## NOW SHOWING: "ONE SINGULAR SENSATION..."

Tracing Houston Theatre from its Earliest Days to the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts by Ernesto Valdés

epresenting the variety of performing arts, Houston's Theatre District reflects over one hundred and fifty years of regional theatre history. The thousands of European immigrants who came to Texas in the mid-nineteenth century brought with them their love of the performing arts, and almost immediately, they constructed crudelybuilt entertainment venues. Their ensuing efforts to establish legitimate theatre began with a tragedy followed by an array of theatres that came and went in a steady stream with the various forms of entertainment—orchestra, dance, drama, and vaudeville—sharing the same stage. This continued with the construction of the Music Hall in the 1930s, but by the end of the twentieth century, each genre had its own venue. Musical theatre remained housed in the Music Hall, while the Alley Theatre hosted plays and drama; Jones Hall became the home of the Houston Symphony Orchestra in 1966; and the Wortham Center opened in 1987 for the ballet and opera. Collectively these theatres, sharing a common history and artistic expression, became the largest theatre district in the nation outside of New York City. By the late 1990s, however, the Music Hall had become obsolete; and in 2002, it gave way to the city's newest venue, the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts.

Built along the south bank of Buffalo Bayou, the Hobby Center is one of the finest venues for musical theatre in the country. Audiences are greeted by a soaring façade of glass and lights that introduce a theatre with on-site parking and a five-star restaurant, making it a short walk from their table to their seat in the auditorium. The Hobby Center's state of the art technology attracts the senses with a seamless flow of music and dance that transports the audience into other times and

places as only musical theatre can do. The stage echoes the history of traveling shows that included plays, vaudeville, burlesque, magicians, concerts, and Broadway musicals that tell stories of World War II sailors stuck on a South Pacific island, a young ingénue who visited the carnival and fell in love with a roguish carnie, a badly scarred but seductive phantom who haunted the opera house and lured its soprano into his self-imposed exile, or young gypsies who struggled for a chance to be on a Broadway chorus line.

An early evening shot of Hobby Center before the night's performance.

All photos courtesy of Theatre Under The Stars unless otherwise noted.







The Sweeny & Coombs Opera House, which opened on November 3, 1890, hosted Gilbert and Sullivan, and Sarah Bernhardt. On December 1, 1907, it burned to the ground with several other blocks of downtown Houston.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

The city of Houston has no frontier-town history like San Antonio, El Paso, Tucson, Dodge City, or Laramie—it was born a city while the dust was settling from Texas' war for independence from Mexico. Impresarios Stephen F. Austin and John Austin conveyed land grants to immigrants they had solicited to settle in Texas, making it clear that "no frontiersman who has no other occupation than that of hunter . . . no drunkard, no gambler, no profane swearer, no idler" was welcomed. Eliminating miscreants, at least the obvious ones, helped insure a relatively sophisticated attitude among these settlers. In fact, one would have thought an early Texian might have had an old, patched-up tuxedo packed in his trunk. The Austins gave one of the earliest land grants to Augustus C. and John K. Allen, who arrived in Texas with ambitions to develop their land along Buffalo Bayou into a city worthy of becoming the new republic's capital. Local politicos vied for Houston to become the capital of Texas in order to display a measure of respectability and culture.<sup>2</sup> To that end, the community needed an opera house that provided cultural entertainment.

The first respondent to bring live theatre to Houston was an experienced showman from New Orleans, G. L. Lyons. He announced his intention to organize a troupe of performers in New Orleans and move it to Houston. As he told Houston's newspaper, *Telegraph and Texas Register*, he wanted to build a "dramatic temple" in the new city. Unfortunately, on March 28, 1837, during the troupe's journey across the Gulf of Mexico, a storm overturned their boat, leaving only two surviving

