

THEATERS--LOS ANGELES California VF.

California VF. Broadway

Historic Theater

District California VF.

California VF.



A walking tour
sponsored by the
Los Angeles Conservancy

Broadway Historic Theater District

Broadway between 3rd and 9th Streets is the first and largest Historic Theater District listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Designated in 1979, the district includes an assortment of theaters illustrating the evolution and vitality of popular entertainment during the first third of this century.

The city's earliest theater district developed in the vicinity of the old Plaza, in what is now El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Park. There, in 1870, undertaker-turned-showman William Abbot erected the city's first permanent theater, named for his wife Merced, which hosted itinerant troupes visiting the frontier town. With the boom years of the 1880s, development pushed southward, creating the next significant theater district along Main Street. In approximately 1910, nickelodeons and vaudeville theaters began to appear on Broadway, drawing business even further downtown. The opening of Sid Grauman's opulent theater (now the Million Dollar) on Broadway in 1918 established that street as a venue for motion pictures, and helped cement Broadway's reputation as the city's third principal theater district.

By 1931, Broadway between 3rd and 9th Streets was the west-coast equivalent of New York's Great White Way. With a dozen major theaters in a six-block area, the Broadway district contained the highest concentration of movie palaces in the world and a combined seating capacity of more than 15,000. But construction of the fabulous Chinese, Egyptian and Pantages Theaters on Hollywood Boulevard in the late '20s marked the beginning of yet another shift in theatrical activity, eventually resulting in the emergence of Hollywood as the city's first-run theater district. Hollywood, in turn, retained its dominance until the 1960s, when Westwood Village began to attract premieres.

In their heyday, Broadway's greatest theaters were total entertainment environments, equalling or sur-

passing the glamour of anything found on stage or screen. Ticket booths, lobbies, auditoriums, staircases, sidewalks and restrooms were all styled to satisfy the most romantic imagination. Decorative elements borrowed from a wide range of cultures and historical periods came together in fantastic combinations that prompted one critic to complain that “no more pitiful degradation of an art” had ever occurred than “the prostitution of architecture” in movie theaters. “Taste and beauty,” he concluded, were “abased to the lowest degree.” But the public responded otherwise, flocking to theaters on Broadway and around the nation, where, for the prices of admission, they were transported into a world of luxury and enchantment.

Today, many of the city's theaters have been lost forever; favorites like the landmark Philharmonic Auditorium at 5th & Olive (demolished 1985) and the enormous 3500-seat Paramount at 6th & Hill (demolished 1963). The Broadway district, however, has remained largely intact, providing a rare glimpse into the past, when theaters and theater-going figured prominently in the fabric of urban life. The Los Angeles Conservancy invites you to discover for yourself the magic of the Broadway Historic Theater District.



Frank Cooper

Detail of U.A. Theater.

1. MILLION DOLLAR THEATER

307 South Broadway

Architect: Albert C. Martin;
William Lee Woollett

Grand Opening: February 1, 1918.

The Silent Man, starring William S. Hart

Seating: 2,345 (1918)

Legendary San Francisco showman Sid Grauman launched his Los Angeles operations at this theater in 1918, dazzling movie audiences with glamorous productions in a setting



B'Hend & Kaufmann / Helgesen Collection

reputed to have cost the million dollars suggested by its name.

All the enthusiasm of the early film industry is conveyed on the building's facade, which fancifully combines heroic figures of the arts with symbols of western Americana (bison heads, eagles, longhorn steer skulls) in a variation of Spanish Rococo known as the Churrigueresque.

The Churrigueresque takes its name from the peculiarly rich, crustaceous ornament produced by the Churriguera family of sculptors in 18th-century northern Spain. The style gained popularity in the United States following its appearance at the San Diego Exposition of 1915, and flourished for many years as part of the Spanish Colonial Revival in California architecture. Architect Albert C. Martin also used the Churrigueresque on St. Vincent de Paul Church in Exposition Park (1925). Similar ornament appears on the interior of the Million Dollar Theater, attributed to William L. Woollett.

From 1950 until the late 1980s, the Million Dollar Theater played an important role in Los Angeles's Hispanic community, presenting Spanish-language films and variety performances, or *variedades*, imported from Mexico. It is now undergoing restoration and is used periodically for live performances and special events.

