



The historic Tampa [Fla.] Theatre, restored in 1976.

HISTORIC THEATERS: THE LOVE STORIES

Saving historic theaters is a passion play reenacted coast to coast

by NOELLE RILEY

No matter where you live in the United States, it's almost certain a historic theater touched your life at one point, whether in a small town you visited or a large city with roots back to the 1800s.

Such theaters have touched lives for centuries, and if it weren't for the love and dedication communities, cities, nonprofits and individuals have for these landmark buildings, many would not have survived into the 21st century.

"At the core of every historic theater is some sort of love story," said Ken Stein, president and CEO of the League of Historic American Theaters based in Forest Hill, Md. "At the end of the day, an individual or a company or a family fell in love with that historic theater and made sure it's still standing today." >



Tampa (Fla.) Theatre, in its original 1926 glory.

Examples of such love affairs exist from coast to coast. “Whether they held fundraisers, or whether they stood in front of a demolition ball... or in front of city council, there’s a love story of some sort. They are absolutely in love with that building,” Stein said.

As a result, historic theaters are thriving, booking hundreds of shows each year and making a profit. “Eighteen out of the last 20 years we made a net profit,” said John Bell, president and CEO of Tampa (Fla.) Theatre, an old one-screen movie theater that seats 1,000.

In the 1950s, dramatic rescue projects took place on theaters built in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many historic venues were left vacant for decades around the 70s and 80s, haunted with ghosts of past performances or films.

“These buildings talk, and if you sit and listen, you will hear it talk to you,” said Molly Fortune, executive director at the Newberry (S.C.) Opera House.

Many restoration projects began again in the 90s, “rebirthing” the structures into their original form — all done by a labor of love.

On top of making sure renovation projects remain intact, historic theater operators are keenly aware of their competitors, which include monstrous venues, such as National Football League stadiums, new arenas, multiplex convention centers, multi-screen movie theaters and outdoor amphitheaters that sprouted up in the last 30 years.

Historic theaters found themselves in a different competitive atmosphere, looking at ways to bring the fan experience up to par with their new competition.

Most historic venues are booking shows throughout the year, with movies, comedians, live musical performances and banquets.

If it weren’t for the hundreds of millions of dollars poured into the theaters over the last six decades, such venues would not be thriving.

Venues Today caught up with four unique historic theaters that survived incredible odds due to the labor of love.

ONE MAN, ONE THEATER AND A WHOLE LOTTA LOVE

Paramount Theatre Austin (Texas)

Original name: Majestic

Year built: 1915

Number of original seats: 1,316

First renovation: 1930

Second renovation: 1970s

John Bernardoni was only 23-years-old when he fell in love with the Paramount Theatre.

“From the beginning, this was a love affair,” he said. “To me, the Paramount is like a woman, and we did have a real love affair with her. The power of the love affair is what carried us against the odds and incalculable challenges.”

It began in 1971, when Bernardoni’s father asked him to fly from Texas to Los Angeles to bring his cousin home.

“When I was in L.A., we went to see “A Clockwork Orange” at the Pacific Theatre, which was a historic theater. At the end of the performance, I was enthralled with the ornate stenciling. We get in the car and we’re driving back to Austin, and as I was on this long journey, I thought, ‘Isn’t there a historic theater in Austin like the Pacific?’” he said.

When they got to Austin, Bernardoni went straight to the Paramount Theatre, which was a one-screen movie theater at the time.

“It was pretty rank. They were playing “Five Flying Fingers of Death,” starring Bruce Lee. As I was watching the movie, I made my way back to see if there was a stage house,” he said. “Happily, there was a stage house.”

Bernardoni knew that a stage house would allow for the theater to have live performances with a place to change in between acts or sets.

“I stopped for a minute back there just to take it in. It had this really powerful domination over me, and I was in the midst of all the stars that played on the big screen there,” he said.

He knew immediately that he wanted to make the theater more than what it had become, which was a low-grade movie house playing Kung Fu movies.