performers.<sup>3</sup> The following year, John Carlos announced that he had acquired a building in Houston at Main and Franklin Streets, which he intended to remodel as a theatre "in a neat and handsome style." He arranged for a "respectful theatrical corps" to come to Houston from the Saint Charles Theatre in New Orleans that was managed by Henri Corri. Once they arrived, however, a conflict developed between the two, and Corri, who had bankrolled the entire enterprise, refused to turn its operation over to Carlos. Instead, he openly declared that, "It would be the greatest pleasure of my life to say in after years that I have been the founder of the legitimate drama in the Glorious Republic of Texas." Corri's public snubbing of Carlos created a distinct problem since Corri had the only troupe in town, but Carlos had the only theatre. Reluctantly, the two formed an unsteady relationship that managed to produce just one evening's entertainment.4

It was customary in those days to run two shows a night. On June 11, 1838, in their only production, the company performed Sheridan Knowles's *The Hunchback* followed by the *Dumb Belle*. The reviews were ecstatic, and the *Telegraph* gushed, "The theatre in this city was opened on Monday evening last. The house was crowded to overflowing, and many citizens were compelled to wait on the outside. . . . the actors have exceeded the expectation of their most sanguine friends."<sup>5</sup>

Despite this success, Corri and Carlos went their separate ways. Carlos went bankrupt, while Corri established the first true theatre in Texas, the Houston Theatre. It opened February 25, 1839, and continued for several years; but when the capital of the republic moved to Austin, attendance fell so low that Corri was eventually forced into bankruptcy as well. By mid-1843, he returned to New Orleans.<sup>6</sup>

Local entertainment remained somewhat mundane until February 16, 1860, when the *Telegraph* announced that Captain E. S. Perkins planned to build a new venue on the corner of Franklin and Main Streets. Named Perkins Hall, it would serve the city for the next thirty years. The theatre, "the first great playhouse in Houston," hosted such performers as Maurice Barrymore (father of John, Ethyl, and Lionel) and Buffalo Bill Cody. Later, Eugene Pillot purchased Perkins Hall, which had become so outdated that many performers refused to appear there. The theatre had succumbed to an illness that one performer diagnosed as "the disease of empty benches."

In 1879, Pillot announced that he would renovate the building and add new innovations such as electric lights and a telephone that would allow patrons to make reservations. Perkins Hall closed on April 14, 1886, and on May 3, caught fire from the adjacent venue, New Variety Theatre. Within half an hour both theatres were consumed in the blaze.8 This incident left Gray's Hall as the lone venue in Houston. However, the building never suited the needs of a theatre, a shortcoming that inspired owners, J. J. Sweeney and E. L. Coombs, to tear down Gray's Hall and build a new facility, which they appropriately named Sweeny & Coombs Opera House. A series of ownership changes, renovations, destructions, and new buildings ensued. Sweeny & Coombs became the Houston Theatre, but it too was destroyed by fire. Winnie Davis Auditorium followed, which twice hosted the Metropolitan Opera's production of Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin*, and went on to serve Houston for the next forty-two years.

During the mid-nineteenth century, America's gift to the arts



Houston's Little Theatre, at 701 Chelsea in 1931.

Photo courtesy of Story Sloane's Gallery, Houston, Texas.

emerged in New York City—the Broadway musical. William Wheatly owned a theatre with the city's most well-equipped stage and held the rights to a melodrama, *The Black Crook*, but he had no performers. Henry C. Jarrett and Harry Palmer owned a company of performers and stage sets, but before their opening night, a fire destroyed the theatre they had booked. Unlike Corri and Carlos, these three met and agreed to open *The Black Crook* on September 12, 1866. In spite of one critic calling it "a five and one half hour bottom-numbing show," it became a hit. According to critics, dazzling special effects and scores of "scantily dressed women" overcame its maudlin themes and sappy lyrics. The show ran for over a year and grossed more than a million dollars.<sup>9</sup>

