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News Letter

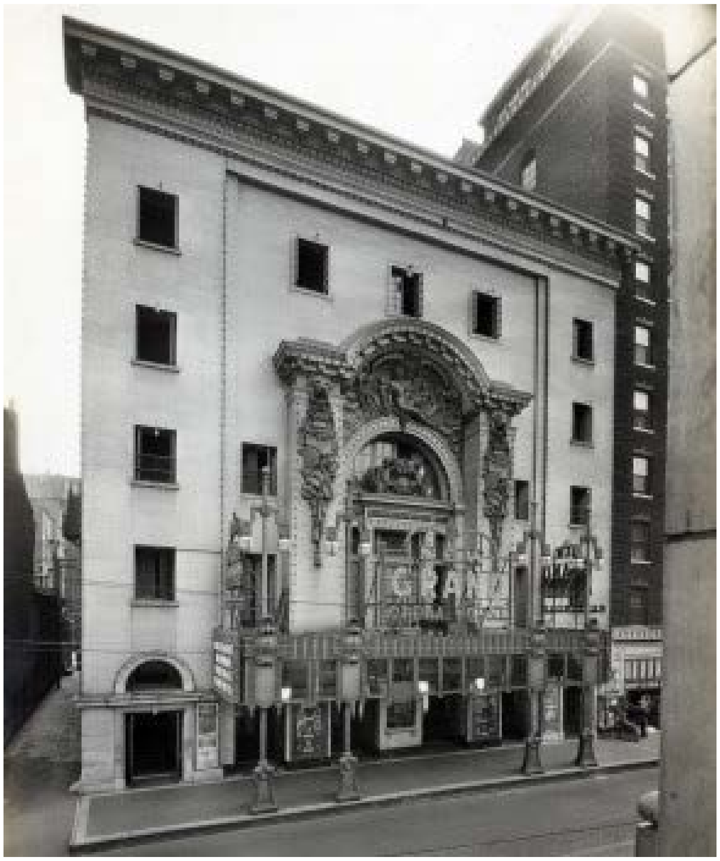
ST. LOUIS' TEMPLES OF THESPIS: AGE OF CHALLENGE

by David J. Simmons

The continuing decline of live theater after the turn of the twentieth century necessitated the construction of fewer new live theaters and theater transformations during the third era of theater building in St. Louis, which I have called the Era of Challenge. Problems and changes within live theater operations and the emergence of the motion picture industry as a rival medium of entertainment shaped this trend. Rising costs for production and transportation of live theater adversely affected the profit margins previously enjoyed by local theater management. In their struggle to survive, these owners and impresarios increased ticket prices substantially, with further inhibited audience growth. They reduced the number of productions by extending the run of a production to a week or longer. This approach saved money, but it reduced the number of choices available to the patron. The chief culprit for escalating costs was the power of the stars to demand higher fees. Famous actors did increase box office receipts, but they reduced profit margins.

When Thomas Edison invented the motion picture in 1894, he believed it to be an entertainment novelty of limited value. Within a short period of time he changed his opinion and recognized the potential of motion picture development. Initial growth of this industry extended over two decades, from 1895 to 1915. From the 30-second film at the penny arcade and the 35 minute movie presented at the Oriental and Pope Theaters in 1895 to the monumental two-hour-plus D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" exhibited at the Olympic Theater in 1915, motion pictures at first complimented, then rivaled, next challenged, and eventually threatened the existence of live theater performance. Griffith's movie proved that spectacle and melodrama, the same qualities that had enticed locals to the first live performances in St. Louis, were superior in film as compared to live theater.

Early films appeared in conjunction with other entertainment venues. Vaudeville theaters popularized the motion picture by showing films as interludes between acts. To attract patrons from the live theater, the movie industry began to focus on telling a complete story at least thirty minutes in length and projecting it in a building specifically designed for this purpose. Once separated from other forms of entertainment, movies found accommodations ranging from tents and air domes (a euphemism for outdoor theaters) operated only during the summer, to nickelodeons, and culminating in neighborhood or community theaters. While the nickelodeon offered twenty-minute programs in a converted storefront with very few personal comforts, neighborhood theaters presented full-length feature films in surroundings closely resembling theaters for live performance. These movie houses had fireproof construction, ample egress, comfortable seating, restrooms, good sight lines, and snack food. During this period, the scale of these arrangements tended to remain modest in comparison to the largest legitimate theaters.



Grand Theater, 512-514 Market St., 1912-13, Tom P. Barnett, built on the site of the old Varieties Theater, see Vol. XX, No 2B, p. 3.

