on the movie theater architecture was fostered by the 1925 Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. This ushered in the Art Deco style that emphasized a machine aesthetic and advocated the abandonment of all “reproductions, imitations, and counterfeits of ancient styles.”¹⁰³ The modern aesthetic also meshed well with the new marquee designs with elaborate lighting.¹⁰⁴ It was the first popular break in the United States from the Beaux-Arts tradition and other period styles.¹⁰⁵ This was beneficial to the motion picture theater builders since the stylistic elements of art deco were less expensive than the elaborate detail and antique reproductions used in the earlier movie palaces.¹⁰⁶ Art deco was a stimulating architecture of glamour which was manifested in glass, mirrors and marble and geometric motifs.¹⁰⁷ Although the exhibition was in 1925, the American motion picture theater architects slowly incorporated art deco into their creations but did not fully adopt the style until 1930.¹⁰⁸ The largest palace ever built, and the last art deco movie palace, was New York’s 6,000 seat Radio City Music Hall (1932).¹⁰⁹

Distinction between the legitimate theater and the motion picture theater was made, in part, by the flashing lights on the exterior.¹¹⁰ The motion picture theaters became the pioneers of electric lights used for advertising.¹¹¹ Neon was particularly used in the west and came into prominence with the Moderne style of the 1930s where incandescent was preferred in the east.¹¹² The marquee was an integral part of the movie

palace in distinguishing it from the legitimate theater as well as the surrounding buildings.¹¹³ Its role became so important that eventually there were designers who specialized in marquee design. Vertical signs on the marquee became a prominent advertising feature since the theaters often occupied a small frontage in a built up downtown center.¹¹⁴ The vertical signs also became an asset with the advent of the automobile. They were easier to see from a distance as well as at increased speeds of the automobile.¹¹⁵ Particularly in the west, the vertical sign became a significant marker in the towns often being the tallest structure.¹¹⁶

The boom of motion picture popularity sparked the creation of motion picture theater chains that raced to build the most and best theaters to capitalize on the market. This evolved into the studio system which paired film exhibitors with film makers to allow control of prime film distribution to their own theaters. The most extravagant, grand scale movie palaces remained in metropolises such as NY, LA and Chicago seating as many as 5,000 people. However, many smaller towns could boast as many as two or three fanciful movie houses along their own main street.¹¹⁷ The incidence of the large movie palaces began the practice of classifying theaters as first or second-run based on the ability to draw larger audiences at a higher price. The idea was that the run of the picture could be extended if it was opened in the most prestigious theater with the highest price and then trickled down to the smallest, less expensive theaters. The first-run theaters were guaranteed exclusivity to new releases thereby increasing the price they would pay for them knowing that no other theater in the immediate area would be

showing the same picture. Each town that premiered films had a first run theater designated by the studios.

The rise of the movie palace was coincidental with American's interest in the new form of entertainment as well as the need for news of the war in Europe. It was during this period that the American filmmakers rose to the forefront of entertainment film production as European producers focused their efforts on recording the war.¹¹⁸ By the end of WW1 the U. S. was home to nearly half of the world's motion picture theaters and twenty years later the U. S. could still claim 40 percent.¹¹⁹ Another boost to the movies after WW1 came from the changes in the arts, sciences and industry, all which captured the attention of the public and were manifested in the movies.¹²⁰

Prior to WW1 resources to promote motion pictures were most often generated internally among the motion picture industry. However, following WW1, and before the Depression, there was a need for additional resources in order to expand the industry. This required capital investments from large corporations, commercial banks and investment bankers. With the assistance of these investors the young film industry had reached its height by 1929 with five vertically integrated companies in control.¹²¹ Although the studios only owned 13% of the nation's total theaters, all of their holdings were first-run theaters that proved to be most profitable bringing in 70% of the national box office receipts.¹²²

The year 1929 also saw a change in the emphasis placed on the movies and their palaces. Advertising in newspapers became commonplace for the motion picture theaters. This produced more revenue for the papers that in turn began to give more

coverage to the movies and movie stars.¹²³ In terms of motion picture theater design, the new style was much more conservative in appearance.¹²⁴ Factors that contributed to this architectural change were the opening of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 and specifically a 1932 exhibition that popularized the International Style.¹²⁵ The accompanying monograph for the exhibition, which was widely read, influenced design throughout the country. New technologies, materials and an emphasis on geometry took over the design scene making the elaborate palaces seem frivolously extravagant. In June 1934 an article in *Architectural Record* by architect Ben Schlanger made the case that the elaborate palaces of the past were inefficient and obsolete compared to new technology.¹²⁶

The motion picture theaters became a social gathering place to watch movies and brought vital nightlife to downtowns.¹²⁷ The earliest palaces of the 1910s were located on mass transit lines in downtowns of cities with 100,000 or more.¹²⁸ It was not until the 1920s that growth began to spread from urban centers creating new business districts and a need for entertainment.¹²⁹ New movie palaces were built between the old downtowns and the new suburban upper class areas thus drawing a wide range of audience patronage.¹³⁰ Typically the smallest theaters were located the greatest distance from the commercial center. These smaller theaters flourished and there were nearly seven smaller theaters for every movie palace by the end of the 1930s.¹³¹

Although synchronizing sound with film had been attempted for many years, it was not successful as a commercial venture until 1927. With the advent of sound the palaces, with their elaborate stages and organs, were less in demand. Talkies required the rewiring of motion picture theaters to accommodate sound that was necessary in order for

a movie theater to remain competitive (Figure 8).¹³² In 1927, an article announced the successful exhibition of sound in synchronization with film:

The inventors whose combined efforts produced the new talking movie believe that in imposing the music after a film has been made they have aided the small town exhibitor. Whereas the music in thousands of picture theaters is limited to one piano, it will be possible hereafter to show anywhere or everywhere a picture with symphony accompaniment.¹³³

The reality was quite different, however. Many exhibitors could not afford the approximate \$30,000 to upgrade their theaters for sound and were not able to compete in the new market.¹³⁴ The new developments also brought about a change in the use of



Figure 8. McDonald Theater Marquee, Eugene, on November 13, 1928. Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #KE40)

motion picture theaters. Movies took the spotlight and no longer needed live performance to support them. The addition of sound also lent a reality to the movies that did not seem to coincide with the fantasy of the palaces.¹³⁵ The etiquette for movie viewing even changed. Before the advent of sound it was considered appropriate to make comments about the film while it was running. With the incorporation of sound, that etiquette changed as people hushed comments in order to hear the dialogue and the movies shifted to a more individualistic experience rather than a group expression.¹³⁶ As Sklar in *Movie Made America* points out, “the talking audience for silent pictures became a silent audience for talking pictures.”¹³⁷

Decline of the Movie Palaces

By the 1930s movies were seen as an acceptable form of entertainment that no longer needed grand architectural statements to provide legitimacy.¹³⁸ However, the Depression proved to be another milestone for the movie industry. People could no longer afford to travel to the urban palaces nor could they afford the admission so they remained at home or turned their patronage to the neighborhood theaters that were more typically designed in the new streamline moderne architecture.¹³⁹ Although streamline moderne was becoming the new aesthetic, a scaled down version of opulence was typically used in the neighborhood theaters..¹⁴⁰

In the rush to create more and larger movie palaces between 1927-29, the market became flooded and by 1930 there were too many seats to fill.¹⁴¹ Attendance dropped from 90 million per week in 1930 to 60 million in 1932 and the impact of this resulted in

the closing of 8,000 theaters from 22,000 to about 14,000.¹⁴² In an effort to draw the viewers back to the theaters, producers began to increase the incidences of sex, violence and horror in their films.¹⁴³ They also developed promotional stunts such as giving away free china or having “Bank Night” on which money was given away.¹⁴⁴ During WW2 the selling of war stamps and bonds became commonplace in the motion picture theaters.¹⁴⁵

The rise of the automobile in American culture also had a significant impact on the motion picture theaters. The marquees were designed to cater to the moving motorist, and parking was provided for theater patrons. By the 1930s the changes were imperative.¹⁴⁶ In many cases city codes were now requiring minimum parking standards. The American love affair with the car continued and drive-in architecture began to cater to that love ranging from supermarkets and banks to restaurants and theaters.¹⁴⁷ Accommodations at new theaters included driveways that would allow passengers to be dropped off at the entrance and then lead to parking behind the theater. Suburban lots of the 1930s were generally designed only to accommodate one-third of the theater’s seating capacity that proved to be insufficient for later audiences.¹⁴⁸ By the end of the 1930s there was a visible change in the streamlined appearance of the theaters, but the atmosphere inside had also changed. People no longer expected the lines of ushers and luxuries that had accompanied the palaces.¹⁴⁹ The extravagant movie palace architecture and luxury of a decade earlier was viewed as overbearing and even wasteful.¹⁵⁰

A surge in movie attendance again took place in the 1940s, particularly from 1940-46, becoming the industry’s most profitable era yet averaging 85 million patrons per week.¹⁵¹ Several factors contributed to this rise in patronage including the high wartime

employment to support the war efforts. In order to maximize production many factories ran twenty-four hour shifts and the theaters strove to accommodate all workers with entertainment by staying open twenty-four hours as well.¹⁵² Rationing of gasoline, which led to limited travel and recreation for many Americans, contributed to the rise in movie attendance. To support the cause of the war, in addition to regularly selling bonds at the theaters, the industry offered 30,661 free movie days on which war bonds were the only price for admission.¹⁵³ These activities raised an estimated 100 million for the war effort.¹⁵⁴ Hollywood also supported the war effort with the appearances of their stars in front of the troops.

Another draw of the movies during this period were the newsreels which had been incorporated into the entertainment since the late 1920s. These preceded the feature film and were about ten minutes in length. In times of peace, the newsreels presented "soft" news such as the latest fashions, sports, comedy and human interest stories. During times of war they provided official information about the latest battles, victories and defeats. The interest in the newsreels actually fostered a new type of theater dedicated specifically to newsreel viewing. The exteriors of the theaters alluded to their function with symbols of the news as well as names such as Newsview. They were small, generally with only one hundred seats, but for a quarter, patrons could view about an hour of news. By 1953 the newsreel and newsreel theater had basically disappeared due to television.¹⁵⁵

The increased popularity of movies during the war period also meant revitalized life for many older theaters. To accommodate the increases in attendance many motion picture theaters that had closed during the Depression were reopened (Figure 9). Many



Figure 9. The Liberty Theater, 411 SW Broadway, Portland, c.1940. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 84877 #9998Y363)

were remodeled to accommodate new technology and promote an updated image. It was also during this period that the studios began to take serious interest in who made up their audience and tried to pinpoint the profile of their viewers. Among their findings was the surprise that contrary to popular belief, the more education and income a person had, the more they attended the movies. There did not seem to be a differentiation between whether the viewers were men or women, but it was confirmed that more young people attended than those in higher age brackets.¹⁵⁶

The peak year for movies was the first year of peace in 1946 with sales of 4 billion tickets.¹⁵⁷ From then on, the decline in attendance began even before television exploded onto the scene. This has been attributed in part to the “baby boom” which kept many viewers at home with their families.¹⁵⁸ In addition, the price of first-run films was rising at the neighborhood theaters due to the 1948 federal anti-trust divestment of the

major Hollywood corporations which controlled the first-run theaters.¹⁵⁹ This unfortunately priced out those with lower incomes.¹⁶⁰ Once again, with a drop in attendance, the industry sought to seduce audiences with more “shock and titillation.”¹⁶¹ They realized that families were staying home for family quality viewing on television so they intended to expand their viewing audience by pushing closer and closer to the edge of acceptable standards of morality. Nudity became a draw since it was not allowed on television.¹⁶²

The decline of theaters continued as theater mania became intrinsically intertwined with the American fascination with the automobile. Drive-ins appeared on the viewing scene in 1933 in New Jersey and establishments in LA were soon to follow.¹⁶³ Although the war years proved a hindrance to the drive-in, the decade following WW2 saw the close of nearly 4,000 theaters but the opening of nearly as many drive-ins (Figure 10).¹⁶⁴ The appeal of the drive-in was powerful. Not only could one attend in the comfort of their own car, but there was no need to dress to be seen. The additional expense of a babysitter wasn't necessary since children could attend in their pajamas and be restless without disturbing anyone outside their own vehicle. In the beginning, developers targeted areas with populations of 50,000 or more, but in the 1950s towns with 200 or less were sustaining drive-ins with the support of the surrounding rural areas.¹⁶⁵ Some early attempts to carry over the proscenium arch form to the drive-in screen were made, but quickly abandoned when realized they were not needed to enhance the experience. The drive-in also changed the dynamics of the movie going audience since it proved to exclude many young people since they did not have their own

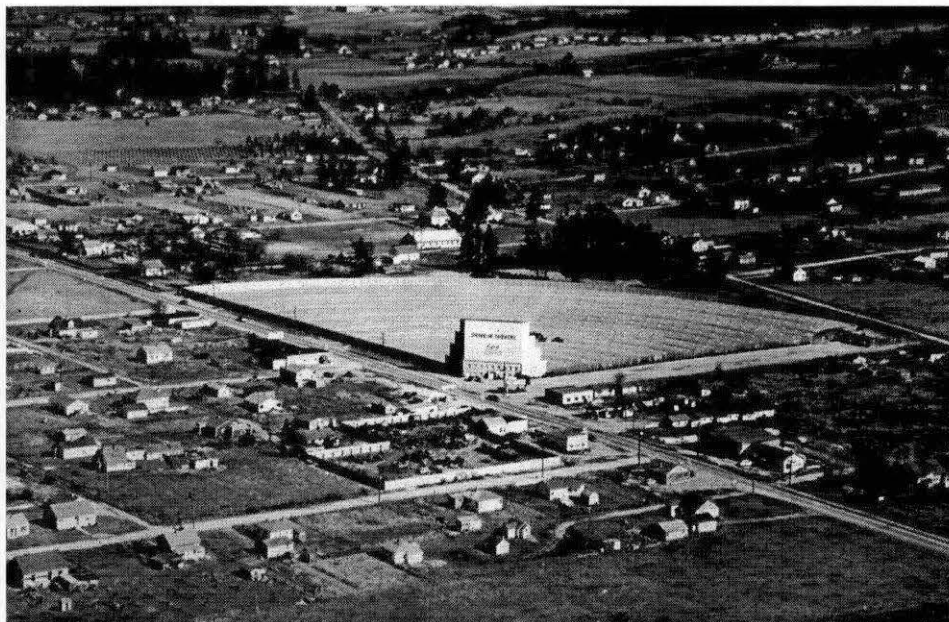


Figure 10. The 82nd Street Drive-in, Portland, 1948. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi CN022214 #0353P174)

vehicles.¹⁶⁶ Decline of the drive-in was due in large part to the growth of towns and the rising value of the land that drive-ins occupied.¹⁶⁷ Another factor was the change in the American view of the automobile. As automobiles became more accessible to the masses and more commonplace, the excitement of sitting in the car you had been running errands in all day was not nearly as enticing. By 1989 only 1500 drive-ins remained in operation.¹⁶⁸

Another important impact that the drive-in had on motion picture theaters was the introduction of the snack bar. The drive-ins had made Americans accustomed to watching movies with the delights provided by concession stands. In order to compete, the motion picture theaters introduced concessions that had previously been prohibited for sanitary reasons as well as to protect furnishings.¹⁶⁹ Popcorn was the first to invade the

theaters followed by candy and sodas.¹⁷⁰ In 1953, one quarter of candy bar sales in the U. S. were attributed to movie theaters.¹⁷¹ Not only did the introduction of food lead to new concerns of protecting the interiors, but the encroachment of the actual concession stand in the lobby space changed the spatial requirements of the theaters. In older theaters seats were often eliminated to make more space for the concession stand.¹⁷² The power of the concession was so strong that even though theater attendance had dropped dramatically by 1956, concession sales were up nearly 40 times from what they were in 1948.¹⁷³ Concessions remain the main source of profits for theater operators. In 1989 they accounted for 80 percent of the profits.¹⁷⁴

Television and the flight of Americans to the suburbs had a catastrophic affect on the urban movie palaces.¹⁷⁵ When it first came onto the entertainment market, television was dismissed by the movie industry as a fad. Hollywood believed that the atmosphere and quality of motion pictures in the theater would remain more powerful than the novelty of television. When it became apparent that television was continuing to gain popularity studios attempted to entice their audiences with gimmicks such as 3-D films. Cinerama, introduced in 1952, was the most successful 3-D venture.¹⁷⁶ Although it is still used today, it did not take hold of the general movie going audience and remains a novelty in planetariums and amusement parks. The most successful new visual format that created a rise in attendance at the theaters proved to be CinemaScope of 1953.¹⁷⁷ Similar forms of it were known under the names of Panavision and VistaVision. These improved formats created a larger, more dynamic picture that engaged the audience and it has remained a part of the modern movie scene. Adaptations were made to the palace

prosceniums since the traditional screens were no longer wide enough to accommodate the new film format. But the motion picture theaters still could not compete with television and the changing lifestyle of Americans. By 1957, nearly 90 percent of American households had a television set and movie attendance had dropped to the all time low of 39.6 million.¹⁷⁸ It was during the fifties that the first great palace saw its demise. The Paradise Theater in Chicago was demolished in 1954 not quite thirty years after its 1928 opening.¹⁷⁹

The next all time low for the movie industry was in the 1960s after a steady decline. Some of the best work of the palace architects was demolished during this period including the grand Roxy in New York City that was razed in 1961.¹⁸⁰ Theaters all over the country were threatened by the prospects of urban renewal. In 1971 ticket sales hit an all time low and fifty percent of indoor theaters were closed.¹⁸¹ To remain in the market some owners of the movie palaces resorted to splitting theater balconies into separate viewing spaces. Since television had become the prominent form of entertainment in the American home the issues of censorship turned from the movies to television. This allowed the movie industry to reach for a new audience using X-rated films and many older theaters became the venues for these productions.¹⁸²

Historic motion picture theaters were further impacted with the building of shopping malls that eventually came to include their own movie theaters. The multi-plex, with an average of four screens, came onto the scene in the mid 1960s.¹⁸³ The advantage of the multi-plex for the exhibitor was the ability to shift films from theater to theater. The larger spaces were used for the most popular films and as their popularity waned they

were shifted to the smaller viewing spaces. Other advantages included sharing a lobby and providing variable times for shows which reduced staff needs once the main showing times were underway.¹⁸⁴ The idea of the multi-plex was not unlike the early nickelodeons that were located in a grouping that allowed a choice of films to see. If one was sold out, there was another option or there was the opportunity for people within a group to see different films.¹⁸⁵

In the 1980s attendance began to climb again. The youth between 12-24 remained the prominent age group with 59% of total admissions yet only making up 29% of the population. Only 25% of the population was attending one film per month accounting for 85% of the total viewing audience with 35% of the public not attending any films during a single year.¹⁸⁶ By comparison, in the 1940s the American public averaged 35 films a year. The advent of the mall multi-plexes made the movie an entertainment form for the youth again. Access to the mall was generally not a problem for teens growing up in the suburbs. The multi-plexes provided entertainment with a minimum of supervision while creating a strong social tie for shared experiences.¹⁸⁷ In the case of modern movie theater architecture, many of the early mall multi-plexes and other new theaters were designed with a minimum of decoration and interest that made them not unlike the early storefront nickelodeons.

Videos and cable television are the latest technologies to influence the presentation of motion pictures. Americans are seeing more movies than ever before but not necessarily in the theaters. Some theater owners have come to the realization that attention paid to the viewing space and comfort of the patrons can contribute to their

success. A California theater chain, Edwards Cinema 21, has even begun to recapture a bit of the exotic revivals of the 1920s with theaters called the Chinese Megaplex, Egyptian Megaplex and Palace Stadium.

In late 1997 they opened the Edward's 21 Stadium Theater located on I-84 in Boise, Idaho. The stylistic differentiation from the typical box-like multi-plex is obvious even from the exterior. The theater will eventually contain twenty-one separate viewing spaces. This chain has found a profitable mix of multi-plex exhibition and recognition of the value of detail. Carefully controlled HVAC systems, comfortable seats with good sightlines and cupholders, improvements of 70mm film, and sound systems such as Dolby and THX have all contributed to the revived interest in viewing films in the theater. Although some modern theaters may rival the movie palaces in scale and expense, the history and magic the palaces present cannot be replaced. For most of the public going to the movies is still an event that merits the excitement of an environment that is memorable.¹⁸⁸

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CHAPTER IV

THE ARCHITECT

Once an architect or firm designed one movie palace it was not unusual for them to design consecutive palaces and theaters during their practice. Some architects and firms, such as John Eberson who developed the atmospheric theaters, or Rapp and Rapp who were Chicago based, specialized in movie theater design. Examples of their work were widespread across the U. S. Rapp and Rapp were responsible for the Publix Theater (now the Paramount) in Portland. Smaller firms also specialized in theater design and Lee Thomas, a Portland architect designed five theaters in Oregon.¹

Lee Thomas

Lee Thomas was born on February 27, 1886 in Germantown, Nebraska and moved to Oregon with his family at the age of twelve.² His education included a year at Pullman College (Washington State College) before graduating from Oregon State College in 1907 as an electrical engineer. His architectural education took place at Cornell where he graduated in 1910. In addition to his architectural studies at Cornell, he also attended a special architectural course at Columbia.

His professional career involved work in New York, Vancouver, B. C.³, and Seattle with Sommerville and Putnam. When he moved to Portland he was associated

with A. E. Doyle and served on the architectural staff of the Portland School District for three years before opening his private practice in 1913. In 1916 he was in practice in Bend, Oregon where he was involved with several public projects including the high school which later became the courthouse. Thomas was appointed by Governor Ben W. Olcott to the first State Board of Architect Examiners when the Oregon Architects Registration Law was enacted in 1919. In 1920 he moved his practice to Portland where among his building credits are some of the original buildings at Reed College and the Central library in Portland.⁴

In 1924, Thomas formed a partnership with Albert Mercier as the junior partner. Together the firm of Thomas and Mercier was responsible for five theaters in Oregon. Their theater credits include the McDonald Theater (1925) in Eugene, the Egyptian Theatre (1925) in Coos Bay, and the Bagdad Theater (1927) and Oriental Theater (1927) on the east side of Portland. The Oriental Theater, the firm's most elaborate theater project, was unfortunately demolished in 1970 after HABS photographic documentation (Figures 11 through 14). The firm is also credited with the design of the Capitol Theater that is cited as being located in Portland as well as in Salem. The Portland Capitol Theater was demolished and the Salem Capitol Theater is now closed. Since it is not crucial to this study, it has not been definitively determined which of these theaters was The Capitol designed by Thomas and Mercier.

