

History of The Charline McCombs Empire Theatre

The land that the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre sits on has been devoted to the arts since 1879. The Turner Verein Association built the Turner Opera House, which operated as Rische's Opera, the Houston Street Theatre, the Alhambra Theatre and the Empire Opera House. The Empire has been used as a venue for vaudeville, silent and talking motion pictures, concerts and live theatre.

Thomas Brady bought, restored and reopened the theatre in 1890 as a family theatre. He operated it in its same condition until 1899 (in 1913, Brady built the Empire Theatre on the same site, housed in the Brady building). It was built as a European palazzo and designed by architects Mauran, Russell & Crow of St. Louis.

The "new" Empire was considered to be the most modern steel-constructed building and the largest theatre in San Antonio at that time -- boasting an electric lighting system, excellent acoustics, electric fans, and stage equipment for vaudeville, stock theatre, and motion pictures. The theatre was fully carpeted and showcased grand draperies throughout its gilded interior.

Atop the canopied entrance of the theatre a copper eagle once soared with wings outspread, beckoning patrons to one of San Antonio's most charming theatres. The walls of the Empire's interior were heavily adorned with decorative plaster moldings, ornamental medallions, free form leaves, maidens, masks, and floral detail intricately painted with metallic powders or gilded with 23 carat gold leafing.

During the flood of 1921, the magnificence of the Empire was threatened when nine feet of water poured into the theatre causing significant damage to its gilded interior. Rather than restoring the ornamentation to its original color palette, the damage was camouflaged by layers of thick, white paint. After years of varied usage, the exquisite artistry of the Empire's interior had been sadly forgotten.

After a long, slow decline, the Empire finally closed its doors in 1978. Ten years later, the City of San Antonio bought the decaying theatre, and through the efforts of Las Casas Foundation, funds were raised to restore the Empire to its original luster.

No one knew what beauty lay beneath the layers of thick, white paint. Slowly, the rich color palette of the theatre began to resurface after the paint was peeled away and restoration experts began to meticulously duplicate the theatre's original grandeur. Six pounds of gold leafing and precise metallic detailing again embellishes the remarkable plasterwork. Refinished mahogany warms the theatre, and maidens float proudly upon the radiant proscenium.

Carpets once again pad the floors, and draperies grandly complement the stage. The copper eagle, originally mounted atop the marquee and feared lost, was found and restored. Layers of paint and years of dirt were painstakingly removed, allowing him to soar triumphantly, once again, above the Empire entrance.

Reopened in April 1998, as the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre, San Antonio's grandest intimate theatre resumes its prestigious position as one of our most beautiful live entertainment and special events venues. In 1999, the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Productions in the Empire Theatre

During the heyday of vaudeville, some of America's favorite stage performers made appearances at the Empire. In the 1920's, silent movies featuring stars such as Lon Chaney and Charlie Chaplin were favorites of the Empire patrons. When talking motion pictures made their debut, huge crowds religiously attended the features. The Great Depression was not enough to slow the business of the Empire when 15,000 people packed into the theatre in one week's time for Mae West's "Belle of the 90's." Gene Autry and Roy Rogers with Trigger were among the most memorable live acts produced on the Empire stage before the theatre began exclusively showing motion pictures.

Since 1998, performances by artists including Don McLean, Shawn Colvin, David Crosby, Gato Barbieri and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band contributed to the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre's success. Musical productions such as Beehive and Always...Patsy Cline are only part of the theatrical offerings. The Empire Theatre is also home to wonderful children's programming. Diverse programming is an integral part of the Empire's new realm, and will continue to define its multi-faceted personality.

Interesting Facts

- The Empire Theatre was built in 1913 by Thomas Brady.
- The theatre is owned by the City of San Antonio.
- The theatre opened after renovation in April of 1998.
- The theatre was originally equipped with an electric lighting system and stage equipment for motion pictures and vaudeville.
- The aluminum and gold leafing that give the theatre its luster were used in the early 1900's because they were very inexpensive. Today 23 carat gold leafing is only available in Europe and costs approximately \$39 a roll.
- Twenty-four different colors of paint, primarily autumn tones, are used throughout the theatre.
- The copper eagle that originally graced the theatre entrance was found stored in a ladies restroom when the restoration began. Layers of paint and years of dirt were removed and the eagle soars again triumphantly over the theatre entry.
- The 60 foot high, 4-story building has a plethora of reflective surfaces and remarkable acoustics. A sophisticated sound and lighting system ensures quality live productions.
- The main floor of the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre has been redesigned with adjustable terraces that can accommodate theatre, cabaret, and banquet style seating.