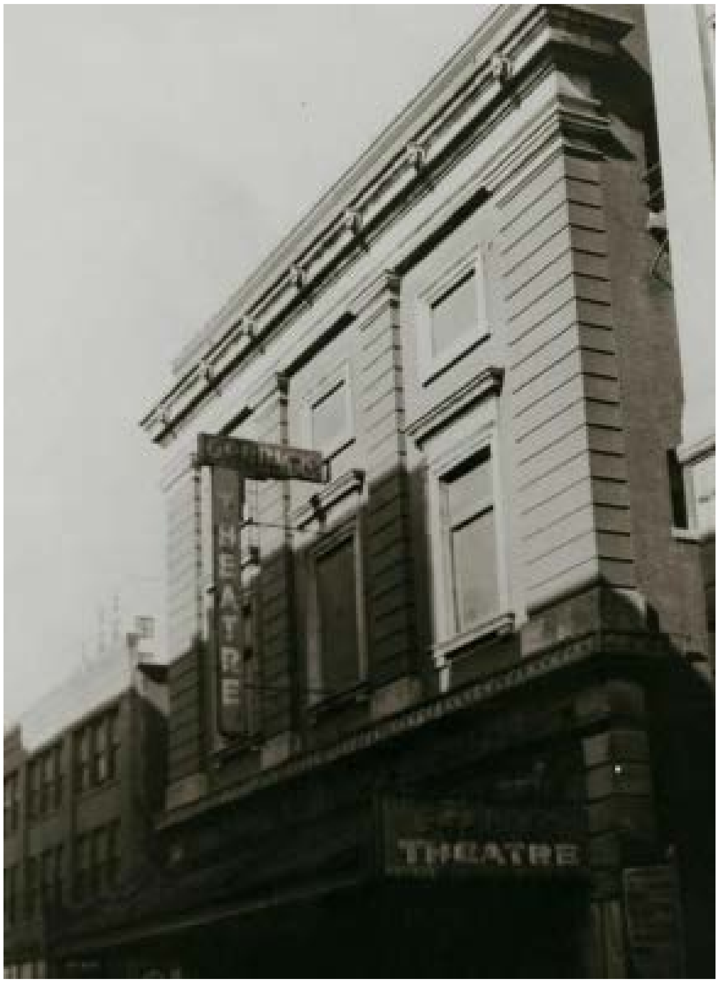
By 1907 these new movie houses began to appear in St. Louis. During the next decade more than a dozen local architects participated in the architectural development of the motion picture house. Duggan and Huff between 1909 and 1911 (eleven commissions) and Kennerly and Stiegemeyer between 1913 and 1923 (nine commissions) specialized in movie house design. The City Directory for 1913 listed more than one hundred outlets where movies could be viewed. Most of these places were neighborhood movie houses. Many of the early converts to the picture show came from the working class. They liked the cheap ticket prices, with all seats being the same price, and the large unobstructed screens. Melodrama became the first form of live theater entertainment to be adversely affected by the motion picture phenomenon. Declining attendance resulted in the closure of St. Louis' two most important melodrama houses – the Havelan Theater in 1911 and the Imperial Theater in 1918.

Between 1900 and 1918 seven new non-movie theaters and one reconstructed theater opened. Of this number five of them operated in the downtown area and the other three in the Grand Avenue theater district. Downtown theaters included the Garrick Theater in 1904, the American Theater in 1908, the Shubert Theater in 1910, the Grand Theater (Grand Opera House) in 1913, and the Orpheum Theater in 1917.

Garrick Theater

Completed in 1904 at a cost of $250,000, the Garrick Theater at 517 Chestnut owed its existence to the Garrick Realty Company of New York City under the control of the Shubert Brothers theatrical syndicate. They wanted a St. Louis outlet for their high class vaudeville and drama. On December 26, 1904 the Garrick hosted its first performance – Ada Rehan in Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew." Several years later the theater passed to local ownership of the Cella family. Its vaudeville format remained unchanged until 1921. When the Standard Theater closed, the Garrick's format changed to burlesque. Except for brief periods of motion picture offerings during the 1930's, it continued as a burlesque house until its closure and demolition in 1954.

Named for the great 18th century English actor David Garrick, this three-story theater of light colored brick with white glazed terracotta trim had a frontage of 65 feet and a complete depth of 116 feet. It was the second of three local theaters designed by architect William Albert Swasey. Formerly based in St. Louis, he had left in 1902 for New York City, where he quickly joined the Shubert organization. Eventually he served as the chief architect for the Shubert Theater empire across the country until 1913. Vaguely classical in design, the theater relied on a simple decorative scheme for its three part front. Among its simple features were a bracketed cornice at the top, a modest second floor balcony, and three separate street-level entrances. Its main central entrance used three sets of double doors. A marquee over the main entrance was added later.



