



**180 MARKET AVENUE**

**PLAYHOUSE THEATRE**  
**(FORMERLY PANTAGES THEATRE)**

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

September 30, 1980

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From its early days, live theatre has had a solid tradition in Winnipeg. In the years before movies, television and radio, performance on some sort of public stage was a treasured form of entertainment, common to all leisured societies. The long winter evenings in Red River were particularly suitable for such social activity and by 1866, an amateur theatre group had been spawned. Other groups followed in succession, each providing bright moments of drama, comedy, music and variety. "Theatres" pressed into use included army huts, the upper floor of City Hall, a store and a church hall that creaked ominously when it held an enthusiastic crowd of 200 people.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1870s, the Theatre Royal and the Princess Theatre were both constructed for Winnipeg patrons but were both rather cheaply done. The Royal had a party wall with a stable and the animals would bray and whinny when the audience made noise. The Princess, like so many of its genre, caught fire from its wood stove and burned to the ground. Better facilities and a growing population eventually promoted local theatrical groups and permitted Winnipeg to lure travelling stock shows and the early vaudeville circuits. Still, the theatres were a little too quaint by our standards. In the winter, exits and windows were sealed to prevent drafts which resulted in serious fire hazard. In the summer, the auditoriums became oppressively hot and patrons were wedged in so tightly that those who fainted had no place to fall.<sup>2</sup>

In 1904, the Dominion Theatre in Winnipeg opened as the first of the well-built, permanent stages. It was on Portage Avenue East, and was long the home of the Manitoba Theatre Centre until they built their own facilities in 1970. The Dominion was designed for vaudeville, but was adaptable for other functions. In 1907, the prestigious Walker Theatre (now the Odeon) opened with Puccini's new opera "Madame Butterfly". The Walker tended towards 'serious' theatre, symphony, opera and recitals.<sup>3</sup> The theatre's owners, Mr. and Mrs. C.P. Walker, were long-time theatre people who worked with the community to develop the performing arts in Winnipeg. The beautiful Walker Theatre, originally among the finest of its type in Canada,<sup>4</sup> served the high brow tastes and never admitted the existence of vaudeville on its stage. The Orpheum, an avowed vaudeville house,

opened in 1911 as part of the famous Keith circuit of superb vaudeville. All these theatres, and numerous smaller ones,<sup>5</sup> were doing a boisterous business when the Pantages opened its doors in February, 1914.

The Pantages Vaudeville Circuit was a top-quality chain of theatres and travelling acts, concentrated in the western United States and Canada. Alexander Pantages, the millionaire behind the theatres, was a Greek immigrant who came to the United States as a child. He rose from a bootblack to a gold miner in the Klondike. His first stake financed a dance hall in the Yukon which made enough to open the first Pantages Theatre in Seattle, Washington.<sup>6</sup> By 1914, Pantages had 17 theatres in the larger cities. Vancouver, Victoria, Calgary, Edmonton and eventually Regina and Saskatoon were on the Canadian circuit.<sup>7</sup> The operation continued to be based in Seattle and the designing architect of the Winnipeg Pantages, B. Marcus Priteca, worked from Seattle.

Alexander Pantages came to Winnipeg to hire his local staff, veteran theatre manager W.B. Lawrence who was lured away from the Winnipeg Theatre, and the local architect George Northwood. The plans were drawn up in Seattle but Northwood looked after the location and the actual construction phase. The theatre was built in only 7 months, a tribute to the contractors who were Eddie Cass and his company, J. McDiarmid Construction.<sup>8</sup> There were several smaller theatres in the area besides the other main cultural and social centres such as the best hotels and private clubs.<sup>9</sup>

Amid much fanfare, the opening performance of the Pantages Theatre was 9 February, 1914. Assembled to see Mademoiselle Adgie and her 12 lions in the Dance of Death, a juggler, two "banjo wizards", a comedian, and a farce skit were such notables as Premier Rodmund Roblin, Mayor Deacon, Pantages and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Walker and other notables.<sup>10</sup> The mayor opened the theatre immediately before the 7:30 show and there was another show at 9:30, a format which became a tradition at the Pantages, along with a 2:30 matinee.

