

CALIFORNIA SOUTHLAND

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THE GROWTH OF A COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE IDEA

By ELLEN LEECH

"What things we have seen done at the Mermaid; heard words that have been so nimble and so full of subtle flame."

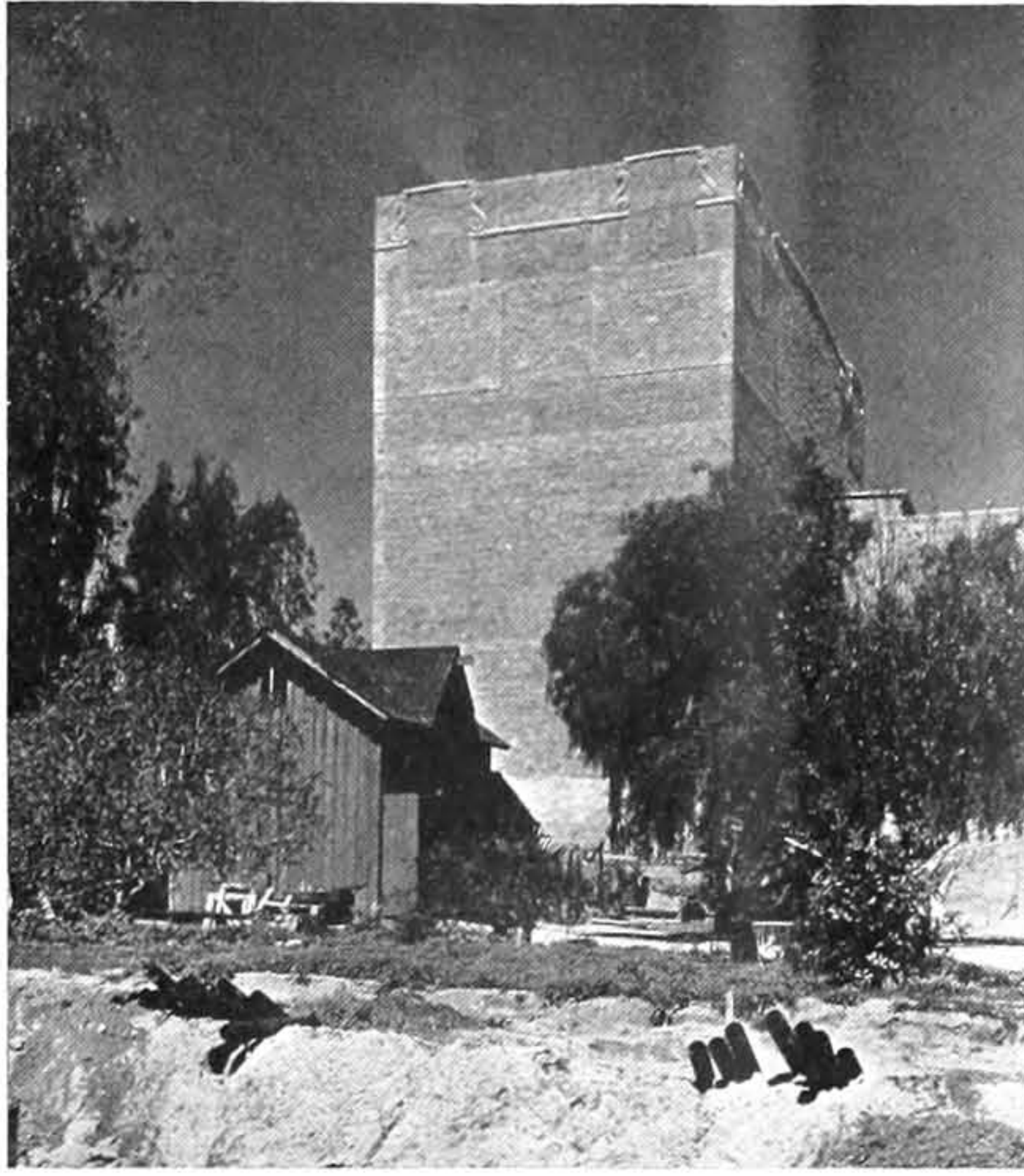
IT has now become so much the rule to expect every project to burst forth fully panoplied,—not from the head of Jove, but from the purse of capital, that we are inclined to forget that the majority of our prized possessions, particularly community or municipal blessings are the result of the slow growth of years, and of the efforts, usually, of a group who recognize the needs of the people long before the majority realize there will be such a necessity.