Garrick Theater, 515 Chestnut, 1904, W. Albert Swasey

All street level entrances flowed into a large lobby equipped with a ticket office, auditorium access, cloak room, and business office. The men's toilet facilities and smoking lounge were in the basement, and the ladies' facilities on the first and second floors. Interior decorations in green, gold and white followed a Louis XIV design scheme. Seating 1,320 patrons, the auditorium had three sections – parquet, balcony, and gallery – complimented by twelve boxes. Its stage measured 65 feet wide to a depth of 35 feet. With a width of thirty-four feet the stage arch rose to a height of 32 feet. Both the balcony and gallery were cantilevered and the roof/ceiling trussed. Fourteen exits served the parquet, while the balcony had five exits with staircases and the gallery four more. The basement had fifteen dressing rooms, four star dressing rooms, and a musician's assembly hall.

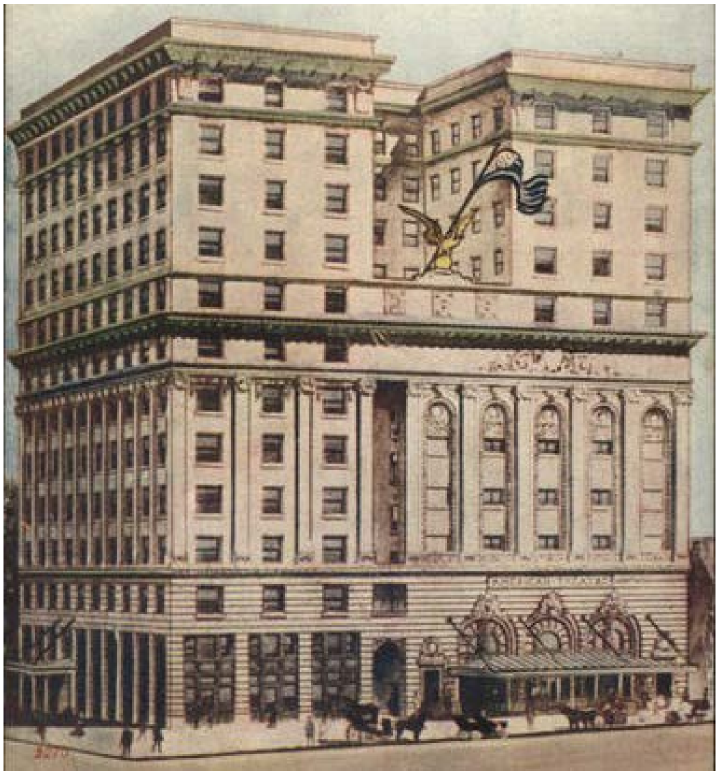
American Theater

Over the years, three St. Louis theaters have been called the American Theater. The first one was at the northeast corner of Market (124 feet) and Seventh Street (128 feet). It shared its premises with a 13-story hotel featuring 275 guest rooms, each with a bath. Using 70% of the building space, the hotel had its main entrance on Seventh with an auxiliary entrance on Market and an inside connection to the theater. The theater front occupied part of the building's south side facing Market. Southern Real Estate and Finance Company, controlled by Louis Cella, dictated the terms of the project and hired Fredrick Bonsack in 1906 to put it together. Construction of this million dollar structure continued to the end of 1907. The owners then leased the theater section to the Vaudeville Amusement Co. of St. Louis, who opened on February 17, 1908, with a program of so-called "high class vaudeville."

Its 74-ft. front of white glazed brick trimmed with white glazed terra cotta emulated the Italian Renaissance manner. A large marquee 56 feet wide and six feet deep sheltered the theater's three separate double doors. Hundreds of electric lights outlined the theater's silhouette, marquee and main entrances. In addition, 120 floodlights illuminated its front. A large arched window appeared over each of the main entrances. All main entrances opened into a large lobby (47 feet wide and 16 feet deep) with sienna marble used for floors, walls and staircases. The box office was on the left side, business office and cloak room on the right, and staircases for upper level seating at either end. All doors were oak inlaid with mirror panels. A great crystal chandelier of more than one hundred lights hung from the lobby ceiling.

The parquet level, upper and lower balconies, and gallery sections in the auditorium seated a total of 2,400 people. Measuring 74 feet wide and 70 feet, the audience room had wide bird's eye maple seats covered with green leather upholstery. A ten-foot deep foyer functioned at the rear of the auditorium. As usual, French Renaissance design dominated the theater's interior appointments. Each floor had access to a ladies' lounge and a gentlemen's smoking area. The stage (73 feet wide and 40 feet deep) had a steel drop curtain weighing seven tons, which could be lowered in 28 seconds. Steel construction, concrete floors, and an auto-sprinkler system helped make the structure fireproof. Among other features were fourteen dressing rooms and a green room.

When the Olympic Theater closed in the spring of 1917, the New York Theatrical Syndicate of Klaw and Erlinger moved their operations to the American Theater. They transformed it into a first-class drama house. It continued to offer high class drama until its closure in May, 1953. In the fall of that year, the theater and hotel were demolished to make way for a 500-car multi-level parking garage. The site is now the west end of Kiener Plaza.

