

1894 Opera House: The Grand Dame of Texas' Opera Houses

by Ernesto Valdes

Henry Greenwall was five years old when his parents brought him from Germany to New Orleans in 1837. After the Civil War, he and his brother moved to Galveston to set up a brokerage firm and soon became interested in managing theaters. Towards the end of the 1890's the city had a thriving population of 37,000 and had become known as the Wall Street of the South. It was the first city in Texas with electricity and telephones, hosting 19 foreign consulates, and although only 3 miles long, the Island bragged of having some 50 miles of tracks for its streetcars. Earlier, in 1867, the Greenwall brothers had remodeled the Galveston Theater but they believed it was time for Galveston to have a more sophisticated venue for the performing arts so they persuaded Willard Richardson, owner, of the *Galveston News*, to build The Tremont Opera House, which they in turn, agreed to lease back from him.

But a bit of bad luck greeted the opening of the Tremont Opera House because when it opened in 1871, an outbreak of yellow fever discouraged travel to the Gulf Coast. Once the epidemic was over, however, various traveling shows were booked at the Tremont such as "Mme. Rentze's Female Minstrels," which was contracted for a five-day run. It was reported that "banker and bootblack" attended this show in order to see the infamous dance known as the "Can-Can." It was described as "a lewd and voluptuous dance in which a lot of depraved men and women throw themselves into all manner of lascivious motions" causing the men in the audience to sit low in their seats and turn up the collars of their coats. The shock of such lewdness was apparently so pervasive that the day after Mme. Rintze left Galveston with her entourage of satyrs and hussies, management announced they would burn incense and olive oil throughout the Tremont for the entire day in order "to purify

Statue in the lobby at staircase to the balcony.
PHOTO: ERNESTO VALDES.

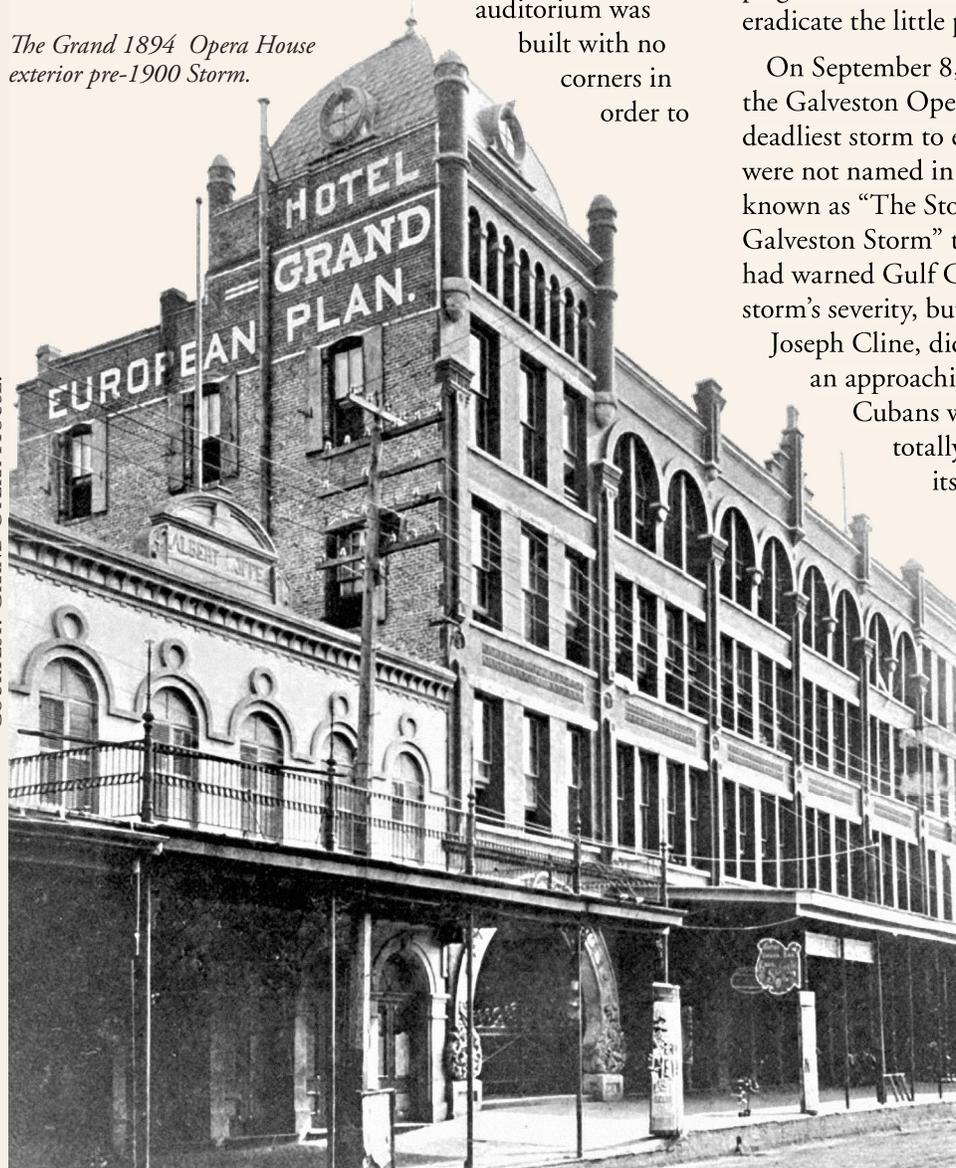
ERNESTO VALDES WAS BORN AND RAISED IN EL PASO, TEXAS. HE HAS A B.A. FROM TRINITY UNIVERSITY, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS; A D.J. FROM SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE OF LAW, HOUSTON; AND A MASTER'S DEGREE IN PUBLIC HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON.

