



100 YEARS OF THE PARAMOUNT

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A look back on Austin's little theatre that remains a special place for generations.



Like the formidable Scarlett O'Hara herself, [The Paramount Theatre](#) is a defiant survivor; transversing a century full of technological and social changes that had rocked so many of her contemporaries.

Its secret to survival? “There is only one way that a theatre stays open for 100 years...that covers a span of five generations, that means five generations of Austinites have deemed it sufficiently important to keep it open,” Jim Ritts, Executive Director of the Paramount and State Theatre and master of ceremonies for the year long party, says. Ritts is a transplant who re-rooted back to Austin in 2006. He and his wife were Century Club members (The Paramount’s most dedicated group of contributors) before he took the reigns from Ken Stein in 2011. His office is the old projection room of the neighboring State Theatre, riveted metal doors still hang as a constant reminder of fragility (and flammability) of the 35 and 70mm film they still show in their theatres today. He sits just outside his office in front of a large conference table where several folders are fanned out, some containing details for upcoming celebratory events that will unfold over the coming year. He reflects on the magic of the last century which has enabled him to sit where he is today, navigating the current history in a long legacy that is The Paramount Theatre.

The story starts in 1915 with the design of John Eberson, one of 1,200 theaters he developed over his prolific career and one of only 25 that stand today. Built in only eight months by Ernest Nalle, the theatre opened as “The Majestic” in October of 1915. At that time the 1,300 seat theatre could house four percent of Austin’s 1915 population — Ritts is quick to point out the absurdity of this business model. “Who in their right mind builds a business like that?” he asks while at the same time acknowledging this foresight is what enabled The Paramount to stay in the same footprint as the city grew around it.



Originally a vaudeville house, the stage was home to such acts as Harry Houdini and the Marx brothers. With the rise of motion pictures, The Paramount met its first of many tests of time. Answering the challenge in 1930 with an interior facelift which introduced the ornate art deco design that is still prevalent today. And no rebranding would be complete without a name change: The Majestic was now officially The Paramount. To complete its coronation as Austin's Premiere Movie Palace, The Paramount was crowned with an almost 50-foot tall beacon of light, erected above the theatre's marquee and affectionately known as "the blade." The predominantly green sign was topped with yellow and orange lights. Rivets ran down along the sign to match the ones along the marquee and were synchronized to act as a glowing runway drawing people inside to see the pictures. The blade was in operation until 1964 when it disappeared.

The iconic blade will be returning to the skyline of downtown Austin this year, admittedly one of Ritts' most exciting projects. As the topic comes up he shuffles through the files on the table and pulls out a rendering of the new blade, "It looks like something out of an action comic!" exclaims Ritts. Three years of dedicated research were required in planning for the historically accurate reconstruction, in conjunction with a successful community campaign "Give Us the Green Light", which made this dream into a reality. Boasting over 1,400 bulbs and standing 50-feet tall, the new beacon is scheduled to be unveiled on The Paramount's actual birthday in October of this year.

The celebration of the building's rich heritage in film has already begun with the Paramount 100 Film Series. Stephen Jannise, Film Programmer for The Paramount, is in the midst of curating this 18- month long series. "Celebrating the fact that we have been around 100 years, which is pretty close to also being the length of time that film has been around, I thought it was the perfect excuse to do something like [the Paramount 100]." Taking inspiration from the historic space and creating opportunities for visitors to see movies they may already know from TV, in an elevated experience. "It just feels like it is all one piece — showing that movie from that era in a theatre from that era," Jannise explains. "Creating new memories for people and creating new favorites for people, I mean all my favorite memories are actually seeing movies here for the first time that I fell in love with and I couldn't believe I spent my whole life never seeing."



Film is only part of the story: “The movies and the live [events] always worked hand in hand, that’s how it was meant to be. In its most troubling period of time that [balance] gets out of whack...” acknowledges Ritts. Several years ago the powers that be recognized that Austin was witnessing a golden age of comedy and there was a niche to be filled for a new generation of patrons. **The Moontower Comedy Festival** was created to fill this need, and in only four years, has grown to be one of the largest comedy festivals in the country. “[The Paramount] always paid attention whenever it could to the patrons and to the artist, everything else will take care of itself and all that, and Moontower is a logical extension of that.” Ritts credits the Moontower Festival in connecting the theatre with a 6th generation of Austinites.

Ritts is often stopped by patrons who want to share their unique bond with the theatre, he collects them, cherishes them, and keeps them along with his own connective tissue, and with each story it strengthens his own ties to the theatre. The stories are of love, childhood, family, and memories from years past or new experiences. One such story was shared at the Q&A following last year’s SXSW screening of *Boyhood*. When asked to give their impression of the experience, Lorelei Linklater connected her experience with the film to the theatre — “I have grown up going to this theatre, it’s a really sentimental place for me and seeing [*Boyhood*] on the big screen is a lovely experience.” Ritts holds back tears recalling this moment, which he lists as one of the best of his past four years at The Paramount. “There is nothing [she] could have said that could have meant more to us, and the reason is because that is the essence of the generational transference that happens here.”

CREDITS

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