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- TO ENTER A BURNING BUILDING

7 SELF-PROCLAIMED SHOEHOUNDS BARE THEIR SOLES

SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE PARAMOUNT THEATRE'S 90TH ANNIVERSARY

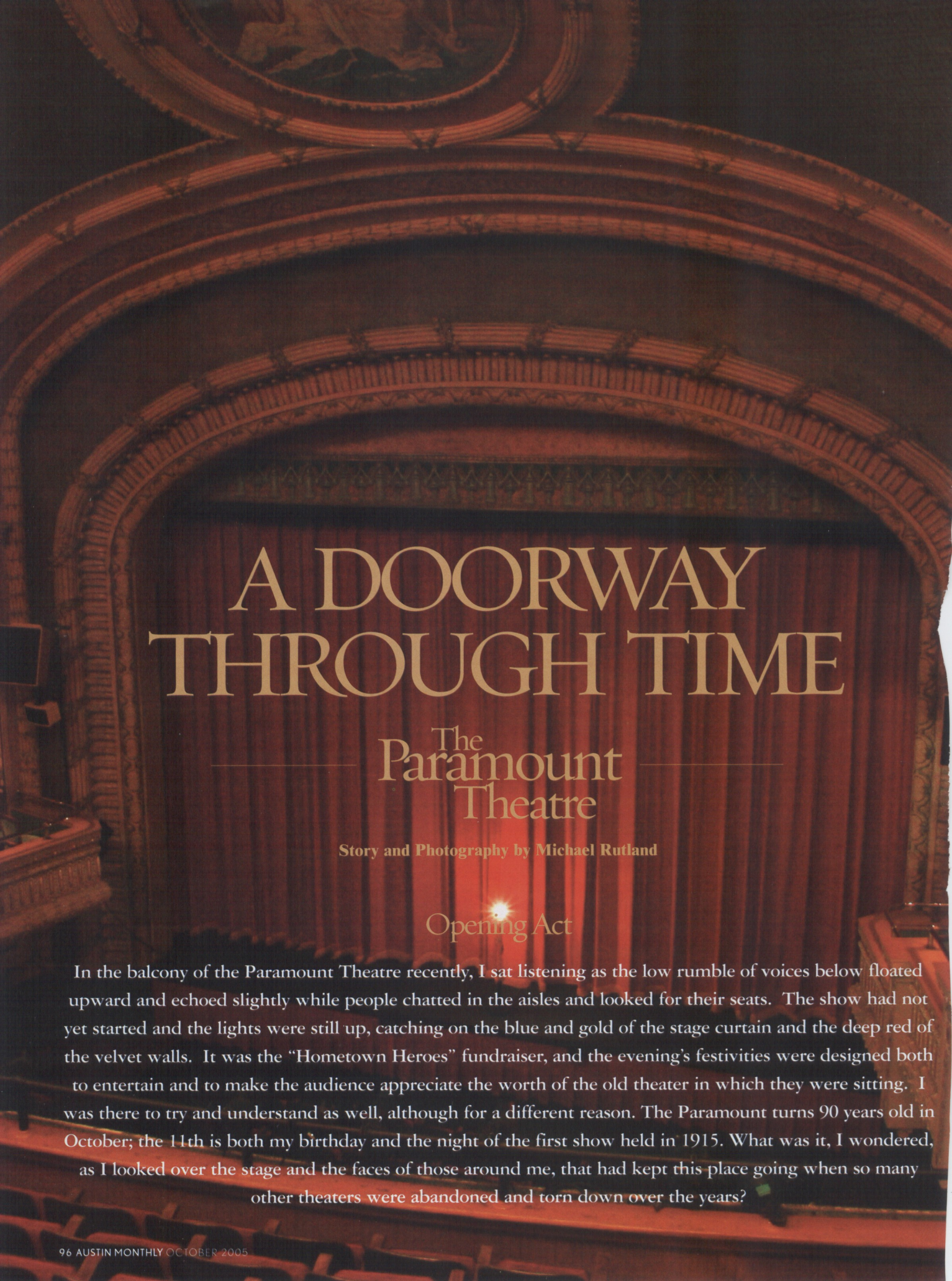
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A DOORWAY THROUGH TIME