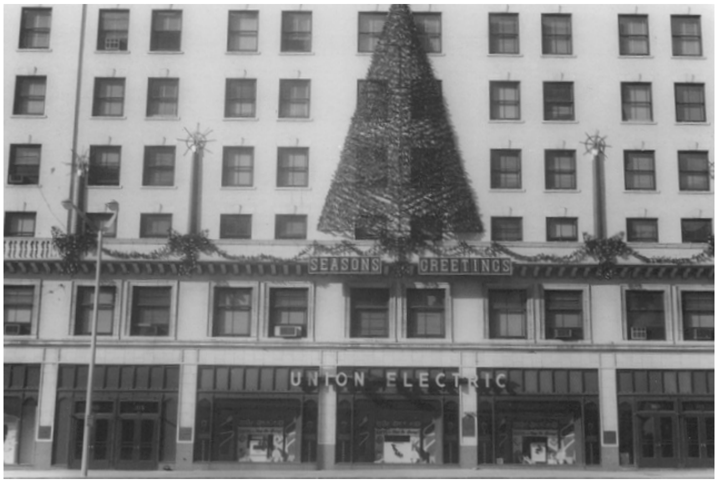


American Hotel & Theater Building, 619 Market St. and 6 North Seventh, 1906-07, Frederick Bonsack

Shubert Theater.

Local investors, through the Corner Real Estate Company, invited the New York theatrical syndicate run by the three Shubert brothers to erect a new musical theater in St. Louis to be located at the southwest corner of Twelfth (Tucker) and Locust next to the Jefferson Hotel. Inspired by the Maxine Elliot Theater in New York City, architect William Albert Swasey's plan called for a theater and five-story office building complex. Directed by the Westlake Construction Company, Swasey's project was finished in 1910 at a cost of $250,000. Eckert Company decorated the theater's interior. Dedicated as a memorial for Sam Shubert, who had died in 1905, it opened on October 31, 1910. Six years later Union Electric purchased the property and decided to add more office space to the building. Guided by architect Albert Groves they raised the height of the structure to twelve floors at a cost of $300,000. The theater section in the building remained unaltered. By 1924 the theater had closed. Spending almost $400,000, Union Electric a year later removed the theater from the premises as part of a remodeling project.

The Shubert Theater and Office Building was 150 feet wide by 100 feet deep, with the theater section at the north end of the Tucker front and the office section at the south end. Both street fronts exhibited Italian Renaissance details. The main entrance was at 317 North Tucker, while an auxiliary entrance on Locust served the auditorium's gallery. The main lobby on Tucker measured 22 by 27 feet. Three levels and fourteen boxes gave the auditorium a seating capacity of 1800 people. The auditorium had 16 exits. Under the large stage (76 feet wide by 50 feet deep) were sixteen dressing rooms. A direct heating system required fresh air be cleaned, heated, and circulated. While each floor of the theater had facilities for men and women, the men's smoking lounge and the ladies' retiring area were on the first floor.

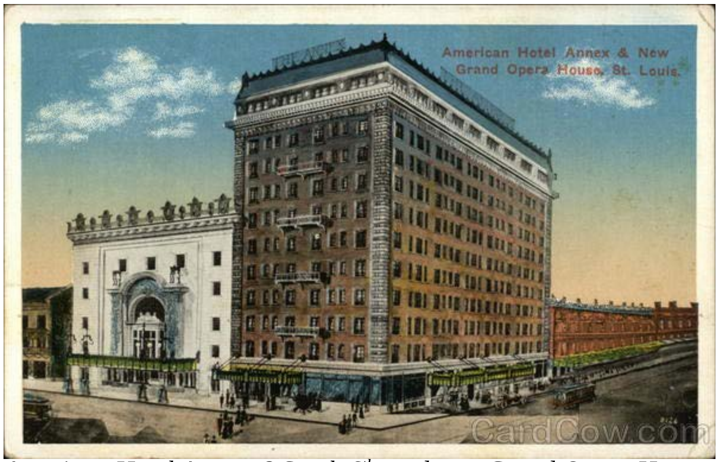


The Twelfth Street (Tucker Blvd) front of the Shubert Building in the 1950s, after the building had been enlarged for Union Electric and the Shubert Theater removed. Photo courtesy of Michael Allen.

Grand Theater (Grand Opera House)

On September 5, 1912, the *St. Louis Daily Record* announced the reconstruction of the Grand Opera House at 512 Market. The architectural team of Barnett, Haynes, and Barnett received the commission from the Middleton Theater Co. A month later the *Daily Record* reported the construction of an eleven-story hotel next door to the Grand under the guidance of the same architectural firm. Both projects originated with the Southern Realty Company controlled by Louis Cella. Later Tom Barnett assumed control of the project, which he completed during the summer of 1913. Vaudeville opened the theater on August 11. During the 1930s it survived as a movie house, but in 1941 its format changed to burlesque, a format that proved successful, especially after the closure of the nearby Garrick Theater. The Civic Center Redevelopment Project demolished the Grand in 1963.

