

TACOMA THEATRE

“The Finest Temple on the Coast”

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Much of downtown Tacoma’s resurgence in recent decades has been built on the shoulders of century-old buildings, with examples ranging from the new University of Washington Tacoma campus housed in rehabilitated warehouses to the old Union Station finding new life as a federal courthouse. Area residents can attend cultural events in two restored 1918 theaters, the Pantages and Rialto. Tacoma once had an even older, grander entertainment venue, the Tacoma Theatre, which was the jewel of the theater district. Long-time residents likely remember it as the Music Box.

Work began on the Tacoma Theatre in 1888, but the vision for the theater dates back to 1873, when Tacoma was selected as the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad. In 1874 the railroad established the Tacoma Land and Improvement Company and named Theodore Hosmer as its general manager. Hosmer and his family moved from Philadelphia to Tacoma that same year.

The railroad’s offices were housed in buildings at Ninth and C Streets—the center of what is now the Tacoma Theater District but what was, at the time, a sparse hillside. It was while working in that office that Hosmer envisioned a grand theater for his newly-adopted city, one befitting the thriving metropolis he believed it would surely become. Even as his health began to fail and he stepped down from his position with the railroad, Hosmer worked to ensure that the land was not sold while he gathered a group of investors.

In 1888 the Tacoma Opera House Company was incorporated, funded by \$10,000 donations from each of 11 prominent Tacoma citizens: John S. Baker, Allen C. Mason, W. B. Blackwell, W. H. Fife, W. D. Tyler, George Browne, Nelson Bennett, General J. W. Sprague, C. P. Masterson, and C. B. Zabriskie.

There was some debate within this group about the best location for the new theater. At that early date Pacific Avenue was already emerging as the downtown area’s main thoroughfare, but Hosmer pushed for his beloved Ninth and C location, where the building would stand prominently midway up the steep incline of Ninth Street. The group finally acquiesced. The investors decided to call the building the Tacoma Theatre, so as to not limit its purpose to opera.

In its report of the theater’s opening night in 1890, the *Daily Ledger* summed up Hosmer’s vision for the project:

It was long before the present magnificent edifice was planned that the project was first thought of. Tacoma was marked out as the City of Destiny, and there were men within its borders who foresaw the tens of thousands who would make their homes upon the shores of Commencement

Bay. A beautiful theater, fashioned in most modern elegance, a fit place of amusement in the metropolis of the new northwest, was one of the things which it was known must be provided.

J. M. Wood of Chicago was hired as chief architect for the project. He brought more than a decade of experience working exclusively in theater design around the country, as well as a team of specialists to focus on aspects of both interior and exterior design.

The building lot Hosmer championed has an odd shape and, as is common in downtown Tacoma, sits on a hill, giving the building somewhat unusual dimensions: 67 feet along the front façade on Ninth; 120 feet along the back façade; 174 feet on the largest side, facing Broadway; and 165 feet on the alley side, now Opera Court. The architectural style was described as Modern Romanesque, but true to the style of J. M. Wood and his team, there were so many unique elements to the structure that it defied an exact definition. The exterior walls of the first story were rough-faced blue-gray sandstone from the Bellingham Bay quarries, while the upper floors were a vibrant red brick. The building had a modest amount of terra-cotta tile embellishment around doorways and windows. One particularly notable feature was the port cochere that extended 25 feet into the street, enabling horse-drawn carriages to pull up under cover as people entered the theater. The Tacoma Daily News was eager to point out that only in Tacoma and Paris were theaters grand enough to have such a feature.

Thomas Moses of Chicago was hired to paint dozens of scenery sets, which he did at night in the theater by gaslight. This allowed him to see how the light fell on the sets as he worked. This plethora of scenery options insured that the requirements of any first-class touring opera or vaudeville company could be satisfied. The scenes included a kitchen, prison, palace interior, oak paneling interior, dark paneling interior, fancy garden with fountain, river landscape, rocky pass, cut and stacked wood, an ocean set, ancient set, street arch, a modern street, a snowy landscape, and many others. A few days before the opening, in January 1890, the *Tacoma Daily News* provided a detailed description of what the theater's first audience would witness. It is fortunate that these accounts exist, as there are almost no extant photographs of the theater's interior. We can rely on architectural drawings and photographs to form a complete picture of the building's exterior but must apply imagination to the accounts of the time to envision the interior:

Upon stepping into the entrance, the visitor will behold before him a picturesque box office, with its colored glass, and the next thing noticed may be the exquisitely decorated pink ceiling which reflects softly the streams of light. To the left of the box office are large swinging doors admitting to the outer foyer. The decorations of the walls, the ceilings, the panels, are superb. A glance is sufficient to show that the finest of decorators have toiled there. Handsome French carpets and rugs of Indian design cover the floor. The chandeliers glow with light and the carpet is so soft and thick that the tramp of the multitude going in sounds not louder than the steps of a child.