Albert Mercier was born in Ishpeming, Michigan and moved with his family to Spokane, Washington in 1911. His architectural experience in Portland involved work with the firms of Whitehouse and Price, and George K. Keith. After serving in the first



Figure 11. The Oriental Theater, 822 SE Grand, Portland. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 47451 #1868)

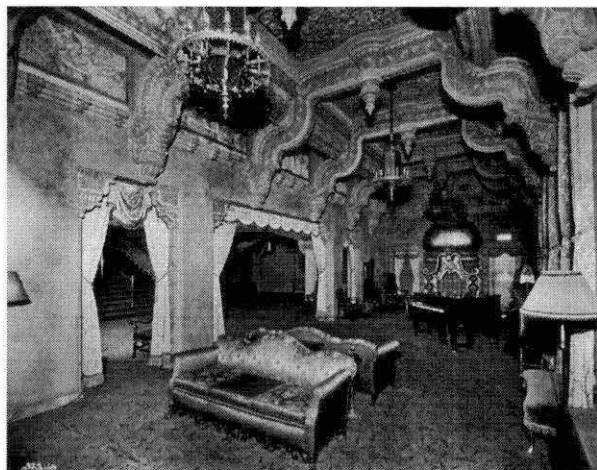


Figure 12. Lobby of the Oriental Theater, 822 SE Grand, Portland. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 47451 #1868)



Figure 13. Auditorium in the Oriental Theater, 822 SE Grand, Portland. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 49271 #1868)

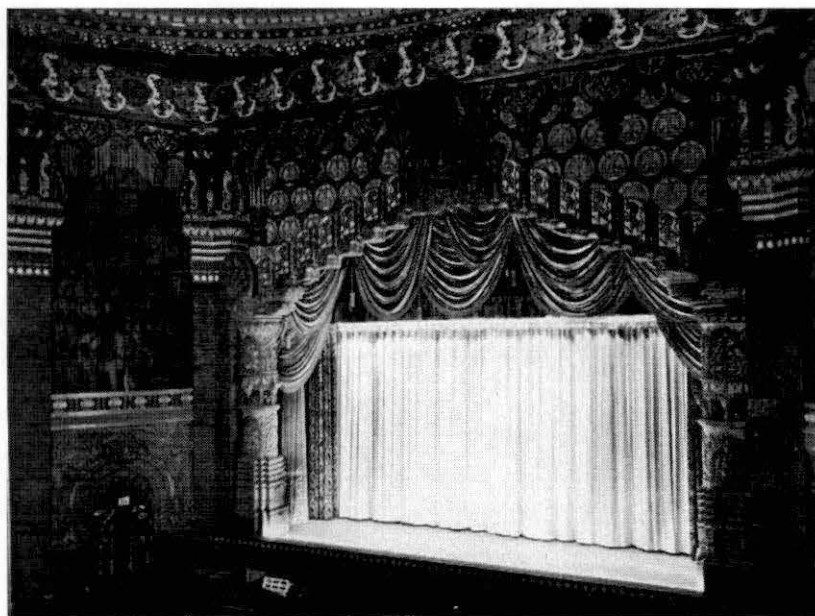


Figure 14. Stage of the Oriental Theater, 822 SE Grand, Portland. Reprinted with the permission of the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 47451 #1868)

World War Mercier worked in Wenatchee, Washington for Marshall A. Dean and then in Spokane as a draftsman for the National Builders Bureau. He returned to Portland in 1923 and began practice with Lee Thomas in 1924.⁵

In 1927 the firm's office was located at 412 East Washington in Portland but moved to suite 220 of the Weatherly Building after its completion. The Weatherly Building was a twelve-story office building designed by Sutton and Whitney and was attached to the Oriental Theater. Aside from theaters, the firm's major projects included the \$200,000 Grand Central Public Market in Portland and the Memorial Union (1928) on the campus at Oregon State College in Corvallis. The Memorial Union was highly acclaimed and brought the firm into prominence.⁶

Lee Thomas passed away in 1953 at his home in Vancouver, WA.⁷ His obituary referred to him as a "widely known" architect and listed him as a member of the American institute of Architects, the Gargoyle Society, the City Club, Portland Lodge No. 55, AF & AM, Al Kader Temple, Phi Kappa Psi fraternity and Highlands Community Club of Vancouver, as well as a 32d degree Mason.⁸

Notes

¹Elisabeth Walton, "Historic American Buildings Survey, Historical Data Report on The Oriental Theatre," ORE - 55 (Portland, OR: HABS, 1970), 8.

²"Rites Slated for Architect: Lee A. Thomas Widely Known," The Oregonian, 3 December 1953.

³"Architect's Rites Friday," Oregon Journal, 3 December 1953.

⁴Walton, 8.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷"Architect's Rites Friday."

⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER V

THE EGYPTIAN THEATRE

Building a movie palace in a small community was a significant sign of growth and progress and the opening was a grand event boasted about in local papers. Movie palaces provided a way for small towns to become connected with the rest of the country not only through the entertainment of film, but also through newsreels. As technology advanced, these small town theaters were not immune to the changes taking place. Just as in larger cities, in an effort to compete with multi-plexes, many movie palace owners divided their balconies into separate viewing spaces. The Egyptian Theatre in Coos Bay is one such theater that has resorted to “twinning” its balcony. For the most part, however, the building’s stylistic influences have been maintained.

Context

The Egyptian Theatre is located at 229 South Broadway on Highway 101 in the small coastal community of Coos Bay, Oregon which has a current population of 15,000 and nearby North Bend which has a population of 9,000 (Figure 15). Coos Bay’s first settler arrived in 1853 and the town, originally called Marshfield until 1944, was incorporated in 1874.¹ Front Street, the original commercial center of Marshfield, developed during the 1880s and 90s. Its location was directly parallel to the waterfront



Figure 15. The Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

with the buildings constructed on pilings over the water.² Expansion inland began before 1900 and by 1915 sloughs were filled to facilitate new construction. Economic factors that led to the commercial growth and development on Coos Bay included the Southern Pacific Railroad's purchase in 1905 of right-of-way on the bay, and C.A. Smith Lumber Company's announcement in late 1906 of the purchase of timber lands and plans to construct a state-of-the-art mill at the south end of the bay on Isthmus slough.³ The rail line to the interior was completed by 1916 and growth in the lumber trade and harbor improvements led to more prosperity on Coos Bay and more construction. The strong economy continued until after the First World War when the decrease in shipbuilding and lumber production created a slump.⁴

As the economy along the bay regained its strength, it was assisted by the growing national automobile travel trend which generated tourist dollars for the Coos Bay communities, particularly after the completion of the Roseburg and Roosevelt highways in 1922. On July 23, 1922 fire broke out in a building on Front Street and nearly all of the bayside buildings and some buildings further inland were destroyed including the City Hall. When rebuilt, the City Hall was constructed inland at Fourth and Central relocating the town's center from the waterfront. The inevitable rebuilding that took place after the fire included three reinforced concrete, "fireproof" structures by Lee Thomas; The Motor Inn Garage, the Hall Building (now the Fitzpatrick Building) and the Wesley Methodist Hospital (now the Ken Keyes College).

Located in the 200 Block of South Broadway, the Egyptian Theatre began as the Motor Inn Garage catering to the auto traffic that its strategic location capitalized on. In addition to the future theater, within the 200 block of South Broadway, Harry C. Noble and his Broadway Building Corporation built the Ekblad Hardware store to the south of the theater, the Independent Order of Odd Fellow building directly across Broadway, and began the New Motor Inn on the corner of Broadway and Curtis all in about 1922.⁵ When a fire destroyed the building directly north of the Egyptian/Motor Inn, Noble replaced it with the Noble Block. This development created a new commercial center that earned Noble the title of the "Father of South Broadway" and placed the future Egyptian Theatre in the heart of it all. The buildings constructed by Harry C. Noble during this period are extant today with exception of the Second Motor Inn.

Motion Pictures on Coos Bay

Motion pictures first came to Marshfield in 1907 in the O'Connell building at Market and Second Street.⁶ In the spirit of most early movie projection spaces, the lack of comfort was manifested in wooden plank seats that extended across chairs.⁷ Other small moving picture operations followed including a space in the local Lloyd Hotel on Front Street and another, called the Nemerif, in the Masonic Lodge. Unfortunately neither of these buildings survive. Among the most successful entrepreneurs of the young Marshfield movie business were Robert Marsden and his brother Samuel. They opened the Grand, purchased the Nemerif and named it the Blue Mouse, and eventually opened the first theater in Marshfield built specifically for moving pictures. The Royal, located on Front Street and the Noble theater, which is extant, soon followed.

North Bend, also located on Coos Bay, is in close proximity to Marshfield and was integral in the development of the movie business on the Bay. The first theater in North Bend also opened in 1907 or early 1908. By 1912 there were two show houses but one eventually closed. Dennis Hull was the force behind the North Bend theater development. By 1924 Robert Marsden had come to dominate the Marshfield theater business along with John C. Noble (Samuel Marsden eventually moved and became the owner of a moving picture theater in Orange California).⁸ To reduce competition and consolidate the businesses the Coos Bay Amusement Company was formed in 1923 to manage the three theaters on the Bay.⁹ The company members included Robert Marsden, Harry C. Noble, John C. Noble and Dennis Hull. All men held offices in the company

except for Harry C. Noble, father of John C. Noble, who was the business investor and builder of the group. The first product of their cooperative effort, the Liberty Theater, was completed in North Bend in 1924. It was a reinforced concrete, 750 seat structure designed by Tourtellotte and Hummel.¹⁰

The Motor Inn Garage/Egyptian Theatre

The Egyptian Theatre, located at 229 S. Broadway in Coos Bay, Oregon, is an interesting theater case study since it was originally built as an auto-garage in 1922 (Figure 16). Anticipating the need for a new theater, Harry C. Noble built the garage with



Figure 16. The Motor Inn Garage, Coos Bay, 1922. ("Motor Inn Garage One of Finest Buildings Erected in Marshfield." Coos Bay Times, 16 December 1922.)

the intention of developing it as a theater.¹¹ After the war the government placed restrictions on certain building materials limiting them to "essential" buildings only.¹² A

theater would certainly not qualify as an essential building so the motor garage was built. Constructed by John Granstrom and completed for \$40,000 it was reported as one of the "finest garages in southwestern Oregon."¹³

Sitting on a 75 foot wide, 125 foot deep lot, the reinforced concrete structure has a heavy timber wood roof with a built-up paper and tar finish.¹⁴ Originally the garage had an entrance on each side of a central portion which contained the office. Business aspects at the garage were conducted by Clark and Noble who were agents for Goodyear, Coast tires, and for the Durrant car.¹⁵ The front was finished in white concrete stucco and the structure provided storage room for 225 cars.¹⁶ In addition to storage space the Motor Inn Garage offered a "first class" machine and repair shop.¹⁷ Service was available twenty-four hours a day to the motorist and the garage's strategic location drew customers from both the Roosevelt and Roseburg highways that were completed in 1922.¹⁸

Plans to complete the anticipated theater were announced in December of 1924. The architect was to be Lee Thomas of Portland who had completed two other buildings in Coos Bay during 1924, the Hall building (now the Fitzpatrick Building) and the Wesley Methodist Hospital (now the Ken Keyes College). It was expected that the theater would seat about 1200, have a 35 foot stage, and a balcony to be reached by an inclined approach making stairs unnecessary.¹⁹

The stage alone for the new theater will cost more than \$5,000 and it will be one of the finest in the state. Stage settings and equipment will be of the best and latest designs. It will be larger than any on the bay and will accommodate any sized company which can be brought into Marshfield.²⁰

Suggestions for the name of the new theater included “the Marsden,” in honor of Robert Marsden who had been instrumental in bringing theater to the Coos Bay area.²¹ However, by late January of 1925 the decoration had been decided as Egyptian and thus the name was chosen.²²

Description 1925

Designed as a combination house for vaudeville and silent films, the Egyptian had a stage that was boasted as able to accommodate any traveling production (Figure 17). The Egyptian Theatre opened its doors to the Coos Bay communities on November 19, 1925 (Figure 18). The day before the opening, the Coos Bay Times printed a special eight-page section addressing nearly every aspect of the theater. It is largely from this publication that the following information about the original state of the Egyptian is

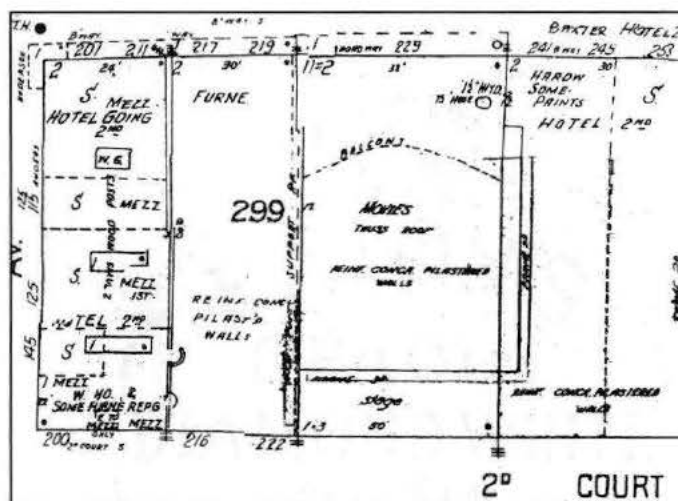


Figure 17. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Showing the Plan of the Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay, c.1930.



Figure 18. On Broadway Looking North, Coos Bay, c.1930. Reprinted courtesy of Toni McSwain.

derived. In addition to information about the theater, this newspaper printing provides valuable insight to the impact of motion pictures on a small community.

First-run films were presented at the theater under contracts with First National, Paramount, Universal, Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, Warner Brothers and United Artists. Outside of the main features, Pathe comedies and newsreels were part of the program. Prices of admission were regularly 35 cents for adults and 10 cents for children with the exception of special productions that were promised to be presented at the lowest possible admission price. Even as at the larger palaces, service was a serious consideration. The ushers were trained and reported as having “your welfare at heart and any request will be given prompt consideration, with a ‘thank you’ and a smile.”²³

Vaudeville was an integral part of early shows at the Egyptian and the Hippodrome vaudeville circuit from Portland would perform five acts at the theater every Monday and Tuesday. The first vaudeville production at the Egyptian was on November 23, 1925 and included a miniature musical comedy called "Stepping Along;" three contortionists, one dressed as a snake, one as a frog, and one as a monkey; a comedy singing and dancing act performing "Oddities on Land and Sea;" Esmeralda and Webb on the Marimba xylophone; and Billy Single Clifford, a lone performer of song and dance and "chatter."²⁴

The Egyptian Theatre was completed for about \$200,000 by the Coos Bay Amusement Company. Although Marshfield, including the surrounding areas, had a population of only 3,000 in 1925, the theater was built to seat 411 in the balcony and 800 on the main floor.²⁵ The local paper reported that "The entire building, constructed of reinforced concrete, gives a feeling of safeness and satisfaction. It is fireproof throughout..."²⁶ No doubt the fire of 1922 was heavy on the minds of citizens on the bay, but perhaps the reputation of the danger of fire associated with movies was a concern as well. Excitement about the theater was apparent. The local paper stated that "The Egyptian is the first house of its type that has been built in this section of the state. It is thoroughly Egyptian in design, color, decoration and furnishing."²⁷

The program for the opening night began with presentation of the theater to the public by North Bend Mayor, L. J. Simpson. This was followed by the latest international news accompanied by Rex Stratton on the organ. Singing was next on the program featuring Clayton V. Bernhard, a popular baritone singing "Until," by Sanderson

and "Smilin' Thru," by Arthur Penn. Next, a short comedy film called "The Uneasy Three," was shown and then the audience was treated to an organ concert. For the occasion Rex Stratton had chosen Schubert's "Serenade," and a medley of "Indian" songs including "The Land of Sky Blue Waters" by Cadman, and "By the Waters of Minnetonka" by Lieurance; and the newest popular hit "Row, Row, Rosie," by Bryan and Myer.²⁸ The feature film was "Graustark," starring Norma Talmadge and Eugene O'Brien. This film was "personally selected by the members of the [Coos Bay Amusement] company after a special review of several of the best productions of the leading companies in the film world."²⁹

Opening night at the Egyptian was attended by 2,250 people who waited in lines nearly two blocks long for admission to the first show from which people had to be turned away for lack of seats.³⁰ Usherettes were costumed in Egyptian uniforms.³¹ Following the second show a special turkey dinner was provided on the stage for seventy-five of the distinguished guests, among them Lee Thomas, the architect for the theater. The paper reported many of the comments made at the dinner about the theater and reported Thomas as saying "I am proud that I drew these plans. But anyone can draw plans, it takes courage and confidence in addition to hard work, to carry them out to such a successful finish."³² Bob White of Multnomah Theatre Corporation of Portland was also present and stated that "I have visited 52 theaters on the coast, and I want to say that this is absolutely the finest of the Egyptian type I have ever seen."³³ And Fred N. Jack, representing Warner Brothers said, "I am glad that I came to this opening. The theater is worth coming miles to see."³⁴

Interior decoration for the theater was completed by the B.F. Shearer Company, a Seattle-based firm that had decorated over thirty-six theaters on the Pacific Coast.³⁵ Carl F. Berg was responsible for direct supervision of the Egyptian project and was reported as being "a true artist with a wide philosophical background."³⁶ The article describing the Egyptian symbolism was entitled "Every Mark Has Meaning of Own." Berg attested that simply using bright colors would not be Egyptian:

Their decorations were severe, angular and direct. Every crook and turn has a meaning very much the same as our symbols in the alphabet through which we tell the story of our daily happenings and express our philosophy of life for future generations...the three bars lengthwise and the three bars crosswise represent reeds, poles or bamboos tied together for strength. They were used on all corners, doorways, archways and so forth. The colors in the cove being vertical represent the beams of colored light coming to earth from the stars...the winged sun represents the overshadowing deity which takes care of all things of mankind on earth. The scarab...has a very deep spiritual meaning in their philosophy pertaining to life. Our present day Easter lily is a remnant of the symbolism of the lotus flower...the different figures that we would ordinarily call idols were symbols of some attribute in deity...Our present stork bringing babies has also come down from the Egyptians who used the Ibis which was worshipped in the same respect...The foundation of all their wisdom from the starting point was the source of light, our Sun, and the planets with their special colors ...³⁷

The article cited Mr. Berg as "well versed" in Egyptian decor through extensive research and that the consistently Egyptian decoration was carried throughout with modern modifications. (See Figures 19 through 22.) It was reported that the company had "systematized the work [so] that the ordinary theater can be decorated in one-third of the time formerly needed. Every man on the force is an expert and an artist in his line."³⁸ In addition to interior detailing of the theater the firm provided the furniture, projection

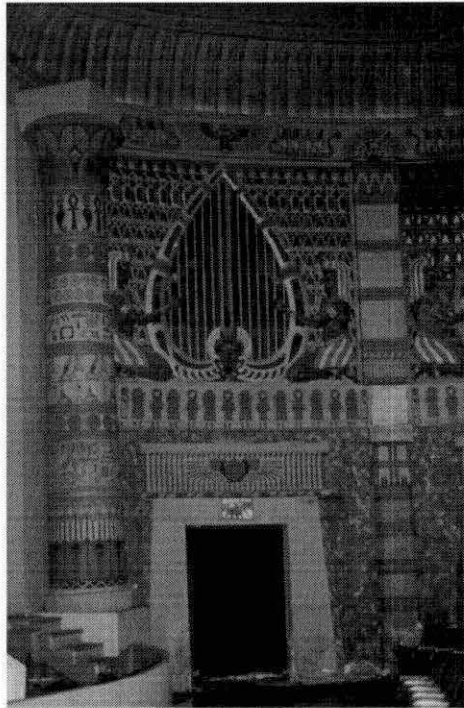


Figure 19. Exit Under Organ Grille, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

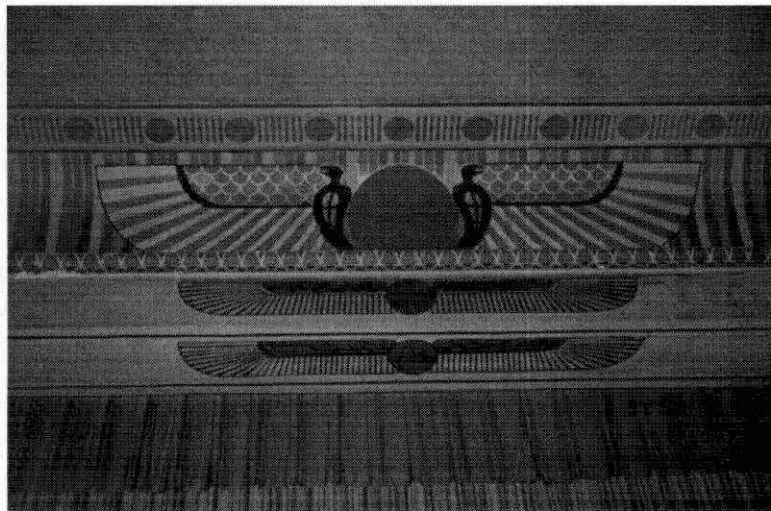


Figure 20. Winged Sun Motif above Proscenium, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

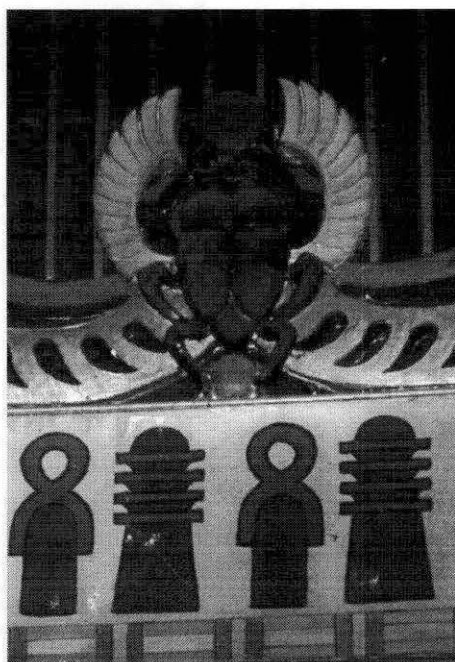


Figure 21. Scarab Detail on Organ Grille, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

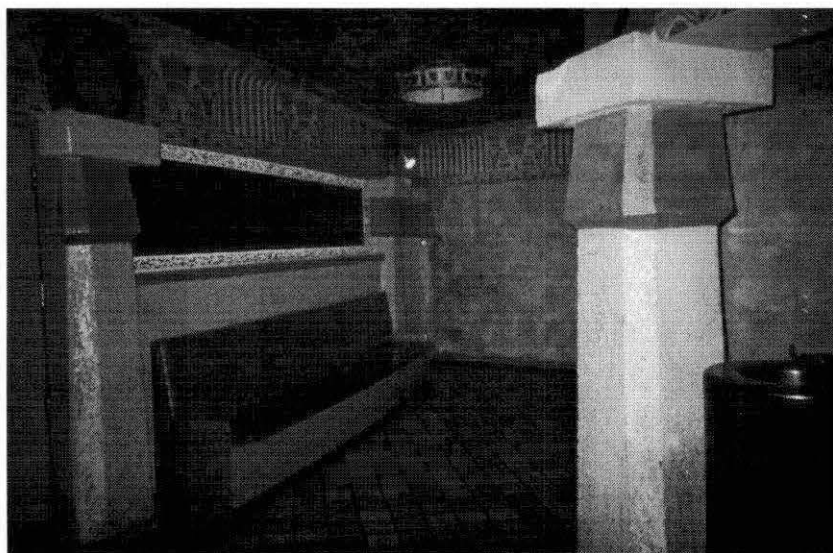


Figure 22. Lotus Border in Lobby, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

room equipment, draperies and carpets. Some of the original wooden Egyptian replica furniture provided by this company is still located on the mezzanine level.