its atmosphere and make it a place fit once more for ladies.” The cleansing must have worked because later acts included some of the greatest stars of that era: Edwin Booth, Fay Tempelton, Lily Langtree, and Sarah Bernhardt, all of which were happily attended by the genteel ladies of Galveston. According to Maureen Patton, who is not only a BOI (born on the island), but also the Executive Director of the 1894 Grand Opera House, Greenwall realized that the city had outgrown the Tremont Opera House and it now merited a true opera house. To that end he pulled off an astonishing undertaking. One day in 1894, he visited the wealthier citizens and the business of Galveston and in essence said to them, “You have in Galveston an older opera house with severe limitations and because Galveston is the premiere city of Texas, you deserve the premier opera house. I ask you to invest in a new opera house that will be the best of the best and it will do you proud.” Before the sun had set that day he had raised \$100,000 for construction of a new palace, which he built in one year!

It was designed like the European opera houses, with seating for 1,600 people; the auditorium was built with no corners in order to

The Grand 1894 Opera House exterior pre-1900 Storm.

COURTESY: GRAND OPERA HOUSE.



eliminate echoes, and no seat was more than 75 feet from the stage. In addition, it housed a small gallery of retail shops and a 17-room hotel. The auditorium had one thing that performers appreciate above all else - excellent acoustics.

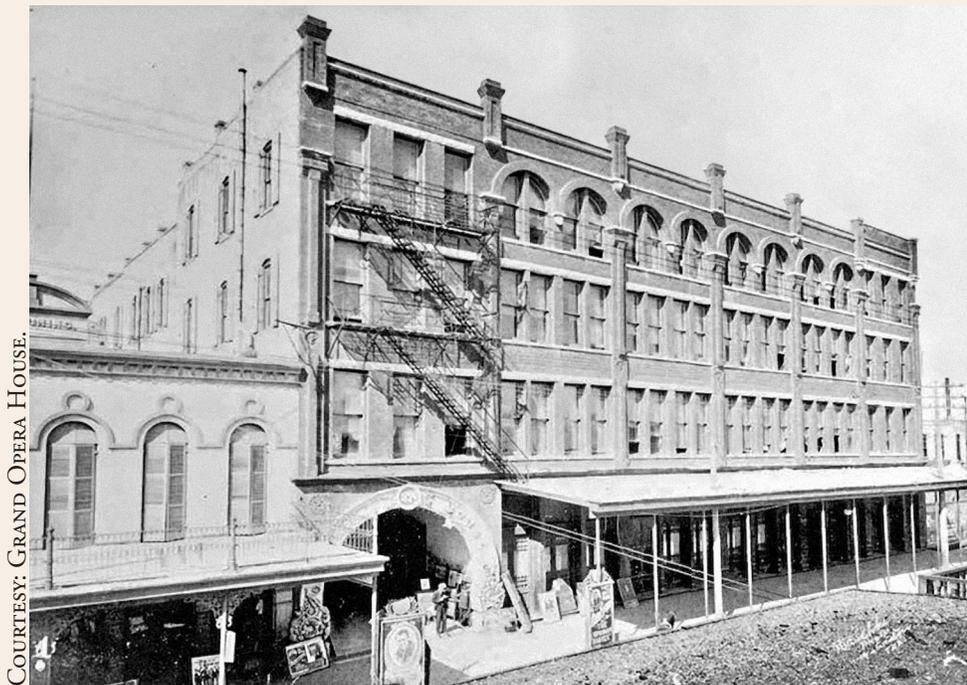
Opening night for the Grand Opera House on January 3, 1895, was a gala evening that showed Galveston's crème de la crème at its best. The performance that night was a drama entitled *Daughter of Eve*, with the lead role played by Marie Wainwright, which must have been a poignant honor for her. She was the daughter of Capt. Jonathan M. Wainwright who during the Civil War, almost thirty-one years earlier to the day, was engaged in the Battle of Galveston. He had refused to surrender his gunboat, the U.S.S. *Harriet Lane*, to the Confederate forces and on January 1, 1863, he was killed defending his ship near what is now Seawolf Park.