Tom Barnett transformed the Grand into an artistic tour de force expressed in his own version of the modern French style. A five-story street façade of white Carthage limestone and concrete crossed five bays for 56 feet. At the center a large arched entrance surround rose forty feet to a height of four stories. This configuration proclaimed the greatness of live theater with sculpted symbols of drama. The theater's three part main entrance was shielded by a large glass and bronze marquee 36 feet long by 8 feet wide. Four pillars in the form of candelabra supported the front of the marquee. On the top of the marquee four bronze figures symbolized Thespis, Goddess of the Theater. Sculptor Victor Holm executed all statues on the front of the theater. Electric lights illuminated the marquee and outlined the central area of the front façade.


American Hotel Annex & New Grand Opera House, St. Louis.
CardCow.com

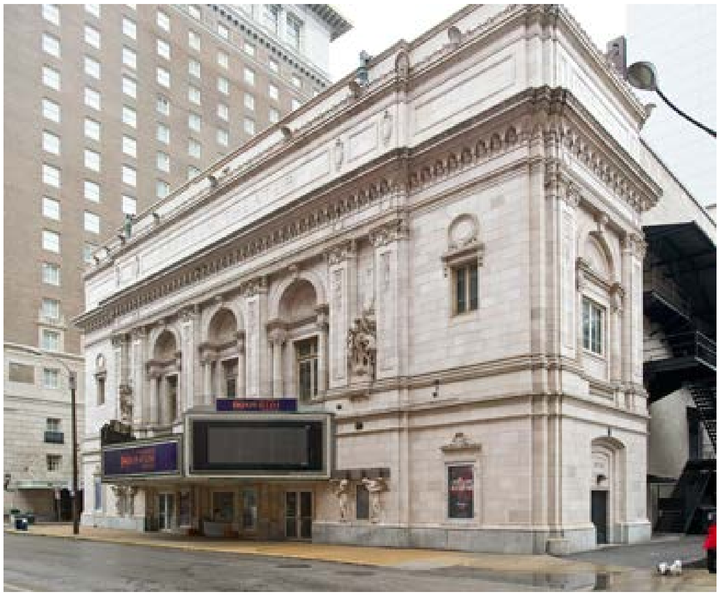
American Hotel Annex, 8 South 6th, and new Grand Opera House, 512-514 Market Street, from a postcard.

Inspiration from the age of Louis XIV gave the Grand its interior decorations featuring oak paneling, red tiled floors, and Flemish tapestries. Its four-level auditorium with parquet, mezzanine, and upper and lower balconies accommodated 2,500 patrons. While the men's lounge was in the basement, the ladies' facilities occupied the mezzanine area. Restrooms were on each floor. Barnett engaged a group of artists to decorate the theater's interior. Toomey and Volland painted a court scene of Louis XIV on the drop curtain. Gutsche and Schaettle frescoed the ceiling of the auditorium. Fred Gray decorated the lobby with cupids and garlands.

Orpheum Theater

St. Louis' Orpheum Theater is better known to St. Louisans of a certain age as the American Theater, but it traces its existence to an agreement made in 1915 between the Orpheum vaudeville circuit and local businessman Louis Cella. The circuit allowed the Orpheum Theater Company to build a new theater on property owned by Cella at the southeast corner of Ninth and St. Charles. The new theater became one of more than three dozen theaters across the country in the circuit. G. Albert Lansburgh of San Francisco designed the St. Louis theater. After graduating from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, France, he had arrived in San Francisco in 1906. As architect of the Orpheum Circuit, he built more than two dozen theaters. Erected at a cost of $500,000, the local Orpheum started life as a vaudeville house on September 3, 1917. Vaudeville prevailed at the Orpheum until 1930, when Warner Brothers Studio leased the property and converted it into a movie house. Warner's was followed by the Loew's Corporation, but in 1960 live theater returned to the Orpheum under the direction of the American Theater. For three decades the American remained at this location. In the 1990's an attempt was made to convert the Orpheum into a cabaret theater with tables and chairs replacing the first floor seating, but the project proved to be unsuccessful. Now the Orpheum sits silent waiting for someone to give it new life.

Rendered in the Beaux Arts style, the three story steel and concrete building extends 110 feet on Ninth Street and 125 feet on St. Charles. Both the north and east sides of the building have alley access, making possible egress from all sides of the theater. Clothed in cream colored terra cotta, the theater front has three parts. In the large center area, the marquee shades the three main street entrances. Above the marquee, three arched recesses are framed by neo-classical decoration, with French doors opening onto small balconies. Sculpted figures are set in niches on either side. A bracketed cornice supports the attic level, which has the theater's original name inscribed in terra cotta. A single story arcaded portico with balcony above extends along St. Charles for most of the building's depth.