An interesting side note about the Egyptian Theatre's decoration is that a long-time Marshfield librarian used to tell the story that one of the painters for the theater came to the library in search of the 1924 National Geographic article covering an archaeological dig in Egypt.³⁹ Upon checking this reference there was not a 1924 article, but a 1923 article covering the opening of King Tut's tomb. No obvious similarities between any of the artifacts pictured in the article and the decoration of the theater are apparent although one photograph has similar characteristics to the hierarchy of the wall treatment in the auditorium. A doorway in Tutankhamen's tomb is pictured with two guardian statues flanking the opening that is not unlike the placement of the slaves on either side of the organ grille lyres at the theater (Figure 23). In addition, decoration on



Figure 23. Organ Grille at the Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay.
Photo by Author, July 1998.

the doorway has a coved, vertical striping along the top, similar in proportion and style to the coved ceiling in the theater. Further down on the door are the same symbols that make up the band of decoration just below the organ grilles. Whether direct links to the decoration of the Egyptian Theatre or not, these similarities are interesting to note.⁴⁰

One of the most magnificent features of the Egyptian Theatre is the Wurlitzer Hopes Jones Unit Orchestra organ that is still intact and operable. Upon its installation it was the second largest organ in the state surpassed only by the organ at the Liberty Theater in Portland.⁴¹ It was a style "H" three manual organ with an Opus number 1126. Its original cost was \$32,000 and was reported as a scale "seldom seen in a city of less than 100,000 population."⁴² The organ was specially designed for the theater and arrived by rail in fifty huge crates. It took three weeks for two assistants under the direct supervision of a Wurlitzer representative to install the organ with pipes as small as a lead pencil to as large as requiring two men to lift them.⁴³ With this organ one man, through three keyboards, could recreate a seventy-five piece orchestra. Instruments included within this grand organ included:

Three violins of different tonal qualities, cello and bass viola of the string family, two flutes, piccolo, tibia and quintadena of the woodwinds, tuba profunda, ophiceide, harmonie tuba, krumett, oboe, and vox humana of the reed instruments, diaphone, bourdon, diapason, clarion and the trumpet. The traps and effects include: marimbaphone, orchestra bells, mandolin, cathedral chimes, sleigh bells, snare drum, bass drum, kettle drum, crash cymbal, Chinese gong, tom tom, Chinese wood block, tambourine, castanet, triangle, fire gong, auto horn, deer call, surf effect, and numerous combination obtaining everything from a baby cry to an airplane bombardment. Two beautiful features of this new Wurlitzer are the harp...and a piano....It is not an effect, or an "electric" piano, but a genuine instrument, the keys of which are electrically connected with those of the organ console.⁴⁴

Adjustable shutters controlled by foot pedals were located within the organ chambers so the volume of the pipes could be “softened into a mere whisper, or swelled into a mighty chorus or bursting storm which, if continued would shake every bit of plaster from the walls and ceiling of the theater, so great is the vibration.”⁴⁵ Acoustics were reported as “near perfect as can be attained” in that every word of the performers could be heard clearly and distinctly to the back of the theater.⁴⁶ The organist for the theater was Rex Stratton, a 1918 University of Oregon graduate who had played at the Blue Mouse in Portland as well as at theaters in Bend and Pendleton.⁴⁷

The Van Wie Scenery Co. of Portland specially designed scenery for the stage. There are six drops including the fire curtain still hanging in the four-story fly loft at the Egyptian. The asbestos fire curtain has an Egyptian funerary barge scene, and the single-plane show drop is painted with a mountain scene (Figures 24 and 25). The four remaining drops are multi-planed with painted legs to enhance or change their appearance. They include a formal garden, a picturesque woodland, an Egyptian scene of a palace balcony overlooking a sphinx, and the Nile and the final drop is an Egyptian temple interior. (See Figures 26 through 30.)

The ventilation system was highlighted in the early publicity about the theater, pointing out that 18,000 cubic feet of air was exchanged in the theater every minute and it was promised that the space would be warm in the winter and cool in the summer.⁴⁸ The projection room was reported as absolutely fireproof. Projection equipment included the latest “Simplex” machine providing a steady picture projected onto the latest Raven screen.⁴⁹ The projection lights were the latest “peerless” Low Intensity Arc Lamps that

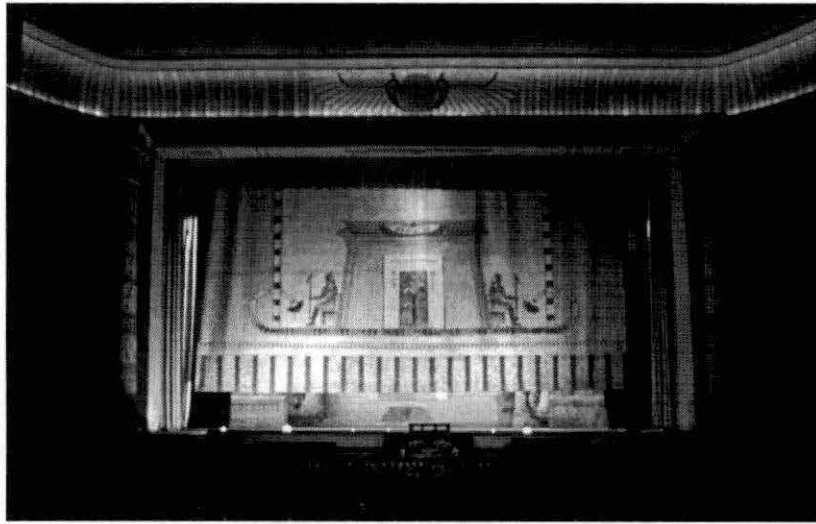


Figure 24. Stage with Asbestos Drop, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo Courtesy of Gerry Lewin, 1991.



Figure 25. Detail of Funerary Barge Scene, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo Courtesy of Gerry Lewin, 1991.

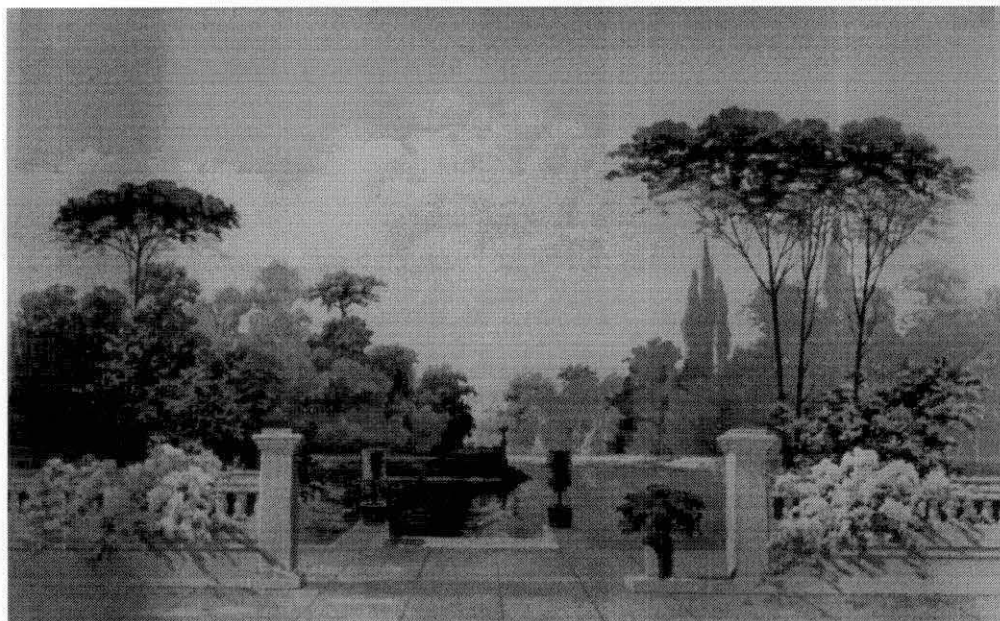


Figure 26. Formal Garden Drop Rendering, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Rendering by Merrie Holbert.

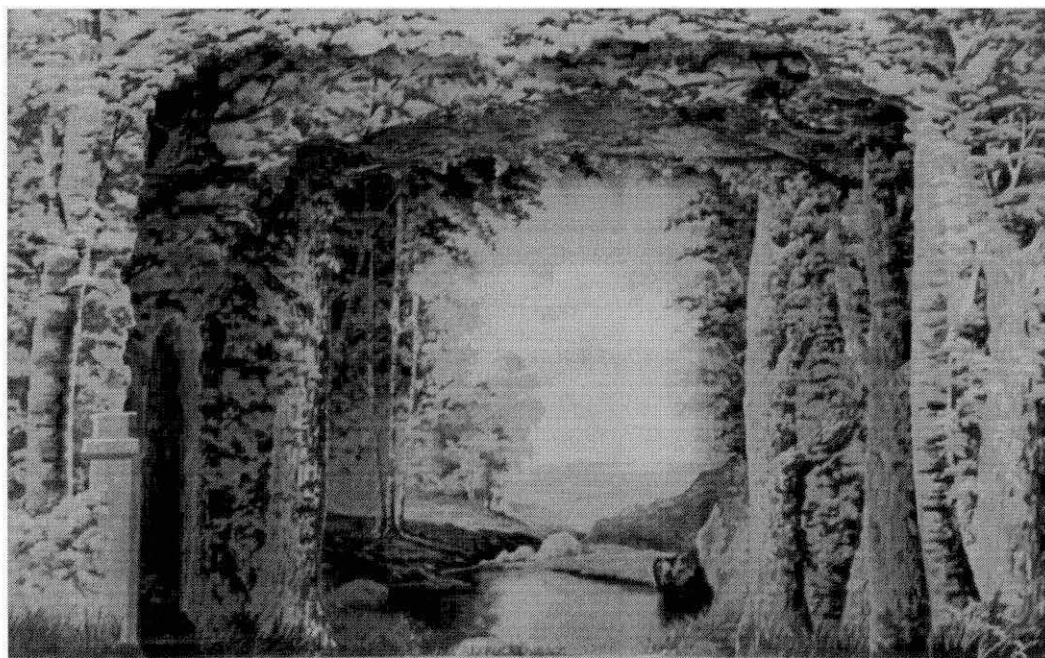


Figure 27. Woodland Drop Rendering, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Rendering by Merrie Holbert.

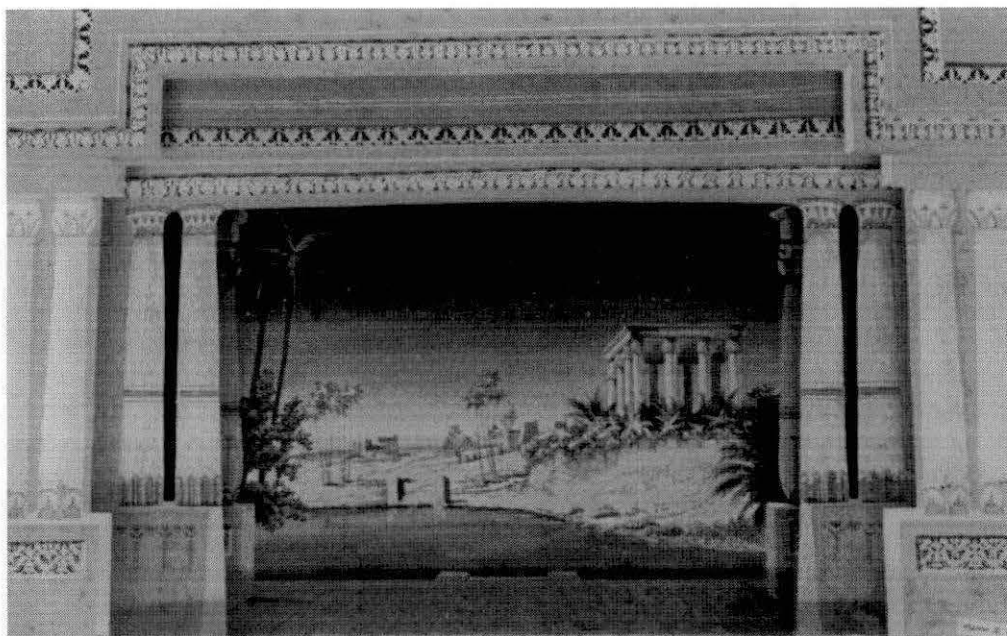


Figure 28. Nile Drop Rendering, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Rendering by Merrie Holbert.

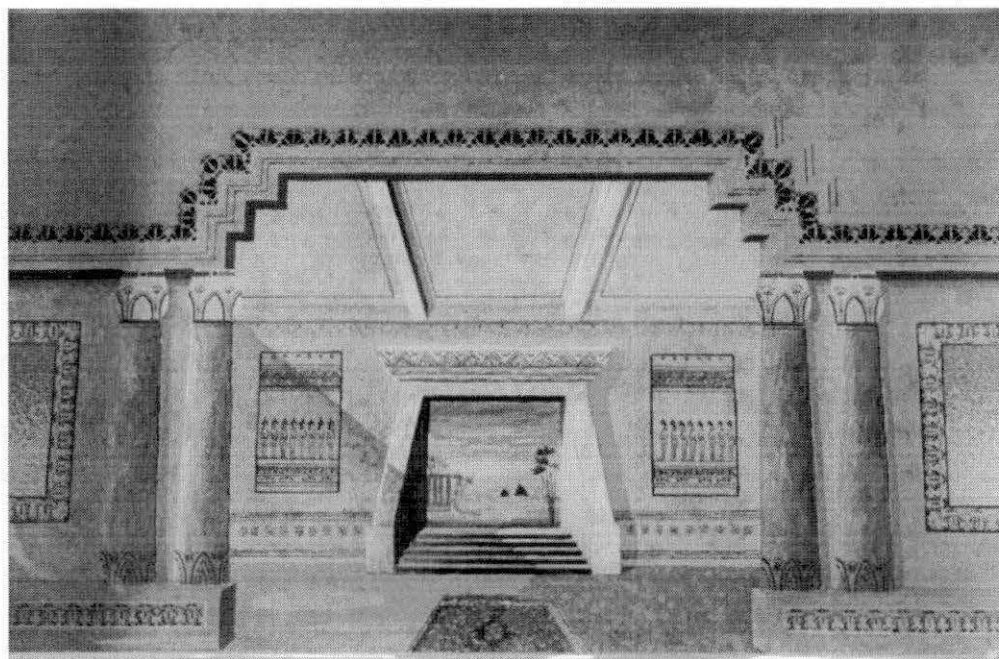


Figure 29. Egyptian Drop Rendering, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Rendering by Merrie Holbert.



Figure 30. Egyptian Drop in Auditorium, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo Courtesy of Gerry Lewin, 1991.

were reported as “the greatest advancement in projection in the past ten years.”⁵⁰ The projection booth was also equipped with a stereopticon allowing slide projection to enhance various “effects” for the live performances such as rain and snow storms.⁵¹ The 600, b88 house lights, concealed within the coved ceiling, were controlled from the projection booth.⁵² Each of the colored lights was switched and dimmed separately. Over one thousand red, blue and yellow concealed cove lights allowed the projectionist to create a myriad of desired effects. To eliminate the need for ceiling fixtures, floodlights with colored lenses were built into the front of the balcony. A total of 52,000 watts, channeled through eight and one-third miles of wire, were all under the control from the

projection booth where A. E. McDuffee, former projectionist for the Blue Mouse Theater, would be the projectionist at the Egyptian and remain so for the next 25 years.

Seating in the auditorium was ordered from the Wakefield Company of Chicago and the model chosen was "of the same manufacture...being used not only in the largest theaters in the Northwest, but such theaters as the Shubert theaters in New York...and the Paramount houses in Chicago which are among the finest in the world."⁵³ It was reported that no "blind seats" were to be found in the house since the proper sight lines had been scientifically calculated to provide a perfect view of the stage from any seat in the auditorium.⁵⁴ Spacing for the seats was 32 inches on the main floor and 40-44 inches in the balcony to accommodate larger, taller patrons. Total seating for the original house was 1,234. All seats were upholstered save a few veneer seats in the very front for children. Red leather covered the main floor seating and green plush in the balcony.⁵⁵

Nine hundred yards of Wilton carpets, specially designed for the theater, covered the floors of the lobby and mezzanine as well as the steps. Draperies were burnt orange silk with decorative Egyptian borders lining the bottom. The stage was bordered with a green silk, festooned drapery with red and gold stripes. Even the cry room was draped with striped awnings and silk plush trimmed in dull gold. Lighting fixtures in the lobby and auditorium had a special Egyptian flair. Drum-shaped fixtures were covered in parchment painted with vultures that were flanked by wrought iron cobras extending up the sides (Figure 31).⁵⁶



Figure 31. Light Fixture in the Lobby, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

Evolution 1925-1998

Talking pictures were introduced at the Egyptian on March 6, 1929. Marsden and Hull of the Coos Bay Amusement Company had attended a special exhibition of Movietone and Vitaphone in Medford at the Criterion Theatre in July of the previous year.⁵⁷ They made the decision to purchase a sound system three weeks later and were told it would be eight months before the installation could be made. The Egyptian was to be the first theater in the area to install a sound system. The closest house offering talking pictures was in Eugene so the Egyptian was the attraction for all of Southwestern Oregon.⁵⁸ It was reported that the organist for the Egyptian, Roy Carnathan, who had replaced Rex Stratton, would remain an employee of the Coos Bay Amusement Company and would “indeed be needed at the organ at times.”⁵⁹ Silent films would continue to be

shown at the Noble Theatre in Marshfield, which would reduce its admission to 25 cents,⁶⁰ and the Liberty in North Bend although Marsden speculated that sound would be installed in both of these theaters in the fall.⁶¹ The Blue Mouse theater would continue to show second-run films for 10 and 15 cents as well as showcase local talent productions.⁶²

The first "talking" feature presented was "The Home Towners" with "The Jazz Singer" advertised as a coming attraction.⁶³ It is interesting to note that the article describing the feature film pointed out that, "The cast is made up of stars of the stage all of whom have trained voices."⁶⁴ The paper advertised that, "In addition to the regular feature pictures each program change will include two Vitaphone Acts (Vaudeville on the screen), all-talking comedies, news reels with synchronized music and sound effects."⁶⁵ With the arrival of "talkies," the theater also began Sunday matinees starting at 2 o'clock. With the increased popularity of synchronized sound vaudeville ended at the Egyptian in the 1930s.

The Coos Bay Amusement Company retained all three theaters, the Egyptian, Noble and Liberty, until about 1946 when they were sold to the Myrtle Amusement Company which retained the theaters only for three years. On Feb. 13, 1949 the theaters were sold to Jones Enterprises who brought Stanley McSwain and his brother Foster to Coos Bay and the Egyptian. It was under the McSwain brothers management that the Egyptian was carried through challenging years as new theaters competed for patrons with the new Port Theatre built in North Bend and the Bay Drive-In in Eastside.

The fifties saw many changes to the Egyptian including new seats that brought the main floor to 648 seats. A concession stand was also added which required enlarging the

lobby by removing the original wooden doors and moving new glass doors out flush with the back of the original box office (Figure 32).⁶⁶ In addition, to accommodate the concession stand, two rows of seats from the center rear section of the auditorium were



Figure 32. Benches Enclosed within the Current Lobby, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

removed and the wall “bellied” out into the space. Another change came with CinemaScope that required modifications to the proscenium to accommodate the wide screen. The Egyptian columns were originally set within the proscenium, so Stan McSwain had a crane brought in to move the hollow columns to plinths flanking the stage rather than destroy them.⁶⁷ It was during the 1950s that the McSwain brothers purchased another organ from the Rialto in Hood River.⁶⁸ The intent of the purchase was to equip the Egyptian’s organ with four keyboards so it could be played by two organists. Some, although not all of the Rialto’s pipes were installed as well as the keyboard and are now

operable.⁶⁹ The body of the Rialto's organ currently sits to the left of the original Egyptian organ.

In 1960 Stanley McSwain took over control of all Coos Bay and North Bend Theaters. Paddy McDuffee, original projectionist for the Egyptian, quit during this period frustrated with the quality of films being produced. He recalled the days of wonderful films like *Gone With the Wind*. "Now there was a picture...It was the best. It was 368 minutes long. Before that opened, Eva sat in her ticket booth for a week, selling hard tickets (for advanced, reserved seating)."⁷⁰ According to McDuffee, in the heyday of the film era a program "didn't amount to nothing" without a cartoon, newsreel or travelogue and a feature.⁷¹ And although he was not personally fond of the Disney movies, he remembered that they were always big business.

Bowing to the pressure of economics in 1976, Stan McSwain made the decision to "twin" the Egyptian's balcony in creating two smaller theaters each seating 170. This development created three divisions in the balcony; two twin theaters on each side, and a center section to allow projection to the main screen (Figure 33). In this center section the risers from the original balcony are visible. In creating the smaller theaters, it was very important to McSwain that the mezzanine lobby and the main detailing in the auditorium remain largely untouched. The original spatial quality of the lobby was changed along with the twin theaters addition. In order to meet fire codes a portion of the each of the wide, lobby staircases were walled off creating small corridors leading directly to the street (Figure 34). Although each of these changes have affected the appearance of the theater, they were done with respect for the historic nature of the

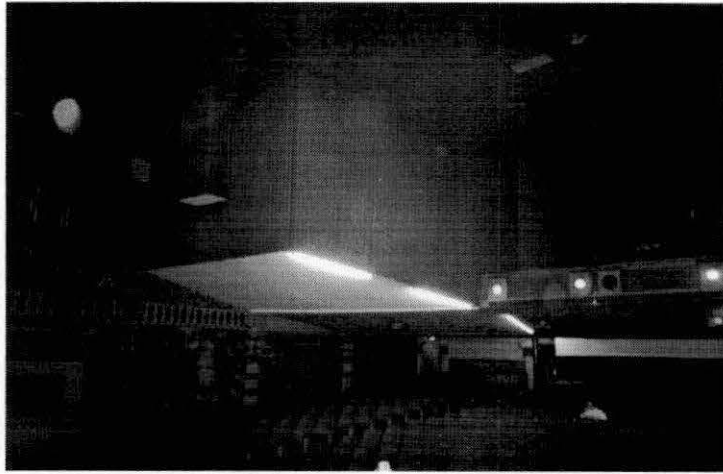


Figure 33. One of the Twin Theaters Inserted into the Balcony, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.



Figure 34. Main Lobby Stair Divided to Create a Fire Exit, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.

building and provided the necessary economic benefits while retaining what was possible of the original decor. All of these changes appear to be reversible.

In 1982 the theater was sold to Tom Moyer and Toni McSwain, daughter of Stan, remained the manager until December of 1995. During the 1980s Toni began seriously considering producing a vaudeville show for the sixtieth anniversary of the theater. When the planning became a realization there was significant clean up to be done backstage which had become somewhat of a storage space. It was known that some of the original vaudeville drops were still hanging in the fly space, but during the clean-up three additional drops were discovered. For the theater's fiftieth anniversary some original vaudevillians were part of the performance including singer Dorothy Ley Curtis, "The Nightingale," and magician Desmond, "The Elegant Scoundrel," who had performed throughout the Northwest in the late 1920s and 1930s until vaudeville died out.⁷² The vaudeville revival was tremendously successful and people were turned away for lack of seats.

Vaudeville was brought back to the Egyptian once more in 1988 and the drops were used for one other live performance featuring the Coquille Sawdusters in 1995. As typical of many small town theaters, the Egyptian has served as a host for many events including stage shows, cooking schools, benefits, etc.⁷³ The theater was even used for a wedding in 1995 set against the formal garden backdrop. Since that time, however, the drops have been returned to the fly space and remain hanging. Storage is the main purpose for the stage once again making it impossible to lower the drops for viewing. The magnificence of the Egyptian's organ has been kept alive with annual Christmas

concerts since the 1950s and periodic screenings of silent movies such as a 1987 Halloween production of the 1925 silent film *Phantom of the Opera*.⁷⁴ The last silent films shown at the Egyptian were for the sixtieth anniversary celebration in 1995.