During the ensuing years traveling shows made Galveston one of their stops for vaudeville, dramas, bands, and circuses. One of the circuses that played the opera house paraded camels throughout the house during several acts. But when the circus and the camels left the next day they left a plague of fleas behind. Again, fumigation was initiated in eradicate the little pests and put the house back in order.

On September 8, 1900, just six years after it opened, the Galveston Opera House was severely damaged by the deadliest storm to ever hit the United States. Hurricanes were not named in those days, so the 1900 hurricane became known as “The Storm” to Galvestonians and the “Great Galveston Storm” to others. For several days, Cuban officials had warned Gulf Coast communities to the west of the storm's severity, but Galveston meteorologists, Isaac and

Joseph Cline, did not detect any of the tell-tale signs of an approaching hurricane so they opted to ignore the Cubans warnings. As a result Galveston remained totally unprepared for the calamity headed in its direction. With winds estimated at 145 mph accompanied by a devastating tidal surge, the storm bowled over the island, killing 6,000 residents and destroying thousands of homes. Its velocity was such that after landfall at Galveston, it raced north into the Great Lakes region still bearing winds at 70 mph. The horror caused by The Storm is beyond words. While photos can show physical damage to property, no photographs can describe the destruction done to the minds and souls of the survivors. The damage to property can be repaired; healing the human soul requires a different cure.

City officials implemented desperate measures to clean up the horror. They organized clean



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The Opera House restored after the 1900 Storm.

up groups, called “dead gangs,” to collect and dispose of thousands of human and animal bodies that littered the island. Soon the nature of their chore took its toll on the dead gangs, who began to resist returning to their macabre task. Officials had to ply them with whisky or forced them at gunpoint to continue the grisly ordeal of piling collected bodies into a common pyre that was to burn night and day for a month. Adding to the surreal horror, some residents went on criminal rampages of looting, rape, and assaults. In the absence of effective law enforcement, the crime wave was met by organized vigilante groups who eventually “executed” 125 people they “found” to be criminals.

Eventually order and hope arrived. Ironically, as the gulf breezes blew away the stench of death, they also blew away the hopeless malaise that lingered in the soul of the city and her people. Islanders began to envision a future and the reconstruction of homes and buildings. The remaining task was that of healing souls crippled by the collective witnessing of unspeakable tragedy and heartbreak. How this transformative endeavor was accomplished is found in the oral history of Maureen Patton: “I believe with every fiber of my being...that theaters like this one

were, in many respects, the heart and soul of the community. After all, this is where people came to socialize, to learn, to enjoy, to be entertained and I think that the Opera House was really critical to the health and the healing of the city because people could come here and either forget for a moment about the horrors that they had gone through or to band together and draw strength from each other.” As witness to her insight, the play bills of the Opera House after the storm included such notables as William Jennings Bryant, who orated from this stage; Anna Pavlova and her ballet from Russia; the Vaudeville acts of George M. Cohan, Mae West, the Marx Brothers, Burns and Allen; and John Phillips Sousa. All played here many times, bringing back to the Islanders a sense of culture and security.

But the storm loosened another reality that Galveston was never able to overcome. The city’s economic infrastructure was irreparably damaged because the storm exposed Galveston’s vulnerability to extreme weather that in turn caused her to lose her position as Texas’ leading city - she could no longer claim to be the Wall Street of the South. While the Island struggled to rebuild other forces were at work to taking over its strategic economic

position. What it took Galveston eighty years to accomplish in transportation facilities and financial institutions Houston accomplished in about ten. Moreover, the Houston Ship Channel was dredged, offering Houston as a more protected port than Galveston while it possessed easier access to the expanding railroads. These and other factors contributed to the economic shift along the Gulf Coast from Galveston to Houston so that in the early years after The Storm, the Islanders had little stomach for plays, operettas, and the troubadours of early 20th century America. Adding to these woes, movies were becoming more popular and the days of travelling shows at opera houses were numbered.