Life of the drama on this coast has always been a precarious one; for many years stock companies occupied the theaters, with an occasional visit of some well known star, though rarely supported by the Eastern cast in its entirety. Therefore, to avoid stagnation along these lines a Tuesday Morning Drama Class was organized in Pasadena in 1912, with Mrs. J. B. Durand as Chairman, for the avowed purpose of studying and reading the best plays of each year. It was later found desirable to join the Los Angeles Center of the Drama League of America, which necessitated augmenting the number by fifty, as one hundred members were required, and finally in 1916 the Pasadena Center was formed. Miss Sybil Jones was the first president, with Dr. Robert Freeman, Mrs. H. I. Stuart and Mrs. Myron Hunt as vice-presidents, and Miss Louise Congor as secretary.

To this early Drama Class, however, Pasadena owes its Community Players and the new Community Playhouse, as the Drama Class was still functioning as an independent body when Gilmor Brown came to Pasadena with his Savoy Players to present such plays as were usually given in stock theaters at that time. Although the entertainments were desirable the patronage was not sufficient to allow a continuance without definite support and realizing this the Class decided to back the project with their entire approval and in order to assist financially suggested the sale of subscriptions, in the amounts of five and ten dollars, these to apply on admissions, and in this way the first impetus was given towards a community theater.

With the organization of the Pasadena Center in 1916 a Play Contest section was installed and it was announced that the play winning first place would be presented by the Savoy Players. The first play to gain the coveted award was "The Scapegoat" by Mrs. Walton Wood of South Pasadena. With every year since the contest has grown and has included a number of dramatic successes. The prize for the best play is now \$100.

In 1917 an Amateur Players Section was formed, under the



THE STAGE TOWER OF PASADENA'S COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, WHERE GREEN STREET IS CUTTING ACROSS EL MOLINO AVENUE.

direction of Mrs. Arthur Palmer, and all members of the League interested in the study and production of plays invited to join. From this nucleus it was soon possible for Gilmor Brown to recruit amateurs to replace his Savoy players and thus gradually eliminate all professional players from the cast.

During the moving years of the war both the Drama League and the Community Players carried on along their educational lines but with modified strength as other interests claimed the time of the members. The players did their utmost, however, to offer entertainment and relaxation to the home workers during the moments of leisure vouchsafed them.

These naturally lean years brought a deficit to the Player and in order to attempt to wipe this out by the introduction of more business-like methods the Community Playhouse Association was formed and articles of incorporation filed in 1918, under which title the Players continue to function.