The Paramount Theatre

Story and Photography by Michael Rutland

Opening Act

In the balcony of the Paramount Theatre recently, I sat listening as the low rumble of voices below floated upward and echoed slightly while people chatted in the aisles and looked for their seats. The show had not yet started and the lights were still up, catching on the blue and gold of the stage curtain and the deep red of the velvet walls. It was the "Hometown Heroes" fundraiser, and the evening's festivities were designed both to entertain and to make the audience appreciate the worth of the old theater in which they were sitting. I was there to try and understand as well, although for a different reason. The Paramount turns 90 years old in October; the 11th is both my birthday and the night of the first show held in 1915. What was it, I wondered, as I looked over the stage and the faces of those around me, that had kept this place going when so many other theaters were abandoned and torn down over the years?



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Austin

THE EARLY YEARS

“I FIRST CAME TO WORK HERE IN TIME FOR THE reopening in October 1980,” said Anthony Johnson, head custodian and unofficial historian for the Paramount. “They had just finished the restoration, and the rest of downtown was starting to be rescued as well. It’s only right that it would be, seeing as how the amount of history that went up and down Congress [Avenue] since 1840 is just incredible. Across the street on that little hill behind the Hickory Street restaurant was the Capitol for the Republic of Texas. Where the Paramount sits was the War Department, and right next door was Sam Houston’s office. The southern wall from the War Department building still exists, standing in the alley next to the Paramount’s fire escape.”

John Eberson, the nation’s leading architect for grand theaters, designed the Paramount, and it was constructed by Austin contractor Ernest Nalle in only eight months. The structure was built as the most deluxe vaudeville and silent-movie house in the state, and it transported the audience to exotic settings in other times and places. It combined Classical and Baroque-revival flourish with the economy of form later favored by Frank Lloyd Wright. Some of its outstanding features include a proscenium arch with a painting of the patron of music, St. Cecilia, and near-perfect acoustics, as well as a self-supporting balcony built without columns. It is the oldest of less than 25 Eberson theaters in the country still in existence, of the approximately 1,200 constructed during his career.

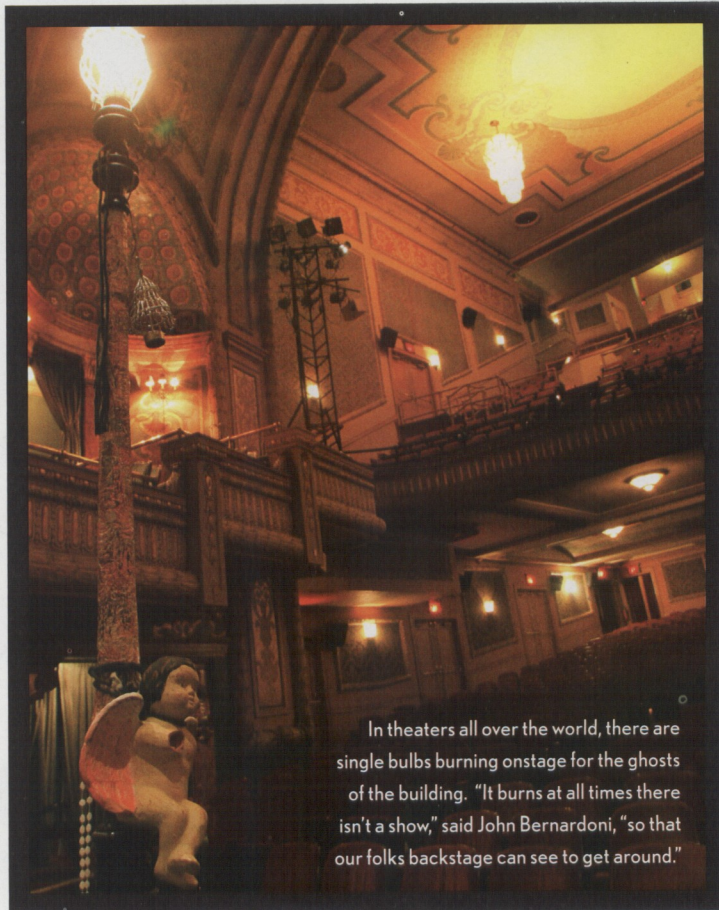
“The theater went through three distinct periods,” said Johnson as we walked the empty aisles. The first was from 1915 to 1929, when it was known as the Majestic and was a vaudeville house, usually showing up to eight short acts each evening. This was a time when the Marx Brothers came to perform and no one knew yet who they were, and children leaned over the balcony railing to watch Will Rogers’ rope tricks so they could later try to replicate them in their barns and backyards.

