

Orpheum Theater Returning Live Stage

By **BOB CURTRIGHT**
Staff Writer

The Orpheum Theater, Wichita's oldest, most ornate and only remaining theatrical palace, has come full circle.

Opened more than half a century ago as an important vaudeville house, it was converted to movies when the stage show circuit died.

Tuesday night, Hollywood lost its celluloid hold on the theater because of the dwindling number of pictures produced per year, and owners said the magnificent rococo structure will be returned to live performances.

JAMES MARTIN, DISTRICT Manager for the Mann Theaters chain, said movies will no longer be shown in the Orpheum. But he was quick to note that the building is in no danger of demolition or conversion to nontheatrical use.

Instead, the theater will be rented on a spot basis for stage shows and conventions. The change will allow the theater to remain as a viable business, Martin said.

A companion Mann theaters project, although not directly related to

the Orpheum change, will be the conversion of the Fox Theater from a single-screen to a twin theater between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Martin said.

THE SHOWS AT THE ORPHEUM won't be vaudeville as in the good old days of 1922 when it opened. More likely, they will be the like of rock concerts and church assembly programs, he said.

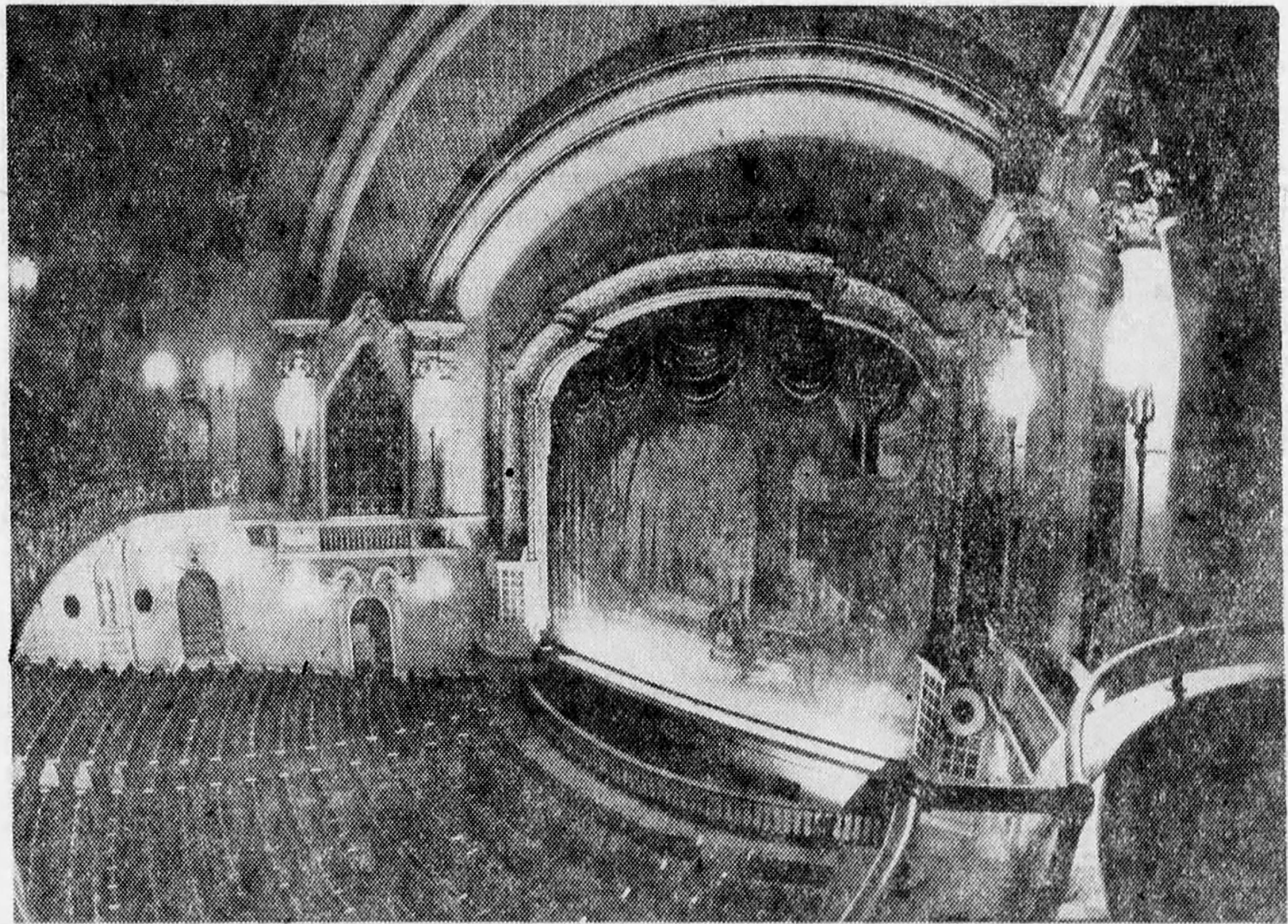
"But we are leaving all the equipment intact so there can be stage shows," Martin added.