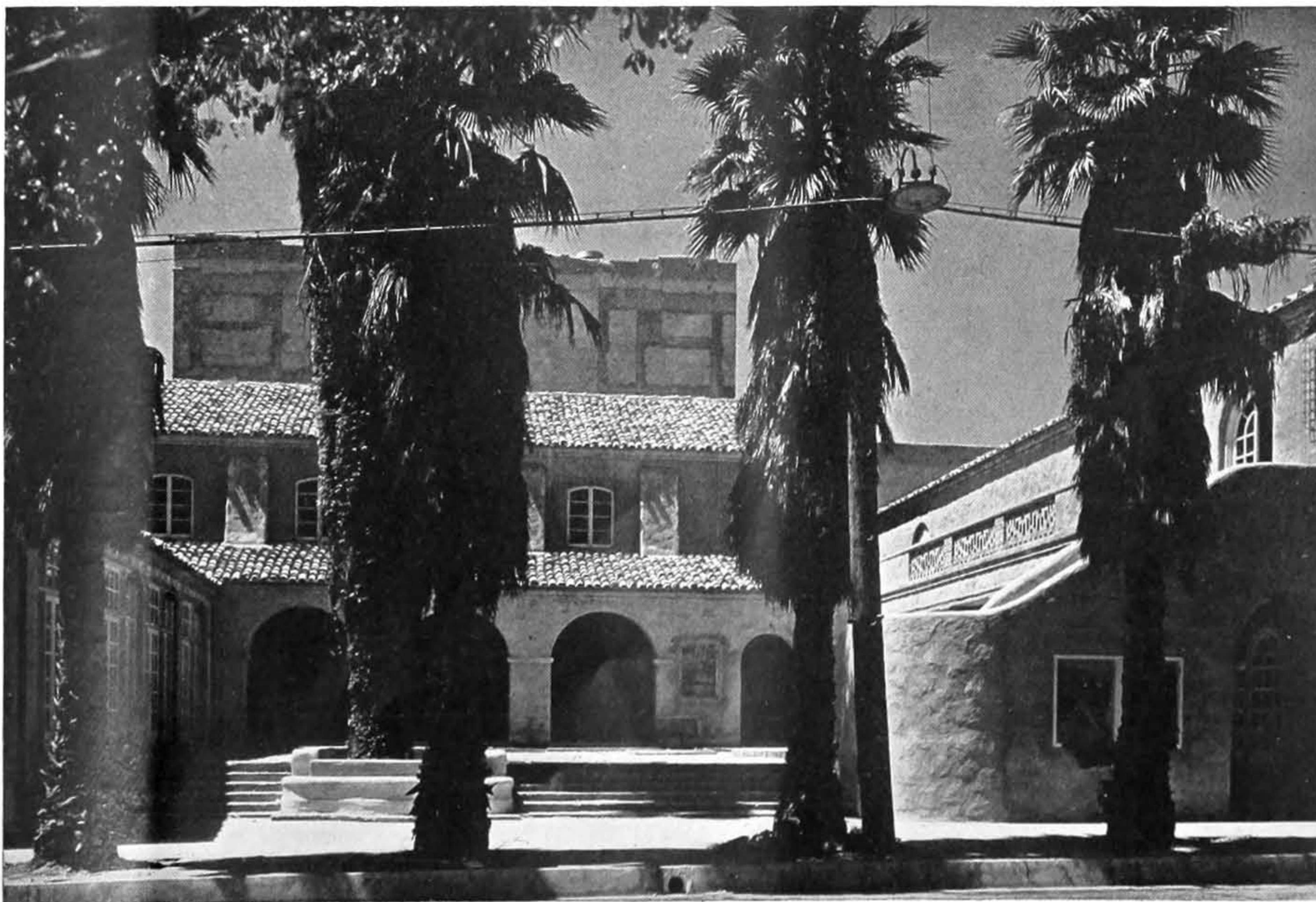
Through the succeeding years the Drama League has held and shown an unceasing interest in the Community Players, aiding and abetting in every way possible that the theater might hold to its ideal of the presentation of drama, rather than become merely a shop where amusement is produced and sold. This protectorate, however, has never been more than that, the two bodies functioning

entirely separately; the Community Playhouse Association under a Governing Board, with revenue-producing memberships, and with nine standing committees, named by the president, to handle various phases of the playhouse work.

When the lot on South El Molino was purchased and a building program discussed it was evident that a separate corporation must be organized in order that, under the requirements of the law, the property could be vested in a legal ownership. Thus the Pasadena Community Guild was incorporated in 1924, as a stock corporation with preferred and common stock. A provision was made, as is usual, that the com-

mon stock could retire the preferred stock and thus in the ownership of the common stock rested the potential control if not the immediate ownership of the building. This common stock, however, can not be purchased by private individuals but all donations received by the Playhouse are used for the purchase of common stock on the condition that the common stock so purchased shall be issued to a trustee for the benefit of the Playhouse corporation; the subscription blank used for this purpose carrying its own explanation, "For the purpose of maintaining an ownership of the property for public good and not for individual gain."