The Egyptian is the only remaining movie theater in Coos Bay. A theater built in the 1980s is now located in North Bend. Both have been under the ownership of Act III Theaters since 1989, but will merge with Regal Cinemas Inc. in mid-August of this year. Regal primarily operates in the eastern United States, but the plans to merge with Cobb Cinemas and Act III will make Regal the third largest theater exhibitor in the United States.⁷⁵ They currently own 1,417 screens in twenty states and seventy percent of their theaters are less than eight years old.⁷⁶ Plans, originally developed by Act III, are currently underway to remodel the theater within the next couple of months. These plans include a new concession stand, seats, and carpet as well as installation of acoustic curtains, surround sound speakers, and an ADA restroom.

Summary

The Egyptian Theatre is an architectural treasure. The remaining Egyptian theaters are very few in number with David Naylor, author of several National Trust books on historic theaters, only being able to recall four including the Coos Bay theater.⁷⁷ Only two other Egyptian theaters remain largely intact in the West and are Peery's Egyptian in Ogden, Utah (1924), now restored, and the Egyptian (Ada) in Boise, Idaho (1927).⁷⁸ The other relatively intact Egyptian theater (1929) is in the Midwest in DeKalb, Illinois and has become a performing arts center. The once famous Grauman's Egyptian

in Los Angeles suffered extensive damage in the North Ridge earthquake and has little of its interior decoration remaining. Although certainly worthy of listing on the National Register of Historic Places, the Egyptian Theatre in Coos Bay has never been nominated to the Register and the current owner is reluctant of such designation. Since a property cannot be listed without owner consent the Egyptian remains at the mercy of its owners.

Aside from the few remaining Egyptian theaters, the Egyptian Revival style was rare in general for any form of architecture. Compounding on this fact, surviving coastal community theaters from the 1920s are also a scarcity.⁷⁹ The exotic style chosen for this location is also remarkable. Typically small communities were conservative in their theater decor choices and often interpreted more classical styles, yet Coos Bay chose a particularly exotic style and carried it out in detail.⁸⁰ According to long-time manager, Toni McSwain, an Egyptologist once came to the theater and marveled that he could actually read the hieroglyphics on the columns which record the date of the theater's opening and the names of the members of the Coos Bay Amusement Company.

Spatially, the Egyptian's auditorium is compromised by the "twin" theaters in the former balcony which have necessitated changes to the spatial quality of the lobby as well. The creation of fire exits affected the width of the grand staircases on either side. Removal of the "twin" theaters is not of immediate concern since they are vital to the survival of the theater at the present time. Fortunately these changes appear to be reversible so should it prove economically feasible in the future that these could be removed, the balcony should return to a part of the main auditorium space. This would allow the fire exits to be removed returning important spatial qualities to the lobby.

The interior decoration of the theater is remarkably intact. The only apparent change in the original painted decoration is in the seated Pharaohs in the lobby (Figure 35). They were recently repainted in a gold that is dissimilar from their previous bronze appearance. Aside from the gold, however, an attempt was made to match the new paint colors with the original scheme and previous painted decoration of the Pharaohs. In addition to the architectural and applied decoration, the original box office, vaudeville drops, organ, and furniture are extremely valuable aspects of this building (Figure 36). These factors combined create a rare ensemble of 1920s history, yet all are threatened by lack of proper attention and water damage.

The most critical issue facing the Egyptian is the damage due to water which is not only affecting the vaudeville drops and other decorative aspects of the theater, but if not repaired will cause permanent structural damage to the building. The Egyptian's location on fill makes it susceptible to flooding which occurs two to three times a year with heavy rains and high tide, or when the sump pump breaks down. The organ has been raised on a palette to protect it from the floodwaters yet they come far too close to this musical gem (Figure 37). Additionally, flooding causes safety problems in the theater by soaking the carpets near the orchestra pit and creating unsafe puddles at the front emergency exits (Figure 38). Installation of a backup sump pump would relieve the flooding problem for the time being. However, in addition to the flooding, several roof leaks contribute to water damage of the vaudeville drops that hang on their original riggings. At the present time Act III has no plans to address the water damage in the

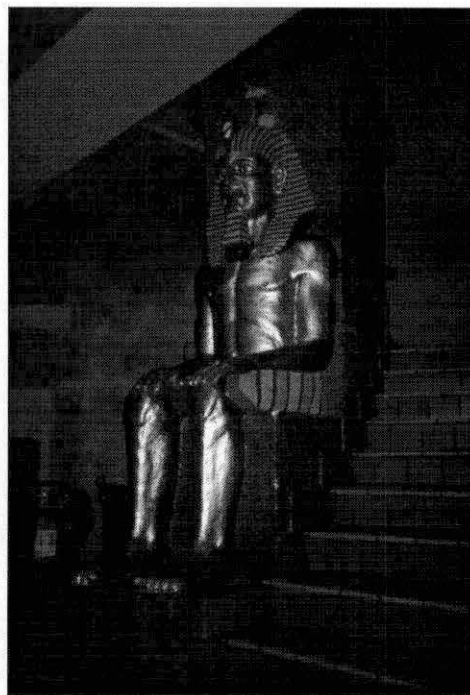


Figure 35. Pharaoh in Lobby,
Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo
by Author, July 1998.



Figure 36. Original Furnishings in the Mezzanine,
Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, July 1998.



Figure 37. Organ Sitting in Flood Waters, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, May 1998.



Figure 38. Wet Floor in Front of Exit, Egyptian Theatre, Coos Bay. Photo by Author, May 1998.

theater.⁸¹ Architects or engineers need to be consulted to present strategies to resolve the continued problem.

The other high priority concern facing the theater is the acoustic technology that definitely needs to be analyzed and addressed by acoustic specialists in consultation with preservation professionals to improve the quality of the sound system while respecting the historic detailing in the auditorium. The owner's impetus for the installation of acoustic curtains is due to the admitted poor sound quality in the theater. Currently the only speakers in the theater are rather old and are located behind the screen. Consultation with

acoustic specialists is imperative to determine how to improve the sound in the space. It is interesting to note that acoustic curtains were added at the McDonald Theater in Eugene. They cover the majority of the wall space and the theater was still not able to reach the goal of THX sound, the current aim in many movie sound systems.

The plans to hang acoustic curtains would invariably cover the organ grilles hindering future use of the organ. The Egyptian's Wurlitzer is the only theater organ in the state still operating in its original setting.⁸² Paul Quarino of Portland has played the organ on several occasions and called it "one of a kind...[a] real Cadillac of organs."⁸³ As well as being a classically trained musician, Quarino has been a national touring artist for the Wurlitzer Company. He is an active member of the American Theater Organ Society and pointed out in a 1994 article that the heyday of theater organs was only about a ten-year period from 1920 to 1930 and very few remain in their original setting.⁸⁴

The theater was and is a landmark in the community and nearby businesses still advertise as being located next to the Egyptian. The theater and its magnificent organ have been in continuous operation since the theater's opening in 1925 which is a record that few theaters with such historical integrity can boast. Although a live performance has not been held in three years the theater certainly retains live performance capability. The Egyptian Theatre has provided entertainment for the surrounding community for over the past seventy years. At the close of the 1985 vaudeville show Toni McSwain validly pointed out, "it's a waste of history to even think about running those backdrops up and leaving them hang there again."⁸⁵ Their availability for various functions and performances would only enhance the theater's versatility and marketability. It is

inappropriate to let the drops and organ continue to deteriorate and allow the covering up of the fabulous Egyptian Revival interior decoration. Not only is this theater important to understanding the development of entertainment on Coos Bay, but it is significant to American theater heritage. The ensemble of its intact, original components and its rarity in terms of Egyptian Revival style makes it an enormously important historic theater. With the assistance of professionals a continuous maintenance and conservation plan for the architectural and applied details in this fantastic theater will ensure that it will be available for future generations to appreciate as a remarkable example of American movie industry history.

Notes

¹"Trading Post in Early Days," Coos Bay (Oregon) The World, 21 September 1974.

²Nancy Waterman Price, "A Preliminary Survey of Commercial Architecture in Marshfield [Coos Bay] Oregon," manuscript, 1986(?), 2.

³*Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁴*Ibid.*, 9.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶"Movie History on Coos Bay," Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Joseph Gaston, Centennial History of Oregon, 1811-1912, vol. 14, Robert Marsden, Jr. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1912), 519.

⁹"Three Theaters Under One Head," Coos Bay Times, Annual Christmas Edition, December 1923.

¹⁰"Liberty Theater in North Bend to be One of State's Best Show Houses," Coos Bay Times, Annual Christmas Edition, December 1923.

¹¹"Plan Big Theater in Noble Building South Broadway," Coos Bay Times, 5 December 1924.

¹²Stephan Dow Beckham, "Egyptian Theatre" (Oregon Historic Inventory Sheet, 1974).

¹³"Motor Inn Garage One of Finest Buildings Erected in Marshfield," Coos Bay Times, 16 December 1922.

¹⁴Beckham.

¹⁵"Motor Inn Garage...."

¹⁶"Motor Inn Has Had Big Year," Coos Bay Times, Annual Christmas Edition, December 1922.

¹⁷“Motor Inn Garage....”

¹⁸“Coos Bay—Roseburg Highway Makes Connection From Coast Country to the Interior of the State,” Coos Bay Times, 16 December 1922.

¹⁹“Plan Big Theater....”

²⁰“Theater Experts Coming This Week,” Coos Bay Times, 23 March 1925.

²¹“Plan Big Theater....”

²²Nancy Waterman Price, “The Egyptian Theater,” manuscript, 1985(?), 2.

²³“Vaudeville and Movies at Show,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

²⁴“Good Vaudeville Bill at Egyptian,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

²⁵Beckham.

²⁶“Best Possible Equipment is Secured,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

²⁷“Theater First of Kind to be Built in this Territory,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹“Coos Bay People to See Egyptian Theatre, Nov. 19,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

³⁰“2250 Attend Big Opening of New Egyptian Here,” Coos Bay Times, 20 November 1925.

³¹Ibid.

³²“Visitors Praise Theater Beauty,” Coos Bay Times, 20 November 1925.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵“Artists Awarded Decoration Work,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷“Every Mark Has Meaning of Own,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

³⁸“Artists Awarded....”

³⁹Price, “The Egyptian...,” 4.

⁴⁰Maynard Owen Williams, “At the Tomb of Tutankhamen: An Account of the Royal Egyptian Sepulcher Which Contained the Most Remarkable Funeral Treasures Unearthed in Historic Times,” National Geographic Magazine (May 1923), 506.

⁴¹“Symphony Organ Declared Marvel,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁴²“Three Theaters to be Operated,” Coos Bay Times, 17 June 1925.

⁴³“Symphony Organ....”

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶“2250 Attend....”

⁴⁷“Rex Stratton to be Organist,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁴⁸“High Lights on the Egyptian Theater on South Broadway Near Anderson,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁴⁹“Three Machines for Projection,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹“Best Possible....”

⁵²“Electrical Work in New Egyptian,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁵³“Theater First....”

⁵⁴“Best Possible....”

⁵⁵Price, “The Egyptian...,” 3.

⁵⁶“Theater First....”

⁵⁷“Movietone and Vitaphone Still New Inventions,” Coos Bay Times, 18 November 1925.

⁵⁸“Latest Advance in Amusements Installed Here,” Coos Bay Times, 2 March 1929.

⁵⁹“Four Men Guide Coos Bay Movies,” Coos Bay Times, 2 March 1929.

⁶⁰“Three Theaters....”

⁶¹“Latest Advance....”

⁶²“Three Theaters....”

⁶³“New Policy Is Announced for Movie Theatre,” Coos Bay Times, 2 March 1929.

⁶⁴“‘HomeTownners’ First Feature,” Coos Bay Times, 2 March 1929.

⁶⁵“New Policy....”

⁶⁶Ron Cowan, “Coos Bay Secret Has Its Own Built-In Drama,” Salem (Oregon) Statesman Journal, 27 May 1991.

⁶⁷Mike Thoele, “Vaudeville to Return: Old Egyptian Theater to Celebrate History,” Eugene (Oregon) Register Guard, 16 November 1985.

⁶⁸Beckham.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Dave Peden, “Roll ‘em!,” Coos Bay (Oregon) The World, 31 August 1985.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Jill Carroll, “Show Marks Theater Milestone,” The Oregonian, 17 November 1985.

⁷³Beckham.

⁷⁴Dave Peden, “Theater to Host Ghouls, Spooks,” Coos Bay (Oregon) The World, 24 October 1987.

⁷⁵www.regalcinemas.com, 1998.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷David Naylor, interview by author, 5 August 1998.

⁷⁸David Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters, (Washington, D. C.: Preservation Press, 1987), 223-224, 233.

⁷⁹Naylor, interview.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Randall Blaum, Vice President of Marketing, Act III Theaters, interview by author, 24 July 1998.

⁸²Cowan.

⁸³J. Kendall Stabler, "The Egyptian Theatre: A Community Treasure," Oregon Coast (November/December 1994), 93.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Thoele.

CHAPTER VI

THE McDONALD THEATER

Urban renewal was a threat to many movie palaces as well as other historic downtown architecture. In efforts to “improve” their downtowns, many cities demolished their historic buildings to make way for “modern” developments. The McDonald Theater, located in Eugene, Oregon, is one of the few remaining historic buildings in the downtown area. Eugene experienced urban renewal in the 1960s and an astonishing number of Eugene’s downtown historic buildings were demolished during this period leaving the downtown area, for the most part, nondescript and bland.

Context

The McDonald Theater is located on the southwest corner of Tenth Avenue and Willamette Street in the central business district of Eugene, Oregon. Willamette Street was the main locale for theaters in Eugene as early as 1903 with the Eugene Theatre at 490 and by 1907 the Bijou Theatre at 489. By 1921 three theaters remained listed in the directory and included the Castle, the Eugene and the Rex Theatres. The Castle closed in 1925 and the Heilig, formerly the Eugene Theatre, was remodeled in 1926 for motion pictures. The McDonald Theater is the last of three historic theaters, including the Rex and the Heilig, which were located within four blocks of each other in the downtown area

(Figure 39). The Heilig closed and was demolished in the early 1970s, and the Rex has been absorbed by the Downtown Athletic Club and remodeled beyond recognition.¹



Figure 39. Looking North on Willamette Street, Eugene, c.1928. Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #GN1124)

Although much of Eugene's downtown architecture was destroyed during urban renewal, the McDonald Theater is located on a corner with two opposing historic buildings, which including the theater, make up "the best-preserved ensemble of early twentieth century commercial buildings now standing in Eugene's downtown core."² On the southeast corner of the intersection is the Schaefers Building (1929), an art deco landmark that was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. The Ax Billy Department Store (1910) was on the northeast corner and has been remodeled into the Downtown Athletic Club. The building on the northwest corner was the D. A. Paine

Block, also owned by the Schaefer's, and is no longer extant. The survival of the three buildings is due in large part to the owners, the Schaefer's, who to their credit were opposed to the demolition of their historic buildings. The Schaefer's family was significant in the development of Eugene after 1908 when five brothers arrived in Eugene from Clermont, Iowa. The McDonald Theater, which remained in the family's hands until 1977, was among the Schaefer's projects and its promoters included George B. Schaefer's, Charles J. Schaefer's, Frank X. Schaefer's, Albert T. Schaefer's, and Aaron Harding McDonald.³

Motion Pictures in Eugene

A. H. McDonald came to Eugene in 1913 from Portland where he was associated with the Progressive Amusement Company. Upon arrival in Eugene he became involved with the local theater business and formed the Castle Theater Company in 1922 that later became the Eugene Greater Theater Company.⁴ At one point McDonald owned and operated the Heilig, the Castle, and the Rex.⁵ The partnership that created the McDonald Theater came from the real estate investment firm that was created in 1924 by Charles J. Schaefer's and A. H. McDonald.⁶ The McDonald-Schaefer's Company planned the building as a mix of each of their interests with McDonald being primarily interested in theater and Schaefer primarily interested in commercial ventures.⁷ Seven storefronts were incorporated into the structure and were rented before the building was completed.⁸ Among the original occupants were two stores specializing in ladies' apparel, a drugstore, a market, a music shop, a print shop, and a shoe store.⁹

At the time The McDonald was built in 1925, Eugene was the third largest city in Oregon with a population of 20,000.¹⁰ It was the grandest theater in Eugene with the largest seating capacity as well as the most modern equipment. The roof is of wood truss construction and the main structure is reinforced concrete reported as containing 22,000 yards of concrete poured by the Stien Brothers who were the general contractors for the project.¹¹ Construction began in September of 1924 and was finished in May of 1925 at a cost of about \$135,000.¹² The original name for the theater was to be The Lowell after the aviator Major Lowell Smith of the United States army who was a “native son of Eugene” and was the first to “circle the globe in the air.”¹³ Before the opening of the theater, A. H. McDonald passed away and was succeeded in the business by his son, Donald. Soon after McDonald’s death discussion of renaming the theater in his honor began. A petition began to circulate for changing the name of the theater and was signed by the Schaefer brothers as well as endorsed by Lowell Smith who sent the following telegram:

Hollywood, Cal. May 5. I sincerely believe the only proper thing to do is to name the new theater after A. H. McDonald, who so splendidly planned it. LOWELL SMITH¹⁴

On May 8, 1925, the front page of the Eugene Guard reported that the name of the theater would become the McDonald.

Description 1925

The McDonald Theater opened on May 7, 1925 and was touted as being “the biggest event of its kind Eugene has ever experienced (Figure 40).”¹⁵ According to

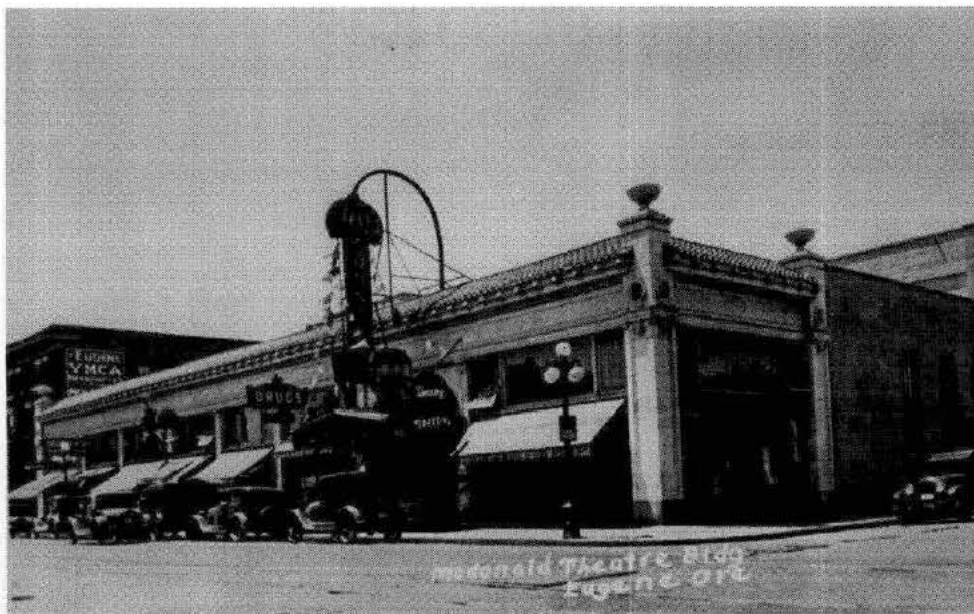


Figure 40. Northwest Corner of the McDonald Theater, Eugene, c.1935.
Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum.
(LCHM #GN1155)

newspaper accounts, the specific opening night was kept a secret until May 7th when the Eugene Guard printed a special theater section that announced the grand opening that evening. The theater was announced as “a credit to any city in the world...[and] a lasting monument to Eugene’s spirit of growth and progress.”¹⁶ The original description in the paper reported:

Entering the lobby [foyer], the massiveness of the Roman arches is relieved by gay colored lunettes on each side, in which the rich coloring of the ancient Oriental world are allowed full display. The soffits are in warm tones, in harmony with the substantial pilasters.

The lobby [foyer] opens into the foyer [lobby], here the first vivid impression is one of bewitching bewilderment. The viewer first tries to take in every charming detail at once, then as one point ____ another looms into clear view. [With] each is seen a new note that adds to the whole until it seems a perfect symphony of color and architectural beauty.¹⁷

The lobby was also described in an earlier article as:

...a thing of real architectural beauty. Specially designed iron chairs, console table, and tapestry and mirror on the end wall, add to the charm. A fountain, with the drinking fount cleverly concealed, will have a part. Four heavy chandeliers hang from grilled rosettes in the ceiling. The torches are of wrought iron.¹⁸

The B. F. Shearer Company of Seattle completed interior decoration for the theater with the on-site work under the direction of Carl R. Berg who was also in charge of decoration at the Egyptian Theatre in Coos Bay (Figure 41). The firm was active in providing decoration for theaters along the Pacific coast and to date had decorated 34 theaters in the past five years.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the last two paragraphs of the article in the Eugene Guard concerning the B. F. Shearer firm exactly matches the



Figure 41. Lobby of the McDonald Theater, Eugene, Historic View. Reprinted with the permission of the Theatre Historical Society in Elmhurst, Illinois. (OR5-1)

information printed in the Coos Bay Times with the appropriate names inserted. The aspects of the McDonald for which they were responsible included the painting and decorating, draperies, carpet, lighting, projection room equipment, stage equipment, opera chairs and all of the furniture used in the theater.²⁰

The double ramps were reported as one of the most attractive features of the lobby with exquisite wrought iron railings executed by the Eugene Foundry.²¹ Five arches resting on piers were framed with decorative stenciling including stenciled rosettes at the meeting point between the arches. Along the back wall of the upper ramp were five stencil-framed, painted murals based on the work of Kay Nielson depicting Norse tales.²² The color range of the murals was from golden to light blue and each mural was set within an impressed arch. The scenes depicted included: The Lad in the Bear Skin, The King of Arabia's Daughter, North Wind Goes Over the Sea, Lad in Battle, and a scene from Prince Lindworm.²³ Carl Berg commented on the blend of different styles in the theater noting that:

...it is queer that the atmosphere of the old Norse period should fit in so well with the southern Byzantine and Roman style, but that is exactly what happens when the two are brought in to contact....Although this art originated in the far North, the style is as Oriental as Byzantine, which originated in the Far East.²⁴

The walls and arch pier supports were treated with a painted band imitating masonry. In some newspaper accounts it was referred to as "conestone" which may actually refer to caenstone, a stone quarried in France and used extensively during the Middle Ages.²⁵

The auditorium seated 1,400 in Heywood-Wakefield chairs with spring cushions upholstered in Spanish leather.²⁶ The same stone imitation as found in the lobby was

used on the auditorium walls in blends of gray and ivory to the height of the balcony level where it was topped with a brightly painted Oriental stencil (Figure 42). Perhaps the most prominent features of the auditorium were the organ grilles contained within a large, double height, wide arch containing three smaller arches supported in the center on two plaster columns with composite capitals (Figure 43). The ironwork for the organ grilles was executed by the Eugene Foundry and was praised for its Old World artistry. There were three tall grilles of wrought iron detailed in gold with Oriental motifs. Beneath each organ chamber was a small garden highlighted with special colored lighting effects. The