2. ROXIE (closed)

518 South Broadway

Architect: J.M. Cooper Co.

Grand Opening: 1932

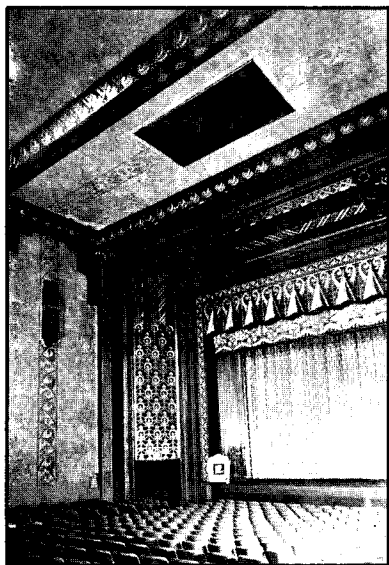
Seating: 1,600 (1932)

Rising on the site of the former Quinn's Superba theater (1910), the Roxie was the last theater built on Broadway before Hollywood usurped the position of Los Angeles's principal theater district. Like its predecessor, the

Roxie was equipped for live stage performances (including a pipe organ), but its long, narrow auditorium was intended primarily for motion-picture display.

The Roxie's Art Deco styling represents a significant departure from Broadway's earlier theater designs. The unbridled extravagance of the Orpheum or the Los Angeles is here replaced by an elegant economy, efficiently reducing ornament without sacrificing the excitement associated with movie-going. Characteristics of the Art Deco, or Zigzag Moderne, include the stepped roofline of the theater's exterior elevation, angular grillwork and chevron ornament on the facade, and a spectacular terrazzo sunburst in the sidewalk. Inside, a poured-concrete balcony in the auditorium forms a stairstep, or zigzag, configuration that adds visual interest to the mezzanine ceiling by using structural form for decorative effect. Applied ornament in the auditorium is concentrated on structural members, and consists of flat, abstracted botanical forms combining the romance of nature with the energy of the machine age.

Characteristics of the later Streamline Moderne style were once evident at the theater's entrance, in the form of a sleek maroon-and-grey ticket booth flanked by serpentine walls. These features were removed when the foyer and lobby were converted to retail use.



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3. CAMEO (closed)

528 South Broadway

Architect: Alfred F. Rosenheim

Grand Opening: 1910

Seating: 775

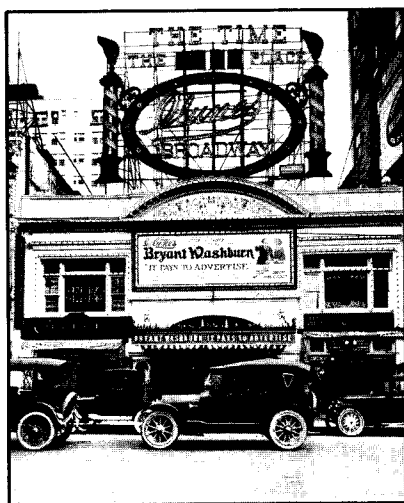
U ntil 1991, the Cameo held the distinction of being the oldest continuously-operating movie theater in California, surviving virtually unchanged from the days when short subjects, newsreels,

and other novelties dominated the cinema prior to the advent of feature-length films.

Originally known as Clune's Broadway, the theater was first operated by William H. "Billy" Clune, a successful entrepreneur who produced his own films for exhibition in Clune theaters. The Clune Studio (now Raleigh Studios) is best remembered for the first film production of Southern California's great romance, *Ramona*, starring Donald Crisp. Clune also operated a theater in the old L.A. Philharmonic Auditorium (now demolished), where the classic silent epic *Birth of a Nation* played in 1915 as *The Clansman*.

While many of its contemporaries were little more than converted shops or dance halls, Clune's Broadway was designed specifically as a "picture playhouse" by the prominent local architect Alfred Rosenheim. Although modest in comparison to later movie palaces, this Renaissance Revival theater was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "handsome" and "elaborate" upon its opening in 1910. Its interior decoration featured marble, plaster, leaded glass and a profusion of electric lights.