Under the limitations of Cali-



THE NEW PLAYHOUSE BEHIND ITS HANDSOME PALM TREES ON EL MOLINO AVENUE. A THEATRICAL PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE HAIGHT. THE COURT AND AUDITORIUM WERE FIRST DESIGNED BY ELMER GRAY, ARCHITECT, AND SINCE ITS INCEPTION ALL THE TALENT OF THE TOWN HAS BEEN AT ITS SERVICE. CARRIED TO A UNITY OF COMPLETION BY DWIGHT GIBBS, ARCHITECT, ALSON CLARK, ARTIST, E. A. CHEESEWRIGHT, T. W. SMITH AND FRANK H. SELLERS, REPRESENTING THE COMMUNITY GUILD.



MISS SIBYL ELIZA JONES, THE FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE PASADENA CENTER, DRAMA LEAGUE OF AMERICA, A PLAYWRIGHT AND COMPOSER.



GILMOR BROWN, NOT ONLY THE DIRECTOR OF THE COMMUNITY PLAYERS BUT RECOGNIZED AS THE EXPONENT OF THE BEST IN TRAINING.



J. W. MORIN IN WHOSE HANDS HAS RESTED, THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE GROWTH, THE LEGAL INTEREST OF THE COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE.

fornia law trusts may not exist indefinitely with the exception of those for charitable and specific educational purposes, and twenty-five years is the prescribed limit for this trust indenture. During this period the trustee shall be subject to control by an Advisory Board and a majority of the directorate of the Playhouse Association but at the end of the twenty-five years unless there is a change in legislation, the common stock must be transferred to the Playhouse Association, whose charter has more than forty years to run and can then be renewed.

In substance then what seems a complicated mechanism of two corporations and the trust is merely an attempt to stabilize the stock voting control, and administer the property for a period of twenty-five years, relieving the Playhouse of the heavier business details until such time as it feels capable of controlling property worth over four hundred thousand dollars.

In case we are inclined, some of us, to hold the Community players in too home-like an estimation it may be well to give the view of a visitor as contained in the following letter from Maurice Browne, head of the Maurice Browne Players and director of the Theater of the Golden Bough at Carmel-by-the-Sea, California.

Editor of Southland,
Pasadena, California:

A week or two ago you asked me if I would put into the form of a letter some of the things I had said to you in conversation about the work of the Pasadena Community Players, and Mr. Gilmor Brown. I have delayed doing this until I had seen the production of their Annual Frolics.

During the last two or three weeks I have been present at Playhouse performances of "Heritage," and the Frolics and at a Playbox performance of "The Tragedy of Nan." In brief, the impression made on me by these three productions,—tragedy, drama, and burlesque mixed with fantasy—is that no "little theatre" group known to me in this country is doing better work and singularly few as good. American Little Theatres for the most part have suffered from two curses: They have lacked variety, and, when they have done good plays, they have too often done them inadequately. The three productions of Gilmor Brown named above—put on as I say within a period of two or three weeks—show extraordinary variety not only in the choice

of material but in its handling; and the handling shows mastery. I do not mean that the three productions were perfect; they were far from it; in each of them there were blank and sometimes bad moments; but that very fact showed by contrast how good their good moments and their general average were.

Gilmor Brown's production of "The Tragedy of Nan" was, without qualification, the best production of that exceedingly difficult and beautiful play that I have seen (this opinion was shared by Miss Van Volkenburg and Mr. Robert Nichols, the English poet, who attended it with me).

