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California **VE.**

# VISTA THEATRE

"Where Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards Meet"

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VISTA THEATRE

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Sid Grauman opened his Hollywood Egyptian Theatre in October of 1922. When construction began, it was planned that his new Hollywood house was to be large and Spanish so far as decor was concerned, but the plans changed abruptly at the foundation level because of projected costs. After all, the crazy Mr. Grauman was building a first run theater out in a quiet suburb of Los Angeles where lemon and fig orchards still grew and "suburban" homes with wide lawns lined the Boulevard. Less than ten years after the opening of the Egyptian, the quiet little suburb had become the second theater district of Los Angeles and home owners had retreated to the Hollywood Hills. The "economical" Egyptian decor also had its impact on the movie world. Locally Egyptians suddenly appeared in Pasadena, Glendale, Arcadia, Maywood, Pomona and Alhambra. Apartments, real estate offices and

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film laboratories also partook of the Egyptian styling. Going further afield, San Francisco and San Diego soon acquired theaters in the manner of the dead pharaohs. There are even Egyptian theaters in Alaska, Boston and Boise--and all because some promoters were wary whether Hollywood would be a paying proposition.

Plans for a theater at the junction of Hollywood, Sunset, Hillhurst and Virgil were published in a local building periodical late in 1922:

"Picture theatre--L.A. Smith has prepared plans for a one story and part two story brick building at the corner of Hollywood Blvd and Hillhurst Ave for the Community Building Corporation, being organized by Wright & Hogan, 1666 North Vermont Ave.... two stores, six offices and theater to seat 900"

The community Building Corporation was made up of several local real estate men, all of whom lived near the projected theater. The theater and office building was intended to help sell more real estate. Ben O.L. Wright is listed as president and his residence in 1926 was on nearby Melbourne Ave. Dennis B. Hogan, the vice-president, lived further west in Hollywood on Leland Way. A third Wright, Orin L., served in the capacity of secretary and treasurer and he resided on Lexington Avenue. The Community Building Corporation, although formed to construct the building, actually was involved in considerable local East Hollywood real estate sales.

Additional notices in the building publication reveal that the Pasadena firm of J. H. Woodworth & Sons

were the contractors, the style was to be Egyptian, and the cost was estimated at \$70,000. The contract was let in March 1923 for \$64,000.

Messrs. Wright and Hogan were fortunate in securing Louis L. Bard for their leasee. Bard headed a small group of local theaters, none of which competed in the first run market, but offered current films to the non-first nighter. He opened his first theater downtown on Hill Street in 1920. Known in its early years as Bard's Hill Street Theatre, it became the Towne in the 1930's and is presently flourishing as the Pussycat. A lease on the small and older College Theatre across the street added a second downtown house.

It no longer exists. His next venture was a considerably larger theater--this time over 1,000 seats--at Adams and Crenshaw. It was first known as Bard's West Adams Theatre, then the Fox Adams during its Fox West Coast years, the Kabuki, a Japanese language motion picture theater after World War II, and most recently as the Apollo West, a Black cabaret theater. Outside Los Angeles, the Glendale Bard house opened in 1925. Like the Vista, this too was Egyptian in style and was a neighborhood house. After the Bard lease expired, the theater operated under the name of Glen. No longer a theater it has also been a bowling alley and more recently a restaurant. The Pasadena house, the largest theater operated by the circuit with nearly 2,000 seating, opened in 1925. Situated at what was then the eastern extreme of the business district, it early proved to be one of the

most popular theaters in town. During the Bard regime films and Pantages vaudeville acts were offered -- one of the few theaters outside Los Angeles to play Pantages acts. In time the name changed to Bard's Colorado and under the name of Academy it has for many years been the flagship house for Fox-West Coast/Mann Theaters in Pasadena. Once Egyptian like other of the Bard circuit theaters, it has been remodeled several times since the 1925 opening. Another theater was added in Alhambra during 1925--this would seem to have been the big year for the circuit--to be known as Bard's Garfield Theatre. Like Glendale, this was a neighborhood house and is still operating under the name of Garfield. On the rear of the stage house a large painted sign with the Bard logo of a sailing ship is still visible. Once also an Egyptian styled theater, it has been modernized. The last Bard house was in downtown Los Angeles, a remodeled restaurant building. Stylistically this interior featured vaguely Oriental decor and, being located less than a block west of Broadway on 8th Street, was technically part of the downtown district. The theater, still operating as a Spanish language house, under the name Olympic.

L.A. Smith, the designer of the Vista and many of the other Bard theaters worked extensively in this area. His first theaters were situated in the southern section of Los Angeles and gave little promise of the highly stylized movie houses of the middle twenties which he would design. By 1925 he was supplying plans for most of the West Coast

Theaters--among them are South Pasadena's Rialto, the Highland of Highland Park and the Beverly of Beverly Hills--all unusual and all have had long and successful careers. The West Adams, East Hollywood and Pasadena Bards--all Egyptian in styling--were done for the Bard circuit. With Balch & Stanberry, his successors, he designed such large theaters as the Fox Riverside and San Bernardino's West Coast Theatre. Before bankruptcy forced him out of the theater design field, some forty theaters came from his drawing board.

The night of October 9, 1923 was selected for the opening of the new Bard's Hollywood Theatre. Flamboyant Egyptian advertising--to be duplicated later for the Bard's Glendale opening--appeared in the Hollywood Citizen. Both films and acts made up the program. Featured were Baby Peggy--in person and on the screen--in "Tips"; Gladys Walton in "The Wild Party"; a Felix--that is, Felix the Cat--cartoon; Noodles Fagan & Company; Tommy Warders, dancer; and the Warren Trio. A very good billing for a neighborhood house opening.

If we are to believe the seating claims of 1923, some 900 people jammed the theater that evening. Later the seating generally appears as 600, a figure reported to Film Daily's Motion Picture Yearbook for many years. After the excitement of opening night, a neighborhood theater settled down to a change of feature twice a week, less vaudeville acts which were often replaced by an organ concert, and finally just films. Under Fox-West Coast Theatre lease,

the name was changed to the Vista--possibly because of the panoramic view still visible across the Cahuenga valley.

In 1938 the 20th Century Lites, Inc. put up the present marquee--probably replacing the one-liner of 1923. Using flashing neon, the new marquee cost \$1,000.