One of the theater’s earliest and still most famous performers was Harry Houdini. He cut a small hole in the ceiling to the left of the St. Cecilia painting and constructed a special block-and-tackle rig that is still hidden in the large open area above the stage. Johnson led me up into this area, where only a handful of people have been since the 1930s, and we tightrope-walked across creaking boards and belly-crawled over pipes and dusty vents to reach the rigging unit.

“There are a couple of different stories,” Johnson told me, as we stood breathing heavily in the thick air and he trained his flashlight on the hemp rope hanging down ahead of us. “Some people say that he had a goat or big cat in a cage over the audience; others say that it was a woman. But whatever it was, he had it tied off up here, and at some point all the lights in the theater went out. When they came back up a few seconds later, both the cage and whatever was in it had vanished. We don’t know how he did it, and the hole is still there for anybody in the audience with sharp eyes to see.”

The second phase of its history was after the theater was sold and remodeled in 1929–1930. For the next 30 years it played host to some of the greatest films of Hollywood’s golden age, as well as notable stage productions and performers. And there were many.

Names as different as Mae West and John Philip Sousa left a small part of themselves alongside Cab Calloway and Orson Welles in the building’s perfect acoustical air. *Citizen Kane* and *Gone with the Wind* played on the same stage that hosted Katharine Hepburn in the 1941 live production of *The Philadelphia Story*. 1955 saw the premiere of *Lucy Gallant* in which Charlton Heston and then-Gov. Allen Shivers (who played himself in the movie) ride in a parade up Congress Avenue to attend the showing of their film. By the time the 1966 world premiere of *Batman* screened with all of its stars in attendance, however, the Paramount was moving steadily into a period of decline.



In theaters all over the world, there are single bulbs burning onstage for the ghosts of the building. “It burns at all times there isn’t a show,” said John Bernardoni, “so that our folks backstage can see to get around.”

{ FAVORITE } { MEMORIES }

AS TOLD TO JOHN BERNARDONI:

“Charlie Root, the manager of all seven Austin theaters for Interstate Theatres who was also an usher at 19 when the Paramount was predominantly a live venue, told me a story about the famous stripper Sally Rand. She actually wore a flesh-colored body stocking, but she looked unclothed under the low-lit lights as she deftly used her feathery fans to float across the stage. She had a fast-and-hard rule that she was never to be hit with a white spotlight because it would destroy the illusion of being unclothed. The projectionist screwed up and forgot to put the blue gel frame in place before he hit her with the spotlight. She stopped the show, left the stage, cursed her way from the stage to the top of the theater (a long damn walk), ate the spotlight operator out in words that would make a naval officer blush, returned to the stage and finished the show.”

PARAMOUNT, INC.

IN EARLY 1974, THREE GUYS SCRAPED A FEW THOUSAND dollars together and decided to try and restore the old theater, which was being considered for demolition. John Bernardoni, Steve Scott and Charles Eckerman were an unlikely group to prevent the old building from being the future site of a Holiday Inn. They had almost no money and no connections, and almost nobody believed that they could do it. But they quickly formed Paramount, Inc. and went about trying to book live acts and get enough exposure for people to want to renovate the dilapidated B-movie house.