For the "lowest and most popular prices" in town, 10¢, 15¢, and 25¢ for the "diamond horseshoe" boxes, one could see some of the most exotic entertainment Winnipeg had to offer. The acts were

timed to go on in rapid succession as a continuous show. Variety was the key to vaudeville and the audiences were certainly never bored. The typical vaudevillian was also a versatile performer who could swing Indian clubs, walk a tight rope, make a wooden dummy talk, escape from a water-filled trunk or play the William Tell Overture to its dazzling finale on a xylophone.<sup>11</sup> Performers sang, danced, recited limericks, and told jokes, sometimes all at the same time.

Winnipeg saw many of the big acts on either the Pantages circuit or the Keith circuit at the Orpheum. The Great Houdini hung himself upside down in a straight jacket from scaffolding protruding from the Free Press building. Blackstone the great magician played, as did a whole troop of Singer's Midgets. Bill "Bo Jangles" Robinson, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, Georgie Jessel, Sophie Tucker and Milton Berle all played to Winnipeg audiences.<sup>12</sup> Most of the Pantages shows lasted a week, three shows a day, and then split weeks in Regina and Saskatoon, on to Calgary and Edmonton, then travelled from the west coast back down to Los Angeles. It was a gruelling pace for the performers and the smaller acts often had to sleep in night trains between cities without a break. For the audiences, it was exciting entertainment.

The Pantages was an actual theatre with an architecture that had developed a tradition over the years. An elaborate proscenium arch, used since the sixteenth century as a temporary frame, hid the wings and focused attention on the stage.<sup>13</sup> Pantages had chosen a motif from ancient Greek drama, which was a suitable genre for modern theatre. Ornamental plasterwork and a detailed frieze with gold-coloured trim led into a panelled ceiling. To the sides of the proscenium were great fluted columns while smaller columns supported the loges on either side. Little of the surface was left unadorned but the whole effect was tasteful and appropriate; moreover, it was exactly what the patrons expected. Theatres, specifically movie theatres, were undergoing birth pangs of bad taste, excessive and pretentious decor and unjustified flamboyance in their styles.<sup>14</sup> Virtually anything was fair game for the movie palaces and there was a spillover into the small theatres throughout Canada and the United States. The Pantages borrowed the concept of contriving architecture to create atmosphere, but managed to stay within aesthetic limits.

Its stage was 74 feet long and 31 feet from the proscenium to the rear wall. A yellow plush curtain (now replaced) graced the stage, behind which any number of prop curtains could be hung. The scenery was shifted by a sophisticated system of weights and counter-weights. Footlights and overhead lights on the balcony supplemented spot lighting from the rear. The orchestra pit was at the foot of the stage. The original seating capacity was almost 1,900 patrons which has been reduced to about 1,500.<sup>15</sup> There was a movie projector installed in 1914 but moving pictures only appear to be used as fillers between vaudeville acts.

In the end, it was the movies that killed vaudeville and caused the Pantages to close. Movies had improved drastically from the early years and were now a cheap and popular form of entertainment. By 1923, the Pantages was competing against ten movie theatres with such lurid offerings as "The Forbidden Woman" and "When Love Comes", with a pet pig that did tricks, a jazzband and a musical comedy review.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that it was "ice-cooled" for summer,<sup>17</sup> on 23 June 1923, the Pantages announced that the hot weather had affected their attendance and they were closed for a week. In fact, the Pantages Unequalled Vaudeville never re-opened.

In the fall of 1923, the Market Street theatre re-opened as the Playhouse Theatre. By 1928, when "talking" movies were released, almost all of the old vaudeville and burlesque theatres had converted to movie houses, while those which remained acquired the image of catering to the rich.<sup>18</sup> The Playhouse carried stock theatre as well as touring theatre companies. Concerts, recitals, operas, school productions and lectures were held there and even films accompanying special events, such as the World Adventure Tour series. In the early 1940s, the Playhouse was taken over by the City of Winnipeg for tax arrears. The City integrated its space needs for the musical festivals and other concerts into the Playhouse. In 1948, the Winnipeg Little Theatre was revived for local amateurs and they used the Playhouse, although it was too big and lacked intimacy. In 1957, the W.L.T. moved into the Dominion on Portage. The old Walker Theatre had been converted into a movie house in 1936.