Martin said several live shows have been booked into the building.

"There is no chance that it will be torn down," he said. "We have no intention for this to happen. We don't see any changes in the building either. We know there is interest in making it a landmark."

BECAUSE OF THE BUILDING'S prime commercial location at the corner of 1st Street and Broadway, several historical groups had become concerned over its future. Worry was heightened in July when another or-

(See ORPHEUM, 7C, Col. 5)



THE ORPHEUM OPENED MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO
... Converted to movies when stage show circuit died

File photo

THE WICHITA EAGLE

Wednesday, November 17, 1976

7C

Orpheum's Last Movie Audience Shuffled Out Slowly and Sadly

By **JERRY JOHANNING**
Staff Writer

The lights dimmed. The less than Academy Award quality movie began and ended in the same way — a death every other minute.

But only a handful — 15 persons — watched the death of another era in the long and sometimes not so glorious life of a grand old lady.

On Tuesday night, the curtains opened at the Orpheum Theater to reveal the movie screen for one last time.

The first martial arts movie started far behind schedule. Perhaps the old lady, who had seen some of the great motion pictures of our time, wished not to end her movie career in such a fashion.

STANDING AT THE bottom of a sweeping seating area in front of the stage, they could look up and gaze, perhaps marvel, at the imposing massiveness of the theater.

The emptiness was sad, and a little lonely.

The awesome closed balcony and the lobby empty save for three old wooden benches, were companions to the row upon row of worn and tattered seats, seating now for nothing but dust.

And throughout the last movie a young attendant continued to clean the candy counter.

THE ORPHEUM, a true lady, had seen much and had been through much.

The hardwood floors showed cracks and the wear which could come only from the shuffling of thousands upon thousands of shoes.

Finally, her last audience shuffled out, slowly.

And the cathedral-like decorations

adorning the walls looked down upon the empty theater in almost reverent silence.

Lights were turned off, the neon

sign outdoors quit flashing its multitude of colors and the doors were locked.

And a grand old lady slumbered.

Orpheum Theater Returning Live Stage

(Continued From 1C)

nate Mann theater, the Uptown, was closed and stripped.

Even though its grandeur remained intact, the Orpheum had become sort of a second-rate movie house because of the dwindling number of films produced per year, Martin said.

Back in 1974 an attempt was made to convert it to X-rated movies, but after about six months that plan was abandoned because of falling patronage. Since then, it has been basically an R-rated theater featuring soft porn and martial arts movies.