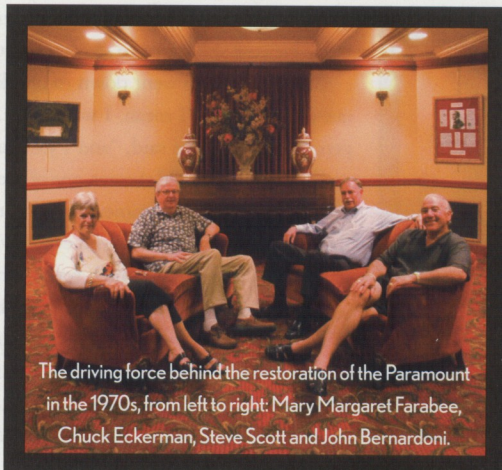
Money was their biggest concern. "We started with less than \$1,000 each and didn't have enough for the performers' deposits, which made it almost impossible to get any decent name people to come," recalled Bernardoni. "One of the guys had to hock two lots on Lake Travis to get money to keep the theater open, and just about every day we had to nip a fiver out of the 'Save the Paramount' jar in the lobby to get food to eat. I can't even tell you how much popcorn and hot dogs we ate from the concession stand those first two years. We just lived on the stuff."

Although they grossed a quarter of a million dollars in their first year, their expenses surpassed that by almost \$13,500. "We had been in operation for two weeks and were just wrapping up the Peter Nero concert that night, when Chuck [Eckerman] waved me over and told me that we were bankrupt," said Bernardoni. "Two weeks, and we were bankrupt. It was just unbelievable."

They did everything they could think of to raise money to keep the stage lit, including filing suit to have a vaudeville-era law, which taxed movie houses, declared unconstitutional. Then-State Comptroller Bob Bullock, Treasurer Jesse James and Attorney General John Hill were named as defendants.

"Even in 1975, there was a statute on the books that was very bizarre and said the following: Any live show held in a regularly established motion picture theater had to pay a sales tax of about 8 percent," said Bernardoni. "Any live show held in a non-regularly established theater, such as Palmer [Events Center] or Armadillo [World Headquarters], didn't get taxed."

The law was implemented in the 1930s as movie houses were growing in popularity, and vaudeville saw this as a way to check a potential threat. The group got Austin attorney Jim Keahy to take their case pro bono, and they sued the state of Texas on the grounds that the law was discriminatory and unconstitutional. They won the suit and got back \$2,000 in taxes, and found out later that Keahy filed a class action suit on behalf of ABC Interstate Theaters and got back sales taxes for *all* of the theaters in Texas going back to the start of the law.



The driving force behind the restoration of the Paramount in the 1970s, from left to right: Mary Margaret Farabee, Chuck Eckerman, Steve Scott and John Bernardoni.



PHOTO (PICAC3346) COURTESY AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER

"This is just an example of how precarious our position was in those days," said Scott. "Eight percent doesn't sound like much, but our profits were so negligible that it would have killed us after a few shows. They made that law in the 1930s, and everybody forgot about it. Live venues did live shows and movie houses did movies, and that was it. We were the first sort of hybrid that came along."

The other obstacle that they faced was the reputation of downtown, as it was widely considered unsafe. "Back when we first took over," said Bernardoni, "downtown was not a place you went at night. People got killed almost every week in certain bars on Sixth Street, and the day after I did a radio spot telling people to come back to see our shows, a police officer was killed in broad daylight half a block down from us."

"Nobody wanted to see this place shuttered," said Eckerman, "but with the safety issue and the economy, that was the direction things were going."

In the early 1970s, banks across the country were pulling investment capital out of downtown areas and putting it into the suburban communities that had been growing steadily since the late 1950s. People didn't need to go downtown to buy their groceries anymore, and the new Highland and Barton Creek malls provided most of the other services that had been

previously only available in the shadow of the Capitol. "If the Paramount closed, it would have been the final nail in the coffin for downtown," said Scott.

Because of this precarious position, the group had to "four-wall" the theater, meaning that they had to lease on a show-by-show basis. "We had to see if the public cared," said Scott. "Most people under 35 probably hadn't been to a show since they were 10, and a lot of Austinites had never been." To gauge the public's interest and

protect their minimal cash reserves, the three did several test shows, the first of which featured jazz artists Dave Brubeck and Sons. The public response was everything that they could have hoped for.