“I thought to myself, ‘I think this needs to

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HISTORIC THEATERS

TOPSTOPS HISTORIC THEATERS | 2017

Based on concert and event grosses from April 16, 2016-May 15, 2017, as reported to *Venues Today*.

VENUE, LOCATION	NO. OF SEATS	TOTAL GROSS	ATTENDANCE	SHOWS
1. Radio City Music Hall, New York	6,013	\$101,243,604	1,252,203	236
2. Pantages Theatre, Los Angeles	2,720	\$2,650,029	20,978	8
3. El Rey Theatre, Los Angeles	771	\$1,850,101	78,295	126
4. The Theatre at Ace Hotel, Los Angeles	1,600	\$1,654,804	33,969	22
5. Palace Theatre, Albany, N.Y.	2,782	\$1,471,471	38,735	30
6. Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles	2,000	\$1,349,660	26,686	16
7. Bob Hope Theatre, Stockton, Calif.	2,042	\$1,315,141	23,573	26
8. Arlington Theatre, Santa Barbara, Calif.	2,014	\$1,115,060	17,708	13
9. San Diego Civic Theatre	2,967	\$559,074	7,538	3
10. Coronado Perf. Arts Center, Rockford, Ill.	2,335	\$406,308	6,535	4

Compiled by Monique Potter, HotTickets@venuestoday.com

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be a performing arts center and not a Kung Fu palace," he said.

After the movie, he went straight to the marketing office to speak with the manager about rejuvenating the theater into something more than it had become. The two immediately formed a bond.

"He hated that it had become a Kung Fu palace," Bernardoni said.

The next four years played a crucial role in revamping and re-imagining what the theater could become.

Bernardoni was told that the Paramount was going to be torn down and a Holiday Inn would take its place on the block in downtown Austin.

"From 1971 to 1973, I worked a couple of part time jobs. I had no money, no muscle and no political pull," he said. "I had that singular laser focus burning that I was going to save that theater. Failure was possible, but I had nothing to lose."

He soon found that nobody cared about his project, saying that, "We ran into a China Wall of apathy. To most people, old buildings are old buildings."

Another problem was that in the early 70s, downtown Austin turned into a ghost town after 5:30 p.m. "No one came, because there was nothing to come back for," he said.

He persevered and joined forces with

Chuck Ekerman and Steve Scott, and both men saw the glowing prospect of a performing arts center in the old, beat-up theater.

The three men formed rapport with the local newspaper, television and radio stations, and to Bernardoni's surprise, the media found saving the theater a worthy cause.

"We decided to do three test shows to see if anyone would come downtown," he said.

They booked Dave Brubeck and sold out all three shows. "The atmosphere he brought to that theater was something I'll never forget. People walked out of there electrified," Bernardoni said.

That first round of success, which ultimately proved that people were willing to visit downtown Austin for nightlife, allowed the men to book old films, including "Casablanca," "Gone with the Wind" and "Wuthering Heights."

As the men continued to book shows, it became apparent that a clear path to saving the theater was being formed.

In 1978, Bernardoni and partners convinced those who owned the theater to donate their share so the men could take over the lease from ABC Interstate Theaters and start applying for grants to renovate the structure.

The first round of funding rang in at \$600,000. In 1979, they got two more rounds of funding with one at \$750,000 and a second \$600,000.

"We hired an architect, and we started in phases," Bernardoni said.

They ripped out all the seats, rebuilt the opera balconies, cleaned-up the facade, and added air conditioning and new bathrooms.

The renovations were complete in September of 1980, and the theater started hosting Broadway musicals, dance shows and performances by local artists.

For the next few years, the theater was operated by only five people, Bernardoni included, and it thrived.

"There was actually enough money to pay us all," he said.

In June of 1985, Bernardoni decided to leave the Paramount and start his own production company, feeling extremely satisfied with what he and a group of dedicated partners had accomplished.

"It was a love affair then, and I'm still in love," he said.