For the rest of the country, the birth of the Broadway musical profoundly impacted the physical integrity of many theatres because most stages were not equipped to present such a show. In Houston, theatres with stages that met these requirements still shared their facilities with other programs. This severely limited the number of days any show could run and, in turn, had a direct effect on the show's costs versus profits. Some of the major venues caught in this dilemma following the demise of Pillot's Opera House included the City Hall Opera House, Sweeney & Coombs Opera House, Winnie Davie Auditorium, and the City Auditorium.<sup>10</sup> On June 21, 1913, the newly organized Houston Symphony Orchestra held its premier concert at the Majestic Theatre. The Symphony, forced to squeeze in between two other shows, had no choice but to perform at 5:00 p.m. Further complicating scheduling, that day marked the end of the season because, as Houstonians will readily acknowledge, in the days before air conditioning "no attraction was strong enough to pull people into a windowless theatre in July and August."11

In addition to staging problems, when well-known artists

came to town, the city lacked a theatre with adequate seating. In 1920, the City Auditorium presented Enrico Caruso, a sell-out show that left many Houstonians without a chance to hear the legendary tenor. In an effort to appease the loyal fans, management ordered all of the doors and windows opened so that the "evening air would be filled with the voice of the most revered tenor of the day, heard by hundreds of people on the sidewalk outside the auditorium." <sup>12</sup>

In 1929, during the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration program brought a twenty-three-year-old woman named Margo Jones to Houston from Livingston, Texas. She had a master's degree from the College of Industrial Arts and Sciences (later Texas Women's University) and had studied theatre in California, Asia, and Europe. Jones became the assistant director of the Houston Little Theatre, a humble venue that was first housed in a "newly cleaned-up city incinerator building." By 1935, Jones had turned this bag of lemons into a lemon pie by successfully reviving the ancient Greek and Roman concept of theatre-in-the-round that eliminated the costs of curtains and scenery. When Jones moved her productions from the incinerator to the air-conditioned lounge of the Lamar Hotel, audiences were probably very thankful. Her first production was *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The intimacy of in-the-round theatre caused an unexpected reaction from a member of the audience during its first production: "In one scene, Mary Alice Krahl asked Joe Finklestein to bring her an ashtray from across the set. Carried away, a man on the front row picked up the nearest ashtray and handed it to her." Many were unaware that six of the nine actors donated a dollar to finance the production.<sup>13</sup>

In 1926, Houston was selected to host the 1928 Democratic National Convention even though it lacked a hall large enough



Theatre Under The Stars presented Rodgers' and Hammerstein's classic World War II story, South Pacific, which is considered one of the greatest musicals of all time.

Photo by Peter Coombs.

to hold the thousands of conventioneers. The city chose a piece of land along the Buffalo Bayou and, in sixty-four days, built a hall large enough to hold 20,000 people. Renamed Sam Houston Hall, it was never designed as a venue for theatre. The city razed the edifice in 1936, and a year later, it completed construction of the Music Hall and Sam Houston Coliseum on the same site.

The exterior of the Music Hall was not particularly attractive, but its acoustics were good, and it seated 3,000 people. It became Houston's premier venue for over thirty years as the home of the Houston Symphony, the Houston Ballet, and Broadway musicals. It hosted a run of musicals and dramas that brought in such renowned performers as Alfred Lunt, Helen Hayes, Ethyl Barrymore, Angela Landsbury, Katherine Hepburn, Igor Stravinsky, Marlene Dietrich, Richard Tucker, and scores of other legends.

Next door, the Sam Houston Coliseum began as the rodeo and convention center venue with a seating capacity of 9,217 (plus several hundred on the floor). The largest facility in town, it became the preferred venue for rock bands during the 1960s and 1970s, hosting The Who, Jimi Hendrix, Procol Harum, The

Doors, Jethro Tull, and The Beatles. Traveling shows such as the Ice Capades and Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus played there as well. Eventually, bad acoustics and the large number of seats with obstructed views caused shows to relocate to the newly built Astrodome and the Summit.<sup>14</sup>

Much of Houston's future was molded, not by political officials, but by a group of civic leaders known as the "Suite 8F Club" who met regularly in that suite of the Lamar Hotel. The group consisted of Jesse H. Jones, Gus Wortham, William Hobby, Oveta Culp Hobby, and others. They established foundations to support the performing arts in separate venues, thereby eliminating the custom of shared stages that stymied the cultural growth of the city. In 1956, Jones commiserated over the idea that Houston needed a first class venue. By 1963, the City Auditorium had been demolished and construction of the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts begun; it opened in 1966. It was, and is, a dazzling auditorium capable of hosting any production. The Alley, a Houston production company that debuted in 1947, opened the doors to its new downtown facility two years later.