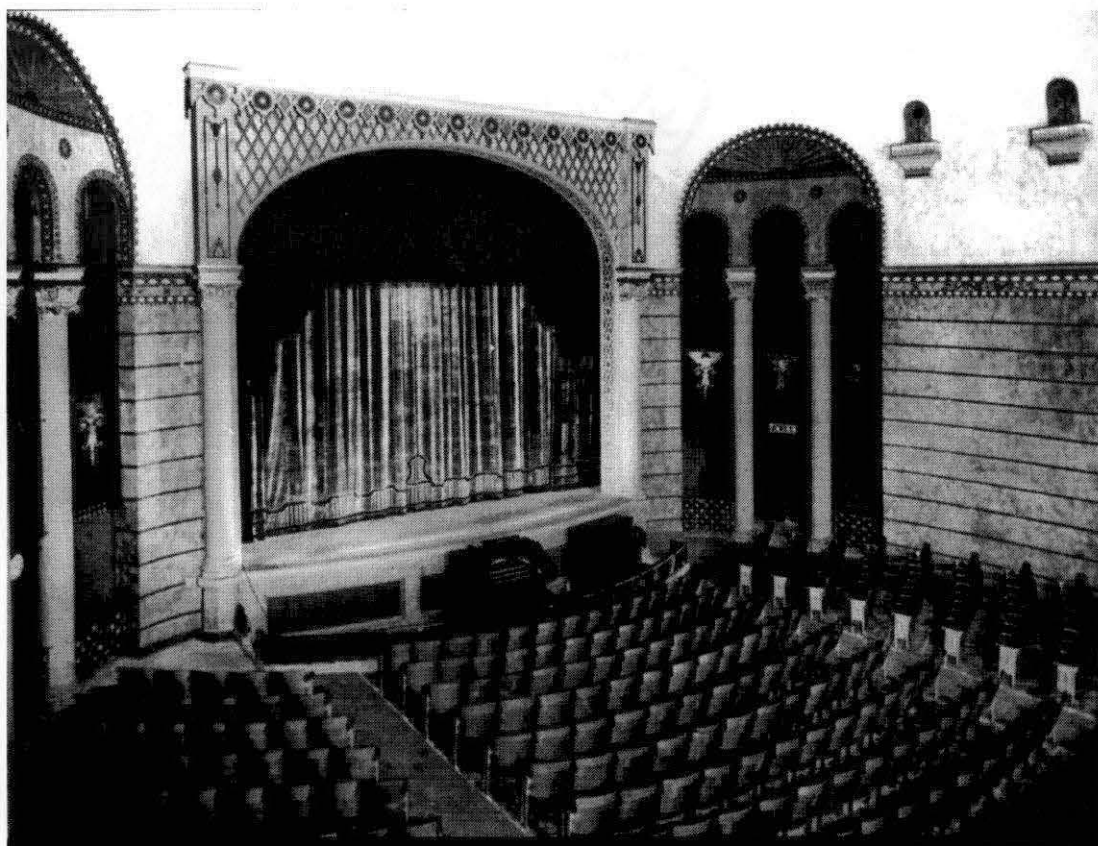


Figure 42. McDonald Theater Stage, Eugene, c.1931. Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #GN1154)

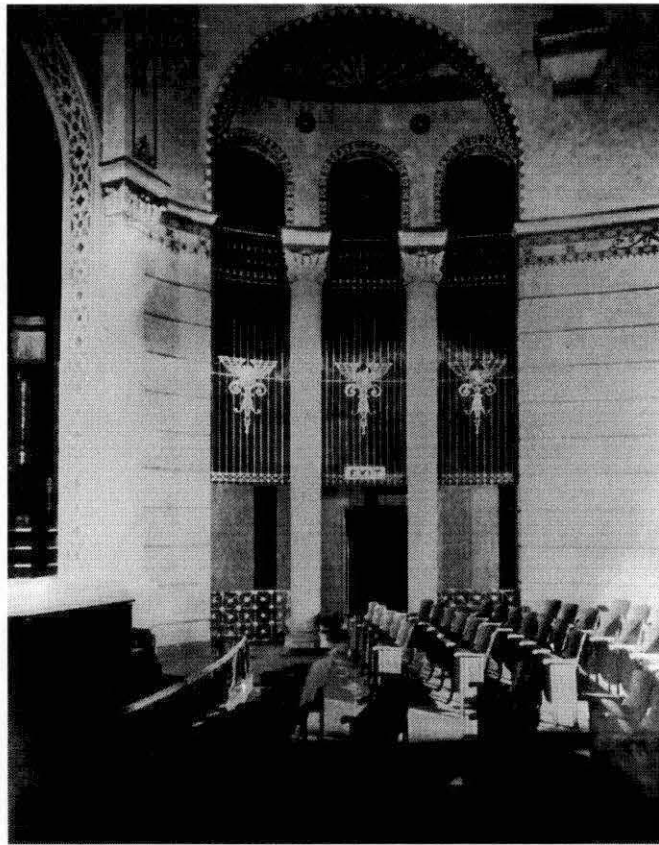


Figure 43. Organ Screen and Exit, McDonald Theater, Eugene. Reprinted with the permission of the Theatre Historical Society. (OR6-1)

walls were additionally decorated with two huge arches on each side that reached to the cove ceiling (Figure 44). Each incised arch had four smaller arches painted within it and the entire arch was surrounded with a decorative plaster molding. On the lower portion of the wall space below the arch was a 12' x 20' landscape mural.²⁷ The upper wall portion of the auditorium was also decorated with light "baskets," five on each side, which provided the main lighting for the auditorium. Each basket contained an incised niche with a flower painted within it and three colored lights and white lights to create a

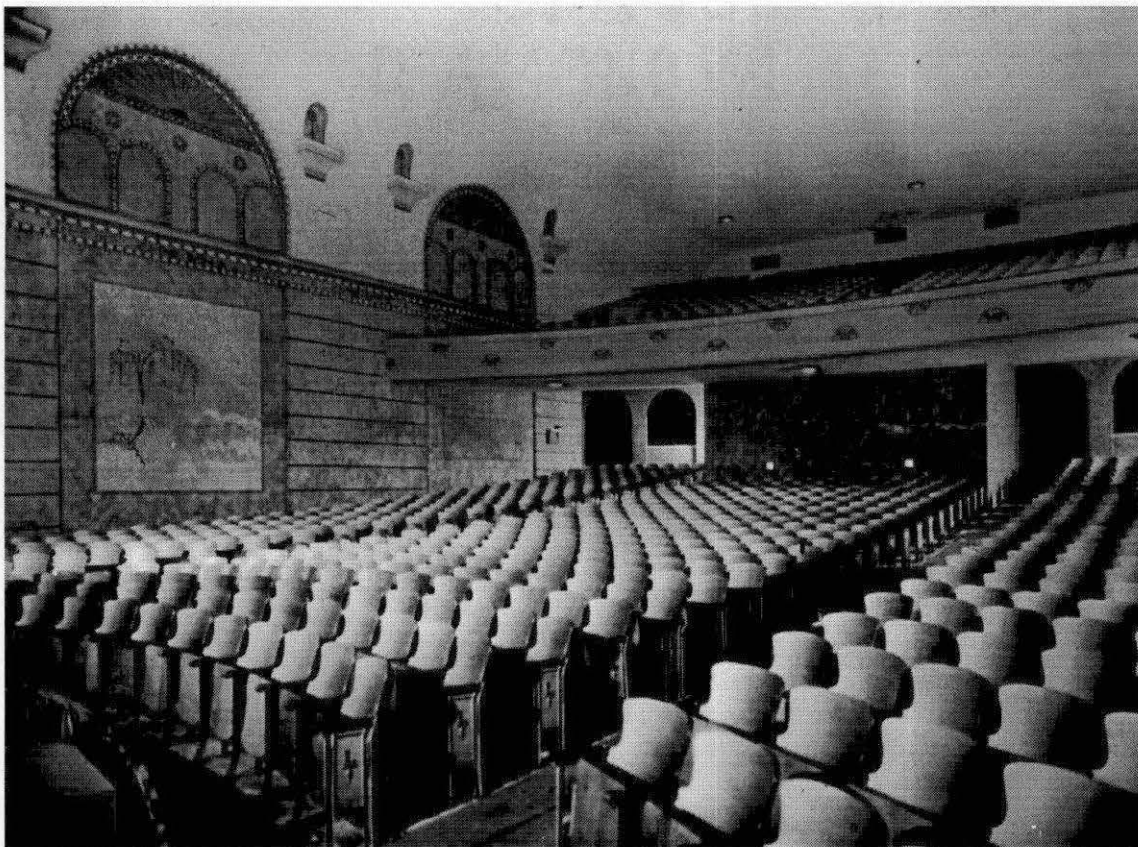


Figure 44. McDonald Theater Auditorium, Eugene, c.1931. Reprinted with permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #GN1153)

variety of lighting effects.²⁸ It was reported that the lights were “so cleverly arranged that it is almost impossible to detect the exact spot from whence emanates the soft radiance that spreads and shifts about the beautiful interior.”²⁹ The cove ceiling was described as “indeed a masterpiece of interior work. It is designed primarily to give the impression of a sky overhead.”³⁰

The stage was draped with a heavy, grand drape of specially dyed, burnt orange silk plush velvet and the draw curtain was blue-grey with a metallic backing.³¹ In the orchestra pit was the Wurlitzer organ which was boasted to produce music that a “75-

piece orchestra could not produce.”³² The representative for the Wurlitzer company, Manley Cockcroft, stated the following concerning the theater’s acoustics:

Beautiful! Amazing! I think it is the most artistic and acoustically perfect auditorium I have ever been in. True, the organ is one of the finest large Wurlitzers installed on the coast, but without the sound quality of the theater the best organ in the world would be wasted.³³

The projection room was equipped with the latest in technology and was attended to by Frank Gibbs. It was provided with a stereopticon for viewing slides, various spotlights, and all controls regulating the house lights which were in three primary colors to facilitate “any color combination” possible.³⁴ Also among the credits and features discussed in the articles detailing the theater was the ventilation system which was billed as one of the theater’s most important assets that would keep the auditorium twenty degrees cooler than the outside air in the summer.³⁵

The opening night program consisted of varied entertainment as typical for movie palaces. Renaldo Baggot was the organist for the theater and performed several pieces throughout the program that included not only the “finest classical numbers, but zippy, fast jazz, as well.”³⁶ The comedy chosen for the evening was “Fares, Please” with Al St. Johns and a musical presentation of “Martsailles” by soprano Joanna James Ellis followed.³⁷ The final production before the feature presentation was a prologue staged by Kate Irwin Stange accompanied by twelve tiny tots all under the age of eight. The evening’s feature presentation was Gloria Swanson’s latest and most elaborate film to date, “Madams Sans Gene.” This was the Pacific Premiere so the McDonald was the first theater in the Pacific Northwest to show the film. It had opened at the Rivoli in New

York two weeks earlier and was the first film to command the price of a five dollar ticket on Broadway.³⁸ Nearly three thousand turned out for the opening night of the theater and the Eugene Guard reported that:

All came expectant, eager, curious. Then they filed out, slowly, reluctant to leave a place so beautiful...It is a structure with a spirit, and last night, as the mighty organ played softly, as the lights glowed in iridescent warmth from above, there was friendly spirit about. Many who came were friends of A. H. McDonald and to them the beauty and charm of the interior gave forth a deep feeling. These people felt the joy that was to have been that of Mr. McDonald—and the memory of this man, whose dream has become a reality for his friends in Eugene, will come back each time they enter the foyer.³⁹

Description 1998

The theater is currently managed by Act III Theaters but was under the management of Tom Moyer at one point who also managed the Bagdad and the Egyptian. The McDonald Theater building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 with local significance as the only intact movie palace standing in Eugene; for its association with the Schaefers family; and as a component of a rare historic ensemble of buildings in Eugene. The building has a one-story, eight-bay commercial facade that extends 160 feet along Willamette Street which is the main frontage (Figures 45 and 46). A pilaster with a base of gray marble marks each bay. Only one other bay along the northeast corner of the building is treated architecturally the same as the front with the remaining surfaces of the building being unadorned and extending 160 feet along Tenth Avenue. Each storefront has a recessed entrance originally with panels of black marble beneath the display windows. The terra cotta facade has several elements which are



Figure 45. Northwest Corner of the McDonald Theater, Eugene.
Photo by Author, May 1998.

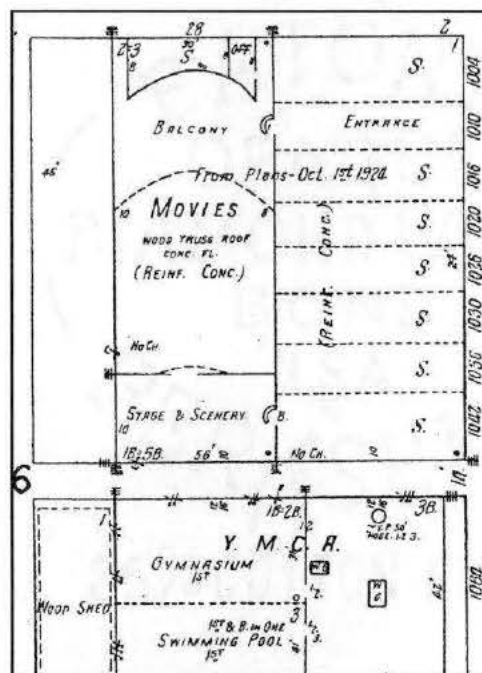


Figure 46. Sanborn Fire Insurance
Map Showing the McDonald Theater,
Eugene, 1925.

reminiscent of the Mediterranean style including a classical entablature embellished with open-mouthed lion heads, a shed roofed parapet covered with mission tiles, corner piers decorated with elaborate cartouches terminating in urns (now missing), and salomonica mullions dividing the upper story windows.⁴⁰ In the theater entrance bay is an arch with a keystone delineating the theater from the rest of the building.

Over the years, in efforts to “modernize” the storefronts, various businesses altered the appearance of their storefront utilizing plywood and corrugated metal sheathing. Although most of these treatments proved to be superficial, the corner bay at Tenth and Willamette had been significantly altered with the terra cotta replaced by white brick and large glass surfaces. The marquee, which was originally of burnished copper and glass with a sky rocketing 22' vertical sign with showering stars, was replaced first in 1938 (Figure 47) and again in 1971.⁴¹ The current marquee is an interpretation of the original (Figure 48) and replaced the 1971 marquee that was damaged in a 1987 windstorm. The original box office was also removed in 1971 and the entrance ceiling lowered. The outline of the original ticket booth was visible in 1993 along with the original raised tile floor of the entry. However, this surface is currently covered with gray indoor/outdoor carpeting. The National Register nomination form indicated that a portion of the original box office glass was present in the theater's basement, but it was not located during this research.

Restoration of the McDonald Theater facade was undertaken in 1986 with funds provided by the City of Eugene and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Title I

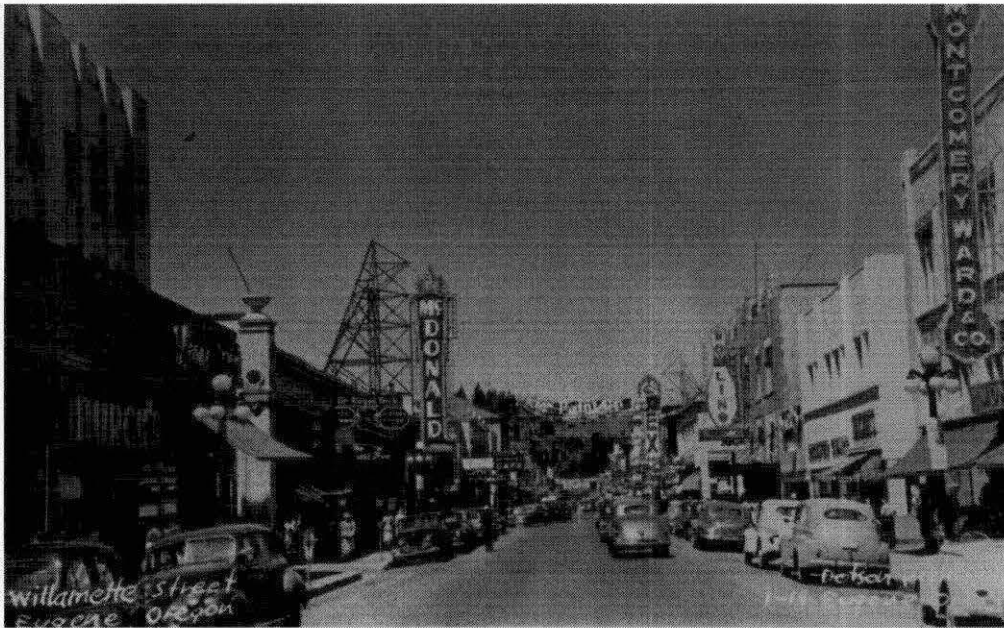


Figure 47. Looking North on Willamette Street, Eugene, c.1940. Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #GN1130)

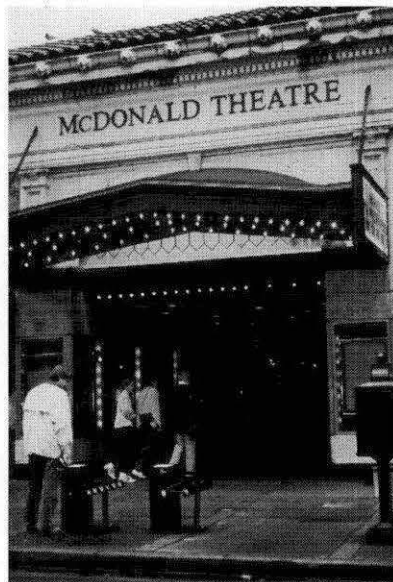


Figure 48. McDonald Theater Marquee, Eugene. Photo by Author, May 1998.

funds available through the city's Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG). The project was intended to assist in "reestablishing Willamette Street as a major focal point of retail development."⁴² The intention of the project was to "upgrade the overall condition of the McDonald Theater Building, thus creating a more appealing business location for prospective retail tenants."⁴³ The four major goals were to:

- 1) Clean, inspect and repair existing terra cotta work, 2) Rehabilitate existing pedestrian level storefront facades and entry bay appearance to match original construction and current tenant needs, 3) Remove existing mezzanine-level additions and remodels and rehabilitate them to the original condition with wood sash windows to match existing mezzanine windows from the historic period, and 4) to rehabilitate the existing parapet shed roof to the original appearance of the mission-style barrel tiles.⁴⁴

The McDonald Theater's interiors have been described as Romanesque, Mediterranean, Byzantine, Oriental and Nordic. This is not surprising since many historic theaters incorporated various stylistic motifs. The majority of the interior decoration at the McDonald Theater was altered many years ago. The applied decoration in the lobby, including the murals depicting Norse Tales, were plastered and painted over (Figure 49). The original ironwork in the lobby along the ramps and the rosettes for the ceiling fixtures remain intact but the original light fixtures have been replaced (Figure 50). The 1982 National Register nomination recorded that an original light fixture was still backstage but it was not located during this research.

In the auditorium a portion of the organ grilles is all that remains to indicate the richness of the original appearance (Figure 51). The light baskets were removed and the walls painted and plastered over. Curtains now line the entire lower wall surface from the

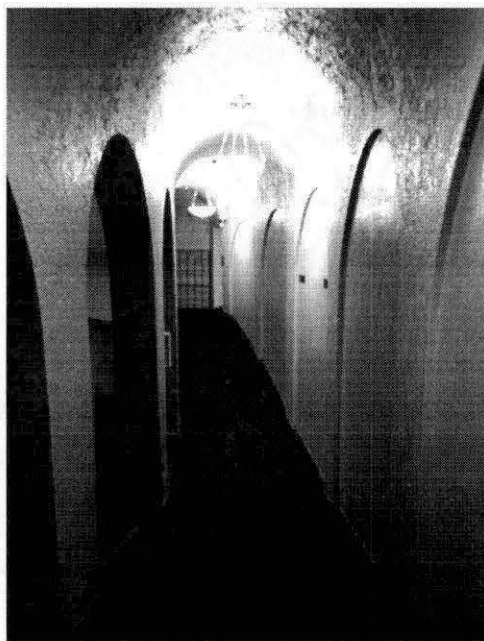


Figure 49. Former Murals in Arches to the Right, McDonald Theater, Eugene. Photo by Author, August 1998.

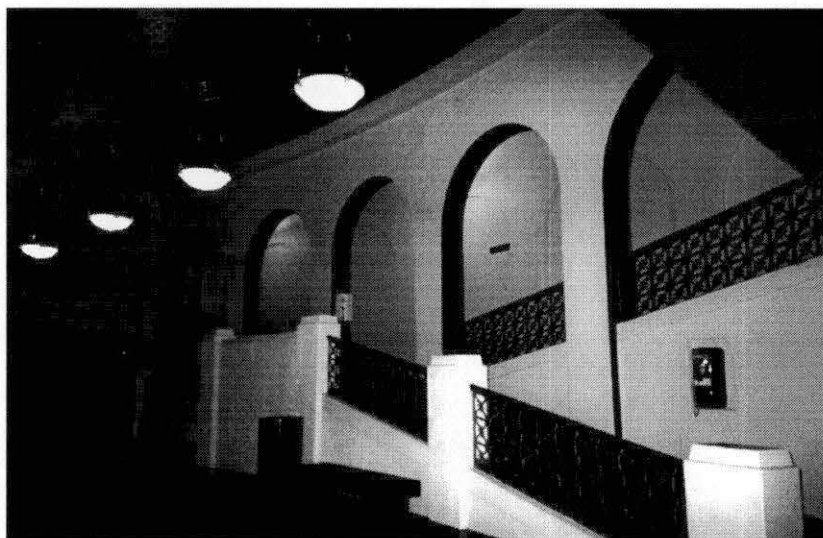


Figure 50. McDonald Theater Lobby, Eugene. Photo by Author, August 1998.

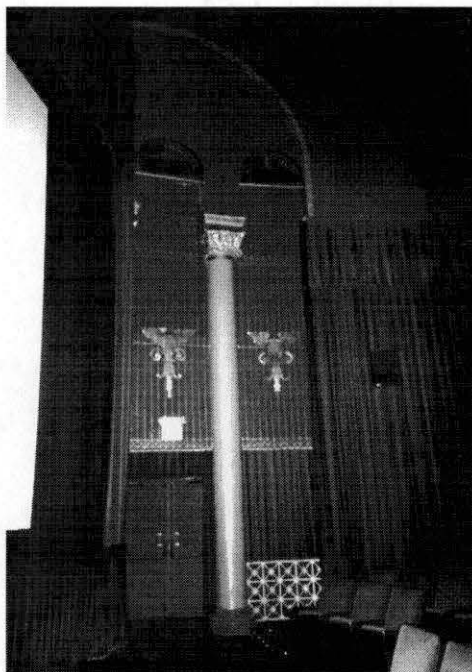


Figure 51. Organ Case Partially Obscured at the McDonald Theater, Eugene. Photo by Author, August 1998.

front of the theater to the rear. On each side of the theater only one column of the organ grille is entirely visible with about one-third of the grille hidden behind the curtain frame of movie screen (Figure 52). The orchestra pit is filled with sand and covered over and the original Wurlitzer organ was donated to Willamette University.⁴⁵ Backstage, the dressing rooms are intact (Figure 53). The only place which the original color scheme and applied decoration is visible is behind the movie screen on the proscenium arch (Figure 54). Under the current management of Act III Theaters, a new color scheme was applied to the theater's interior. Although the original applied decoration has been altered



Figure 52. Arches in the McDonald Theater Auditorium, Eugene.
Photo by Author, August 1998.

