

A CITY OF [PART 1 OF 2] THEATRES

By Marc Wanamaker

■ Noted theatre historian Marc Wanamaker is Hynda's guest columnist this month. Part two continues next month.



Los Angeles Theater, 1931.

It is not generally known, but Los Angeles was one of the largest theatre towns in the United States dating back to the 19th century. Beginning with legitimate stages and later cinema theatres, Los Angeles boasted more than several thousand theatres sprawling throughout the entire Los Angeles area by the 1920s. Every main street in every town had a theatre on it, and by the time movies came to Los Angeles there were even more built that were bigger and better.

Los Angeles had a grand legitimate theatre history since the mid-19th century as described by famed stage and film actor Hobart Bosworth, who worked in several of the downtown theatres in the 1880s and 1890s. Bosworth described the theatre world of Los Angeles as "surprisingly robust and patronized by thousands of residents who were knowledgeable about the plays and players." Los Angeles had its first semi-permanent stage, an open-air covered platform with a proscenium arch near the Plaza in 1848, but the most important theater to be built in Los Angeles was the 1,200-seat Ozro Childs Grand Opera House, built in 1884 on Main Street near First. From the mid-1880s, Los Angeles became a regular stop for touring theatrical companies, starring some of the world's most illustrious stars including Sarah Bernhardt, Maurice Barrymore, Lillian Russell, Anna Held and Lionel Barrymore, among many others.

When the movies came to Los Angeles in the form of a "phonograph and Kinetoscope Parlor," people began slowly to patronize the new type of entertainment, leading the way for the enlargement of the "parlor" theater into the *Nickelodeon* theatre.

Marc Wanamaker, owner of the Bison Archives in Los Angeles, works in many aspects of film production, exhibition and research and is a world expert-consultant in film history. He has graduate degrees from Cal State Northridge, UCLA and USC in Theatre Arts, music and history, and administrative experience with the American Film Institute. For the past five years, Marc has been teaching film history at UCLA Extension. He has written many books on such subjects as Los Angeles; Beverly Hills; Hollywood; Theatres of Los Angeles; and two upcoming volumes on Studio City and Westwood/UCLA. Marc is a member of the prestigious theatrical

Wanamaker family from Europe and the United States. I know you will enjoy this as much as I did, and we thank Marc for sharing his great knowledge.

— Hynda



Guest Columnist,
Marc Wanamaker



The Childs Grand Opera House, 1920.

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member

Thomas L. Tally of Waco, Tex., became the first local exhibitor when he opened his Phonograph and Kinetoscope Parlor in August 1896 at 311 S. Spring St. This open-front store contained six viewing machines. Soon, Tally acquired a Vitascope projector and renamed his establishment the Phonograph, Kinetoscope and Vitascope Parlor. With the proliferation of films being distributed to Los Angeles from the East Coast by the Edison Film Co., Tally opened the Electric Theater at 262 S. Main St. in 1902, the first real movie house, a sit-down theatre with 200 seats. The Philharmonic Auditorium opened in 1906, overlooking Pershing Square, and by 1915 theater owner William H. Clune took over the theater and began showing motion pictures there with D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. By 1919, downtown Los Angeles's Broadway had both Vaudeville and movie palaces, attracting thousands to see the films of the day.

Only a few of these early theatres exist today. Examples include the Cameo Theater, built in 1910, which was the oldest continuously running movie theater in Los Angeles when it closed in 1991, and the Clune's Broadway Theater, which opened in the same year. They became very popular theaters during the early 20th century. The Globe Theater, which opened in 1913, became a flea market. The Rialto theater opened in 1917 along with the Kinema on Grand Avenue. The Million Dollar Theater, showman Sid Grauman's first Los Angeles picture palace, opened in 1918.

With the coming of the 1920s, more movie palaces opened on Broadway, and they included grand theatres including The Loew's State Theater, which opened in 1921, and Grauman's Metropolitan Theatre in 1923. The Orpheum, which opened in 1926, was the Los Angeles showcase for the Orpheum Vaudeville circuit and a favorite venue for performers Will Rogers, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Jack Benny. The United Artists Theater was opened by Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and D.W. Griffith in 1927 in the "Hollywood-Gothic" style. The Mayan Theater on South Hill Street, which also opened in 1927 in a "Hollywood-Mayan" style, had been completely renovated into a nightclub in recent times. By 1931, the only other theater to open in downtown Los Angeles before the Great Depression was the French "Versailles"- style Los Angeles Theatre, which opened with the premiere of Charles Chaplin's *City Lights* in 1931.

At the same time that downtown Los Angeles theaters were being built since 1915, other parts of Los Angeles



Orpheum Theatre, Broadway, 1931.

were also building theaters to service their respective neighborhoods.

Examples of some of the more famous theaters in the greater Los Angeles area included the Wiltern Theatre, which opened in 1931 at Wilshire Boulevard and Western Avenue. This grand Art Deco theatre is still one of Los Angeles's greatest architectural treasures and attracts thousands of music lovers for varied musical shows and musical groups. Other midtown theaters designed in the more traditional Spanish-Italian style of architecture included the Belmont Theatre at 126 South Vermont Ave., which opened in 1926, and the Uptown Theatre at Western Avenue and Tenth Street (now Olympic Boulevard), which opened in 1925 with one of the largest electric signs on the West Coast. The Westlake Theatre on South Alvarado Street, built in 1926, had its neon sign recently restored and can be seen for miles around.

One of the more interesting architectural landmark theatres is the Forum, at 4050 West Pico Blvd. Architect Edward J. Borgmeyer designed in the grand style of ancient Rome. Opening in 1924 with D.W. Griffith's *America*, the theater today still exists as a church. Wilshire Boulevard, which became one of Los Angeles's longest thoroughfares, had become one of the city's concentrations of movie theatres. Some of the more prominent theaters included the Four Star at 5112 Wilshire Blvd. in the Art Deco style; the Fox Ritz Theatre, on the south-east corner of La Brea and Wilshire Boulevard; the Fox La Brea, built in 1932; the Larchmont Theatre, which opened in 1921; the El Rey the-



Million Dollar Theatre, Broadway, 1920.

atre, a 900-seat Art Deco jewel that opened in 1937 and still exists in the form of a nightclub today; and the Fairfax Theatre at Fairfax and Beverly Boulevard, which was transformed into a multiplex like many around the Los Angeles area during the 1980s and 1990s.

One of the greatest of the midtown theater landmarks was the Carthay Circle Theatre, which was once located at 6316 San Vicente Blvd. Opened in 1926 in the Spanish Revival style, its circular auditorium and 140-foot tower were unique among Los Angeles theatres. The interior was a tribute to the early years of California's history, featuring murals illustrating pioneer times. When the Carthay Circle Theatre opened, the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed it "The Beacon light of amusement seekers." Since its original opening, the Carthay Circle was the site of many Hollywood premieres, including the West Coast premiere of *Gone With the Wind*.

NEXT MONTH:
**The Theatres
of Hollywood,
Brentwood and
the Valley.**



Wiltern Theater, Western and Wilshire Boulevards, 1932.



Tally's New Broadway Theater, Downtown L.A., 1909.