

TACOMA'S PANTAGES THEATRE

by Lloyd E. Klos

In the spring of 1977, Tacoma's devotees of the arts were excited over the possibility of the city's purchase of the 1299-seat Roxy Theatre (successively named Pantages, RKO Orpheum and Roxy) for use as a performing arts center. If successful, the theatre will have come "full circle," as it was built and opened as a legitimate theatre in 1918, the pride of Alexander Pantages.

Pericles Pantages had left his native soil of Greece for America when he was nine, changing his name to Alexander in awe of the ancient military leader. Holding odd jobs in San Francisco until 1898, he sought his fortune in the Yukon where gold had been recently discovered. However, he got into the theatre business when he persuaded Klondike Kate to invest in a theatre in Dawson. He had a way in presenting the best acts, often enticing

attractions from the competition.

Returning to Seattle, he launched into the theatre business in earnest and by 1910, owned or held interest in 26 houses. Continuing to acquire more, he controlled 72 by 1926.

The Tacoma Pantages was designed by architect B. Marcus Priteca, who was associated with Pantages from 1911 until 1936.

Though the Pantages was not a "motion picture palace" of the style of the glamorous twenties, it still was very ornate. It had about the maximum amount of sculptured ornamental plaster and terra cotta possible. A specialty of architect Priteca, a sunburst glass ceiling, about 20 by 30 feet, was in the middle of the high dome. It also had a big sculptured torch in the center of the proscenium arch, plus ornately decorated Greek pillars on either side of the stage.

The theatre opened in 1918 with a strictly-vaudeville bill for the matinee and two evening performances. No films at all. In 1920 and 1921, a one-reeler was run before the vaudeville acts. In 1922, came continuous operation with feature pictures and vaudeville. To accompany the picture, a special chamber orchestra was hired, which was smaller than the vaudeville aggregation.

A pipe organ was installed in 1923 and split the picture accompaniment with the small orchestra. By 1924, the organ was used for all picture work.

It is impossible to talk about this theatre without mention of two men who were called "The Edisons of the Stage," the twin brothers, Carl and Clyde Ellis. Carl, the theatre's stage manager, and Clyde, its projectionist, became well-known in theatre equipment circles for their development of colored mediums for the evolution of stage lighting effects. So revolutionary was this development that Alexander Pantages used it in the other theatres of his circuit.

Before the debut of the "Ellis System of Stage Lighting" in 1920, theatregoers were treated to "straight" colors and "straight" whites. In place of this, the Ellis Brothers substituted powerful globes, combining the old scheme with their patent color mediums. The most powerful light did not fade or dissipate the color mediums, which were stained glass, similar to cathedral window glass, and cut in narrow strips to allow for expansion in the presence of heat from the 1000-watt

Exterior view of Roxy (formerly Pantages) marquee in 1954.

(Leverenz Coll.)





Lobby of Tacoma's Pantages Theatre. The house was built before the motion picture palace era, as the rather plain decor will attest. (Leverenz Coll.)

bulbs.

The idea was emphasized in the border and footlights. The original borders of the Pantages had 150 to 200 globes. The Ellis system was substituted, containing four lights of 12 globes each. Cost of lighting was cut in half, but the stage was given several times more light. Also, every possible color was included: red, green, blue, amber, and their combinations, which were perfect for vaudeville acts requiring special lighting effects.

Two persons long-connected with the Pantages are Corky Ellis, the present stage manager, and Will Conner, whose Conner Corporation ran the house and four others in Tacoma from 1959 to 1974. They have fond memories of the theatre.

"This is one of the last great theatres in the area," says Will Conner. "Look at that terra cotta in the balcony. You just couldn't afford to build a structure like this now. I remember when that terra cotta was installed. It came from a plant in Auburn, Wash., when I was a boy there. It was shipped here by the wagonload."

Corky Ellis, whose father, Carl, was the stage manager of the house when it was opened, says that every theatre had its greenroom. Why, no one seems to know, but they all had one. The one in the Pantages was located below the main floor and hasn't been used in 46 years. From

this green, rectangular room, are doors leading to small dressing areas, each having a sink, make-up table and a mirror, bordered with light bulbs. The main room served as a sort of living room.

"In those days, a \$100-a-week act was a headliner, but they paid their own travel, room and meal expenses. They spent a lot of time here between performances. Coffee was provided. I can remember when I booked Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy for \$75 a week.

"Times were tough in the thirties and we'd have to watch the performers very closely. They'd sneak in hot plates and try to cook their meals down there.

"This building was constructed for use as a legitimate theatre, not as a movie house. But, the stage hasn't been used since the thirties."

"When I operated it as a movie house," says Conner, "I'd put on a stage show occasionally. But, it was always in front of the screen, not back on the stage. One act I booked in this fashion was the Mills Brothers in the late 1930's."

Corky says that the last time the stage was put to use was in 1930. "We had Bela Lugosi in *Dracula*. We rigged some special equipment so the 'vampires' could fly across the stage. Things were tough in those days. The show ran two or three days and bombed. However, I believed he made enough to get out of town."

Will recalls The Great Davy who juggled cannon balls. "At least, he *said* they were cannon balls. Not unlike some performers who were heavy drinkers in those days, Davy would sit in the dressing room and drink a whole gallon of moonshine. When the five-minute buzzer alerted him, he'd go over to the sink, get rid of what he had drunk, and go out to give a perfect performance. Following his act, back to the dressing room he went to resume the cycle."

Corky remembers Elvira and the Weaver Brothers, a country music group which he says was so good, they'd even be great today. Then there was Cliff Arquette (Charlie Weaver) who appeared often at the Pantages. Babe Ruth also appeared on the stage, and would hit a baseball, attached to a string, into a net.

But Corky's most vivid recollection was of heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey. "They set up a ring and he came out and boxed a few rounds with some locals. Once in a while, one of the boys would try to make a name for himself. One caught the champ with a pretty good punch. It was the worst mistake he ever made!"

Corky recalls the pipe organ whose console rose from the pit. "The guy who played it regularly was Arnold Leverenz." The organ in the Pantages was a 3/10 Robert Morton and boasted the first console elevator in the Northwest. The Pantages became the RKO Orpheum about 1929 and renamed the Roxy in 1934. □

Arnold Leverenz at the 3/10 Robert Morton console in the Pantages. (Leverenz Coll.)