"This place was absolutely electrified," remembered Bernardoni. "You could cut the air with a knife. It was like every human being was interconnected with wire; the air was just crackling." Through word of mouth and the favorable endorsements by the *Austin-American Statesman* and radio disc jockey Cactus Pryor, both shows sold out. The next day the theater was back to showing the Bruce Lee movie *The Five Fingers of Death*, but the group had the proof they needed.

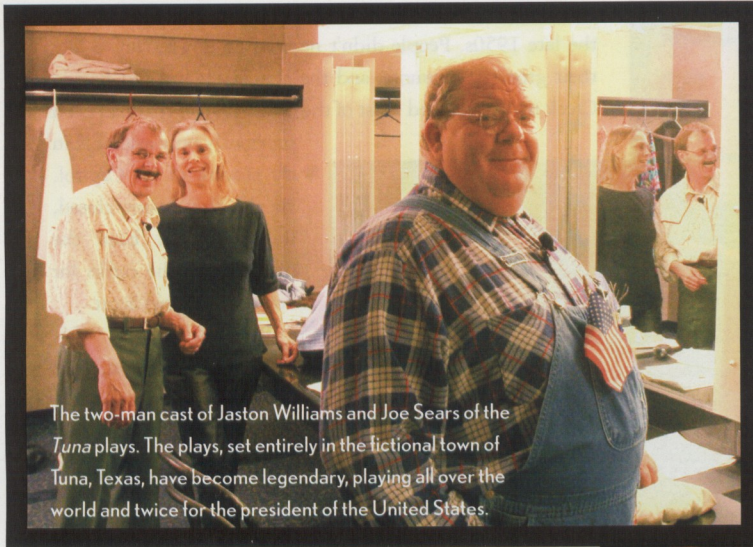
{ FAVORITE MEMORIES }

CHARLES ECKERMAN: "The first favorite memory is that first show with Dave Brubeck. We had sold out both shows, and there was a lot of excitement about them. It was great to see the line of people waiting to get into the second show that went around the corner by Reynolds–Penland and down the block, when so many people said our project would never work. Another favorite memory was Oscar Petersen riding in my old Buick when I picked him up from the airport and brought him to the theater. He was and still is one of my favorite jazz musicians. I hated to get rid of that car."

"All in all a mixed blessing," laughed Scott. "We broke even and packed the house like we wanted to, but the three of us had to clean it up afterwards."

Charlie Root, longtime manager of the Paramount, got the trust officer at the bank that owned the lease to cut it down from \$3,600 a month to \$1,500. With Root's help, Bernardoni also convinced Roberta Crenshaw and other part-owners of the theater to donate their shares to the new Paramount, Inc. "I had to drive home the point that there were people who were highly focused on tearing the theater down and that I needed her help to save it," said Bernardoni. "I was told that it was going to be a Holiday Inn by one of the banks, and that scared a lot of people as much as it did me."

Bernardoni even commissioned a photographic artist to create a picture showing the Paramount as a pile of rubble with the marquee poking out, but he said he didn't have the heart to use it. By the time Crenshaw donated her one-half interest, enough money was coming in to restore the theater, and a short-term lease of \$1 dollar per year was arranged with the owners of the remaining half.



The two-man cast of Jaston Williams and Joe Sears of the *Tuna* plays. The plays, set entirely in the fictional town of Tuna, Texas, have become legendary, playing all over the world and twice for the president of the United States.

{ FAVORITE MEMORIES }

ANTHONY JOHNSON: "I guess it's a tie between Mae West and Chuck Berry. Back when I first started, I was sweeping up the lobby and suddenly there's Chuck Berry, rolling down the aisle as big as life. This was back when I played guitar in a rock band, and it was like seeing Elvis on the barstool next to you in the 1950s. Well, I just called out, 'How's it going, Chuck?' And he walked right over, clapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Hey, how you doin' there, boy? Good seein' you.' Then in 1987 I met director Robert Benton, who told me when he was a student at UT in the 1940s, he came here to audition for a show with Mae West. Apparently he wasn't her type because she took one look at him and said, 'Get that four-eyed geek off the stage, and bring me a man!' Of course he went on to become a great director, but I guess he never cast her in anything."