"Heritage," with a not very good first act and a markedly poor fourth act, showed in the second act, on the part of author, director and players, admirable team-work, and in the third act reached heights that I have only seen surpassed in this country by the New York Yiddish Theatre in its best days when Ben-Ami was at its head. The Pasadena Community Players have shown me so much good acting in the past few weeks that it is invidious to mention anyone by name, but I feel I must pay special tribute to Miss Belle Mitchell for her flawless piece of character work in "Heritage;" Miss Ada Gleason, too, and one or two of the others were hardly less good. Acting of such a calibre, is, unfortunately, not usually associated with "little theatres."

The Players' Frolic showed that they could laugh at themselves—and at the public and, *mirabile dictu*, at their backers—without strain, bitterness, or self-consciousness. It was spontaneous fun and it was good fun, with, as the best burlesque always has, moments of beauty in it.

Presumably these three productions are more or less typical of the work of the Community Players. If that is so, especially now that they are just about to move into their new theatre, to which there is none superior that I know of in the United States, they can challenge comparison—and pretty light-heartedly at that—with any similar American organization, let alone with any on the Pacific Coast. In New York, any theatre-lover, as a matter of course, regularly makes a Sabbath day's journey to the wilds of Grand Street to see the new show at the Neighborhood; as often as not he doesn't know what he is going to see, but he knows he is going to see a good show; similarly in Los Angeles I find myself making a similar journey to the Pasadena Playhouse, with the same feeling, and as a matter of course.

Very sincerely yours,
MAURICE BROWNE.