The original rooftop electric sign and clock of Clune's day was replaced with the present 24-sheet billboard in the 1920s. This promotional device was designed to hold posters printed in 24 sections, each about 30 x 40 inches; an expanded version of the posters shown in attraction cases in the theater lobby.



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4. ARCADE

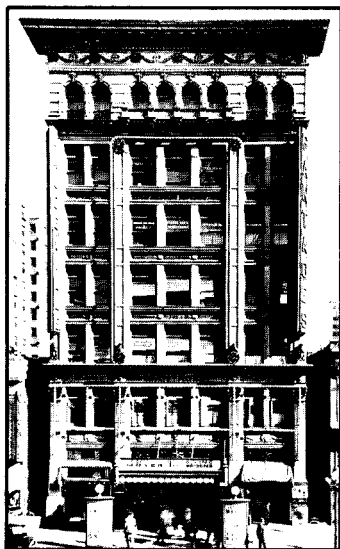
534 South Broadway

Architect: Morgan & Walls

Grand Opening: 1910. Vaudeville

Seating: 1,400 (1910)

The Arcade, formerly the Pantages, was the first theater leased in Los Angeles to the famous Pantages vaudeville circuit. Its founder, Alexander Pantages, began his career producing variety shows for miners in the Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush. He later opened a theater in Seattle, and eventually controlled the largest privately-owned vaudeville circuit in the world. Contributing to Pantages's success was his policy of employing only female ushers, or usherettes, in his theaters. His decision to establish a theater on Broadway in Los Angeles did much to promote development of the street as a theater district.



Security Pacific National Bank Collection / Los Angeles Public Library

Although the theater interior has undergone repeated remodelling since the days of vaudeville, the structure's exterior remains intact, with "Pantages" still clearly visible on the cornice above the marquee. This marquee was added in the 1940s, approximately a dozen years after the name Arcade was borrowed from the adjacent Broadway Arcade Building.

The seven-story structure is the product of the prolific architectural partnership of Octavius Morgan and J.A. Walls, which produced such downtown landmarks as the I.N. Van Nuys Building (1911), and the Morosco Theater (now Globe Theater, 1913). Like these, the Pantages followed a conservative, Beaux-Arts formula, characterized by classical ornament and tripartite vertical division of the facade. In later years, however, the firm of Morgan & Walls, in connection with Stiles O. Clements, went on to create varied and imaginative designs like the eponymous Mayan Theater (1927) and the Art Deco Pellissier Building (1931) at Wilshire and Western Avenue.

5. LOS ANGELES

615 South Broadway

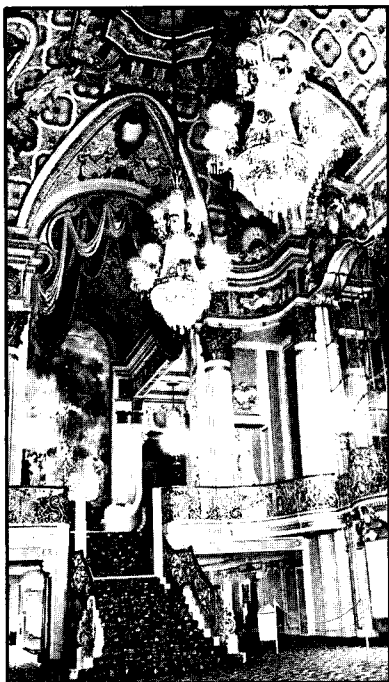
Architects: S. Charles Lee
and S. Tilden Norton

Grand Opening: January 30, 1931.

City Lights, starring Charles Chaplin.

Seating: 1,967 (1931)

The last of Broadway's great movie palaces, the Los Angeles Theater was constructed for independent film exhibitor H.L. Gumbiner at an estimated cost of more than one million dollars. Despite the onset of the