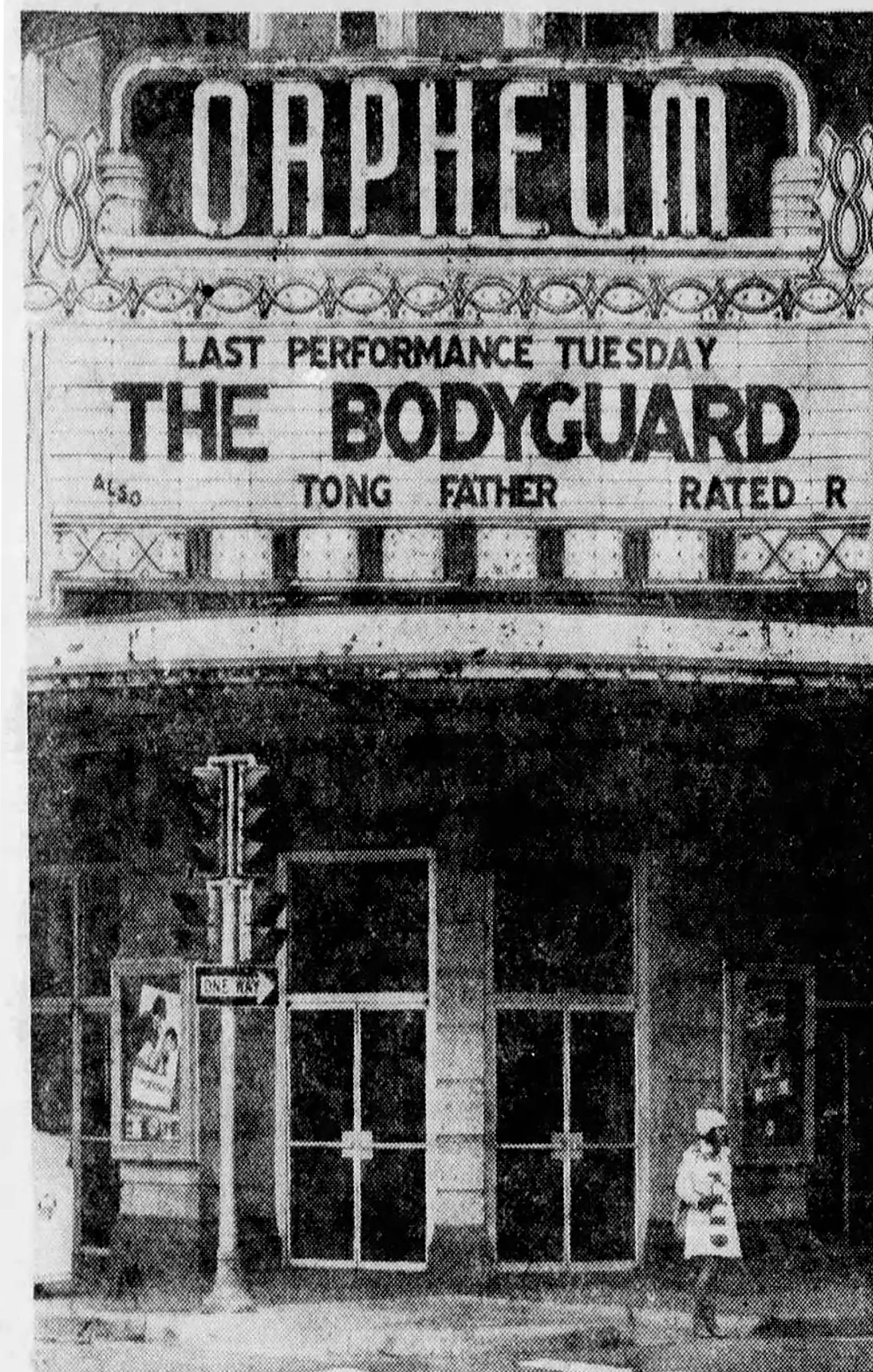
BUT EVEN THAT EMPHASIS couldn't be sustained, he said.

"There are only so many movies made per year and there are a lot of screens around Wichita now," Martin said. "We have just run out of movies to run."

Conversion of the Fox Theater will begin Nov. 29 when it is closed for an estimated \$100,000 remodeling. It will reopen Dec. 22.

Remodeling will include adding a central wall and realigning seats, plus doubling projection equipment and adding automation.

The name may be changed from what most people recognize. Because it is in the Garvey Center, the theater's full name is the Fox-Garvey. Martin said it may be simplified to the Garvey I and II when it reopens.



Staff Photo By John Avery

'BODYGUARD' WAS ORPHEUM'S FINAL MOVIE
... Manager said martial arts films didn't help