In 1924, the Galveston 1894 Opera House was sold to one Atillio Martini, who opened it as a movie theater and as a venue for occasional vaudeville shows. Wanting to have the *feel* of a movie house, Martini, to his credit, opted to cover the elegantly carved woodwork and archway of the opera house rather than remove them. Later, he sold the theater to the Interstate Theater chain, which owned it until 1960s and 1970s. As the surrounding area became a neighborhood of seedy bars, prostitutes, and pornographic move houses, the offerings of the Opera House descended too. What had been once been the Wall Street of the South was now skid row populated by bums and derelicts and a once proud stretch of commercial buildings became known collectively as “The Wino Hotel.” Worse, the BOI’s, who should have been the most concerned about the loss of their heritage, were the most apathetic as developers. In the interest of urban renewal, they began to destroy the city’s 19th century commercial buildings and the heritage of their unique architecture.

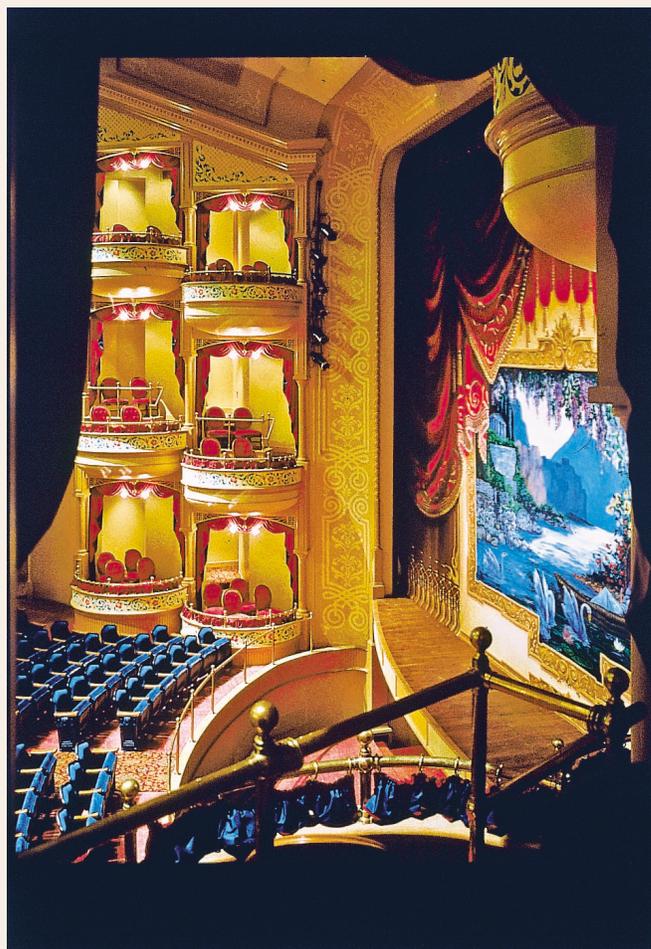
Interestingly, salvation came from four IBC’s (Islanders By Choice: outsiders that came to live in Galveston) who brought with them an outsiders’ perspective that saw the charm and value of the old 19th century buildings and, more importantly, the necessity

of saving them: Sally Wallace (who arrived with a preservationist's interest), Emily Whiteside (Galveston County Cultural Arts Council), Ed Protz (sociologist and grants coordinator for the Moody Foundation), and Peter Brink (Director of the Galveston Historical Foundation). They were able to find enough muscle in the law to challenge the mindless destruction of Galveston's priceless buildings. Several well-publicized battles ensued between preservationists and developers that awakened the BOI's to the cause of preservationists with whom they joined forces.

Somehow in the passing of a generation or so, the grandeur of the Opera House had faded. Maureen Patton's tells us of a dance instructor from the theatre department at Galveston College in the mid-1970s who wanted to organize a community theatre. She and a choreographer started looking for a theater so they went to investigate what was purported to be an old movie theater. Once inside, one of them ended up in the balcony while the other was on the stage, and they quickly noticed the ease with which they were able to talk. "Listen, this is not just a movie theatre - there is something here that is more than a movie theatre, ...the acoustics of this place are just wonderful... this is a *real* theatre." They took their idea to the Executive Director of the Galveston County Arts Council, Emily Whiteside, and said, "This would be a great venue for Galveston. We could do some theatre here, and a lot of other things." Apparently, Emily decided to have a look for herself. At the scene,

she saw what looked to be an archway behind some boards and when she peeled them back, she saw that some of the carved letters in the Romanesque arch had been chipped but one word remained clear and legible: *Opera*. She said she felt a ghost breathe down the back of her neck as she realized she had rediscovered the Grand 1914 Opera House!

