

## **Arts Center Enterprises – San Antonio**

In 1988, the City of San Antonio's Tri-Party Initiative, under Mayor Henry Cisneros, began to execute an innovative plan to revitalize downtown San Antonio, beginning with the area between Alamo Plaza and Market Square, encompassing the Majestic Theatre.

The area had fallen victim to the Gulf States recession, and years in the spotlight did not immunize the Majestic against the region's economic woes. The Theatre had closed, but a planned revitalization of the area offered the Majestic a chance to shine again.

Also, at that time, a non-profit organization, Las Casas Foundation was founded by Jocelyn L. Straus to preserve and restore buildings for cultural use. The sixty-year-old Majestic Theatre was once again given the opportunity to flourish. The arrangement called for the Majestic Building and Theatre to be sold to the City. Retail, residential and commercial real estate components were developed by Virginia Van Steenberg and the Majestic Development Company. The Majestic Theatre and the Empire Theatre were to be developed by Las Casas Foundation.

Las Casas signed a 50-year lease with the City for the Theatres and in turn sub-leased them to Arts Center Enterprises (ACE). "Las Casas Foundation is fundamental to the Majestic and Empire Theatres' success. In partnership with the City of San Antonio, this organization not only raises money to restore the Theatres, but it is also a significant link to the cultural community in San Antonio," says Kirk Feldmann, ACE Executive Director.

The City's plan to rejuvenate downtown spurred ACE to agree to manage and run the Majestic Theatre and Charline McCombs Empire Theatre.

"We shared in the City's vision of a revitalized downtown cultural arts center, and the results have been an active vibrant performing arts facility enjoyed by citizens from throughout our community," says Feldmann.

In 1989, after a \$4.5 million dollar restoration, the "new" Majestic returned to center-stage in the entertainment industry and reopened as the home of the San Antonio Symphony (1989 - 2014), the Majestic Broadway Series and became the cornerstone of the San Antonio Cultural Arts District.

Over the next six years, The Majestic Theatre proved to be a stellar example of successful public, private, and non-profit cooperation where citizens enjoyed a state-of-the art performing arts center.

"The theatre is booked nearly every week out-of-the-year, providing in excess of 175 performances annually and millions of dollars of economic impact to our City. ACE is proud that the Theatre continues to operate successfully and without any subsidy from the City of San Antonio," says Feldmann.

Despite the rejuvenation and success of the Majestic, its 26 foot-deep stage house prevented ACE from booking dance, opera, and the largest most lavish theatrical engagement know as "mega musicals."

Mega-musicals, such as "Miss Saigon," "The Phantom of the Opera," "Aida," "Lion King," "Wicked," and Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," deliver a new level of technical sophistication because of the size and complexity of scenery, costuming and special effects. They are also considered mega-musicals from a production standpoint in terms of the quality of the actors and the amount of money spent on capitalizing these projects.

"The mega-musical philosophy is to deliver the very same, and in some cases an even better show in each community than what appears in New York. If you can do that successfully you're letting the consumer experience a first-class show without having to leave San Antonio," says Feldmann.

"The Majestic was originally built to meet the technical needs of the 1920's and 1930's when the biggest challenge you had to worry about was getting a horse on a vaudeville stage. The 26 foot stage is about 14 feet too shallow for the spectacular Broadway mega-musical productions," says Feldmann. To expand meant acquiring the Little Brady Building at 208 E. Houston Street that for years was not available.

The Little Brady Building stands in the center of the block between the Majestic and the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre and overlaps the Majestic's stage wall by 25 feet, preventing the expansion of the Majestic stage. Obtaining the Little Brady Building would solve the Majestic's stage house limitations and provide an expansion from 26 to 40 feet deep, allowing ACE to book mega musicals.

In July 1995, the Rangel family, owners of the Little Brady Building, agreed to enter in a long-term lease with Las Casas Foundation.

Faced with a 1997 commitment to the "Miss Saigon" production company and a \$3.5 million capital investment, ACE and Las Casas Foundation decided to acquire the Little Brady Building but needed a financial pledge from the City. "It was a huge deal that happened in just four months. It was the opportunity for a management company with the incentive and resources to work together with the community and help make a \$3.5 million capital investment project happen," reflects Feldmann.

Having witnessed the \$2.5 million impact of "The Phantom of the Opera's" single engagement in 1995, the City had the foresight to see that a one-time investment in the Theatre renovation would have a tremendous ongoing benefit for the people of San Antonio. With over \$500,000 already committed by Las Casas Foundation, city officials agreed to match ACE's up-front investment of \$1.5 million and the deal was made to alter the course of San Antonio's entertainment history.

Like the Majestic Theatre, the Empire Theatre was known for its intricate carvings and beautiful décor. Las Casas Foundation raised \$3.5 million dollars to painstakingly restore the Empire to its former glory. After 20 years of inactivity, ACE was proud to reopen the Empire Theatre in April 1998 as the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre.

"The renovation of the Empire Theatre opened its doors to a diverse level of programming. The 852-seat landmark is perfectly sized for small musical theatre, recitals, concerts, children's theatrical performances, and lectures. The Empire is also well suited for community and corporate events, given its seating and downtown location.

Now with the Majestic and Charline McCombs Empire Theatre having been successfully placed back into commerce, ACE continues to strive to bring the finest in entertainment to San Antonio. "We are appreciative of this community's support and we continue to be good corporate citizens and give back to the community that makes us strong," says Feldmann.