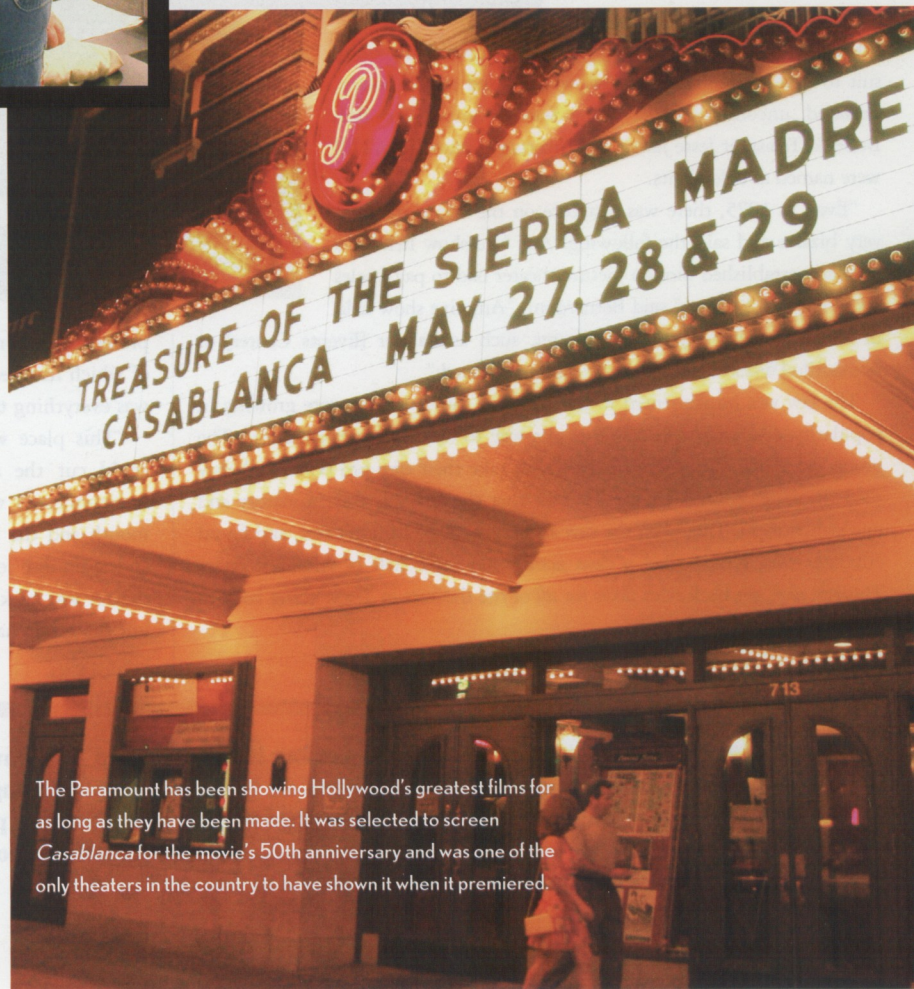
The building had long been an object of historic interest, but it was not designated as a state or national landmark until 1977. In that year, with the help of the Heritage Society of Austin, the Texas Historical Commission and the Junior League of Austin, the theater was registered on the list of state and national historical places and began to receive federal funding for restoration.

Funds for the renovation were provided by such diverse sources as the Federal Economic Development Administration and the City of Austin, as well as the Heritage Society of Austin, the Texas Historical Commission and the Junior League of Austin. Regular patrons also helped by putting their loose change in the donation box in the lobby, a practice that continues to this day.