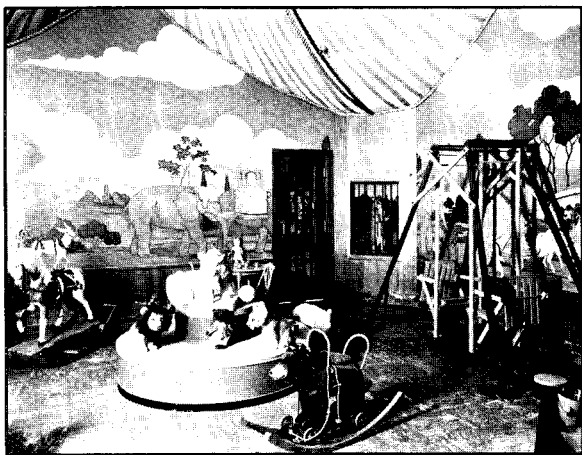
Frank Cooper

Great Depression, Gumbiner was intent upon maintaining—and even exceeding—the lavish standards of Broadway's pre-Crash theaters. To achieve the desired effect, he turned to S. Charles Lee, who had designed the nearby Tower Theater for him in 1927. Working with Lee was architect S. Tilden Norton, son of the late Isaac Norton, whose estate owned the land on which the theater was built. Norton also served as associate architect of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple (1922-29).

Closely patterned after the celebrated Fox Theater in San Francisco, the Los Angeles Theater recalls the glories of the French Baroque. Its majestic lobby features space-enhancing mirrors, fluted columns, gilt ornament, bronze bannisters, sparkling chandeliers, finely detailed plaster ornament and a sunburst motif alluding to France's "Sun King," Louis XIV. A grand central staircase leads to a crystal fountain and a mural in the style of the French painter Fragonard.

Inside the auditorium, a decorative curtain depicts a courtly scene in three dimensions, with painted figures wearing skirts of real fabric and wigs of braided wool. In tribute to the theater's namesake, the great seal of the City of Los Angeles hangs above the proscenium arch.

In addition to its decor, the Los Angeles also boasted a number of unusual amenities, including an electric indicator to monitor available seats and blue neon floor lights to guide patrons through the aisles. Mothers with crying babies could retire to either of two soundproof Crying Rooms above the loge, while older children romped in a staffed playroom in the basement. Patrons seeking refreshment might visit the theater restaurant or smoke in a designated room with built-in cigarette lighters. Ladies would congregate in a glamorous restroom featuring sixteen private compartments, each finished in a different marble, or mix with the men in the walnut-paneled lounge, where a periscope-like system of prisms relayed the featured film from the auditorium to a secondary screen.



B'Hend & Kaufmann / Jim Lewis Collection

Playroom of the Los Angeles Theater.

6. PALACE

630 South Broadway

Architect: G. Albert Lansburgh

Grand Opening: June 6, 1911. Vaudeville.

Seating: 2,200 (1911)



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Built as the third home of the Orpheum vaudeville circuit in Los Angeles, this theater is now the oldest remaining original Orpheum theater in the country. The greatest singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats and animals acts in vaudeville filled the programs here for fifteen years, until the Orpheum moved to its fourth and final location at 9th & Broadway in 1926.

G. Albert Lansburgh, who designed both the 1911 and 1926 Orpheum Theaters, was one of the principal theater designers in the west between 1909 and 1930. In addition to commissions in Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis and New Orleans, his works included the Warner Bros. Theater Building in Hollywood (1927), and the interiors of the local Wiltern and El Capitan theaters.

Loosely styled after a Florentine early Renaissance palazzo, the facade of this brick and concrete structure also carries multi-colored terra-cotta swags, flowers, fairies and theatrical masks illustrating the spirit of entertainment. Four panels depicting Song, Dance, Music and Drama — the muses of vaudeville — were sculpted by Domingo Mora, a Spaniard whose work appeared on the old Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. Mora's son Jo later sculpted the figures decorating the nearby Million Dollar Theater.

While the structure's exterior displays Italian influences, its interior decoration is distinctly French, with garland-draped columns and a color scheme of pale pastels.

7. LOEW'S STATE

703 South Broadway

Architects: Weeks & Day

Grand Opening: November 12, 1921.

Vaudeville and *A Trip to Paradise*,
starring Bert Lytell.

Seating: 2,450



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Because of its strategic location at downtown's busiest intersection, Loew's State was for many years Broadway's most profitable theater, accommodating crowds with entrances on both Broadway and 7th Street.