The 1940s and early 50s also saw the (Royal) Winnipeg Ballet dancing at the Playhouse. In 1954, the Playhouse underwent an \$80,000 renovation but three years later it was again in arrears on its

taxes. At this point, the management of the Playhouse was handed over to Winnipeg Enterprises Corp., which has experienced some trouble in keeping the Playhouse operating profitably.<sup>19</sup>

The Playhouse is still an active stage, although there is little real theatre there now. A wide variety of smaller concerts enjoy its more intimate quarters. The interior, although its colours have changed, is much as it was in 1914. Vaudeville has come and gone and so have all its stages in Winnipeg except the Walker (Odeon) and the Playhouse Theatres.

Footnotes--

1. Irene Craig "Grease Paint on the Prairies" Transactions of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba Series III No. 3 Winnipeg 1947, p. 39.
2. Hilary Russell All that Glitters: A Memorial to Ottawa's Capitol Theatre and its Predecessors Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History No. 13, Ottawa 1975, p. 14.
3. Dorothy Garbutt "Carriages at 10:45: A History of Early Winnipeg Theatres" paper presented to the Manitoba Historical Society, c. 1976, p. 3-5.
4. Bob Noble "Winnipeg Stage Productions Have Glorious 100-year History" Winnipeg Free Press 27 June 1967.
5. There was also the Bijou vaudeville theatre on Main, the Strand, the Empress and at least three smaller theatres. Burlesque, also very popular at the time, was considered a lower form of entertainment and was confined to tiny local theatres. It is clear from the literature at the time that while vaudeville was good, clean fun for the whole family, burlesque was most certainly not.
6. Vince Leah "The Playhouse Theatre: 60 Years Plus One" Winnipeg Tribune 19 April 1975.
7. "Winnipeg The Focal Point", map, Manitoba Free Press, 24 January, 1914.
8. City of Winnipeg Building Permit No. 106, 10 February 1914. The permit was taken out one day after the Pantages Theatre was opened. It is obvious some concessions were made within the City.
9. Alan F.J. Artibise Winnipeg a Social History of Urban Growth McGill-Queen's University Press Montreal 1975 p. 153-4.
10. "Head of Vaudeville Circuit in Winnipeg" Free Press 9 February 1914. See also the Telegram on that date.
11. "The Vaudevillian" Free Press 7 July 1973.
12. Loc. cit. Also Garbutt, op. cit.
13. Mary Clarke and Clement Crisp Design for Ballet
14. Russell, op. cit., p. 32-33
15. John Kiernan "Winnipeg: A Theatrical History" Appendix 1, University of Manitoba, N.D.

16. Free Press, 2 June 1923.
17. Fans blew air over ice cubes into the ventilation system making the patrons damp if not cooler.
18. Kiernan, op\_cit., p. 4.
19. "City asked to take back ailing Playhouse Theatre" Tribune 24 March, 1975.

## **APPENDIX I**

### George W. Northwood

George Northwood, the consulting architect on the Pantages Theatre, was a prominent Winnipeg architect. In the firm Northwood and Carey and later Northwood and Chivers, he designed such buildings as St. John's Cathedral, the Northern Crown Bank, the Selkirk Mental Hospital, the Charles Gordon house in Armstrong Point, the Pavilion in Assiniboine Park and the Civic Auditorium (now the Provincial Archives Building).

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Plate 1 – 180 Market Avenue, Playhouse Theatre, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)



Plate 2 – A view of the proscenium arch with the loges on the right, ca.1950. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4210.)

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Plate 3 – The stage viewed from the main floor beneath the balcony, ca.1950. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – The main floor seats and the balcony, ca.1950. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

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Plate 5 – The ticket lobby and doors into the theatre. The prices for most seats were \$4.00 to \$4.50, ca.1950. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, N4213.)

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Plate 6 – Interior, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)

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Plate 7 – Interior, no date. (City of Winnipeg, Planning Department.)