Theatre Under The Stars produced Meet Me in Saint Louis, a romantic musical about a family living in St. Louis on the eve of the 1904 World's Fair.

Photo by Bruce Bennett.

The move to separate venues for individual genres of performing arts continued with the opening of the Wortham Center in 1987. Although Gus Wortham passed away in 1976, his foundation donated \$20 million of the \$66 million cost of the theatre; the balance included contributions from 2,200 individuals who gave \$100 or less. The Wortham currently houses the Houston Ballet and Houston Grand Opera. The first major opera house built in the United States in twenty-five years, the Wortham gave Houstonians much needed jobs and morale-lifting entertainment at the height of the oil bust when the city's economy was in a serious recession. It was, in effect, a restatement of the city's "can-do" attitude. These theatres constituted Houston's downtown entertainment complex, but the Music Hall was in disrepair and in need of attention.

In the meantime, a young man from Pasadena, Texas, Frank M. Young, was waiting in the wings of Houston's theatre scene. At age seven or eight years old, he took part in a children's program at his church in which each child had a few lines to say. As he related later, "we sang two or three things and the entire church erupted and stood up screaming and hollering. That's the first high I ever experienced." That "high" lay dormant only to emerge years later.

Young graduated from high school in Pasadena in 1958, attended the University of Texas and the University of Houston, and then transferred to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) intending to become a psychiatrist. During his senior year at UCLA, he auditioned for a production of George M. Cohan's musical, 45 Minutes From Broadway, scheduled to be a well-paid, three-month tour that included travel to Hawaii, Korea, and Japan. He got the part over his classmate, George Tekai, who later became famous as "Sulu" in the original television series, Star Trek. Ironically, it was Young's only tour as a performer, but it awakened the dormant "high" he had experienced as a youngster in the church program, and it never slumbered again. 19

When he returned to Houston, Young began a series of jobs

with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Those experiences raised his confidence enough to accept an offer to produce a musical at the new Miller Outdoor Theatre facility. He chose *Bells Are Ringing*, gathered a troupe of performers who agreed to work without pay, and opened the show on September 15, 1968, with a budget of \$4,400. The review in the *Houston Chronicle* called it a "Sparkling Presentation," while the *Houston Post* headlined their review as "Almost Too Good." Shortly thereafter, Young organized Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS).<sup>20</sup> Since then, TUTS and Miller Outdoor Theatre have become legendary partners in Houston's theatre culture.

In 1972, TUTS moved its home to the Music Hall where Young continued bringing in top shows. However, the facility's age, regional population growth, and expanded productions made the Music Hall unsuitable for modern theatre. Among other complaints, the roof leaked, forcing audience members to wear garbage bags during the performance.<sup>21</sup> According to Allen Becker of PACE Management and Broadway Across America, "the Music Hall was a dump. You couldn't even buy a ticket that was dry if it rained."22 In addition, the building had an innate problem—only a single brick wall separated the Coliseum from the Music Hall. While that was sufficient for the shows of an earlier era, it was sadly inefficient for keeping out sounds of modern concerts with enhanced sound systems in the Coliseum from being heard in the Music Hall. This reality embarrassingly manifested itself during a drama featuring the late Katherine Hepburn. With a rock band playing in the Coliseum audible in the Music Hall, Hepburn stopped the performance and told the audience that they needed to complain to the proper officials; she also announced that she would never play in Houston again.23