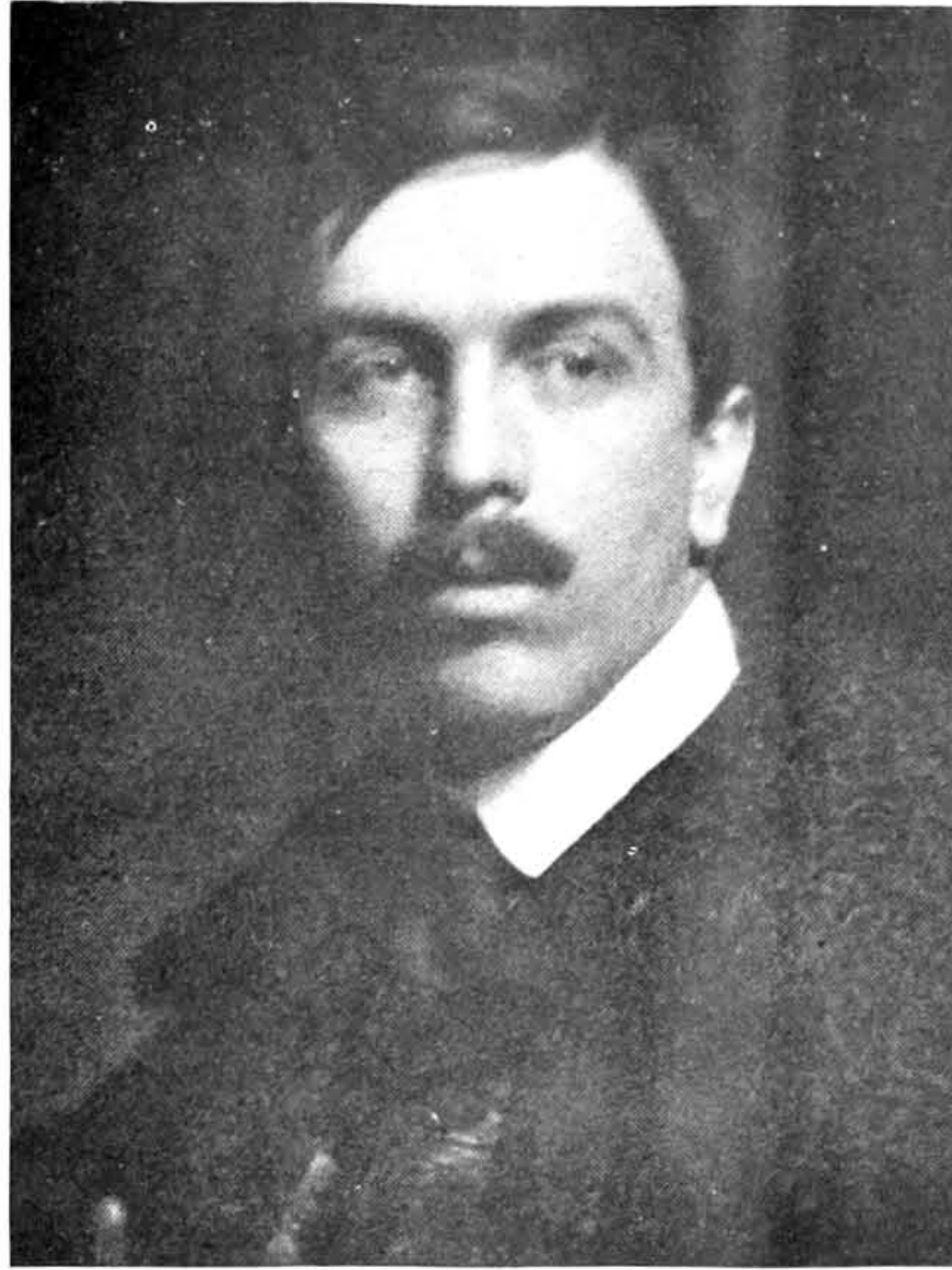


THE STAIRWAY TO THE MUSIC ROOM WHICH AWAITS COMPLETION.

FOLLOWING the growth of an idea through years of experience and trial we find invariably that the tangible thing, the thing which has persisted through change and growth, lodges year by year, month by month, day and night, through sunshine and shadow, in the heart of some individual. Growth means change and sustenance from new sources; and as the Community Playhouse has be-



MISS ELEANOR BISSELL IS NOW, AND HAS BEEN FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, PRESIDENT OF THE PASADENA CENTER OF THE DRAMA LEAGUE.



ALSON CLARK, PAINTER, ETCHER, CRITIC IN THE SCHOOL OF ART IN PASADENA, WHO HAS GIVEN OF HIS TALENT IN THE DESIGN OF THE TOWER.



CAPTAIN PAUL PERIGORD, OF CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, PRESIDENT OF THE COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE ASSOCIATION AND ALSO PRESIDENT OF THE COMMUNITY GUILD.

come a vortex for community interests in the arts of human expression, and takes on tangible form it has reached out through the community and has found here and there rich stores of experience in the multitudinous talent, latent, quiescent and retired, existing in this cosmopolitan, but decidedly American population of Pasadena. It follows, therefore, that Pasadena is a prolific and unusually fine field for the working out of this democratic American ideal. These results now become apparent in the actual building of the Community Playhouse. One cannot take a photograph of an idea as it exists in the mind of its possessor; but if one who loves his fellow men and wishes to give to his community from out his store of talent training, wealth, or skill in any line, will build a Community Playhouse, not only can a photograph be taken of his idea but it can be presented to the waiting world which just now is eagerly asking: "What is democracy and is it worth saving?"

Southern California has been called the laboratory of community life as well as the land of heart's desire for the individual home. The combination is dynamic; new ideals of home are developing, new forces in community effort are being released.

The very fact that our population is mobile and, as the chemist would say, "in solution," has left it free to crystallize around that which most interests the individual with brains and talent. Every citizen and every newcomer is welcomed to work.

The atmosphere of the community is that which is breathed most generously by the amateur and the connoisseur, but the core of the whole thing is highly professional in its art and training.

The test of the quality lies in the quality of the people who have finally brought about the realization of these ideals. Foremost in the actual business of building the playhouse and bringing it to its present perfection as an up-to-date theatre is Mr. Frank H. Sellers, whose tireless attention to contracts and details has the gratitude of the whole community.