There is a parlor for the exclusive convenience of all ladies attending the theater, the gentlemen having a smoking and lounging room in another quarter. The parlor is fitted with luxurious chairs and settees. Stepping between handsomely painted columns, the visitor is in the inner foyer. It extends around the rear of the main auditorium, is handsomely carpeted and affords a fine view of the audience and stage. It is intended for a promenade and a general resting place between acts. At each end of the inner foyer a grand staircase leads up to the balcony.

The main auditorium is a revelation of beauty and grandeur. Before the beholder is the wide proscenium arch, and one of the most unique and picturesque drop curtains it has ever been the pleasure of an American audience to behold. Above is a glorious chandelier which throws a bright

golden glow all over the immense space. The walls are golden shades of yellow with tracings of blue, and the panels are raised relief work of the same general color and tone.

The chairs and railings are upholstered in terra-cotta brown, and long strips of carpet of Indian design stretch down the aisles and extend between the almost innumerable rows of chairs. The eight boxes are beautiful. They gleam with golden yellow and tracings of gilt and blue, and in form resemble pagodas. Their railings and handsome chairs are upholstered in terra-cotta brown against a very pleasing background of blue curtains and hangings trimmed with gilt fringe and tassels. The deeper shades in the decorations are nearer the floor. As they approach the ceilings, the blue becomes softer and the yellow and gold seem to fade.

The new Tacoma Theater presents a grand view from the stage and the body of the house. When filled with the brilliant audiences of next week the scene will be surpassingly fine.

The seating capacity was 1,200: 600 on the auditorium floor, 320 in the balcony, and 280 in the gallery. The stage dimensions—70 feet wide, 42 feet deep, 56 feet high from floor to ceiling, with an additional 20 feet of working depth below the stage—supported the claim trumpeted in the press that the Tacoma Theatre offered the “largest stage on the Pacific coast.” It required a staff of eight strong men to operate the curtains and scenery sets, handling over 10,000 feet of line for the scenes and 1,400 feet of steel wire rope for the drop curtains.

In October 1905 the Tacoma Theatre hosted the first stage presentation of *Ben Hur*. The production took advantage of the theater’s unique capabilities. The producers who adapted the original novel into a play would only take their production to theaters in which they could stage the chariot race with real horses. Over 100 actors and eight horses filled the Tacoma’s stage, and the performance was praised by audiences and critics alike.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Tacoma Theatre to the city of Tacoma during the first decades of its existence. After its opening in 1890, it was another 28 years before the Pantages and Rialto theaters—neighbors on either side of the Tacoma—were built in 1918, and another nine before the Temple Theater opened in 1927. Several theaters existed in Seattle in this same era, of course, but none had the staging capabilities of the Tacoma. Therefore, in addition to its use as an entertainment venue, hosting both local and visiting acts, the Tacoma Theatre also served as an important setting for community events, school graduations, and political conventions.

A sampling of the more famous visitors to the Tacoma Theatre during its earliest decades reads like a who’s who of the entertainment world: Mark Twain, Harry Houdini, John and Ethel Barrymore, John Philip Sousa, Sarah Bernhardt, Al Jolson, and the list goes on. The theater was booked for multiple nights each week for 35 years. There are undoubtedly many other significant events and visitors that have been lost to history.

The theater closed in 1925 for a dramatic transition: a conversion from performance venue to film venue. The theater’s interior was completely gutted and refurbished. The stage became smaller to increase the seating capacity from 1,200 to 1,600 and the entrance moved to accommodate a larger ticket booth. An elevator and projection booth were added. The facility reopened in 1927 as the Broadway Theatre.

The plan was also to remodel the exterior, covering the original brick with off-white stucco. However, while the building’s exterior was being cleaned in preparation for this change, there was so much excitement among Tacomans about the beauty of the newly-cleaned red brick that the owners decided to leave the exterior largely unchanged.

The group that managed the Broadway Theatre ran into financial challenges, which led to its takeover by John Hamrick, a successful businessman who owned theaters throughout the region. Renamed the Music Box, the theater began hosting a combination of movie and stage events, featuring such significant guests as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Benny Goodman alongside first-run motion pictures. Gradually over the decades, the stage events dwindled and the Music Box became exclusively a movie theater.

On April 29, 1963, the Tacoma City Council met to discuss an urban renewal plan for the theater district. The city had hired a prominent San Francisco architect to design a pedestrian plaza, and the Music Box was identified as a focal point for the project. Virtually unchanged since its 1927 remodel, the theater was perfect as a dramatic historic structure around which to renew the district.

The following evening, during a showing of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, a burned-out bearing in a ventilating fan sparked a fire. Because the fan room was isolated, situated beneath the projection room high in the building, it took some time for anyone to notice either smoke or fire. By the time someone called the fire department, the blaze was out of control, quickly spreading to consume the entire roof of the building.