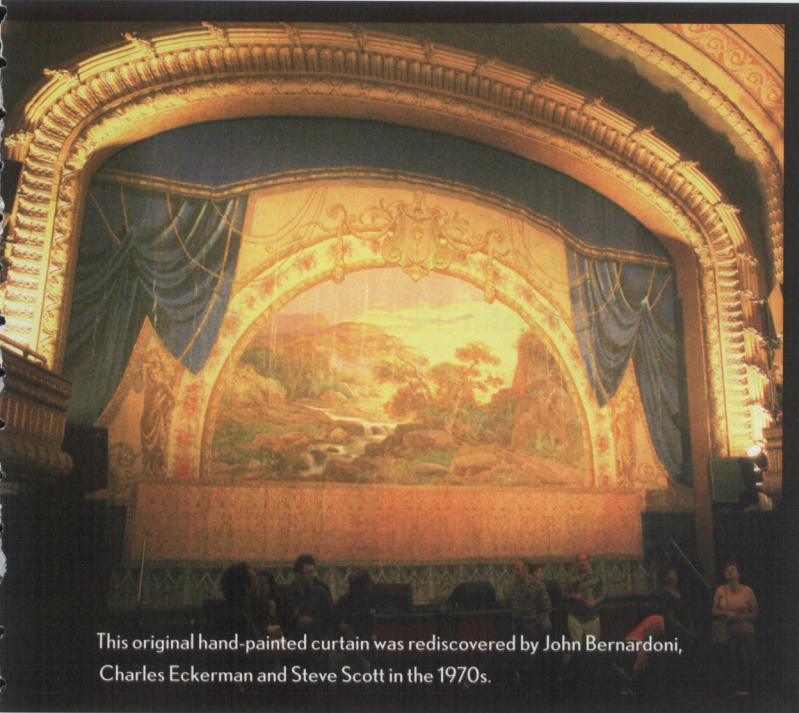
But even though they had the money they needed and the restoration was well under way, they were never short of problems. During the performance of *California Suite* in 1978 with Brenda Vaccaro and James Farentino, the antiquated air-conditioning coils froze, with several inches of ice covering their surface. This occurred prior to intermission, and Vaccaro's manager called Bernardoni over during the break. He said, "John, you have a pissed-off actress in there right now. Her face is completely melted, and she's not going back on. I don't know what kind of bull**t you've got in you, but you'd better get it ready because she wants to see you right now."

Bernardoni then went down to her dressing room feeling very nervous and out of his depth. "I mean, I was 25 or 26, and I wasn't used to dealing with people like this," he said, "and I just started blathering to her about how we were restoring this old theater, one of the jewels of the country, and people were upstairs as we spoke hammering ice off the AC coils. I guess it worked because she did agree to go back on and even invited me out to dinner with her and her mother the next night, which was pretty mind-blowing."

Vaccaro was not the only star to work around the problems of renovation. When the cast of *West Side Story* came to perform, they not only left their mark in the minds of the audience, but on the building itself. "They rebuilt the orchestra pit," said Eckerman, laughing. "We had hired a crew to come in and expand the pit because it was tiny, and the whole cast pitched in. Even the



The Paramount has been showing Hollywood's greatest films for as long as they have been made. It was selected to screen *Casablanca* for the movie's 50th anniversary and was one of the only theaters in the country to have shown it when it premiered.



This original hand-painted curtain was rediscovered by John Bernardoni, Charles Eckerman and Steve Scott in the 1970s.

musical director took his turn, and I remember him bouncing around on the jackhammer like it was nothing. And they were rehearsing during all of this as well. Jackhammer in the day; rehearse at night. You ask about why people love the Paramount? It's right there. I mean, who would do that?"

The theater went through three years of renovations, and its doors never closed for a day; the group couldn't afford that. But people and performers kept coming despite the mess, and in October of 1980 the Paramount began its third phase, fully restored and nationally recognized as a classic performing arts center.

"It was the catalyst that really gave the creative spark, fever and energy back to downtown because it was such a great treasure for people to rally around," said Mary Margaret Farabee, a Heritage Society member who helped to bring the theater back to life and still works to raise funds. "Austinites discovered it during the renovation and then began to see what other great historical buildings were all along Congress Avenue. Saving the Paramount saved downtown, and even today it's the best venue in the whole city."