The Orpheum Theater, 416 N. Ninth St., 1917, G. Albert Lansburgh

The Orpheum's most striking feature is its terra cotta ornament, which includes figural sculpture, drama masks, musical trophies, and grotesques. An Italian sculptor named Leo Lentelli composed the sculptural designs and made the models. Winkle Terra Cotta Company created the molds from Lentelli's work and completed the finished product. Trained in Rome, Italy, Lentelli began his American sculptural practice in 1903. Among his achievements, he supplied ornament for the Rockefeller Center in New York and the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.

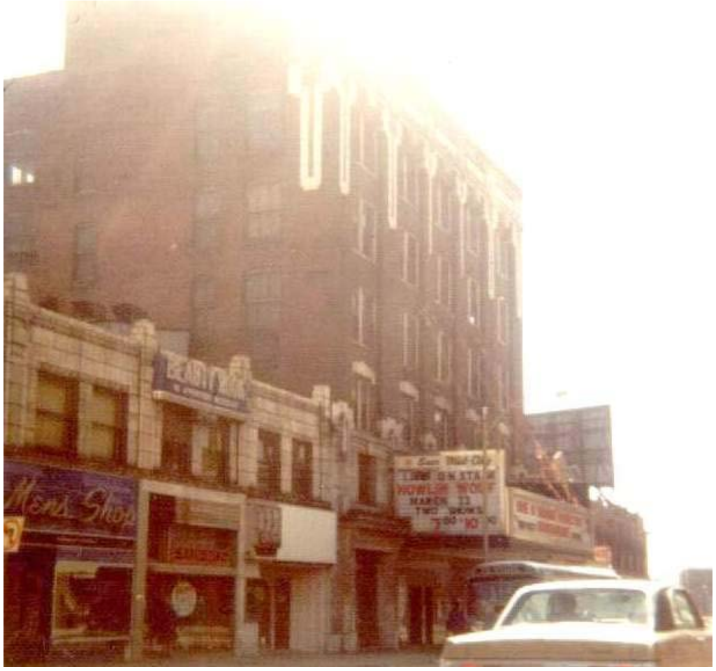
Using a wide, shallow fan-shaped seating area, the auditorium (100 feet wide by 95 feet deep) arranges 2,300 people on four levels. The ceiling's low dome design guarantees excellent acoustical properties. Most of the theater's public spaces depend on indirect lighting for their illumination. Every floor has a lobby with mosaic floor, marble staircase, and ornamental plaster. A thirty-five passenger elevator takes patrons to the gallery seating. Ticket booth, business office, and cloak room operate out of the first floor lobby. Restrooms are on all three floors, and the dressing rooms can be found under the stage and in the wings.

During the Age of Challenge, the Grand Avenue district experienced the construction of three new live performance theaters. First came the Princess Theater at 320 North Grand in 1910, followed by the Empress Theater at 3620 Olive in 1913, and finally the Victoria Theater at 3627 Delmar (now Grandel Square) in 1913.

Princess Theater

The local architectural firm of Harry Clymer and Francis Drischler (active from 1908 to 1916) made plans for two of the three theaters built in the Grand Avenue district during this period. Their first commission, the Princess Theater, resulted from a request by the Mid-City Realty Company for a theater and studio building to be located at 320 North Grand, at the southeast corner of Olive. Charles Carpenter and the Fishel brothers directed the project. Costing $300,000 and taking a year to build, the Princess made its debut on September 12, 1910. In 1917 this vaudeville house was remodeled by an architect named Charles Deitering for $30,000. Two years later the theater became the Rialto. In the mid 1920s the Shubert syndicate purchased the property and renamed it the Shubert-Rialto. When the Great Depression arrived, it became a movie house called the Shubert. Live theatrical performance under the direction of the American Theater came to these premises in 1953. The American remained at this location until 1960 when the name transferred to the Orpheum back downtown. This theater then reverted to a second run movie house called the Loew's Mid City. When the ownership changed in 1972, it was renamed Campus Mid City. It closed in 1975, and the Jack Dubinsky Real Estate Company ordered its demolition three years later.

The six story brick Princess Theater Building had a frontage of 75 feet and a depth of 160 feet. Its design suggested the arts and crafts movement. A five-bay front was faced with white glazed brick and terra cotta for the lower two floors and matt finished dark red brick with white and green glazed terra cotta trim for the upper floors. A large overhanging cornice crowned the roof line. Three street level entrances designated the building entrance at the north end, the theater access in the center, and a restaurant admission on the south end. A bronze marquee sheltered the theater access.