Fortunately for the audience, there was no visible fire and relatively little smoke in the auditorium, and the evacuation was smooth. The crowd of ousted movie-goers, joined by those evacuated from the neighboring Rialto, watched from the street as firefighters made a valiant but unsuccessful effort against the fire, several of them escaping just before the entire roof collapsed into the building, the ornate plaster and chandeliers crashing down onto the seats.

The following morning, the *News Tribune* described the tragedy in detail, praising the fire department for protecting lives—there were only three minor injuries during the evacuation and the battle to save the structure. The article included a history of the theater under such dramatic headlines as “Boiling Flames Blacken 75 Years of Tacoma Theatrical History” and “Charred Ruins Once Resounded to Voices of World Famous.” The report also highlighted the unfortunate irony of the fire:

A dramatic redevelopment plan for downtown Tacoma, to include a Broadway mall, one new park and lots of new parking, was unveiled for the City Council and civic leaders yesterday by the city's consultants. Ironically, the San Francisco architects retained by the city had singled out the Music Box Theater as one of the architecturally sound buildings which downtown should be rebuilt around. The building was destroyed by fire a few hours later.

There is no historical marker on the site of the former Tacoma Theatre, and those under 50 can only have seen it in photographs. That said, its impact on downtown Tacoma remains tangible. The 1960s plans for the redevelopment of the area, largely designed around the existence of the Tacoma Theatre, went forward. To this day, the Rialto and Pantages, originally the youthful neighbors of the grand old Tacoma, remain active venues for both local and visiting performances, anchoring a vibrant theater district. A few more lines from an account in the *Tacoma Daily Ledger* of the Tacoma's opening highlight this lasting impact and leave one wondering what might have been:

The beautiful theater had an opening which promises it abundant success. It is true that as the city continues to grow, other handsome play houses will be erected, perhaps in localities considerably removed from the Tacoma theatre, but this house will always be a favorite, because it marked the beginning of good amusements on Puget Sound. Playgoers will appreciate the

investment that was almost speculation for their benefit, and when the city shall have outgrown an auditorium seating less than 1800 people, many of the old residents will have a fond place in their hearts for the first perfect theater in the state, and will not be inclined to desert it.

Sidebar:

When Rachmaninoff Played Tacoma

It was a dry, relatively warm evening in Tacoma on February 21, 1925, as a capacity crowd made its way to the Tacoma Theatre to hear the world-famous composer-pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff perform. A few audience members may have had the chance to hear him live once or twice before when he played in Seattle and Portland in recent years. Others may have heard his records on their new Victrolas. But this was the first, and as it turned out, only time that Rachmaninoff visited Tacoma.

Bernice Newell (1862–1937), a prominent Tacoma citizen and booster, as well as an arts and society writer and editor for Tacoma newspapers for many years, was single-handedly responsible for Rachmaninoff's visit. Although Newell was born in New York and died in California, she spent most of her life in Tacoma and was passionate about developing and promoting the city's cultural scene.

Beginning in the early years of the century and reaching a climax in the 1920s, Newell's "Artist Course" concerts brought a substantial number of prominent classical musicians to Tacoma. Her work was recognized in national media, and the concerts were unfailingly well-attended and enthusiastically reviewed in local newspapers. Although Newell did occasionally choose other venues for these concerts, she most commonly selected the Tacoma Theatre, with its large stage and seating capacity.

At this time, Tacoma had an active music scene of its own, with many local musicians, amateur and professional alike, performing regularly. Newell clearly believed, though, that the concert calendar was not complete without visits from some world-renowned musicians. Through her "Artist Course," she was responsible for Tacoma concerts by some of the most famous orchestras, violinists, pianists, and opera singers of the day.

In 1925 four world-class performances were presented at the Tacoma Theatre in less than a month—Rachmaninoff on February 21, French pianist Alfred Cortot on March 3; violinist Fritz Kreisler on March 10, and Metropolitan Opera soprano Florence Easton on March 16. Ticket prices for these performances in the opulence of the Tacoma Theatre ranged from \$1.10 to \$2.75. Only a few months later, the theater closed to be remodeled into a film venue.

The Rachmaninoff concert was a great delight to the many people who had traveled from around the South Sound to hear the great artist play. The *Tacoma News Tribune and Ledger* reported:

Sergei Rachmaninoff at the Tacoma Theater Saturday evening played a program of wonderful music before a great audience composed of music lovers and students of Tacoma and all the surrounding territory, and it is doubtful if any single artist has ever been received with more earnest enthusiasm and sincere appreciation than was accorded the great Russian who stands in the very front of world artists of the present day.

The program given by Rachmaninoff was selected from the compositions of world masters, and was played with such breadth of understanding and ease of manner as to give the impression of a giant giving largess to his followers who were eagerly grasping for the wealth of his generous

bounty. With every number came storms of applause that sounded like the falling of many waters, and the tall, spare figure, slightly bowed, with its grave, expressive face, over which a serious smile crept in response to the enthusiasm of the audience, returned many times to respond with bows, and as the program progressed, to give the encores so greatly desired.

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