At the little cupboard of an office, 83 North Fair Oaks Ave., where the playhouse interests have centered during most of these years of growth, and where during each day discussions of advancement of the work proceeded, one finds a list of the present governing board for 1924-1925.

The Governing Board of the Community Playhouse Association: Paul Perigord, president; Mrs. Robert A. Millikan, vice president; Joseph C. Sloane, secretary; Guy R. McComb, treasurer; Miss Eleanor M. Bissell, Clinton C. Clarke, Mrs. Phillip Schuyler Doane, Mrs. George E. Hale, James W. Morin, George A. Mortimer, Mrs. Frank H. Sellers.

Others have served on this board in previous years, but upon this year's members has fallen the brunt of securing the funds for the new playhouse and building it.

The volunteer workers and players have come from every section and from every class. The players occasionally have stage aspirations but more frequently volunteer simply as a community duty but emerge, through the skillful coaching of Gilmore Brown, with an enviable record.

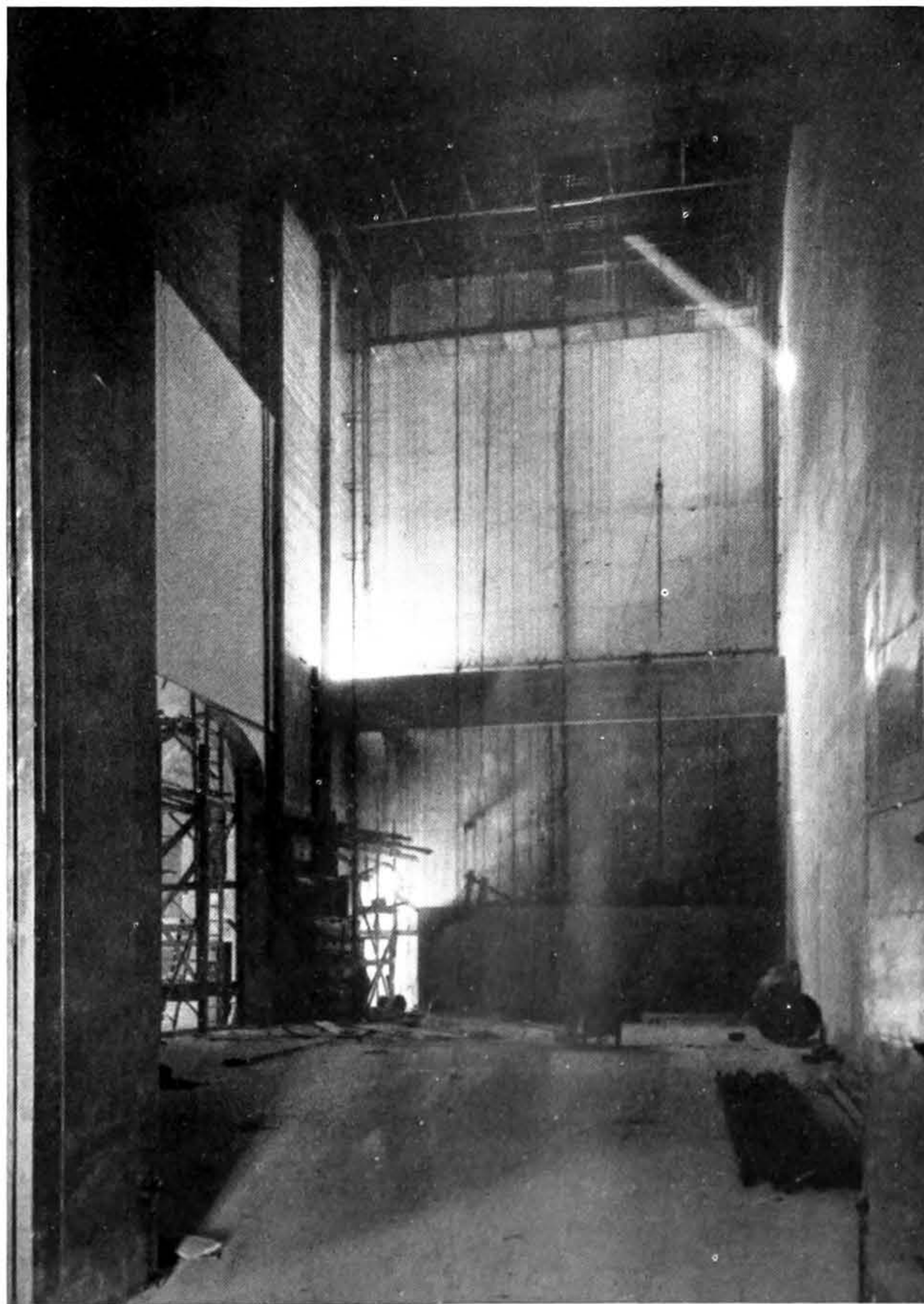
The community co-operation extends beyond the players and the footlights as it encompasses the working committees, the play readers, the property and wardrobe committees, and, when the building plans were announced, artisans from every part of Pasadena offered their services.

