

THE STAGES OF LA

[PART 2 OF 2]

By Marc Wanamaker

■ Part two of a survey of the theatres of early 20th century Los Angeles focuses on Hollywood, Brentwood and the Valley.



Hollywood Pantages Theatre, 1939.

Marc, 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

Guest Columnist,
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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



La Reina Theatre, Sherman Oaks, 1938

Photos courtesy the author.

Here's part two of Marc Wanamaker's wonderful overview of some of Los Angeles' most notable theatres. Part one ran last month.

HOLLYWOOD

The building of theatres in Hollywood began in 1910, when the Idyl Hour Theatre opened its doors at 6525 Hollywood Blvd. By 1913, the Idyl Hour, whose name changed to the Iris Theater, moved to 6415 Hollywood Blvd., and then, by 1918, to yet another location, 6508 Hollywood Blvd. Also in 1913, the Hollywood Theatre opened with a capacity of 700, the same year that Cecil B. DeMille came to Hollywood with the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company to film their first film, *The Squaw Man*, which led their company to success and which later becoming Paramount Pictures, the first major motion picture studio that still remains in Hollywood to this day.

The 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s saw incredible growth of theater building, with the Egyptian, Chinese and Pantages Theaters as Hollywood's movie palaces. Many of the Hollywood theatres were built in the silent era and were later converted to sound film exhibition. During the 1940s, several of the Hollywood theaters were completely remodeled and became unrecognizable to even the residents in the vicinity. They utilized the new styles of the "modern age," including Streamline Moderne and Skouras style (a "Hollywood baroque" design style developed by Fox West Coast Theatres president Charles Skouras) for the exterior and interior designs. The movie palaces of Hollywood, including Grauman's Egyptian and Chinese theatres, were built as "movie palaces" designed for premieres. Grauman's Egyptian Theatre, built in 1922, continued as a first-run premiere house well into the 1960s. By the 1970s, the Egyptian (which became a United Artists theater) began to decline, losing its first-run status well into the 1990s. After suffering damage in the 1994 earthquake, the theater was restored and re-opened as the American Cinematheque. Grauman's Chinese Theatre was built as part of a major redevelopment of Hollywood in 1927 along with the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Grauman's Chinese Theater's unique architectural style has become a Hollywood icon to this day.

The Paramount Hollywood Theater opened as a film theater in 1941 with *Citizen Kane*. It was originally a legitimate house named the El Capitan and was taken over by Paramount the following year. The Paramount was renamed the El Capitan by Disney in the 1980s and is currently a Disney flagship theater playing first-run Disney releases.

The Warner Hollywood Theatre opened in 1927 at Wilcox and Hollywood Boulevard, and since the 1940s as a first-run theatre. It became world-famous when it was converted into a Cinerama theater in the 1950s.

In 1931, Hollywood's most beautiful theater, the Pantages, opened as one of the most important Hollywood-Art Deco theatres in the United States. Theatre critic Edwin Schallert wrote after the gala 1930 opening, "The Pantages Theatre is a step beyond any other theatre that has been opened here in its note of modernity indeed. Architecture seems to have progressed to new moods since the last playhouse made its debut." B. Marcus Priteca was already well known for designing beautiful theatres. He was successful because he also excelled at creating good sightlines and crystal-clear acoustics. He once said, "Seeing is hearing." He knew that using all of the senses enhanced the film-going experience. The dramatic and dazzling interior was refurbished in 2000 and is now a live theatre venue, presenting major traveling musical shows.

Located in the Hollywood area was one of the largest concen-

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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

trations of film theaters in the Los Angeles area. From the small neighborhoods to Hollywood Boulevard, the theatres of Hollywood were designed in many styles and attracted very diverse audiences over the years. Some of the older Hollywood neighborhood theatres included the Bard's Theatre that opened in 1923 on the backlot of the old D.W. Griffith studio. This 800-seat theatre was designed in the Egyptian style and later renamed the Vista Theatre that still shows first-run films today.

Hollywood had other legitimate stages including the Hollywood Playhouse Theatre, built between 1925 and 1927, which later became the Hollywood Palace Theater on Vine Street, and the Music Box Theater, built in 1926, which became the Pix Theatre and then the Henry Fonda Theatre. Currently it's a music performance venue.

Other Hollywood Boulevard theatres were built between the 1920s and 1940s that served the general Hollywood area. Some of these included the Marcal Theater, which opened in 1928 and was near Bronson Avenue. The nearby Hawaii Theatre opened in 1940. The Vogue Theatre, designed by one of the great theatre designers, S. Charles Lee, opened in July 1935. Currently, the theater has undergone a complete transformation into a nightclub. S. Charles Lee also designed the nearby Hollywood Theatre, which underwent a complete renovation in 1938. The famous marquee is intact, but it now fronts the Guinness Book of World Records Museum. On Hollywood Boulevard, across the street from the Pantages Theatre, was the Hitching Post Theatre, which first opened in 1941 and later re-opened near Argyle during the war.

Hollywood's first art house opened as the Filmarte Theatre, 1228 N. Vine Street at La Mirada, in 1928. It later became famous as the Steve Allen Playhouse in the 1960s next door to the Hollywood Ranch Market, where Steve Allen would perform stunts and interview Hollywood residents on the street. In the Los Feliz district of Hollywood is the Los Feliz Theatre, built in 1934 as an art house. It was turned into a triplex in the 1990s.