The theater originated as part of the vast entertainment empire founded by New Yorker Marcus Loew, who formed Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) in 1924. Like other theaters in the Loew's chain, the State offered both film and vaudeville, with performances enhanced by the theater's own orchestra and chorus line. Here the famous team of Fanchon and Marco established their reputation and developed their popular "ideas," or thematic productions. In 1929, a very young Judy Garland appeared at the State as one of the singing Gumm Sisters, gaining the recognition that led her to stardom.

Reaching a height of 12 stories on a 160 x 169-foot lot, Loew's State Theater is the largest brick-clad structure in Los Angeles. Its sedate, utilitarian exterior belies its decorative interior, which combines classical, medieval, and traditional Spanish details. Unexpected touches of exotica appear in the auditorium, where a seated Buddha occupies a niche above the proscenium arch, and a composition of planets and onion-domed towers decorates the asbestos curtain. The building was designed by the partnership of Charles Weeks and William Day of San Francisco, whose other works include the Mark Hopkins Hotel, the State Library in Sacramento, and the Fox Theater (now Symphony Hall) in San Diego.

8. GLOBE (closed)

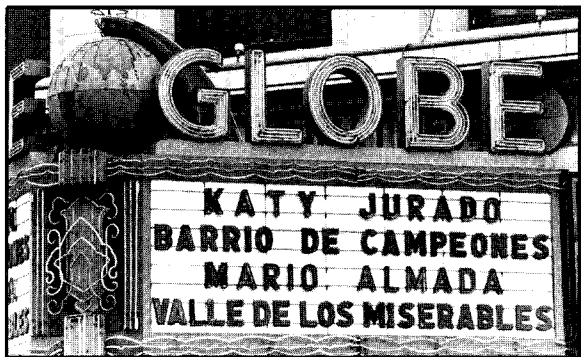
744 South Broadway

Architects: Morgan, Walls & Morgan;
Alfred F. Rosenheim

Grand Opening: January 1913.

The Fortune Hunter, by Winchell Smith

Seating: 782 (1950)



Frank Cooper

Formerly known as the Morosco, this opened as the Los Angeles base of theatrical producer Oliver Morosco, who rose to fame with such hits as *Peg O' My Heart* and *Canary Cottage*.

Full-scale dramatic productions were something of a departure for the west-coast Broadway, which in 1913 was dominated by nickelodeons and vaudeville houses. Even so, the venture proved successful, offering plays starring the popular performers of the day. After Morosco moved on in the 1920s, the practice continued under the direction of Henry Duffy.

During the Depression, the theater was converted to motion-picture use and for many years featured an all-newsreel program. Later, it served as a showcase for Spanish-language films until a swapmeet was installed in 1987. Despite these changes, the name Morosco still clings to the building's facade, hidden behind a modern marquee.

Alfred Rosenheim, designer of the Cameo Theater (formerly Clune's), was also responsible for the interior of this theater. Shoppers may still see its balconies and marble staircases in place amidst an assortment of retail booths, with original cherubs, garlands and theatrical masks enlivening the walls.

9. TOWER (closed)

802 South Broadway

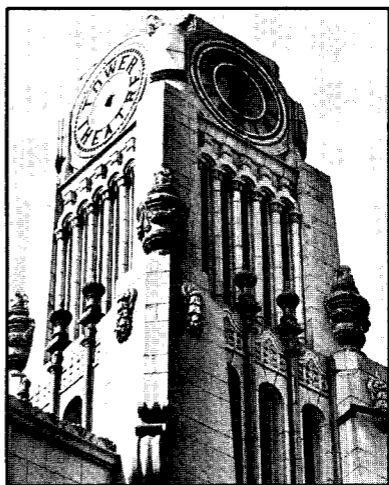
Architect: S. Charles Lee

Grand Opening: October 12, 1927.

The Gingham Girl, starring George Arthur
& Lois Wilson

Seating: 900

This was the first of more than seventy theaters designed by S. Charles Lee, one of America's most prolific and innovative theater architects. Lee's efficient planning allowed for



Frank Cooper

construction of a 900-seat theater on a narrow lot formerly occupied by a theater seating only 650, which also included commercial storefronts that helped draw shoppers to the show.