Fast forward to current day, and the theater hosts a whopping 275 shows a year, said Jim Ritts, who is the current general manager of the venue.

The love affair with the Paramount doesn't just belong to Bernardoni and his partners, Ritts said. It also belongs to those who have frequented the theater over the years.

"We're now on the sixth generation of people coming to the theater," Ritts said.

TAMPA THEATRE TIES COMMUNITY TOGETHER THROUGH MOVIES

Tampa (Fla.) Theatre

Original name: Tampa Theatre

Year built: 1926

Number of original seats: 1,500

Renovation: 1976

Unlike the Paramount in Austin, the Tampa Theatre hosts only movies — classics, new releases and independent films.

It, too, went through a dramatic rescue period in the 70s, but this was not a singular love affair that saved the theater. Instead, it was a community effort by those who refused to see the magnificent structure torn down, said John Bell, general manager of the venue.

"The community rallied that the theater needed to be saved," he said. "It's turned out to be a resounding success story."

Tampa Preservation Inc. was formed, and members of the group advocated to Tampa City Council, as the city of Tampa owned the building, to let them run the building so they could operate the theater and apply for grants to make it structurally sound.

City Council approved the offer four to three, and Tampa Preservation Inc. took over the historic theater, putting love, sweat and tears into renovating the structure.

Formerly a vaudeville film house, the building has a number of challenges, including transforming it into a viable movie house with 21st Century technology.

In 2013, the film industry decided to stop producing 35 mm film, and the theater had to get creative with how it would convert to digital.

Due to the way the film house was built, the angle of the lens didn't quite work the same way with digital. A design team came in and helped the historic theater install an optical mirror that allowed digital to work in that space, Bell said.

"That allowed us to stay in the game," he said.

Now, the theater plays movies more than 600 times a year, and continues to make a profit year in and year out, Bell noted.

"We're shoehorning all this stuff to make the building work," he said.

Another challenge is working with movie distributors to ensure the Tampa Theater has access to new films on the market.

Maintaining the venue in general is an ongoing obstacle. Bell likened it to the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. "By the time you're done painting one end, you're always having to go back and paint the other," he said.

Recently, the theater decided to go down to 1,250 seats, which was a decision that didn't come easy. The goal is to make theater patrons more comfortable, Bell said.

Originally, Tampa Theatre had 1,500 seats, but in the 70s, it went down to 1,440 seats. For Bell, reducing seats may hurt the gross potential initially, but he understands that venues now live in a world that's dependent on the guest experience.

"We made the decision that making the

patron comfortable was important," he said. "We believe it will pay off in the long run."

Prior to Bell and the board of directors finally deciding to go down in seating, they met with the Tampa Bay Lightning staff to hear what they're doing to keep fans happy.

"They had done the best job of building fan loyalty," he said. "They talked about putting the fan at the top of the pyramid." Thus, Tampa Theatre is in the process of increasing legroom by six inches at each seat.

OUTPOURING OF LOVE GOES INTO THE PALACE THEATRE IN GEORGETOWN

Palace Theatre, Georgetown, Texas

Original name: Palace Theatre

Year built: 1926

Number of original seats: 300

Renovation and reopening: 2001

The Palace's resurrection also was due, in part, to the love affair the community had with its historic theater.

"Our theater was a movie theater first built in 1926. It was a movie theater until the 80s and then it just kind of sat," said Jessie Drollette, GM. "With multiplexes, they really couldn't keep up with cushy seats and other amenities. Some of the people who are on our board now decided that we should start putting on stage plays."

Only 20 miles outside of Austin, the theater is located in the old town square, visible to all who pass through town.

Long-time board member Sonja Asendorf and her husband opted to retire in Georgetown, as they had several family members in Austin. The town square and theater were two of the reasons Asendorf was drawn to the community.

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"It has the perfectly beautiful square in old town that had been brought back to life in the 80s," she said. "When I looked across the street, there was this dilapidated marquee."