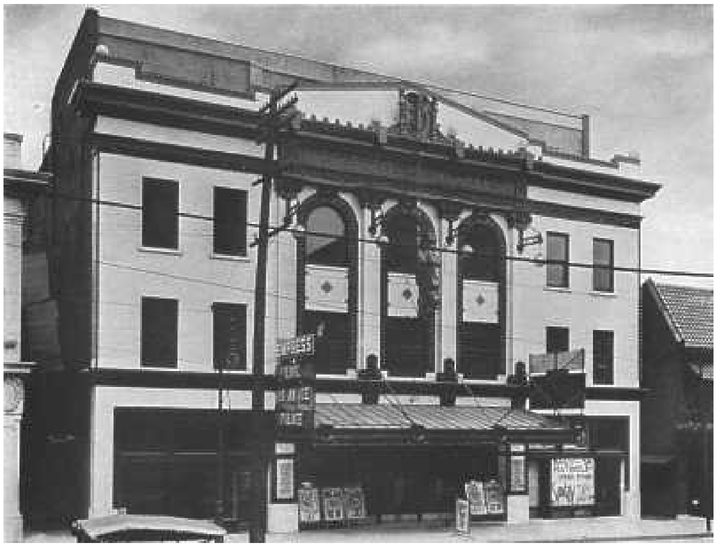
Princess Theater, later the Rialto, 320 N. Grand, 1910, Clymer & Drischler

In the building lobby at the north entrance four electric elevators and a staircase transported people to the floors above. On the second floor a rehearsal hall seated 500, on the third floor access to the theater's gallery seating, and on the remaining floors twenty-two artist studios. Later the artist studios were converted into office space. Its theater entrance flowed into a large lobby with the usual arrangement except for two ticket offices. With 1510 seats the auditorium had three levels and four boxes. Each level had its own lobby restroom equipped. Auditorium contained a large stage (65 feet by 40 feet), an adjustable orchestra pit for forty musicians, and indirect lighting. At the rear of the building were twenty fully equipped dressing rooms.

Empress Theater

Clymer and Drischler received their second theater commission from the Empress Amusement Company for a second-run vaudeville house to be located at 3620 Olive. With $175,000 invested and construction completed by the end of 1912, the Empress gave its first vaudeville performance in the spring of 1913. During the mid-1920's, the format changed to serious drama performed by a resident stock company.

Conversion to a motion picture emporium came during the Depression. But in 1951 the Ansell brothers leased the Empress. They transformed it into a first class drama house with an excellent local stock company headed by New York star power. To attract large audiences, they offered high class productions at reasonable ticket prices. Unfortunately their experiment failed. Rising production costs and low audience participation resulted in a loss of $200,000 during its four seasons of operation. Increasing debt forced the Empress to close on March 19, 1955. Except for a brief period as a church, it remained closed until its demolition in March 1977.

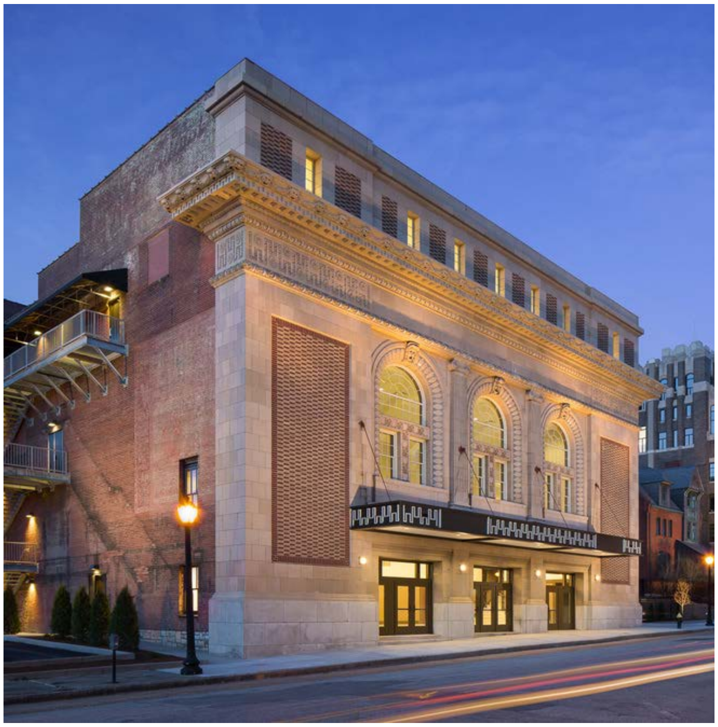


Empress Theater, 3620 Olive, 1912-13, Clymer & Drischler

Using a three part arrangement seven bays across, the front of the three story brick Empress Theater measured 72 feet wide by152 feet deep. Composed of white glazed brick and terra cotta in a classical French manner, the three door entrance was flanked by storefronts. The lavish lobby (35 feet by 40 feet) was characterized by ornamental plaster walls and ceiling, marble floors and staircases, and extensive mirrored panels in the French style. The auditorium had a total of two thousand seats in balcony, loge, and orchestra areas. An ample stage (50 feet by 40 feet) was supplied with sixteen dressing rooms at the rear. Like other large theaters of the period, it had a full compliment of restrooms and lounges.