In the best movie palace tradition, the Tower combines historical styling with a heavy dose of show business. Described by Lee as a "modified French Renaissance" design, its exterior walls are punctuated with false, or blind, windows in classical surrounds. Atop each window, two nudes recline: a discreetly draped masculine director with camera and megaphone, and a scantily-clad starlet with beads and a mirror. Another film reference occurs in the grand arch above the theater entrance, which contains a stained-glass window featuring celluloid strips draped like garlands around a shield.

The richly decorated interior is similar to that of the larger Los Angeles Theater, which Lee designed for the same client in 1931. Like the Los Angeles, the Tower once featured a panelled lounge, a playroom, marble toilet rooms, and modern technical devices. Opening the same year as the landmark "talkie", *The Jazz Singer*, it was the first downtown theater equipped to accommodate talking pictures.

The theater is now closed except for occasional use as a movie location.

10. RIALTO (closed)

812 South Broadway

Architect: Oliver P. Dennis;
William L. Woollett

Grand Opening: 1917

Seating: 840 (1950)



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This early motion picture theater was built for entrepreneur J.M. Quinn from the designs of architect Oliver P. Dennis, who created a classically-inspired, pedimented facade that has long since disappeared. In its place is one of Broadway's longest and most spectacular marquees, installed in the 1930s. Dennis, who generally favored the Beaux Arts and American Colonial Revival styles, also designed (with his partner Lyman Farwell) the so-called Magic Castle in Hollywood.

In 1919, Sid Grauman assumed operation of the Rialto and engaged William L. Woollett to redesign its interior. The programming also changed at that time to include feature-length films and Grauman's famous pre-screening "prologues." These prologues were elaborate costumed revues related in content to the theme of the picture, and frequently included appearances by the film's stars. One 1919 program at the Rialto included a performance of "Barcarolle" by the theater orchestra and a fashion show of gowns worn in the feature film, *Male and Female*, starring Gloria Swanson.

11. ORPHEUM

842 South Broadway

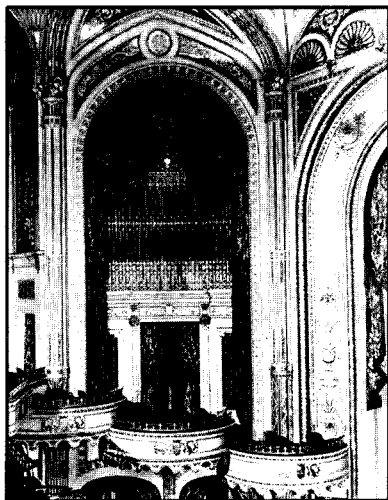
Architect: G. Albert Lansburgh

Grand Opening: February 15, 1926.

Vaudeville.

Seating: 2,190 (1947)

In 1926, this grand theater became the fourth and final house operated by the Orpheum vaudeville circuit in Los Angeles. As at the earlier Broadway Orpheum (now Palace), G. Albert Lansburgh



B'Hend & Kaufmann / Helgesen Collection

once again employed a French theme inside the theater, this time executed in the full-blown Grand Manner. Polished brass doors, lush brocade drapery, silk wall panels, marble pilasters, enormous chandeliers and figures of bare-breasted bronze women all contributed to an atmosphere reminiscent of the Paris Opera. More restraint was shown in the downstairs lounge, which features rich panelling and a mock fireplace.

Throughout the years, the Orpheum has hosted some of show business's greatest entertainers, including Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker, Will Rogers, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Sally Rand, the Marx Brothers and Lena Horne. Comedian Jack Benny courted his future bride between twice-daily performances at the Orpheum, crossing the street to the May Company department store where Mary Livingston worked as a lingerie salesgirl.

The last of the great theater organs remaining on Broadway was installed at the Orpheum in 1928. This thirteen-rank, three-manual Wurlitzer organ has metal and wood pipes that can simulate over 14,000 orchestral sounds, including tinkling bells. Now restored to working order, it is lovingly cared for by the Los Angeles Theater Organ Society. The theater itself is maintained in part by the Friends of the Orpheum, a hands-on volunteer organization providing technical and production assistance for historic theaters in Los Angeles.

12. UNITED ARTISTS

933 South Broadway

Architect: Walker & Eisen;

C. Howard Crane

Grand Opening: December, 1927.