In addition to the Music Hall's physical condition, its limited facilities restricted the type and number of shows that could be presented. The only alternative required crews making severe physical modifications to the structure of the stage. Manning Mott, Assistant Technical Director of Zilkha Hall at the Hobby



Center, revealed that the new Broadway shows would not come to Houston due to the lack of space.<sup>24</sup> Frank Young explained that the final straw came when Disney Productions wanted to premier *Lion King* at the Music Hall, but the inadequate stage forced the theatre to turn down the offer. Michael Eisner, CEO of Disney Productions at the time, wrote to Mayor Bob Lanier stating that if Houston wanted to attract the best in musical entertainment, a new building needed to be constructed.<sup>25</sup>

City leaders lacked a consensus on whether to remodel the Music Hall or build a new theatre. Finally Mark Shapiro, chairman of Texas Commerce Bank, called the interested parties together, and after lengthy negotiations, they determined a new venue offered a more practical solution. The remaining challenge was raising the funds.<sup>26</sup> Keeping with the family tradition of giving back to the community, former Texas Lieutenant Governor Bill Hobby agreed to donate \$12 million dollars toward the new facility, generosity that was recognized by naming the venue Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. (Ironically, on departing the meeting

Arts. (Ironically, on departing the meeting watching theatre under the stars. in which he agreed to the substantial donation, Hobby still had to pay four dollars for his parking.) The remaining funds came from scores of other individuals and entities such as El Paso Corporation, The Brown Foundation, The Wortham Foundation, Selim Zilkha, Houston Endowment, and Fayez Sarofim & Company.<sup>27</sup>

In order to continue its productions during the period between demolition of the Music Hall and erection of the Hobby Center, TUTS faced significant expenses. To meet these needs, it established the *Bridge to the Stars* fund through which contributors could donate the sustaining capital. Donors included the M. D. Anderson Foundation, BP, Conoco Incorporated, The Cullen Trust for the Performing Arts, Burlington Resources, and many individuals.<sup>28</sup>

Construction of the new theatre began in November 1999 and opened to the public on May 10, 2002. Robert A. M. Stern

designed the \$92 million facility that finished out as an incomparable venue with two theatres: Sarofim Hall, designed for major productions, which seats 2,650; and Zilkha Hall, intended for use by community groups, which seats 500. Both can accommodate a full orchestra and are equipped with state of the art technology. As a reminder of TUTS' years at Miller Outdoor Theatre, the domed ceiling of Sarofim Hall portrays the night sky with two thousand blinking fiber-optic stars graced from

time to time with a shooting star.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to bringing top rated artists and shows to Houston, the Hobby Center and TUTS engage in projects that tie them to the community. For example, as a symbolic gesture just before hoisting the last steel girder into place, the theatre offered pedestrians in the area an opportunity to sign their names on the beam's surface along with those of the organizers, donors, architects, contractors, and board members. However, the strongest bond between the citizens and the Hobby Center results from TUTS' Humphreys School of Musical Theatre that provides instruction in acting, singing, and dancing to Houstonians as young as four years old, assuring the city generations of home-trained performers.<sup>30</sup> Humphreys also has groups that put on small productions and

This oval cartouche, commemorating TUTS, dominates the ceiling of Sarofim Hall representing the sky at the annual summer solstice, June 21, as it would appear over Miller Outdoor Theatre. The thousands of lights form the Milky Way, and every five minutes, a shooting star graces the image – assuring the audience that they are still watching theatre under the stars.

classes for children in hospitals who would otherwise have to endure limited forms of entertainment.

Admittedly, the road from Corri and Carlos's first theatre production in 1838, to the stunning magnificence of the Hobby Center 172 years later, is long and faded with yellowing pages, photos, ticket stubs, and playbills to trace its path. The past lives on, however; and it has been reported from time to time, as the house lights begin to dim, that an old Texian couple—he, dressed in a patched-up tuxedo, and she in her starched gingham dress—are seen taking their seats among the audience.

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