The Galveston County Arts Council purchased the derelict building and with funds from George Mitchell, the Kempner Fund, and the Houston Endowment, the rehabilitation of the opera house began. As workmen pulled away temporary walls and facades, a treasure trove of the original art emerged much of which has been brought back to its former grandeur. Anyone old enough to remember the Interstate Theater chain will immediately recognize the carpeting throughout as it was the



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A picture of the stage from a second level box seat.



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Photo of Anna Pavlova, who appeared several times at the Opera House.

same color and pattern used by the Interstate Theater chain throughout the country in the 1940s and 50s. The most visually dramatic piece was the redesigning of the curtain depicting the Greek poet Sappho in an ethereal light that dominates the auditorium when standing inside.

Once the remodeling was completed, the opera house experienced another re-opening on January 19, 1986; this time Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme were the opening act. Since then such notables as Helen Hayes, Ray Charles, Willie Nelson, Sarah Vaughn, Lionel Hampton, Bernadette Peters, Paul Anka, Hal Holbrook, Gregory Peck, and a string of classical operas and famous Broadway musicals have entertained Gulf Coast residents, some 80% of which come from Houston.

The legends of theater and the romance of the occult begs a question about "other" occupants in the opera house. Ms. Patton was asked whether or not she had ever encountered the phantom of the opera who claimed to be inside her mind and perhaps bragged that he had composed the music of the night. She informed me that if there were any such phantoms



Families enjoying a show at the Opera House

in the theater they were benevolent, probably relatives, who never bothered her. The stage hands, however, had other experiences - seeing silhouettes, feeling air flutter next to one's face, or seeing "auras" lingering about. Since no sopranos have gone missing and all hands are accounted for and no drastic events have occurred, we may assume Ms. Patton is correct in assessing any phantoms or ghosts as benevolent.

What do today's performers and road handlers think about this old opera house as a venue compared to the newer, state-of-the-art auditoriums they encounter elsewhere on their tours? According to Malcolm Pye, a third generation stagehand at the Opera House, "Oh they love this house. The people will come in, especially the road people, when they first get here in the morning, they are sitting outside because they've been driving from God knows where. And they get here, maybe 4:00 in the morning... and we'll unlock the door, and go in and turn the lights on and when the curtain goes up and they see that house they all go, 'Oh my God look at the building... it is beautiful!'"

There are few places along the Gulf Coast, indeed in the nation, where one can sit in the same place where for over 100 years people have come to enjoy the magic of theater. That the 1894 Galveston



The auditorium and curtain as it appears today

Opera House survived time, risqué productions, plagues of fleas, storms, apathy, and urban redevelopment is a testament to the desire of many who valued that connection and wish to preserve this patrimony for their children and grandchildren. ★

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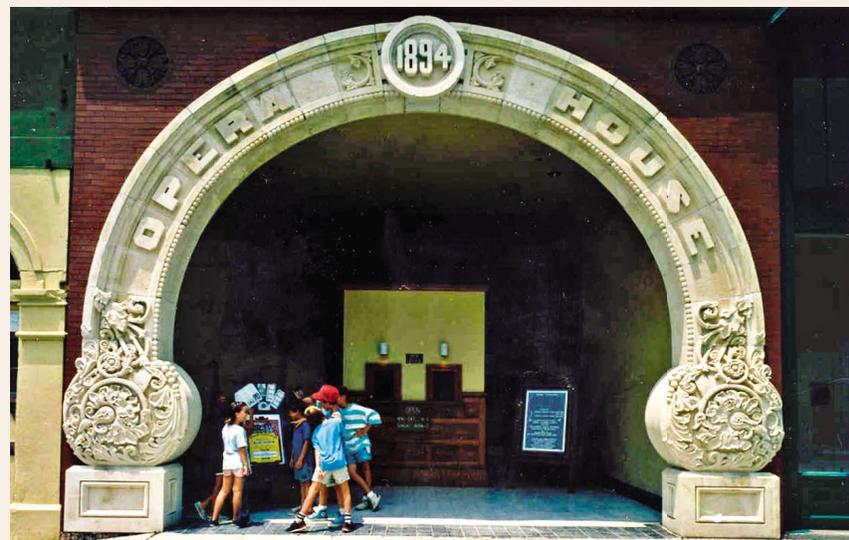
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The entrance to the Opera House today.