My Best Girl, starring Mary Pickford

Seating: 2,214

In 1919, director D.W. Griffith and screen stars Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin broke from the exploitative studio system to form United



B'Hend & Kaufmann / Helgesen Collection

Artists, thus gaining complete control over the creation, production and distribution of their work. Seven years later, the United Artists Theater Circuit was formed to showcase first-run UA productions, with this theater serving as the flagship for west coast operations.

Fittingly, United Artists also broke from the tradition of classical-revival styling that characterized most of the neighboring Broadway picture palaces, and opted instead for a largely Gothic motif achieved by the application of tracery to the building's facade and a double-height ogival window over the theater entrance. In the medieval fashion, grotesques are incorporated in the capitals of applied columns, including a figure holding an early motion-picture camera.

Inside, a profusion of cast-plaster ornament in both Gothic and Spanish forms is complemented by a remarkable series of frescos and murals by the firm of Anthony Heinsbergen. The vaulted ceilings of the foyer are painted to resemble tapestries, and those of the lobby imitate stained glass. In the auditorium, the original United Artists and their co-stars are depicted as characters from their most popular pictures.

The following theaters, though not on Broadway, are well worth a detour:

PANTAGES THEATER

northwest corner of South Hill and West 7th Streets

Much of the interior of this splendid 1920 French Beaux-Arts structure remains intact, despite conversion to a jewelry center. Look for heraldic shields bearing the inscription WB; a holdover from its days as the Warner Brothers Downtown Building.

MAYAN THEATER

1040 South Hill Street

This outstanding example of the Mayan Revival craze of the '20s is now a successful nightclub. Carved-stone serpent heads, warrior priests, celestial symbols and hieroglyphics were designed by Francisco Cornejo to ornament the structure by Morgan, Walls & Clements.

BELASCO THEATER

1060 South Hill Street

Another exotic design by the firm of Morgan, Walls & Clements, this theater wears Spanish, rather than Pre-Columbian dress. Although the ground-level facade has been remodelled, conquistadors in "pineapple" surrounds remain in place above the second story.

OLYMPIC THEATER

315 West 8th Street

Originally Bard's 8th Street Theater, the name was changed to honor the Olympic Games held in Los Angeles in 1932. Remnants of the classically-detailed facade are visible behind the current screen, but the original Chinese interior decoration has been lost.



Detail of Mayan Theater.

Frank Cooper

THE LOS ANGELES CONSERVANCY is a private nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the preservation and revitalization of the city's architectural heritage. Founded in 1978, the Conservancy provided one of the first public constituencies for the preservation of historic landmarks in greater Los Angeles. Members enjoy a newsletter, program announcements, membership discounts, participation in preservation activities and free downtown walking tours. For more information, please call (213) 623-CITY.

MIRACLE ON BROADWAY is a public-private partnership created by the local business community and the city's Community Redevelopment Agency. Its objective is to restore the area between 2nd and 9th streets on Broadway to create an attractive and economically productive downtown center.

METROPOLITAN THEATRES, founded in 1923, operates the Orpheum, Los Angeles, State, Palace, and Million Dollar theaters on Broadway, in addition to historic theaters elsewhere in the city. The company was among those parties instrumental in the founding of Miracle on Broadway in 1986.



Text by Sandra A.B. Levis with contributions from:

Tom B'hend	Vic Carson	Jill Dolan
Mark Irwin	Preston Kaufmann	Ed Kelsey
Steve Markham	John Miller	Jon Olivan
Tom Owen	Susan Richey	David Saffer

and the late Daniel Hoye

Publication of this booklet was made possible by a grant from the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles.

Additional support of the Los Angeles Conservancy's Downtown Walking Tours is provided by Maguire Thomas Partners.



Olive St.	Hill St.	Broadway	Spring St.	Main St.
				3rd St.
	MILLION DOLLAR ■			4th St.
				5th St.
PERSHING SQUARE		■ ROXIE ■ CAMEO ■ ARCADE		6th St.
PANTAGES □	LOS ANGELES ■	■ PALACE		7th St.
	LOEWS STATE ■ OLYMPIC □	■ GLOBE		8th St.
		■ TOWER ■ RIALTO ■ ORPHEUM		9th St.
	UNITED ARTISTS ■			Olympic Blvd.
	□ MAYAN □ BELASCO			11th St.

■ Tour site

□ Not included in tour

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