Victoria Theater

After terminating their association with the Germania Theater in 1896, the German Drama Society engaged architect Joseph Conradi to prepare plans for an eight hundred seat theater costing $40,000 to be located in the vicinity of Broadway and Market. Plans were prepared but the project was not built. At the beginning of the twentieth century the local German community formed a stock company to finance a new German language theater. Under the auspices of the German Drama Society, the German Real Estate Company purchased a site (100 feet by 150 feet) for a new theater on the north side of Delmar (now Grandel Square) 150 feet west of Grand Avenue. They paid $20,000 for the Drummond residence there. They selected the architectural team of Widman and Walsh. Construction continued through the last half of 1912 into 1913. Construction costs exceeded $175,000. On March 1, 1913 Goethe's play "Faust" was performed in the German language, initiating the theater. Although the Victoria presented plays in English as well as German, it struggled to turn a profit. With the outbreak of the First World War anti-German sentiment forced the Victoria to close its doors on September 17, 1917.



The Victoria, now Sun Theater, 3627 Grandel Square, 1912-13, Widman & Walsh, photo by Mike Kelley Photography

One year later George Fox leased the Victoria and converted it into a movie house called the Liberty or Liberty Hall Theater. Eventually competition from its two large neighborhood rivals on Grand – the Missouri and St. Louis Theaters – impacted its profitability. In response, ownership of the Victoria changed its format to burlesque and renamed it Liberty Burlesque Theater. A year later it became World Burlesque Theater. During the 1930s and 1940s it survived as a jazz nightclub called the 400 Club. Starting in 1950 the theater returned to a motion picture format. The ownership renamed it the Sun Theater and subsequently the Lyn Theater. After two years of activity, it closed. A sixty year interregnum followed of intermittent operation ranging from church services to burlesque shows. Several attempts to revive the theater's fortunes met with failure. With the theater sliding into major deterioration, the Lawrence Group renovated the Sun Theater at a cost of eleven million dollars. Now it serves as a playhouse and auditorium for the Grand Center Arts Academy.

German Renaissance design permeated the Victoria's architecture. Facing south at 3627 Delmar (Grandel Square), the four-level-over-basement brick and terra cotta Victoria had a 79 foot front and a depth of 150 feet. On each side of the theater was a ten foot alleyway facilitating easy exit. The theater façade employed plain and ornamental brick plus multicolored panels of terra cotta. Partitioned into three sections, the front located the theater's main three part entrance in the center area. One important feature of this façade is the contrast between the brick and terra cotta in the framing of the top and sides. A second important aspect of this façade is the fine and imaginative detail of the three windows above the entrance area and the entablature at the top of level three to include both the cornice and frieze.

The Victoria's lobby extends across the entire front of the building, providing access to the auditorium, ticket office, restrooms, business center and cloak area. On the top floor was a large recital hall seating 500 and a studio area. The three level auditorium with 12 boxes seated a total of 1,872 people. The theater has a large stage, a high proscenium arch, and ample dressing rooms in the rear. Its steel and concrete construction made the premises fireproof.

From 1890 to 1930 vaudeville reigned as the most popular form of live entertainment. Vaudeville acted as a catalyst for the construction of many theaters built during the Age of Challenge. Several early movie houses and later the movie palaces of the 1920's tried to maintain a connection to vaudeville either as an addition to the film or sometimes as a substitution. These arrangements were called combination movie houses. Emergence of talking motion pictures in 1927 and the public escapism fostered by the Great Depression of the 1930's brought to an end reign of vaudeville.

Today the musical comedy survives locally in a commercial setting at the Peabody Opera House and the remodeled Fox Theater. St. Louis' Muny makes its contribution during the summer season. Drama continues at the regional theaters, often associated with institutions of higher learning. We have the Edison Theater at Washington University, the Loretto-Hilton at Webster University, the Touhill at UMSL, and the Emerson Performance Center at Harris-Stowe. Several local professional groups also offer drama to the public. But burlesque, melodrama and vaudeville vanished from the scene decades ago.

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Box 5 American Theater 1960-1979
Box 13 Empress Theater
Box 16 Garrick Theater 1903-1907
Box 17 Garrick Theater 1908-1935
Box 29 Liberty Theater
Box 47 Orpheum Theater
Box 50 Princess Theater
Box 52 Shubert Empress, Shubert Garrick, Shubert Jefferson,
Shubert Rialto
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