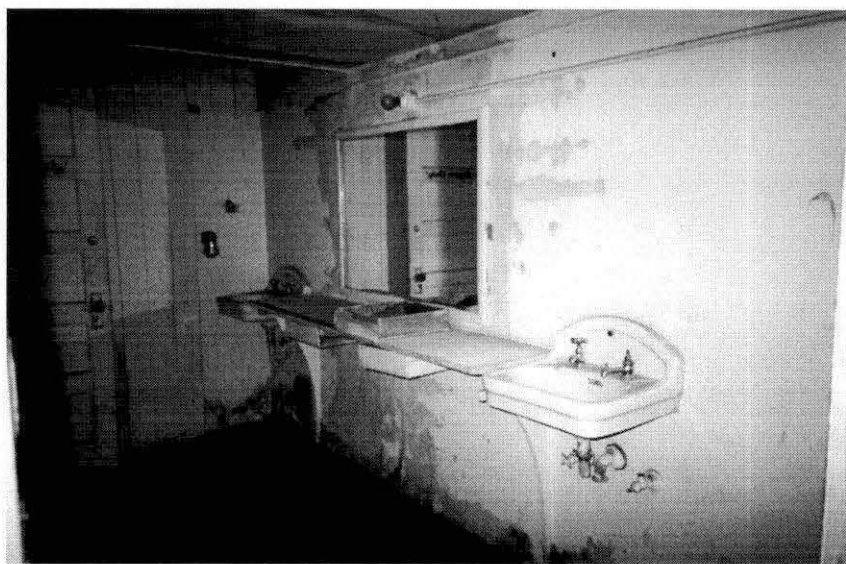


Figure 53. Backstage Dressing Rooms at the McDonald Theater,
Eugene. Photo by Author, May 1998.

for many years, the current color scheme of bright red, purple and blue is inappropriate for the historic character of the theater. The color scheme should reflect the historic, more subtle palette.

Some positive and negative changes have taken place at the McDonald Theater. The balcony was closed to patrons and has once again reopened. At one point the concession stand was located in the lobby in front of the double ramps disrupting their visual impact. The concession stand has since been moved to the foyer which is a much

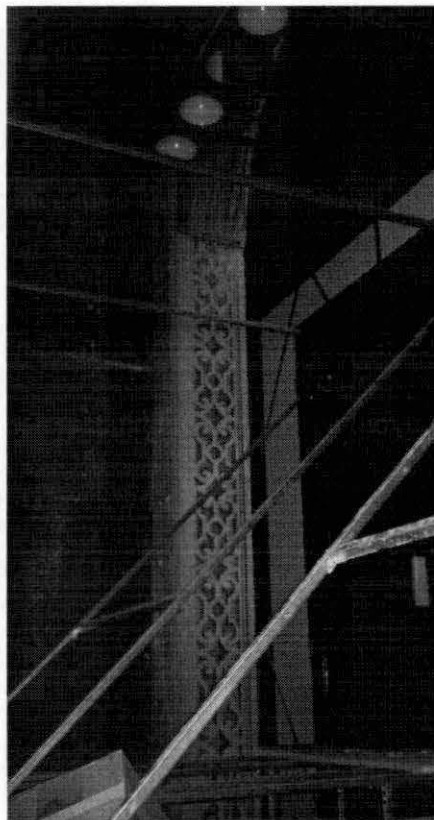


Figure 54. Proscenium Arch
Detail Behind the Screen at the
McDonald Theater, Eugene.
Photo by Author, May 1998.

more appropriate placement (Figure 55). The foyer was not historically addressed in detail in newspaper accounts or photographically indicating that the foyer was of lesser importance than the lobby.



Figure 55. Foyer at the McDonald Theater, Eugene.
Photo by Author, August 1998.

Summary

The exterior of the theater is a successful rehabilitation that has returned the historic appearance to the Willamette Street facade once again providing a sense of unity to the storefronts. It is significant that the building has remained a continual blend of entertainment and commercial space and that it remains a movie theater with various businesses occupying the storefronts. The current marquee is a successful interpretation of the original although it lacks the important vertical sign element which was an important feature of the theater until 1971. Without this element the theater entrance

remains unemphasized and uncharacteristic of the theater's early appearance. A vertical sign based on historic photographs would be an asset to the facade as well as an effective advertising element for the theater. The original tile and outline of the box office were present in 1993 before the carpeting at the sidewalk was added. If the tile remains intact it should be exposed and a box office reconstructed based on historic photographs. These suggested changes, carried out with the assistance of a preservation professional, would enhance the appearance of the theater's exterior by reincorporating significant elements that were characteristic of a movie palace. The final feature missing from the facade that should be replaced, based on plans available from the Lane County Historical Museum, are the terra cotta urns that topped the corner piers.

The spatial characteristics of the McDonald are intact and the auditorium has remained one space throughout the history of the theater. The balcony is available for seating which offers a unique experience to moviegoers. The loss of the theater's applied interior decoration and some of its architectural decoration is unfortunate. Incorporating an interpretation of the historic color scheme would return some integrity to the interior. The auditorium has lost nearly all of its historic character with removal of the light baskets and painting and plastering of wall surfaces. Two-thirds of the organ grilles are exposed with the remaining one-third hidden behind the curtained frame for the movie screen. Exposing the entire organ grilles would be a powerful improvement to the auditorium space. These two suggestions of incorporating an interpretation of the historic color scheme and exposing the organ grilles would initiate greater appreciation of the theater's history and could begin to capitalize on the theater's unique qualities.

The current manager is very enthusiastic about creating public interest in the theater and returning the interior to a more appropriate historic color scheme as well as providing displays about the history and original appearance. The theater's upcoming seventy-fifth anniversary would provide excellent momentum for raising rehabilitation funds. As the only movie palace remaining in downtown Eugene, the McDonald Theater is a significant building worthy of rehabilitation. It continues to be a landmark feature in the downtown area. The Lane County Transit District main station was completed within the last year on the same block and the "McDonald" platform is part of the station. Although much work remains to capture the historic qualities of the interior, the importance of the theater in Eugene's architectural and cultural history is unquestionable.

Notes

¹Carmi Weingrod and Judith Rees, "National Register Nomination for McDonald Theater Building," (Salem: State Historic Preservation Office, 1987), Sec. 8, 1.

²Ibid.

³"Promoters of Theater Building Project," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

⁴Weingrod, Sec. 8, 2.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Polk's Eugene City and Lane County Directory, 1925, Vol. 10 (Portland: P. L. Polk and Company, 1925), 56.

¹¹Weingrod, Sec. 7, 1.

¹²"Stien Bros. Erect Lowell Building," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

¹³"Gala Features on Bill for Premier to Drama Patrons. Magnificent Interior of Eugene's Finest Playhouse to be Thrown Open for First Time—Elaborate Prologues Prepared," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

¹⁴"M'Donald Will be Name of Theater, Manager Decides," Eugene Guard, 8 May 1925.

¹⁵Mr. Gallagher, Mr. Shean Next Week; Lowell Will Open Doors," Eugene Guard, 2 May 1925.

¹⁶"Spirit Guided by High Ideals Felt in Lowell Theater," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸"New Lowell Theater Will Be Open Soon," Eugene Guard, 25 April 1925.

¹⁹“B. F. Shearer Ends Decorating Task for New Theater,” Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹“Spirit Guided....”

²²“Charming Tales of Old Norse Days Depicted in Scenes on Lowell Wall,” Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵“New Lowell....”

²⁶“Equipment of New Theater Complete Now in Every Detail,” Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

²⁷“New Lowell....”

²⁸Weingrod, Sec. 7, 3.

²⁹“Lowell Has Ample Projection Room,” Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

³⁰“Spirit Guided....”

³¹“Lowell Has Ample....”

³²“New Wurlitzer Proved to Be an Innovation Here,” Eugene Guard, 2 May 1925.

³³Ibid.

³⁴“Lowell Has Ample....”

³⁵“Heating Work in Lowell is Done by J. Finne,” Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

³⁶“Gala Features on Bill for Premier to Drama Patrons. Magnificent Interior of Eugene’s Finest Playhouse to be Thrown Open for First Time—Elaborate Prologues Prepared,” Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹“Crowds Throng to Opening of Lowell Theater,” Eugene Guard, 8 May 1925.

⁴⁰Weingrod, Sec. 8, 1.

⁴¹Ibid., Sec. 7, 1.

⁴²“McDonald Theater Building Acquisition and Rehabilitation Project,” (City of Eugene, 1985), Sec. 15.1.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Weingrod, Sec. 7, 2.

CHAPTER VII

THE BAGDAD THEATER

Adaptive reuse projects are not always sympathetic to the history and original use of a movie palace. The balance between appropriate reuse and respect for the building's original function is not easily reached. Many movie palaces struggle to continue to show films or are adapted to a myriad of sympathetic, or sometimes inappropriate uses. The Bagdad Theater is a creative revitalization project that has reached an interesting balance.

Context

The Bagdad Theater is located on the northwest corner of the intersection of Hawthorne Boulevard and 37th in Portland, Oregon. It is another of Lee Thomas' theaters and is the only remaining large-scale movie theater in the Hawthorne district. The Oriental, also designed by Lee Thomas, was demolished in the seventies. Directly across the street from the Bagdad Theater is the 1911 Echo Theater that is listed on the National Register, and is a much smaller scale theater. The Bagdad's location is in an area commonly known today as the Hawthorne district. It is a vibrant, healthy community with strong, successful commercial and residential diversity. The Hawthorne district was platted in 1890 by James Morrell Russell and his wife, Grace and was called the Elsmere Addition.¹ Vigorous development began after the first bridge was

constructed from Portland across the Willamette. This formal rural area became a prosperous business and residential district joined to downtown Portland by streetcar lines. Prior to the Bagdad Theater, the First United Presbyterian Church, and a cider press occupied the site. As the area grew, the property values of this parcel rose dramatically from 1908-1910 rising from \$3,000 to \$20,000.² When plans were discussed for a potential theater in the 1920s, the Sunnyside neighborhood, as it came to be called, was the perfect place for a suburban theater. Demographically it spelled financial success to the theater developers.

In 1926 two companies struck a deal for three-quarters of a million dollars in which Universal gained half interest in the Portland based Multnomah Theaters Corporation.³ Under the agreement, Carl Laemmle, President of Universal Pictures, became the President of Multnomah Theaters Corporation effectively taking over the majority of the suburban movie theater market in Portland.⁴ Locally, the Multnomah Theaters Corporation owned eleven of the premiere movie houses in Portland during the 1920s making it the largest suburban theater circuit in the Northwest.⁵ Among their properties were The Clinton, Moreland, Graeper's Egyptian, the Bob White, Granada, Chaldean, Echo, Alhambra, Tivoli, Gay, Venetian and the Multnomah.⁶ In the national market, Universal Pictures was not one of the five largest national corporations in the movie industry during the 1920s, yet they remained a significant force.⁷ Although Universal Pictures did not have many of the top stars of the day under contract, they produced quality films that continued to draw audiences. Among their most successful were *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy* which were popular in the early 1930s.

Their horror film stars were Lon Chaney, and later, Bella Lugosi and Boris Karloff. In the comedy world they were successful with Laura LaPlante and Reginald Denny. In addition to acquiring the operating theaters, two lots were included in the agreement, one at a location on Hawthorne Avenue. It was the joint effort between Universal Pictures and Multnomah Theater Corporation that created the Bagdad Theater. By this period in the movie industry's history, neighborhood theaters had gained popularity and recognized financial success. The movie industry was thriving in Portland. By 1927 when there were fifty-two theaters located in the city.⁸

Description 1927

The contract to build the Bagdad Theater was negotiated with the Christman & Otis Development Company in May of 1926.⁹ The location was the 100 x 165 foot lot at the corner of SE 37th Avenue and Hawthorne. Construction of the Bagdad began in the summer of 1926 after the First United Presbyterian Church and the cider mill on the site were razed. When the building was completed it covered four city blocks, varied in height from three to five stories and had cost \$100,000 (Figure 56).¹⁰ At the time, it was the largest theater outside the downtown area and was called "a triumph of artistry and craftsmanship."¹¹ In anticipation of the Bagdad's premiere, The Oregonian reported that:

Pennants and banners are now flying along Hawthorne avenue proclaiming to all Portland the opening of the new house and will attract thousands to the street the night the doors are opened. Many blocks on either side of the theater on Hawthorne avenue will be aglow-literally a blaze of illumination-which is made possible by huge searchlights and floodlights brought to Portland especially for the occasion. Music will be provided by

bands for the crowds on the street and if the weather permits a section of the street will be roped off for street dancing.¹²



Figure 56. The Bagdad Theater, Portland, January 1928. Reprinted with Permission from the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 45753 #1861)

The Bagdad Theater, an “Oasis for Entertainment,” opened its doors to the east side of Portland on January 14, 1927. The theater’s manager was Edward Fautz¹³ and the main feature was “Her Big Night,” a comedy starring Laura LaPlante.¹⁴ The accompanying newspaper article boasted of the fine Arabian inspired decor that was not only apparent in the architecture, but in the uniforms of the usherettes as well.¹⁵ The article reporting on the opening night stated that:

The Bagdad, the latest and finest in the chain owned by the Multnomah Theaters Corporation, is a beautiful theater. It is bright, cheerful, large enough to be impressive, yet not too large to be cozy. Probably the most striking feature of its construction is the large entrance and foyer. Here is

a bright decorative motif; a fountain, lighted indirectly, plays a tune all its own. At the back of the foyer is an impressive colonnade, rising to the balcony. It is not a stairway, but an inclined walk [Figure 57]. Last night, as the organ played a welcome to the large opening crowd, massed flowers added their color and perfume to enhance the color scheme of the house [Figure 58].¹⁶

The organist for the evening was the recognized Portland musician Helen Earnst and the new conductor was Leon Strashum who had been the orchestral leader of many well known movie palaces.¹⁷ Among his credits were conducting at the Pantages in San Francisco as well as other theaters in Los Angeles and Oakland and he had been the leading violinist with the Metropolitan opera House of New York.¹⁸ The Russian born violinist was a graduate of the St. Petersburg Imperial Conservatory and later studied with Tchaikovsky.¹⁹ Another highlight of the evening's festivities was the appearance of Marilyn Mills, direct from Hollywood with her "famous horse, Beverly."

Evolution 1927-1998

Shortly after the Bagdad's opening a front page story reported the successful exhibition in Schenectady, New York of sound, synchronized to motion pictures.²⁰ Much of the excitement surrounded the system's ability to reproduce low frequency tones that had previously been inaudible with sound accompaniment.²¹ The article attested that "when reproduced today the strains of the 100 piece orchestra permeated every inch of the auditorium, with the deep low notes of the tubas, bass viola and bassoons easily identified."²² It was not long before Vitaphone was being installed in theaters throughout the country and it was reported to be arriving in Portland in March 1927.²³



Figure 57. Ramp Leading to the Balcony, Bagdad Theater, Portland, January 15, 1927. Reprinted with Permission from the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 47551 #1861)

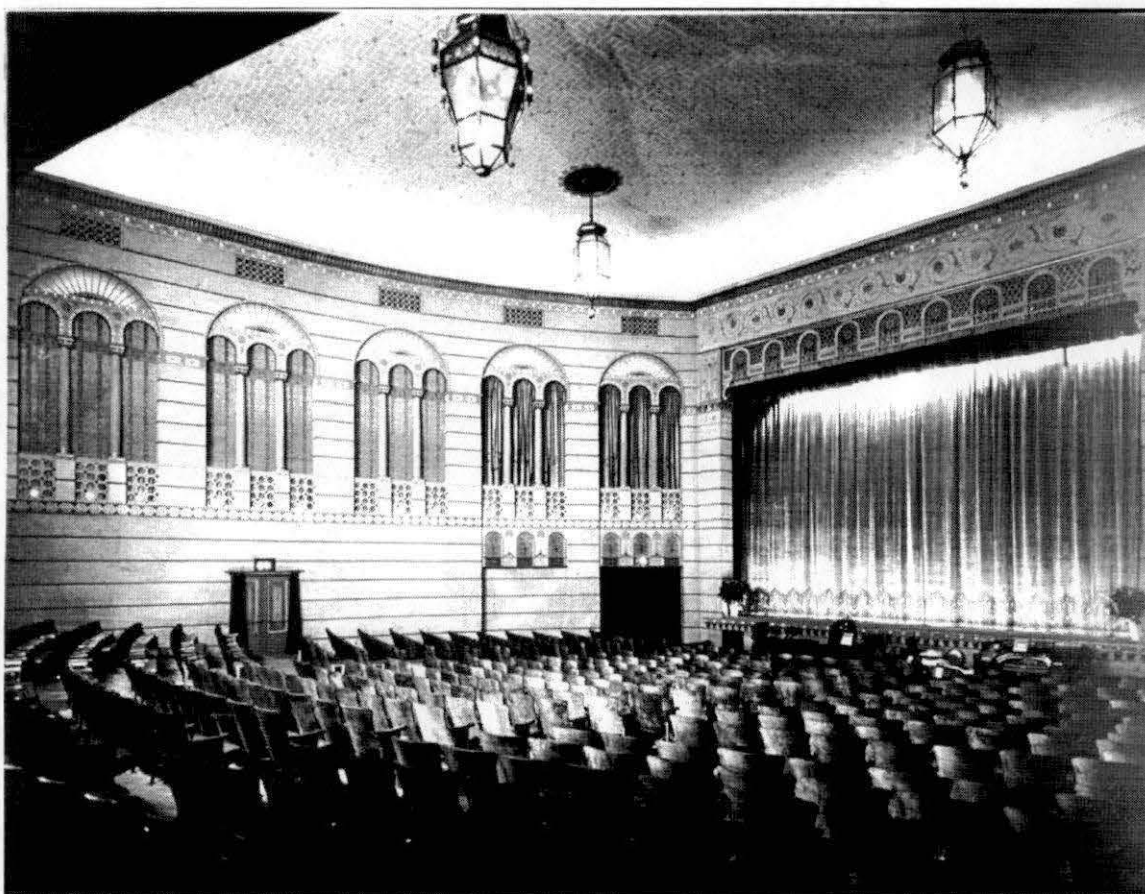


Figure 58. Auditorium of the Bagdad Theater, Portland, January 16, 1927. Reprinted with Permission from the Oregon Historical Society. (OrHi 83061 #1861)

Upon completion the building was leased to Multnomah Theater Corporation for a period of 20 years providing them with the responsibility of subletting the storefront spaces. It is interesting to note that a stipulation for the sublets included the agreement that no drug stores were to fill the spaces. The original storefront occupants were John A. Fenton and Monroe Palmer's Bagdad Barber & Beauty Shop, Birger Tonseth's Bagdad Florist, and a confectionary shop owned by William S. and Grace Russell called the Bagdad Den. As the theater became a location identity landmark, its name was adapted to many businesses. Within ten years after its opening businesses such as the Bagdad Apartments, Bagdad Grocer, Bagdad Pharmacy, Bagdad Service Station, and the Bagdad Five and Ten Cent Store were all within two blocks of the theater. More recent businesses have also borrowed the landmark name including Bagdad cleaners, Bagdad Shoe Clinic, Bagdad Tavern, Bagdad Waffle Shop and the Bagdad Oasis confectionary shop.²⁴

Vaudeville was an integral part of entertainment at the Bagdad since its opening and it remained in place into the 1940s drawing heavily on local talent.²⁵ In its seventy-one year history the theater has presented over 25,000 shows on stage and screen.²⁶ Among the well-known performers who entertained at the Bagdad were the exotic dancer Mercedes, and a young Sammy Davis Jr. performing with the renowned Will Mastin Trio. Celebrities that later visited the theater included Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher and Michael Douglas in 1975 for a special premiere of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to benefit the Oregon Mental Health Association.²⁷ The most recent premiere took place in 1991 with *My Own Private Idaho*.²⁸

Management changes and the evolution of the movie business and technologies inevitably fostered changes in the theater, some more invasive than others. Rudolph Christman of Christman Inc. erected the current marquee design in 1937 for \$500.²⁹ The Christman Company altered three windows on the second floor by cutting the concrete to make larger openings.³⁰ Joseph Bradt was manager of the theater for about a decade from the mid 1930s. In the 1940s the Capitol Amusement Company consolidated it under Capitol's "Vaudeville" moniker along with other local theaters. The fifties saw rapid shifts in management with about three turnovers. The Forsyth family took over operations in the 1960s with the Bagdad Theater Corporation.³¹ In 1972 Christman, Inc. leased the Bagdad to Moyer Theaters and they later purchased it on June 30, 1982 for \$150,000.³² Tom Moyer reminisced in a 1974 article about the single screen and how it started fading in 1966.³³ In the pre-war days he recalled that:

...you could stand at the door of a neighborhood theater and know who would be in each night, each Sunday afternoon...But movies aren't a habit any more. Now theatergoers are highly selective. They go only when it's a picture they want to see. And the big pictures keep on breaking records but the lows are lower than ever.³⁴

Under the Moyer management, the Bagdad's main auditorium was split into two spaces creating a separate 500 seat balcony viewing space in 1973 from the 700 seat main floor viewing space.³⁵ A third viewing space was created on the stage in 1974 and seated about 140 people.³⁶ A 1976 newspaper article reported on the movie theater experience in Portland and included a report on a trip to the Bagdad. Several additional older theaters were also visited, but of the Bagdad the writer had to say:³⁷

Acrophobiacs beware. As at Bagdad No. 2, latecomers enter this second floor hall from the front of the theater - head-on into the enormous screen image. To find their seats, they must turn and mount a series of dimly-lighted steps, a frightening experience for them, a disturbing one for the already assembled viewers.

When the current owner, McMenamins, took over the building, dentist and doctor's offices were located in spaces on the upper level and retail, including a video store, located in the storefront spaces. McMenamins began renovations in 1991 and removed the balcony screen to return the main auditorium to one viewing space. When installing new seats, the company replaced every other row and provided intermediate rows with a long table that facilitated their plans of serving food while showing second-run films (Figure 59). With the changes brought about by McMenamins, the theater seats



Figure 59. Bagdad Theater Auditorium, Portland. Photo by Author, August 1998.

700 and is often two-thirds full.³⁸ The storefronts, which were an integral part of the original building, have become the Bagdad Cafe that is available for food service to the theater. On the building's side street, McMenamins has opened small pub called Greater Trumps which specializes in port wines and cigars. The company is considering utilizing the stage area as a separate movie viewing space again. The building houses a variety of opportunities attractive to the neighborhood and passersby. The options include a movie and dinner in the theater, lunch or dinner in the cafe, or spending time in the more intimate Greater Trumps pub.

Ed White, the current manager, credits part of the theater's renewed success to its profitable location.³⁹ The area just one block from the theater on either side of Hawthorne is primarily residential. Although there is not a specific parking lot designated for the theater, the majority of street parking is unmarked and generally obtainable within a short walk to the theater. Diversity of the neighborhood is also a plus and other nearby businesses have profited with the success of the Bagdad. In a Roadside article interview a neighboring bookstore clerk said, "we love the Bagdad because when the movie lets out, people wander in here and we get extra business at a time of night that otherwise would've been real quiet."⁴⁰ To further capitalize on this advantage some businesses stay open late. Ed White also attributed the Bagdad's success to its community participation. They have devoted weekend receipts to the local Sunnyside Neighborhood Association and sponsor an annual fundraiser for a nearby School for the Deaf.⁴¹ Admission to the theater is just \$1 for all shows including matinees and double features. All of the films are second-run, and as most modern theaters, the Bagdad makes

its profits not on the movies, but the concessions. The menu includes pizza and sandwiches that complement McMenamin's ales and wines.

