

180 MARKET AVENUE – PANTAGES (PLAYHOUSE) THEATRE
B.M. Priteca (Seattle), 1913; Stechesen Katz Architects, 1992



As Winnipeg leapt from a pioneer hamlet in the 1870s to an urban centre in the 1880s, so too did local demand for access to professional drama, music and dance, along with safe, comfortable facilities in which to attend performances.

Entrepreneurs responded by attracting touring artists to the city and building facilities such as the Princess and Grand opera houses and Victoria Hall (Winnipeg Theatre). By the early 1900s, more elaborate venues, such as the Dominion, Bijou, Walker, and Orpheum theatres, were being developed to house regular touring circuits of live entertainment, including popular vaudeville or variety shows.

In 1913, a new force entered the scene – Pericles (Alexander) Pantages of Seattle, Washington – to build yet another facility on the south side of Market Avenue just east of Main Street. At the time, Pantages was well on his way to establishing a chain of theatres in western Canada and along the U.S. West Coast to showcase his vaudeville circuit.

The Winnipeg outlet opened on 9 February 1914 with a juggler, comedian, musicians, a farce skit, and the Dance of Death performed by Mademoiselle Adgie and 12 lions. The theatre subsequently offered three daily shows, each with seven to 10 short acts. The programs usually originated at the Pantages Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and played one week in Winnipeg before moving west. Acts that appealed to popular taste, economical admission prices and quick audience turnover were all part of the circuit's business strategy.

Pantages (1867-1936) lived a storied, self-made life. Born on Andros, a Greek island, he left home at an early age and worked on a schooner, as a labourer in Panama and in various service jobs in San Francisco, California. He went north in the late 1890s to the Yukon and Alaska, lured by the Klondike and Nome gold rushes. There he became involved in entertainment and theatre management after working in the restaurant/bar trade and connecting with some well-placed investors. In 1902, he moved to Seattle and opened a vaudeville theatre, the Crystal, in a converted storefront. He built another Seattle theatre in 1904 – the first to carry his name. From that base, he began to compete with other major circuits such as Keith-Albee, Orpheum, William Morris, and Sullivan-Considine, also of Seattle. Pantages eventually owned some 30 theatres and controlled another 42.

His principal architect from 1911 to 1929 was a Scot, Benjamin Marcus Priteca (1889-1971). The latter studied at Edinburgh University and the Royal College of Art in London and apprenticed with Robert MacFarlane Cameron of Edinburgh. He opened his Seattle practice in 1909 and spent most of his career in that city. Priteca eventually designed some 150 vaudeville and movie theatres for four North American chains, as well as synagogues and other buildings.

From 1911 to 1921, he employed what became known as the “Greek Pantages” style of Classical Revival architecture for his theatres. An exterior feature of the style was the use of light terra cotta on front façades. Interiors were noted for fine marble, bronze, gilt, and tapestry finishes, good sight-lines and acoustics, quick stairway access to loge and balcony seating, cove auditorium ceilings with stained-glass light monitors, curved balconies, and decorative proscenium arches.

The two-storey Winnipeg version was of brick construction on a stone foundation. It was built by J. McDiarmid and Co. for about \$210,000. Local architect G.W. Northwood supervised the work.

Dominating the Neoclassical front (north) façade are a pavilion and full-length metal marquee with an arch and torch keystone over the main doors. Five large second-floor windows are set in terra cotta surrounds. Pairs of Ionic columns underscored by brackets flank the three middle openings. The roof-line is marked by a bracketed metal cornice and a fascia that displays the name “Pantages” between the words “Unequaled” and “Vaudeville.” The rest of the front is clothed in light brown-grey brick with smooth-cut limestone blocks along the foundation. There are four double entrance doors, an additional exit to the west and an east-end entrance to an upper-storey stairwell. Side and rear elevations have ordinary brick finishes with minimal fenestration.

The main-floor interior is divided into a lobby, the doors of which lead to a second foyer, and a sloped auditorium with side and interior aisles, some box seats, a shallow orchestra pit, and large stage. The upper floor contains offices, a curved balcony and loges. Among the auditorium’s ornamental features are fluted columns beneath the loges, decorative pediments over the loge portals, and an elaborate proscenium arch that incorporates large fluted Ionic columns, the trademark Pantages cartouche and torch, festoons, and other detailing. The theatre originally held more than 1,700 patrons (now reduced to about 1,400).

The Pantages circuit was well attuned to its audiences and aggressive in competing for talent. As such, it was more successful than others in weathering difficult market conditions in the 1910s and combating the growing popularity of motion picture entertainment. Eventually, however, rising transportation costs, competition from movie studios for investment, facilities and performers, and sound and other improved film technologies took their toll. In mid-1923, Pantages closed his Winnipeg outlet. Six years later, he sold most of his remaining business to Radio-Keith-Orpheum. After overcoming a personal scandal, he tried to restart a theatre circuit in the early 1930s, but by his death only the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood was still operated by his family.

The Winnipeg Pantages reopened in the fall of 1923 as the Playhouse Theatre. It offered live drama until the Great Depression when the space was put up for rent. Its stage was graced on occasion by some notable visiting artists and local groups such as the annual Music Competition Festival and (Royal) Winnipeg Ballet. Usage was not sufficient, however, to ward off tax sale to the City of Winnipeg in 1944. Since then, the theatre has withstood proposed sale and demolition, as well as recurring debates about how it should be managed, to serve as a venue for professional and amateur performing artists, lectures, film series, and other events.

In 1992, the building was extended west to Main Street through a two-storey concrete addition clothed in stone, glass, metal, and ceramic tile. It was designed by Stechesen Katz Architects of Winnipeg and built by Bockstael Construction (1979) Ltd. It encompasses an entrance, lobby and box office set back from Main by a plaza, a rehearsal hall, dressing rooms, and enlarged backstage and rear loading areas. In 1995, the rehearsal studio was dedicated to Daphne and Taras (Ted) Korol in recognition of their contributions to the performing arts in Winnipeg.