Lastly, the most unique of all the theatres in Hollywood was the construction of the Cinerama Dome Theatre in 1963. When the film *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* premiered at the Dome's opening, moviegoers saw a concrete geodesic dome housing a special theatre that was designed by Welton Becket. The dome was constructed of 316 concrete hexagonal panels and became a Los Angeles cultural monument after its restoration in 2004.

THE WESTSIDE

Every neighborhood in Los Angeles had its local theater. Some were of exceptional quality in design and importance. The Westside had many landmark theaters including the Marquis of West Hollywood, which once stood on Melrose Avenue just east of Doheny Drive. Opened in 1925, the theater would have gone unnoticed if it weren't for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which purchased the theater for its headquarters beginning in 1949 and moving in 1975. The Fox Stadium Theatre was built at 8906 West Pico Blvd. in the 1930s and was a part of the Fox West Coast theatre chain. Designed in 1937, the Lido Theatre was a multipurpose structure on Pico Boulevard near the corner of Fairfax Avenue. The Lido was an Art Deco landmark on Pico for decades before it closed and was adapted for other commercial uses. In Westwood, the Crest Theatre, also known as the Majestic Crest, was built by Frances Seymour Fonda, the second wife of Henry Fonda. Opened in 1941, the theater today is still in operation.

The two most celebrated theaters of Westwood Village are the Village Theatre and the Bruin. The Village was built as part of the original development of Westwood Village in 1931. Designed by Percy Parke Lewis, the Fox Village Theatre is famed for its neon-topped tower. Just across the street, the Bruin Theatre was opened in 1937 and was designed by S. Charles Lee with a Moderne concave façade and a half-circle wraparound marquee. Both theaters have had "dual" premieres over the years, a tradition that continues today.

Continuing west into Brentwood and Sawtelle are samples of some other notable theaters, including the Brentwood Theatre, which opened at 11611 Wilshire Blvd. in 1926 and became a popular neighborhood house for almost four decades before its closure and demolition. Sawtelle also had two theaters, with the Nuart and Tivoli, both on Santa Monica Boulevard. The Nuart at Sawtelle Boulevard opened in the early 1930s and continues to be a



Grauman's Chinese Theatre, 1956

popular art house. The Tivoli, which opened in the 1920s, became the Laemmle Royal Theater. Nearby in Brentwood is the Aero Theatre, built by Donald Douglas of Douglas Aircraft in 1940 as a morale booster for his employees. It is now operated by the American Cinematheque and shows classic and rare films.

The Fox Venice, which opened in 1951, was the only theatre that ever opened on Lincoln Boulevard and continued as a popular venue well into the 1980s, when it closed in 1988 for good. The theatre became a music concert venue in the late 1970s and was a very popular nightclub that drew patrons from around California to see top acts perform on its stage. Also, there was a theatre on the Ocean Park Pier named the Dome Theatre. Built in 1922, the Dome became a part of the Ocean Park history along with its sister theatre, the Rosemary, when the entire pier was demolished completely in the 1970s.

SAN FERNANDO VALLEY

Lastly on this tour of Los Angeles theatres are some of the San Fernando Valley sites that became landmarks for decades. The Studio City Theatre at 12136 Ventura Blvd. was opened in 1938 with its beautiful neon marquee that could be seen for miles around. After closing in the 1980s, the building with its marquee became a Book Star bookshop. In North Hollywood there was the El Portal on Lankershim Boulevard, which opened in 1926 and after many decades was remodeled into a legitimate stage as it currently is operating. The Magnolia Theatre at Magnolia and Hollywood Way opened in 1929 and was designed in a

French Deco style. Like many others in the Valley, it did not survive. The beautiful La Reina Theatre at 14626 Ventura Blvd. in Sherman Oaks, which opened in 1938 and was designed by theatre designer S. Charles Lee, had one of the most striking neon marquees and blade signs in the entire San Fernando Valley. It too did not survive after its closing in 1987, but the façade was kept to front commercial stores on the boulevard.

There are so many other great landmark and neighborhood theatres that cannot be covered in this article, since there were several thousand theatres in the Los Angeles area over a period of 100 years. Theatres such as the Rivoli in Van Nuys; the Alex in Glendale; the Figueroa south of Downtown Los Angeles; the Leimert in Leimert Park on West 43rd Place; the Mesa at Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue; the Baldwin on South LaBrea Avenue; the Academy, which opened in 1939 with its landmark Streamline Moderne tower design on West Manchester Boulevard; the Manchester Theatre on Manchester Avenue; the Inglewood and the United Artists on North Market Street in Inglewood; the Loyola in Westchester; the Alcazar on East Gage Avenue; and the Warner in Huntington Park, built in 1930 and an Art Deco jewel.

All of the theatres of Los Angeles left a cultural, architectural and historical mark on the development of the Los Angeles area. These are the theatres where the City of Los Angeles residents patronized and remember as a part of their lives. The theatres of Los Angeles and its heritage continue to be a part of the rich cultural heritage of the motion picture industry in Southern California that still endures today.



Bruin Theatre Westwood, 1938.