

Deco Bookshelf: Texas Theaters That Survived

By Jim Sweeney

Many old theaters have survived in Texas' cities and towns, but not without hard work by local activists and some harrowing near-deaths and even resurrections. That's the main message you get from "Grand Old Texas Theaters That Won't Quit" by Joan Upton Hall and Stacey Hasbrook (Republic of Texas Press, paperback, \$18.95).

It's not a comprehensive catalog of preserved theaters in Texas, but the book's tales of 48 theaters offer a look at the variety of ways theaters survive. A map offers non-Texan readers help in nailing down the location of the smaller towns.

While there are big-city theaters in this book, it mainly focuses on small towns. Some of the theaters were opera houses or other venues for live performances, others were for movies only. Some were both, or have evolved into community theater centers.

Hall says the inspiration for the book came from the restoration of the 1925 Palace in Georgetown, near her home. The theater, redone in the Deco style in 1936, is now a performing arts center.

Many of the theaters are modest structures, although some, judging by the interior and exterior photos (some current, some vintage) would hold their own against the fanciest big-city palace.

In some cases, they are big-city palaces. Austin's 1915 Paramount is a classical/baroque building that got a Deco interior later on. Its original architect was noted theater designer John Eberson. The authors note that the Paramount is one of the fewer than 25 of Eberson's 1,200 theaters still standing.

The 1921 Majestic in Dallas, one of Eberson's atmospheric theaters, is an impressive Renaissance/Baroque palace. It has a Roman gardens theme. One of its historic footnotes is that Ginger Rogers began her career there "by winning a Charleston contest."

A less fortunate footnote for another theater, reflecting changes in the movie business, applies to the 1935 Spanish-style Village Theater in Dallas. When a chain chopped it into four theaters in 1987, it was the last independently owned theater in the country's 10 largest cities that was showing first-run films.

Another statistic that reflects the changes in the movie business is that Denison once had 30 theaters. The 1920 Rialto was the last to die, in 1986. It's now being restored for musical performances.

El Paso's 1930 Plaza, in a Spanish-revival style, was originally designed for vaudeville, with 2,410 seats. The design was altered during construction to accommodate movies. Its downtown neighborhood was the theater district; there were 17 theaters here at one time. Some have been demolished, and the Plaza is the only one both still standing and still operating as a theater.

San Antonio's 1929 Majestic, another Eberson design, had nearly 4,000 seats and cost \$3 million. When built, the 18-story building was the largest theater in the South and the second largest in the country, the book notes. Half a million people attended its opening, and the president of Mexico sent a general to represent his government. After a long decline, the Majestic was restored and is now home to the city's symphony and rotating plays.

The authors note with some disappointment that very few of the communities in which these theaters survive market them as attractions. When Hasbrook called the Chamber of Commerce in Alpine, the woman she talked to told her she didn't think the town had a theater. But the town's 1927 Rangra still shows movies. Hasbrook got the information from a deputy sheriff whose uncle owns the building now. The town's other surviving theater building, the Granada, may become a playhouse, but it has been gutted and nothing original remains except the exterior walls.

Theater owners, both chains and local, occasionally are the bad guys in these dramas. Interstate Theatres, the chain that owned Abilene's 1930 Paramount, a Pueblo Deco/Spanish palace, stripped most of the interior furnishings and auctioned them off in the 1970s, the book notes. The Paramount survives today as a playhouse, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Interstate also stripped the Plaza Theater in El Paso in the 1970s. Some of the furniture was thrown out. Ironically, the Hoblitzelle Foundation, founded by the family that founded Interstate, is cited by the authors for often aiding theaters.

Some of the theaters needed work to modernize them. Albany's modest Spanish-style Aztec, built in 1927, had its lobby extended onto a vacant lot to add a kitchen, restroom facilities and a meeting room. Aside from plays, the building can be rented for receptions and meetings.

Other theaters have had varied careers. Bastrop's 1889 Opera House served as a pistol range for a while. The 1920 Deco-style Majestic in Eastland is now a bed and breakfast.

The 1886 Stafford Opera House in Columbus became a Ford dealership in 1916. The upstairs "became an arena for boxing, basketball games and even a roller skating rink." To alleviate a housing shortage during World War II, apartments were constructed in part of the building, while tires were stored in another part.

The big attraction at the Spanish-revival Jefferson (1927) in Beaumont is its Robert Morton Wonder Organ, the authors say. It has 778 pipes and is "one of only seven disappearing organs in the country that are in the original theater and actually still working."

Lots of theaters have ghosts, according to the book. In the case of the 1909 Palace Theater in Canadian, there's a twist. The current manager, Rob Talley, told the authors he plans to be the theater's ghost after he passes on.

Anyone who's ever worked in community theater will recognize the tales of creative renovations and innovative financing and fundraising in this book. In some instances, people revived a theater that was a gutted ruin.

The Palace in Canadian burned down twice. There was almost nothing original left. When it was restored, the owners chose the Deco style the interior had after the second fire.

When being converted to playhouses, many theaters only put in

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399 seats. That tactic, the authors explain, is because the royalty for producing a play is higher for theaters with 400 or more seats.

The authors note that large numbers of the theaters they encountered had been damaged by fire. The 1915 Gem Theater in Claude has a sturdy, simple, vaguely Prairie-style facade, almost banklike in its solidity. It was built of steel and concrete after an earlier fire had destroyed most of the town.

At Canadian's Palace, the seats were taken to an auto body shop to be stripped and repainted. The seats at Gainesville's 1919 State Theater were in such bad shape they were taken to a carwash for cleaning. The 18-inch-wide seats in Mason's 1928 Odeon didn't fit modern Americans very well and they were uncomfortable, so they were removed. For a while in the 1990s, movies showings were "bring your own chair."

Theater owners and advocates often proudly tell war stories of problems. The Palace's Rob Talley noted that, pre-restoration, he got compliments from patrons for the great special effects during the movie "Twister." Some in the audience apparently didn't realize the rain was coming in through holes in the roof.

Almost nothing of the interior furnishings of Dalhart's 1920s La Rita remained by the 1980s except for a tile water fountain. The original appearance of Lubbock's 1938 Cactus Theater was determined with old photos and architectural clues. By the time restoration began in the 1990s the theater had been closed for 35 years and was missing its marquee and large chunks of its walls.

Long periods of dormancy aren't unusual with these theaters. Port Lavaca's Main Street Theater was vacant for 30 years before being restored. Post's Garza Theater was boarded up for 30 years after vandals torched it in the 1950s. Terlingua's Starlight was roofless for nearly 40 years.

While many of the theaters in this book have the same decline-and-rescue script, Clifton's 1916 Cliftex Theater has "stayed in continual operation as a movie theater since its opening," the authors found. There probably are few theaters in America that could make that claim.