McMenamin's adaptation of the Bagdad has brought it national attention in magazines such as Preservation by the National Trust, a cover story in Roadside, and articles in Nightclub and Bar, and Utne Reader, an alternative publication, which ranked Portland as one of the ten best places to live in the U. S. naming the Bagdad as one of the best attractions.⁴² In tribute to the Bagdad's uniqueness, one writer stated that:

After you walk out of the Bagdad, aglow from a pleasant evening of food and film, you end up reflecting on what an original place it is in the world of movie theaters...It seems to have one foot securely in its fascinating if not overly fancy past, and one foot securely in its present atmosphere of comfortable and interesting fun.⁴³

The decor of the Bagdad is not exactly true to its name. The stylistic influences range from Byzantine and Medieval to Middle Eastern. As many of the exotic theaters of the 1920s, the theme was not necessarily scholarly based and elements of many different cultures were often present in the decor. The name Bagdad is not even spelled traditionally as the Baghdad.

The Bagdad Theater was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1989, under Criterion C, as a well-preserved example of a 20s-era movie house.⁴⁴ Part of the description identified it as: "perhaps the most prominent building along the Hawthorne commercial strip in the Sunnyside neighborhood...the theater's unique Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival style design is unlike that of any other theater in the city."

Description 1998

The exterior remains largely as it was in 1927 although the main entrance is no longer recessed and is glassed-in flush with the storefronts (Figure 60). As mentioned before, the marquee design dates from 1937. The Bagdad is rectangular in plan and has a



Figure 60. Exterior of the Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

structural system of reinforced concrete covered in stucco (Figure 61). Red tile covers the varied roof forms. The south and east elevations are simple with little adornment. The main storefronts are located on the north facade that has the most detailing and fronts Hawthorne. The former storefronts, each with a display window surmounted by a multi-paned transom and a red tile hood, now house the McMenamin's Bagdad Cafe that is one continuous space inside. Above the display windows are six balconettes with multi-

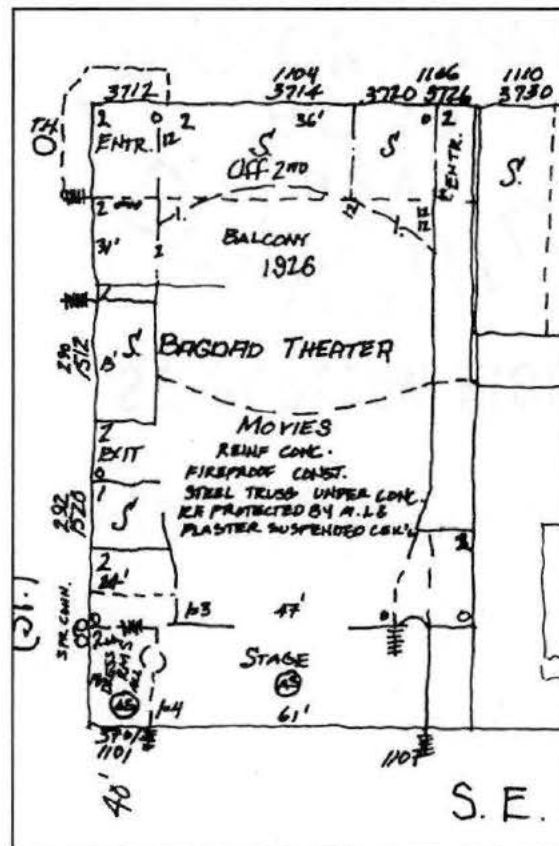


Figure 61. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Showing the Bagdad Theater, Portland, 1950.

paned casement windows set in blind arches. Continuing up the north facade, there is a decorative arched molding just below six square windows. The west elevation that fronts 37th Street is very complex with many roof forms and somewhat scattered fenestrations in varying wall planes. Two storefronts are located on this elevation at the street level. Each has a recessed entry flanked by display windows with the same treatment as the north facade including the red tile hood.

The interior decoration of the Bagdad is remarkably intact. Once past the concession counter, to the left is a shallow arch that leads into the 700 square foot lobby

space (Figure 62). Entering the lobby there is an overwhelming feeling of stepping back in time. The original wrought iron light fixtures glow softly casting dim light on the



Figure 62. Lobby with Ramps Leading to Balcony, Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

original stencils on the lobby beams (Figure 63). The fountain is functioning although not dispensing into the original basin (Figure 64). A mash tun, a barrel used in the beer-brewing process, is the current water receptacle.⁴⁵ Leading to the balcony, arcaded double ramps lead past murals set within arches along the walls (Figures 65 and 66). Columns supporting the arches are faux marbled with colorfully painted capitals (Figure 67). The dominant colors in the lobby are golds, blue-greens and red. The dim lighting and dirt from time give the colors a considerably dull appearance. The most detracting features in this space are the modern, plastic garbage cans that are in blaring contrast to the historic decor. The interior walls of the cafe space (which now occupies the storefronts) and the former box office area are painted in stylistic Middle Eastern inspired murals,

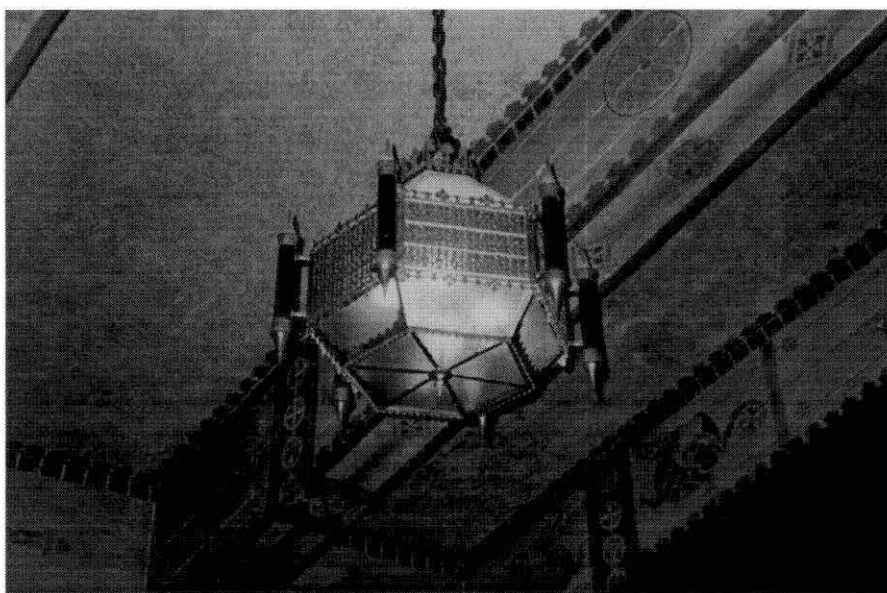


Figure 63. Original Light Fixture at the Bagdad Theater, Portland.
Photo by Author, April 1998.

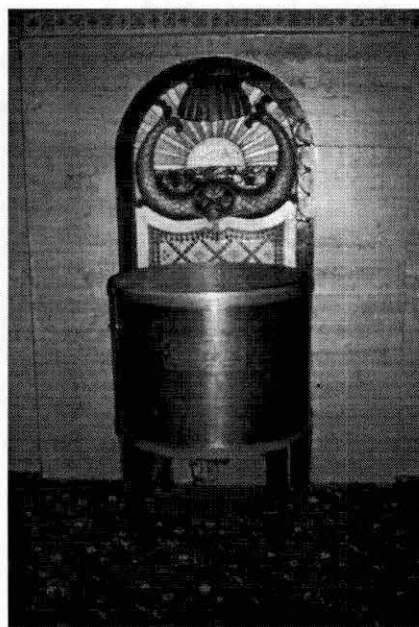


Figure 64. Lobby Fountain with
Mash Tun Receptacle, Bagdad
Theater, Portland. Photo by
Author, April 1998.

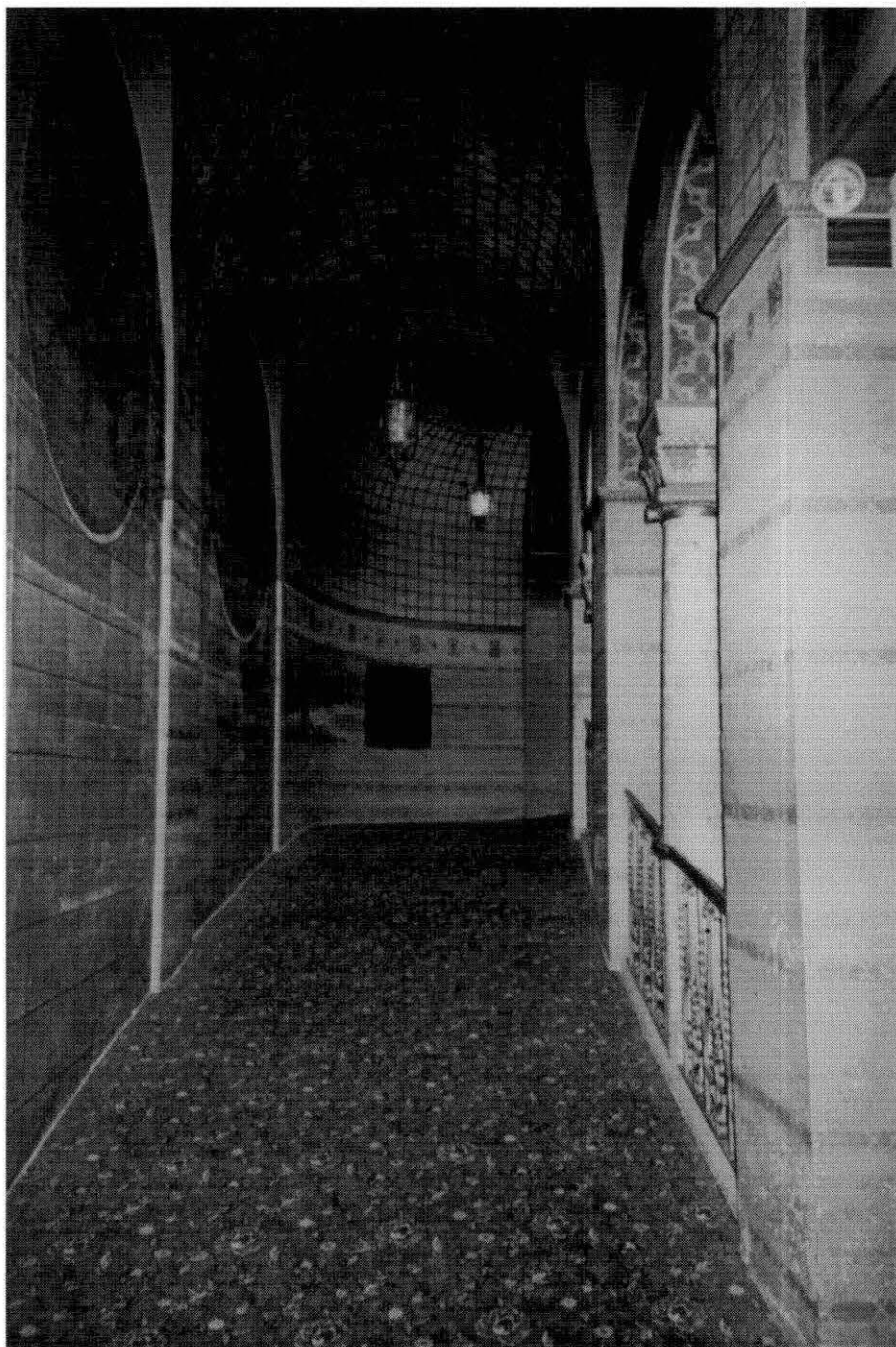


Figure 65. Ramp Leading to the Balcony, Bagdad Theater, Portland.
Photo by Author, April 1998.



Figure 66. Mural Detail, Ramp, Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

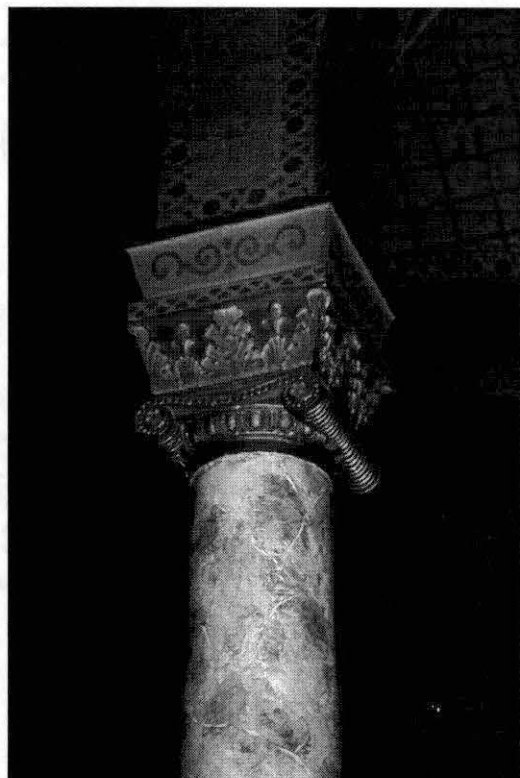


Figure 67. Faux Marbled Column, Lobby, Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

commissioned by McMenamins. The view into the former foyer from the former box office area is where the L-shaped concession counter is now located (Figure 68).

The main auditorium space also retains many of its original characteristics although an acoustic curtain was added (Figure 69). Fortunately it is only hung on the lower portion of the side walls. Although the movie screen extends past the proscenium arch, the painted decoration above and partially down the sides of the proscenium is visible. Above the acoustic curtains on the side walls are Trompe l'oeil wall tiles and large arches with an inset smaller arcade of three arches supported by two columns. A



Figure 68. Foyer with View of Concession Stand, Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

beautiful, yet now barely visible sunburst motif decorates the uppermost portion of each of the large arches. Painted detail in the auditorium is very difficult to distinguish. The original light fixtures are intact in this space and are quite grand with the appearance of many lights sheltered within a translucent golden shell. The coved ceiling with uplighting highlights the stencil work and the entire ceiling is painted with a geometric line pattern. The auditorium's central ceiling light fixture is detailed with painted scrollwork and stenciling. Toward the balcony, where the wall once was for the second screening space, some of the vibrancy of the original colors is revealed. They were



Figure 69. Auditorium Wall Arches, Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

spared dirt and aging for the nearly twenty years the balcony screen was in place. The same colors are used in the auditorium as in the lobby but they are much more difficult to discern. At the stage area the original light panel, catwalks and dressing rooms are still intact but the orchestra pit has been filled in.

McMenamins

McMenamins Inc. merits particular discussion not only for their management of the Bagdad, but for their efforts to revitalize several historic properties in the Northwest. McMenamins Inc. manages about 40 properties from Eugene to Seattle and brings in more than \$30 million in annual sales and employ about 900 workers.⁴⁶ Some, although not all, of their properties are historic sites that have been altered to suit the McMenamin's philosophy but they also own establishments in suburban strip malls. Restoration in the strictest sense is not their goal. They are more interested in restoring life to a building rather than returning every detail to a particular point in time. As Mike McMenamin stated in an article for Preservation Magazine:⁴⁷

What is history? Is it when the doors of a place opened in say, 1904 or 1924 when some of the most significant things in the life of a building happened, or when murals were put in-in say 1943? What are you restoring the building to? And in doing that, where are you going with it? The building's still there, it still has to be used, it still has to continue in its history. We certainly try to still go forward while respecting the past and to make that history available to people.

The McMenamin's story began in 1974 with Mike McMenamin opening Portland's Produce Row Cafe. This was the first of five establishments he successfully developed and then sold. His brother Brian joined the business in 1980 and they opened

the McMenamin's Pub in suburban Hillsboro. The first historic property they acquired was the Cornelius Pass Roadhouse, a farmstead in Hillsboro that opened in 1986.⁴⁸ All previous ventures had been leased, but they purchased their first historic property, an old red brick Swedish tabernacle church, in 1987.⁴⁹ The 1912 Swedish church became a longshoreman's hiring hall after 40 years and later unsuccessfully housed a theater group who purchased it in 1982.⁵⁰ Located on the northern edge of downtown Portland, it became their first large-scale adaptive reuse project. It was renamed the Mission Theater and became McMenamin's corporate headquarters. A movie screen was installed in the main space for viewing second-run films and the attached rectory became the corporate office space. As at the Bagdad, the Mission Theater serves McMenamin's wines and ales along with menu items.

Perhaps their largest project is Edgefield, which started as the Multnomah County Poor Farm in 1911. After several uses, including a nursing home, it was closed in 1975. Mike McMenamin visited the site in 1988 and began plans for a bed and breakfast inn. Four years later the project was finished with a 100 room inn on 25 acres including a garden and vineyard. The main buildings on the complex have all been converted to various pubs and guest rooms. Continuing with their major historic projects is the Crystal Ballroom in downtown Portland. It is a three-story, 30,000 square foot structure built in 1911 with a special ball-bearing floor for dancing.⁵¹ Throughout the years it saw the flappers of the twenties, Depression-era dance marathons, ballroom and square dancers and concerts from performers like James Brown and the Grateful Dead.⁵² The four million dollar renovation has renewed the life of this property that was condemned in

1968 but is currently on the National Register. The Kennedy School is McMenamin's most recent historic project. The 1915 school in northeast Portland was vacant for nearly two decades but has been renovated to include 35 guest rooms, a restaurant, theater, brewery and, in the community spirit, a garden and meeting rooms for local organizations.⁵³

McMenamin's properties have been extremely successful due in large part to the company's neighborhood participation, relaxed atmosphere and historical property development.⁵⁴ They have created a certain "look" to each of their properties with the unifying element, painted murals, depicting specific themes influenced by the historic property and completed by local freelance artists. The "Brews Brother's" success has additionally been attributed to an understanding of their clientele as well as being in the right place at the right time.⁵⁵

Not only are the brothers credited with the preservation of many historic sites in a creative and interesting marketing strategy, but they have also been credited with the "microbrewing revolution" in the Northwest.⁵⁶ Oregon and Washington are the two leading states in their proportion of draft beer consumption, 27 percent of the beer sold in the Northwest is drawn from taps, compared with just three percent in neighboring California.⁵⁷ McMenamin's is the largest brew pub company with the most inventive schemes and their marketing strategies are obviously working.⁵⁸ Their overall objective is to create family-oriented atmospheres that are creative and fun.⁵⁹ Mike McMenamin once said that a building "can't be a vessel of antiquity. It has to be vital. History continues."⁶⁰ History is continuing at the Bagdad in a revitalized way with McMenamin's

management. They recognized the unique qualities and potential of their property and have found an affective way to capitalize on them.

Summary

The seriousness with which McMenamin's researches their historical properties is impressive. They have a staff historian who compiles information about each historic holding. The company not only made a commitment to revitalizing the Bagdad Theater, but has also successfully revitalized several other historic properties that were threatened. Under the McMenamin's management revitalization of the Bagdad Theater has been a success. The building has experienced many of the spatial changes typical to historic movie theaters including walling the balcony into a separate viewing space from the main auditorium. To McMenamin's credit the auditorium has regained its spatial integrity. McMenamin's value the history of the theater and have made the building accessible to interested visitors even during the off hours. A scrapbook photographically detailing the McMenamin's renovation is also available to interested patrons.

The Bagdad is an adaptive reuse project that has met an innovative blend of uses. In the world of movies it is a unique and interesting compromise which is thriving. The combination of an atypical movie environment paired with atypical concessions, including food and specialty beers and wines, has contributed to the success of this revitalization project. It is certainly not a solution that could work for the majority of historic theaters but its success is worth noting. More importantly, all changes are

reversible enabling the theater to return to a live performance capacity should the opportunity arise in the future.

It is the respect for history that helps to make the Bagdad a success. It is a refreshing break from the stale, typically modern theater and makes going to the movies an experience to remember. The excitement of sitting in the theater beneath the fabulous original fixtures is magical. A reminder of the theater's long history is heightened by the musical selections played before the film starts. Although not necessarily from the 1920s, the musical array ranges from the 1960s backward creating a nostalgic appreciation for the theater and its place in the community of the twentieth century entertainment. It is an extraordinary place that gives a sense and appreciation for the past while being grounded in the present.

Notes

¹Tim Hills, "Bagdad's Past," manuscript (McMenamin's historian, 1991), 3.

²Ibid.

³"Movie Men Close \$750,000 Deal," The Oregonian, 22 April 1926.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Hills, "Bagdad's Past," 2.

⁸"Censors Tighten Film Supervision," The Oregonian, 12 November 1927.

⁹"Bagdad Theater Opens," The Oregonian, 15 January 1927.

¹⁰"Bagdad Theater Marks 70 Years on Hawthorne," Resonance From the Festival, newsletter, (Portland: McMenamin's Co., December 1997), 3.

¹¹Tim Hills, "A Preview of the Bagdad's Past," manuscript (McMenamin's historian, 1991).

¹²"Streets to Blaze with Bright Lights at East Side Theater Opening Friday," The Oregonian, 9 January 1927.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Hills, "A Preview...."

¹⁵"Bagdad Theater Opens."

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸"Bagdad Conductor Here," The Oregonian, 5 January 1927.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰"New Voices Given to Silver Screen," The Oregonian, 30 January 1927.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³"Portland to Hear Talking Movie Soon," The Oregonian, 9 March 1927.

²⁴Hills, "Bagdad's Past," 5.

²⁵"Bagdad Theater Marks...."

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Hills, "Bagdad's Past," 5.

²⁸Hills, "A Preview...."

²⁹Hills, "Bagdad's Past," 6.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²"Moyer is Acquiring 57-year-old Bagdad Theater," Portland, The Business Journal, 23 July 1984.

³³"Day of Neighborhood Movie House Gone," Oregon Journal, 22 May 1974.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵"Moyer is Acquiring...."

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Stephanie Oliver, "Big Screens but Little Else," Portland Willamette Week, 15 November 1976.

³⁸Teri Dunn, "Show Time!," Roadside, No. 23, n.d., 17.

³⁹Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰Ibid., 19.

⁴¹Ibid., 19-20.

⁴²Hills, "Bagdad's Past," 7.

⁴³Dunn, 33.

⁴⁴K. Zisman, et al., "National Register Nomination for the Bagdad Theater" (Salem: State Historic Preservation Office, 1989), 4.

⁴⁵Dunn, 15.

⁴⁶Tom Gauntt, "The Brews Brothers," Nightclub and Bar Magazine (May 1997), 37.

⁴⁷John Pastier, "The Brews Brothers," Preservation Magazine (November-December 1996), 72.

⁴⁸Ibid., 70.

⁴⁹Ibid., 72.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Gauntt, 38.

⁵²Ibid., 37.

⁵³Ibid., 39.

⁵⁴Dunn, 19.

⁵⁵Pastier, 71.

⁵⁶Gauntt, 39.

⁵⁷Pastier, 71.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 70.

⁶⁰Dunn, 33.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

The awareness of the importance of movie palaces and their rehabilitation continues to gain momentum. As discussed in the movie palace section, many of the grandest palaces have become successful revitalization anchors for their communities. Although often not as large and elaborate as the downtown palaces, many neighborhood movie palaces and theaters in small communities are of equal value in representing and promoting an appreciation for the evolution of American entertainment history. There are currently eleven historic theaters in Oregon on the National Register with five more listed as potentially eligible including the Egyptian Theatre in Coos Bay. Six of the Oregon theaters on the National Register are from the 1920s and include the Bagdad and the McDonald. It is likely that there are more of these potential National Register resources in the state.

Each of the case study theaters has undergone an interesting phase in movie theater evolution. The Egyptian Theatre is compromised spatially, in the lobby as well as the auditorium, but represents a rare ensemble of original components as well as being a rare example of Egyptian Revival architecture. The McDonald Theater, although intact spatially, has the most altered appearance with the original applied decoration and murals lost beneath paint and plaster. The Bagdad Theater seems to have come full circle with

its revitalization. Fortunately its applied decoration has remained relatively untouched and the present owner has returned the original spatial qualities of the auditorium. Its adaptive reuse has capitalized on the magical qualities of the theater and has proven highly successful.

