

Los Angeles Theatre

Los Angeles, California
S. Charles Lee, Architect



Theatre Historical Society
of America

ANNUAL No. 25 - 1998

**LOS ANGELES
THEATRE**

Los Angeles, California

**Opened
January 30, 1931**

**Architect
S. Charles Lee**

**Designer
W. Marbury Somerville**

**Decorator
Anthony B. Heinsbergen**

**Capacity
2190**

**Organ
Wurlitzer 2/10
Style 216, Op. 1620**

**Moved from the TOWER THEATRE,
Los Angeles (1927)**

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By 1931, with economic depression deepening, the "golden age" of the movie palace, less than two decades old, was winding down in most places, but Los Angeles wasn't one of them: 1930 and 1931 were exceptionally fertile years, with big houses going up all over, most, from the Hollywood PANTAGES on, expressing the new modernism today called "Art Deco." Yet right in the middle, and in downtown, came the LOS ANGELES, a conspicuous throwback to the period revival tradition which had long been the mainstay of movie palace, and most other, architecture. An effulgent celebration of the French Baroque, the LOS ANGELES, despite its relatively small capacity, stands today as a supreme exemplar of the movie palace style in its fullest flower.

It was built by independent exhibitor H. L. Gumbiner, whose greatest success had been the TOWER, Los Angeles (1927), a 906-seat house with all the architectural pretensions of something many times its size. The TOWER's architect was S. Charles Lee, on his first theatre job, and Gumbiner engaged him again for the LOS ANGELES. In a conversation with Tom Owen, Lee recalled that Gumbiner asked him to set up a tour of great movie palaces to get ideas for the new house, the first stop being San Francisco, where the pair inspected the new Fox (Thomas W. Lamb, 1929-1963). Having found what he wanted, Gumbiner called off the rest of the tour and put Lee and his office to work.

Too much is made of this connection: while both are evocations of the French Baroque, and certain areas of the LOS ANGELES—the facade, lobby and auditorium dome in particular—do echo the FOX, it is not, as so many claim, a replica. Still, the temptation to compare the two is both

inevitable and irresistible, and the LOS ANGELES, with fewer than half the FOX's 4651 seats, can easily hold its own or better. For one, the coffered lobby and auditorium ceilings in the LOS ANGELES reflect treatments planned for the FOX but canceled in favor of more economical painted schemes, and are clearly superior.

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The dome aside, the auditorium suggests the FOX no more than it does many others. True, the sidewalls of both were composed of a series of arches, but this scheme was very common and can be traced back to Rapp & Rapp's CHICAGO THEATRE (1921), or further. Here the FOX has the edge: reflecting its great height, the FOX's arches are each higher than the next, front to rear, drawing the eye forward. In the relatively low LOS ANGELES,

the arches are nearly in the same plane. The LOS ANGELES also has a most unusual balcony arrangement: in place of a single structure, it has two shallow balconies, with little overhang, set well back. Among other things, this configuration created space for a smoking room and cry room off the mezzanine foyer, both with excellent views of the stage.

In the way of patron amenities, the LOS ANGELES can stand up to any comparison. In addition to the cry and smoking rooms, it has a spacious single lounge suite occupying all the space beneath the lobby and most of that beneath the auditorium. Beyond the essential facilities, this suite contains a ladies' cosmetic room, children's playroom and fully equipped restaurant, the last probably unique. The great oval main lounge serving all of these may very well have no peer in any movie palace of any size. On its north wall it had a viewing screen which transmitted the upstairs entertainment to patrons waiting or simply lounging. Sound was also transmitted into those areas needing it: in several of the auditorium views a large microphone can be seen hanging from the dome.

Gumbiner overextended himself building the theatre, and as an independent exhibitor he had serious problems getting the best product. The LOS ANGELES closed within the year and was taken over by Fox West Coast. Loew's operated it for a time in the 1940s as an outlet for their MGM pictures. The final operator was Metropolitan Theatres, which, having tried everything, closed it on April 28, 1994. The theatre is not idle however: it opens for special presentations, often under the sponsorship of the Los Angeles Conservancy, and as the epitome of a movie palace, it remains in demand as a film, television and advertising location.

Very similar in composition to the FOX's facade, that of the LOS ANGELES differs in detail and, being only about half as wide, in proportion. (With a broad frame around the window, absent in the LOS ANGELES, and much more space between the pairs of columns, the FOX's facade had a less vertical emphasis.) The early sketch shows a simpler marquee and more complex articulation of the shop wings than what was built, along with a window as the central element. The drawing to the left, widely published at the time, is very close to the finished product, but has an unbuilt statuary group in the niche.

The great bronze marquee gave way to a three-paneled "bullnose," a treatment very popular in the 1930s and 1940s. Although Lee's records make no mention of the later marquee, it was, ironically, a type he favored and helped to popularize. Fortunately, the vertical sign has remained unaltered since its installation.

The Organ

The Wurlitzer in the LOS ANGELES was built in 1927 for the TOWER Theatre and moved to the new house. This was a common practice early in the sound era: theatre organs were essentially obsolete, but some exhibitors still felt one necessary in a new house, even if it meant stripping an older one. (Fox West Coast, in particular, engaged in a lot of this.) Given that by then many theatres were being built without organs or even chambers in which to put them, it may be churlish to complain about the LOS ANGELES's organ, but a 2/10 seems hardly adequate for a house of its size and stature.

Still, the Style 216 was Wurlitzer's most sophisticated two-manual organ, with an English Post Horn, couplers and crescendo, features rarely found in organs of its size. Based on the Style 215, it was designed by Frank Lanterman for West Coast Theatres, and of the dozen built, all but the TOWER's went into their houses.

Used mainly with the orchestra in the early days, the organ enjoyed a brief revival in the 1960s with concerts and at least one recording, by Ann Leaf. Some years ago it quietly vanished, as did the 3/11 Wurlitzer in the STATE. Rumors continue to abound, but it seems likely that parts from both have found their way into larger installations.

Seen opposite at opening, the auditorium is everything a movie palace ought to be, and from this angle manages to look larger than it really is. The only discordant note is the two-manual organ console: even early in the sound era, the theatre should have had something more impressive.

No theatre had a curtain treatment quite like the LOS ANGELES. Terry Helgesen called the valance "the most elaborate I've ever seen." It consists of a hand appliquéd valance with the seal of the city of Los Angeles in the center; woven in and out are three sets of swags and drapes in red and blue velvet and gold satin. The drapes at the sides were removed and some of the swags shortened to accommodate a CinemaScope screen, but otherwise this remarkable piece of goods is still in place.

The house curtain, which also survives, is woven like a tapestry with gold and silver threads, all on a massive wooden frame. It shows a royal court with its carriage against a rural landscape complete with a huge triumphal arch. The figures, larger than life-size, have costumes of velvets and satins and real wigs. Note how closely the finished curtain treatment matches the drawing above. Behind the front curtain was a title curtain of electric blue velvet with designs in silver beads. (See following pages.)

The seat backs featured a field of fleurs-de-lis with a coat of arms in the center. The coat of arms was repeated in stencil work on the wooden backs. The Heywood-Wakefield end standards are identical to those in the ORIENTAL, Chicago.

With a total of eight aisles on the main floor, the seating sections were never more than six seats across, a great convenience to patrons. Down the sides of each aisle were one-inch strips of frosted glass lit from beneath by pale blue neon, a precursor of today's popular "Tivoli" lighting. The extravagance of aisles found downstairs was not repeated in the balconies.