THE THEATER TODAY

TODAY THE PARAMOUNT HOSTS MAJOR STARS FROM all over the world, and all thoughts of demolition are in the past. The theater is sought out by many performers not only for its excellent acoustics, but also because they love playing on the same stage used by so many past greats.

Ray Benson: "This hall has brought in amazing performers. This is where I saw Stevie Ray Vaughan finally break through to the public, and of course, the *Tuna* guys; what can I say? Coming to the Paramount Theatre to see *Greater Tuna*, *Red, White and Tuna*, or a *Tuna Christmas* should be required for every Texan or anyone that's ever thought about being a Texan."

Lyle Lovett: "The Paramount is one of the best theaters in the whole country to play. The first show that I ever saw in the Paramount was on the 31st of January, 1981, and it was Uncle Walt's Band that opened up for Rod Cooter. It was just an incredible night, and from that show on I knew I wanted to play at the Paramount, which I've gotten to do so many times now that I've lost track."

Leo Kottke: "There are bad halls, halls that take the stuffing out of you, either because they have so little character that they drain yours or because they close in on you somehow, like the grave. It's hard to get moving with a

big blob of architectural remorse hanging onto your ankle. But with the Paramount, when you're waiting in the wings to go on, you can feel the other acts that have filled the stage all these years. You can see a bit of the hall with its proscenium arch, its lighting, and you can feel its sound ... something you feel before you put any sound into it. It's a right-sized, sensitively designed, beautifully traditional space. And, above all of that, it's a 'working' building. It's being put to right use. It has its own flow. All an act has to do is jump in; it's already rolling. It's an honor to play such a place."

The theater has gone through other financial hard times since coming off the demolition list, including "passing chicken buckets around in the audience and soliciting money on street corners," according to former executive director Paul Beutel. It is still dependant primarily on donations, but its place in Austin's future is secure. Studios trust it to show vintage films that other houses will never see, and performers go out of their way to play on its small stage. As observed by current executive director Ken Stein: "People feel something about places like this that money just can't influence. I've met so many people who met their future spouse on a first date here. We've got directors like Ron Howard and Robert Rodriguez that go out of their way to screen their premieres here. Howard and Matthew McConaughey actually financed a new sound system for the theater for the premiere of *Ed TV*. That is dedication you just can't find in many places today."

An anonymous card left in the suggestion box after the "Heroes" benefit sums it up well: "I don't know how it survived when so many others didn't, but thank you for not letting it fold. It just wouldn't be Austin without the Paramount."

CLOSING ACT

WAS IT LUCK? LOVE? IN THE END, THERE IS NO explanation that one can give to convey what the Paramount is. The history of the area and lists of great past performers can only go so far. To truly understand just what the theater is, you have to watch a black-and-white movie there on a summertime evening. You have to feel the tingle on your skin as the musician's note carries all the way to the back without losing any power. And you have to sit down before a show when the place is empty and just listen. If you do this, you will hear a voice that speaks on a level far more subtle and encompassing than human speech. It is the soul of a building that has gained its own voice after hundreds of others have flowed over its seats and been caught in the red velvet of its walls.

I heard that voice as it joined with Jimmy LaFave's that night of the benefit, and I suddenly understood the "why" of the theater's endurance. As he sang the gentle and haunting "Never is a Moment," a feeling of clarity came and I scrambled to write in the darkness, although I could not see the paper.

"The feeling is beautiful and heartbreaking," I wrote. "It is every movie about hope and loss that I have ever seen, every love that I've watched drive away. It's like the soundtrack of my own coming of age, set in an age that only exists in this place."

And that, I think, is what the Paramount truly is. It is whatever age a person wants to be, any time and place that they want to visit. As Charles Eckerman said, "It is like a painting that you can enter into and enjoy time and time again." It makes me think of that line from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when the character says that we are merely passing through history. I understand now that in its own way, the Paramount is like the Ark of the Covenant, acting as a repository and a window on some of the best heights that humanity has achieved. Some of those are fiction, only light and shadow cast on the screen through the smoke of a *Casablanca* cigarette. But the feelings and emotions they bring are real and cannot be experienced anywhere else today.