Comparisons Between the Case Study Theaters

There are various references that provide clues to each case study and its original relationship to the community. The information included in the articles for the opening of each case study theater decreases with the greater population of the community. This is a direct commentary on the importance of the theaters to their respective locations. In Coos Bay, Marshfield at the time and the smallest of the three communities, the opening of the theater was a tremendous event meriting a special eight page section in the local paper detailing every contributor to its construction. Carl Berg, decorator of the Egyptian for B. F. Shearer of Seattle, received due recognition for his fine execution of the theater in an article citing his expertise on Egyptian decor. Berg was also the decorator for the McDonald Theater in Eugene, yet he receives less mention in the McDonald's opening article than the Egyptian's. There is no mention of the decorator for the Bagdad.

It is difficult to draw spatial and decorative comparisons between the Egyptian and the other two case studies since it is not a corner lot theater and it is such a unique exotic expression. An interesting aspect about the Egyptian Revival theaters, particularly the one in Coos Bay, is that there is not a jumbling of stylistic details. Everything is

basically Egyptian in color, detail and form whereas there is an eclectic mixture of styles and classical and exotic motifs present in the Bagdad and the McDonald.

Among the three case study theaters there are parallels that can be drawn particularly between the Bagdad and the McDonald. Although the Egyptian is quite different in form and style from the other case study theaters, there are still interesting comparisons that can be made. The spatial ordering in the theaters offers an interesting point of discussion. The following comparisons are based on the original appearance of the theaters rather than the present appearance except where noted. The main elements of each theater are discussed below within categories for ease of reference.

Exterior

The exteriors of the theaters are quite varied, particularly the Egyptian Theatre which has a mid-block location, whereas the Bagdad and the McDonald theaters both occupy corner lots with storefronts along the main entrance facade. (Refer to Figures 18, 40 and 56.) Articulation of the facades increases beginning with the relatively plain Egyptian Theatre with blind windows, to the highly articulated Bagdad with varied roof forms and wall planes creating an appearance of several smaller buildings, not unlike a little village, along the west elevation. It is interesting that the main elevations of the Egyptian and the Bagdad are similar. Both elevations incorporate seven rectangular articulations, blind windows in the Egyptian, full windows with balconettes in the Bagdad, which gives a feeling of height unlike the McDonald, which is more horizontally grounded. The main facade of the McDonald is located on the longest axis whereas the

Bagdad and Egyptian theaters have much smaller street frontages creating a greater sense of verticality.

The exterior of each theater fortunately appears much as they originally were recorded in early photographs. The Bagdad and Egyptian's facades have remained consistent while the McDonald's was successfully restored in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the box offices for both the McDonald and the Bagdad are not longer extant. Although the Egyptian retains its original box office, its spatial relationship to the theater has changed with the placement of the entrance doors flush with the front of the box office. This change has incorporated the box office function into the foyer as a section of counter space at the concession stand.

Marquee

There is no direct relation between the original marquees for the theaters other than the small, geometric glass pieces along the outside, underneath edge of the marquees at the McDonald and Bagdad theaters. Unfortunately none of the original marquees exist on the theater facades although adaptations of early marquees at the Bagdad and the McDonald have been reproduced. The McDonald is lacking its vertical sign element, however, making the exterior of the building much more nondescript than when it incorporated a vertical marquee. The marquee at the Egyptian, although not based on the original, has a similar massing which relates to the sidewalk. Originally, rather than relying on a vertical element on the front of the theater, the Egyptian utilized signage over the street which has been eliminated and a more modern vertical sign in neon is currently

in place on the facade. Of the three theaters, the Bagdad's marquee is the most successful representing a 1930s version of the advertising feature giving a sense of historic connection.

Foyer

Essentially there is not a foyer at the Egyptian Theatre. The original outdoor space surrounding the box office was rather shallow and led directly to the lobby space. The McDonald and Bagdad both have foyers that are quite different from each other. It is difficult to determine what the original small foyer at the Bagdad looked like since no photographs of it have been found to this date. It now houses the concession stand for the theater and is basically the same size as the original exterior space around the box office. It is much smaller than the foyer at the McDonald Theater. The McDonald Theater's foyer is quite deep and relatively narrow corresponding in size to the adjacent store spaces. The ceiling is made up of graceful shallow arches and the walls are elegantly detailed with sculptural lunettes resting on pilasters. Unfortunately, no original photographs of this space have been located to date although the original decorative treatment is described in verbal accounts. It is a long narrow space quite different from the more square foyer at the Bagdad.

Lobby

As mentioned in the previous paragraph the lobby at the Egyptian Theatre is rather small, particularly in comparison to the other case study theaters. Its size is much more

compact and the arrangement of its elements is quite different from the McDonald and the Bagdad. Perhaps this was intentional representing the closed and cramped feeling of a tomb. Rather than incorporating ramps as the other theaters do, the Egyptian utilizes dog-legged stairs to reach the mezzanine level. It is interesting that Lee Thomas had originally planned to incorporate ramps into the Egyptian Theatre.¹ To this date, however, no information confirming the original plans incorporating ramps has been found. Even with the spatial differences between the theaters, the stylistic differences are obvious. Decoration in the lobby of the Egyptian follows one theme unlike the McDonald and the Bagdad where the architectural and applied details are more eclectic.

The lobbies of the McDonald and Bagdad theaters are strikingly similar incorporating double ramps along a colonnade leading to the balcony (Figures 70 and 71). Although there are spatial similarities, there is more applied decoration apparent in the Bagdad as well as a more refined articulation of the openings in the arches along the ramps. Square piers support the arches in the McDonald creating five stencil-framed arches whereas alternating composite, faux-marbled columns are centered between rectangular piers at the Bagdad creating eight small arches.

Comparison of the applied detail at the McDonald and Bagdad lobbies include the similar treatment of the walls with evenly spaced bands simulating masonry. At the McDonald these were plainly painted and at the Bagdad they are stenciled patterns. Similarities between the two lobbies are evident. Each lobby incorporated painted murals framed in stenciled patterns visible within the arched colonnade. On the front plane of the arches there is a circular stencil at the mid-point between arches. The painted

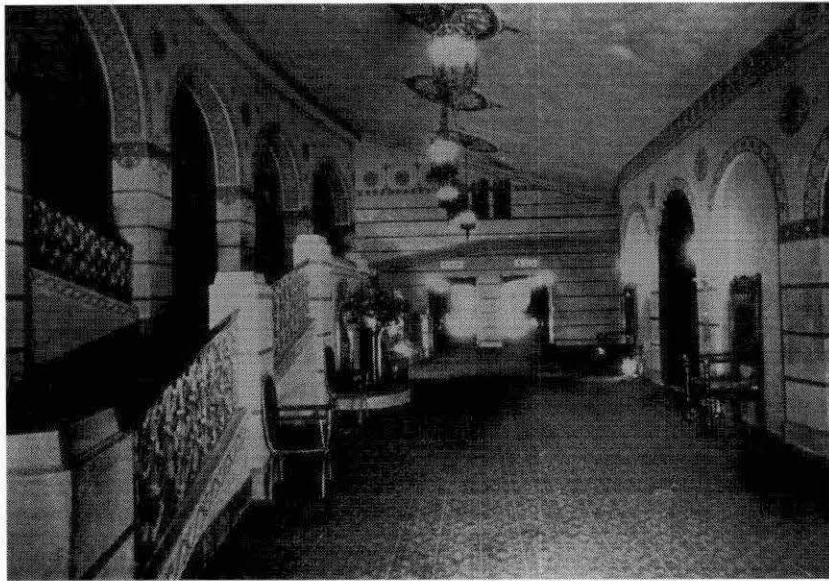


Figure 70. Lobby of the McDonald Theater, Eugene, Historic View. Reprinted with the permission of the Theatre Historical Society in Elmhurst, Illinois. (OR5-1)



Figure 71. Lobby with Ramps Leading to Balcony, Bagdad Theater, Portland. Photo by Author, April 1998.

decoration is generally similar in its application along the ramps, arches, walls, etc. The exception is in the ceiling treatment that remains plain at the McDonald, both on the main sloped ceiling and in the vaulted upper ramp. In general the stenciling at the Bagdad is more elaborate than at the McDonald.

Auditorium

The auditoriums of both the McDonald and the Bagdad share similarities in design and applications (Figures 72 and 73). The design and treatment of the theaters' organ grilles share significant features. Each has a large, double height, wide arch containing three smaller arches that are supported in the center by two columns with composite capitals (although they both have composite capitals they are not the same at each theater). At the McDonald the columns are double height and this arched pattern only occurs once on each side of the auditorium denoting the organ grilles. At the Bagdad, however, the columns are single height and the pattern continues along the wall repeating five times before reaching the balcony edge. This repetition articulates the wall plane providing dimension and interesting concealed lighting effects. In both cases stenciling is applied to the inside and face of the smaller arches and the top of the large arch is treated with a sunburst motif of slight proportional variation.

The wall plane of both auditoriums is treated with the simulated masonry lines to the height of the capitals in the large arches. At this point, the line decoration stops at the McDonald but continues up the wall at the Bagdad to concealed cove lighting and stenciled and painted decoration on the ceiling. The McDonald's ceiling in the

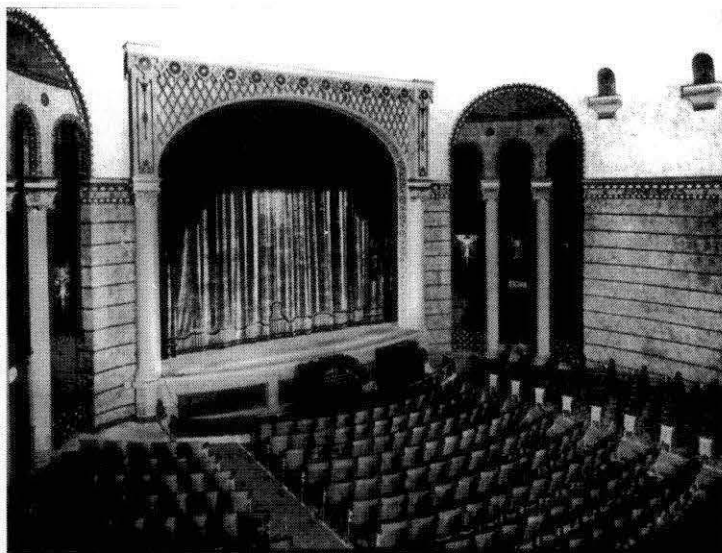


Figure 72. McDonald Theater Stage, Eugene, c.1931.
Reprinted with the permission of the Lane County
Historical Museum. (LCHM #GN1154)

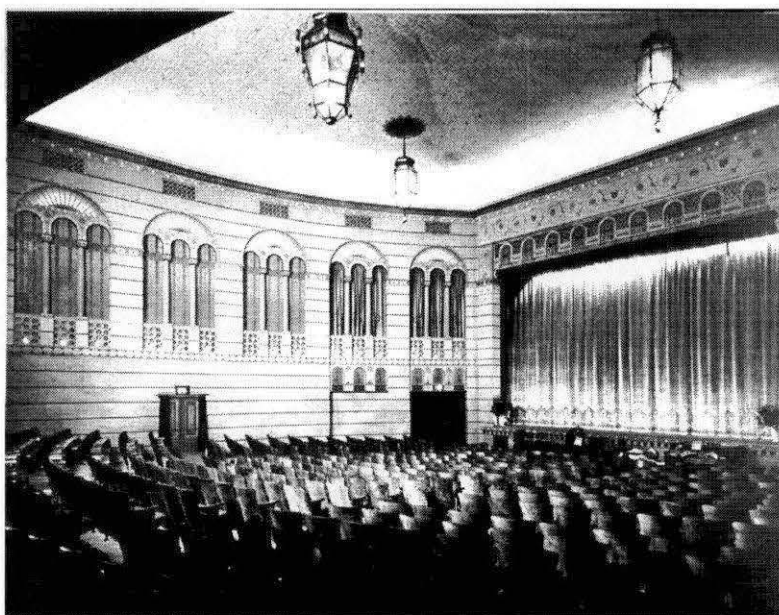


Figure 73. Auditorium of the Bagdad Theater, Portland,
January 16, 1927. Reprinted with Permission from the Oregon
Historical Society. (OrHi 83061 #1861)

auditorium and lobby are without stenciled and painted decoration. The upper walls above the capitals in the McDonald are also plain except for two incised, large arches on each side of the auditorium with four smaller arches painted within. On the lower west wall there is a mural (Figure 74). The McDonald seems a bit unfinished in comparison to the Bagdad particularly in upper wall and ceiling treatments. When comparing the two theaters it is evident how successful the Bagdad's painted decoration is in creating wonderful, fanciful spaces and making the loss at the McDonald more apparent.

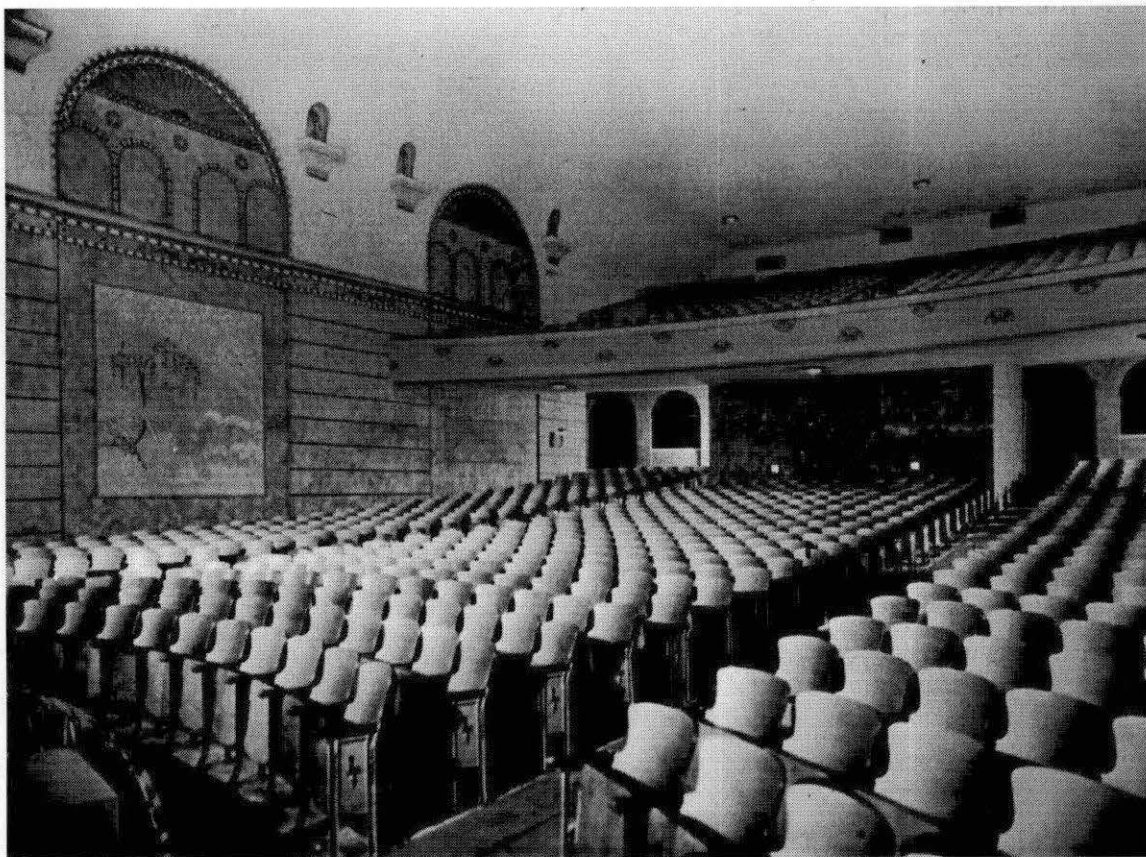


Figure 74. McDonald Theater Auditorium, Eugene, c.1931. Reprinted with permission of the Lane County Historical Museum. (LCHM #GN1153)

Future

The Egyptian represents a unique opportunity to showcase its history. The potential for repair and preservation funds could foreseeably come from special showings of silent films with accompaniment on the organ. The original ensemble of the box office, vaudeville drops, organ, furniture, and applied decoration warrant recognition of their rarity and incorporation into a current function where not already in use. The owners of the Bagdad are aware of, and have capitalized on, its unique qualities. Understanding and appreciating these spaces for the history they embody requires the type of investigation and commitment that McMenemy's has incorporated into the Bagdad Theater.

Understanding fosters appreciation therefore efforts to develop displays at the historic theaters that highlight the history of the particular theater, and highlight the history of the movies, would help to educate the public. Displaying historic photographs in the foyer of each theater would inform the public and give value to each of their histories and show what was lost and gained through each theater's evolution. At the Bagdad, a display of historic photographs would also prove beneficial providing appreciation for how little the theater has actually changed. Unfortunately, no historic interior photographs of the Egyptian Theatre have been located to date.

As mentioned in the Roadside article about the Bagdad Theater, designation on the National Register of Historic Places was draw enough for tourists to visit the theater.² History is a number one draw of tourist dollars and the Egyptian and McDonald theaters

could benefit from marketing their history as the Bagdad does. The McDonald Theater is on the National Register but it has lost much of its sense of magic with the loss of applied decoration and spatial features. Spatially it still evokes a feeling of stepping into the past. The Egyptian and the Bagdad still convey that special quality with the remainder of their intact applied decoration.

Summary

From this research it is clear that the spatial characteristics and applied decoration are the two most important features that maintain the integrity of a historic movie theater. These features should have priority in the planning for their future use. It is impractical to envision the restoration of all historic theaters to their original state. Restoration in the strictest sense would mean to return a theater to a specific point in time which is impractical due to the many changes and advances in technology. To survive in the highly competitive modern movie world the screens must remain wide and the concession stands a component. However, respect for the historic significance is important in allowing the movie palaces to age gracefully not expecting them to compete with modern theaters. The experience that they offer is unique to the modern movie market and each movie palace can capitalize on its unique qualities and characteristics. The discussion of the three case studies, although specific to each theater, have highlighted possibilities for other movie theaters. Parallels made between the case study theaters and other movie theaters may be useful in identifying and capitalizing on the special qualities and historic character of other historic theaters.³

Communities often have local resource people with proper training and interest in their historic properties who are willing to help encourage their recognition. Local citizens who are proud of and interested in their architectural treasures are often willing to devote time to the preservation of their community's history. Buildings with historic importance cannot survive without a commitment by the owners and the community. It is only with perseverance, professional consultation and planning, financial incentives, and community action and support that a historic property can capitalize on its past and become a viable part of the present.

Revitalization of historic properties can respond directly to the needs of a community. Not every theater is adaptable as a performance hall nor is that approach practical for every historic theater. Although it is desirable that movie palaces once again incorporate live performance into their repertoire, they were originally intended for movies as well. Historic movie palaces, particularly the fantasy architecture palaces, are remarkable because just as they did many years ago, they can still offer a unique experience to the moviegoer. The magic present in these movie palaces deserves celebration and recognition. These historic theaters offer patrons an opportunity to enter a world of fantasy and history. The opportunity to take in history and entertainment at once is a marvelous experience. It is even possible to use the historic technology that may remain in some movie palaces. For example, the atmospheric theaters could incorporate the lighting effects they once used on the ceilings for the modern pre-show entertainment. Modern moviegoers could marvel at the stars, clouds and other lighting effects that were enjoyed by audiences over seventy years ago. The movie palaces are

still exciting environments for what they are and what they were. The fantasy experience they have to offer is so far removed from the modern movie experience that there is no comparison and is an important, marketable point.

As historic preservation moves away from the short-sightedness of preserving only the best of the architectural styles or properties associated with famous people, vernacular properties such as the movie palaces discussed in the case studies, are gaining recognition for their importance as vernacular representations of the history of American movie entertainment. What other form of architecture had such an impact on the common person? Socially movie palaces played a specific role in creating a sense of community from urban areas to small towns. Their influence was widespread manifesting itself in some form in even the smallest communities. They enlivened the downtowns and brought increased revenue to nearby businesses. If effectively reused, they can serve those functions once again, a benefit with which mall multi-plexes can never compete.

History connects us to our past creating an understanding for those who came before us. It is important for new generations to experience movies as they were once were, in movie palaces located in the center of downtown. Those who disregard the movie theater architecture as unimportant disregard a strong force in the very definition of American society in the twentieth century. Think of Paddy McDuffee, projectionist for the Egyptian Theatre, who spoke of *Gone With the Wind* with such awe and respect. Indeed, the magic of that film was heightened by the spaces in which it was shown. Imagine the draw that classics such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, or *Ben*

Hur would create if shown in historic theaters. It is rare that the younger generation has the opportunity to see classic films on a large screen. Film preservation is a growing field and could effectively be paired with the revitalization of movie palaces. Exhibitions of preserved films could involve a historic movie club creating a summer afternoon draw or early weekend matinee providing the opportunity to enjoy classic films in the format in which they were meant to be enjoyed—on the big screen. Adding variety to the screenings, such as incorporating preserved short features, like cartoons, would contribute another important aspect in understanding what it was like going to the movies during the heyday of the palaces. Historic newsreels are also fascinating and entertaining as they remind us of previous fashions, political events, wars and social conduct, all contributing to the understanding of what the movie palaces once were. Incorporating these historic film exhibitions into the modern movie schedule could bring the world of the past and future together.

The movie palaces are architectural treasures worthy of preservation. They are not only a unique building type, but they represent the “fusion of architectural design, economics, entertainment and technology.”⁴ As videos continue to rise in popularity they still cannot compete with watching a motion picture in a theater where an audience experiences the anticipation of the show beginning, the thrill of a big screen showing, and the “bigger than life” emotional experiences presented by the film.⁵ Architecture makes a difference in the experience of a movie.⁶ The place can profoundly affect the perception of that experience.⁷ This was a certainty that the movie palace architects and decorators understood and capitalized on.

Audiences remain enamored with Hollywood. Movies still have a profound impact on modern society reflecting our realities and fantasies. American heroes, idols, and celebrities of the twentieth century include many movie stars from the cinematic world and this will continue into the twenty-first century.⁸ Today, fantasy architecture is designed and built in larger and more complex forms in places like Las Vegas and Disneyland. Instead of one building, it is a community of fantasies. The movie palace phenomenon is a reflection of a time not so distant that deserves understanding, recognition and revitalization. We are responsible for ensuring that cultural and architectural treasures are preserved for future generations. The movie palaces represent an important element in the history of the built environment. The fantasy, magic and widespread appeal of the movie palace phenomenon remains unparalleled in architectural history and must be respected.

A small atmospheric movie palace in Faribault, Minnesota had posted next to the switchboard:

PLEASE DO NOT TURN ON THE CLOUDS
UNTIL THE SHOW STARTS
BE SURE THE STARS ARE TURNED OFF
WHEN LEAVING.⁹

Americans still hunger for fantasy and continue to take pride in their history. What better way to capitalize on both than to incorporate those interests into the revitalization of historic theaters?

Notes

¹"Plan Big Theater in Noble Building South Broadway," Coos Bay Times, 5 December 1924.

²Teri Dunn, "Show Time!," Roadside, No. 23, n.d., 17.

³David Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1987), 32.

⁴Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse (New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1982), 9.

⁵Maggie Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theater, Starring S. Charles Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 184.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., 1.

⁹Ben Hall, The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1961), 102.

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