It was love at first sight for her.

"I stopped in and they welcomed me. I happened to be a singer as well," she said.

Her efforts to save the theater began immediately, and she joined an enthusiastic group of dedicated citizens who wanted the Palace to be much more than it had become.

"From fall of 1995 through June of 1999, we did everything we could to keep the theater open in the state it was in," she said. "In 1998 and 1999, I produced and directed the talent show called "Pop Goes the Jazz"."

The theater hired an artistic director and invited the Austin jazz band to perform for Georgetown patrons.

"They were eager to come out to play in their pursuit to save this theater," she said.

It was clear after several performances and plays that the theater desperately needed a facelift.

A lawyer named Gene Taylor moved to town with his family.

"The moment they walked past the theater and saw the for sale sign, he said that this

place should be for the arts and cannot become a shoe store or a retail store," Asendorf said. "He started a group and got enough people who were interested in saving it."

The restoration began in 1998, and the theater closed from 1999 to 2001, reopening its doors on Oct. 5, 2001, she said.

"We reopened with a sparkly new theater that pretty much looked like the 1936 theater we were striving to keep," Asendorf said.

It started out as an \$800,000 project, and that figure grew as the renovations began.

"We were very, very active at our fundraising efforts," Asendorf said.

Once the theater had been repaired, the board decided they needed an artistic director and hired a talented woman named Mary Ellen Butler who had been a theater person her whole life.

"She knew how to do all the things we needed to do. She was hired in 2004," Asendorf said. "She knew that people were most likely looking for musicals."

To this day, Butler is still the art director and the theater now manages a \$2 million annual budget.

Another quirk about the theater is that it didn't have a back stage for actors to change costumes between acts. Actors would literally have to change in the alley behind the theater.

A tin building behind the building eventually came up for sale, and the theater bought it.

"Now you step across the alley to the tin barn to change," Asendorf said.

A 'CRAZED' MAN POURS HIS HEART INTO THE NEWBERRY OPERA HOUSE

Newberry (S.C.) Opera House

Original name: Newberry Opera House

Year built: 1881

Number of original seats: 426

Renovation: 1996

The Newberry Opera House in South Carolina is one of the oldest historic theaters in America. It was built in the late 1800s.

In the 1980s, the opera house was scheduled to be torn down, but Dr. James Wiseman, whose parents ran two hotels in Newberry, would not allow the demolition.

He basically was raised at one of the hotels that faced the opera house, so he grew up looking at the structure and formed a romantic relationship with it.

"Within this love story, people thought he was crazy to try to save it," Fortune said.

In his pursuit to bring awareness to the historic theater, he brought a bus full of people dressed in tuxedos and ball gowns to the venue to see a show. Through that effort, people started to see the theater's viability.

A foundation was formed to save the theater and Wiseman became the chairman.

In 1992, the city vacated the building, and in 1994 the restoration project began.

"An additional 10,000 sq. ft. was added to the original building in order to create a full theatrical production facility. The total cost of the renovation was approximately \$5.5 million," states the theater's website.

Historic theaters should not be looked at as a pastime in people's memories, Fortune said.

"The fastest growing website in America is Ancestry.com. These buildings are touch-points for where we're from," she said. "They have personality. Every person in the U.S. has a memory of being in a historic theater at one point in their life."

Earlier this year, Wiseman was honored by the city of Newberry for the love and dedication he put into the theater.

The *Newberry Observer* wrote in a Feb. 11, 2017 article: "Wiseman's devoted persistence, relentless fundraising, self-described 'preaching,' and loyal leadership took the lifeless shell of a building threatened by the shadow of a wrecking ball to the state of the art performing arts center we enjoy today." 

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WHAT Venues Today reception with awards, drinks and appetizers.
WHEN Tuesday, August 8, 2017, 5:30-7:00pm
WHERE Music City Center, Room 107, 201 5th Ave South, Nashville, TN 37203
WEAR Business casual or country attire (For the southern spirit!)
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