Due to the fact that many of the leading experts, engineers, architects and specialists donated their services wholly without compensation, and many of the contractors supplied material and labor at actual or almost actual cost, the Guild has been able to erect and furnish the building so cheaply that those bankers and financiers, who have been charged with procuring a large part of the funds to erect the structure, consider that for every dollar of cash expended there has been put into the building one dollar and twenty cents of actual value.

Among the artists, architects, engineers and experts who have rendered such signal service in making the building unique for beauty, efficiency of operation and economy of construction, so that it stands in a class by itself, are Alson S. Clark, artist; E. J. Cheesewright, decorator; A. Dwight Gibbs, architect, associate for the interior; Elmer Grey, architect for the building; Elliott Lee Ellingwood, engineer for the heating and ventilating; Prof. Vern O. Knudsen, specialist in acoustics, University of California; Claude D. Seaman, electrical and stage equipment engineer; Prof. Clifford M. Swan, specialist in acoustics, Harvard University.

Among the contractors who have by their conscientious work carried through the splendid construction of the building, and which they did with little or no profit to themselves, are Winter Construction Company, general contractors; Anciano Stone Company, slate flagstones; C. W. Cole & Company, stage illuminating equipment; Electrical Products Company, stage electrical equipment; Frabric Studios, stage rigging; Thomas Hannibal, stage curtain and

(Continued on Page 20)



THE INTERIOR OF THE STAGE TOWER AND THE STAGE OF THE NEW COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE. NEAR THE BRIGHT LIGHT AT BACK IS THE MODEL SWITCHBOARD, TWO WORKMEN GIVE THE SCALE.

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THE PLAYHOUSE

Continued from Page 11

drapes; Wm. L. Haven, acoustical treatment; J. Hokom Company, sprinkler system; W. E. Langstaff, general electrical contractor; E. O. Nay Company, heating, ventilating and plumbing; Era Petersen, decorator; Roberts Manufacturing Company, hand wrought lighting fixtures; Safety Electrical Products Company, stage switchboard; Watkins Plaster Company, staff ornaments; C. F. Weber Company, theatrical chairs; West & Company, finished hardware.

The best minds of the community have been for months and still are interested in the actual building of the Community Playhouse. Begun as a vital necessity, realized by those nearest to the weekly round of management, the project has been accumulating momentum and material until the talent of the town is concentrated in the social and artistic center now nearing completion on El Molino Avenue.

That the project is on a firm financial basis is vouched for in the personnel of the building committee of the holding corporation. Mr. Frank A. Sellers, as chairman, has so crystalized the various forces and so utilized the talent volunteered that not only have large funds been adequately handled, but money saved by volunteer work has been economically used for needed changes and improvements. Mr. T. W. Smith of the First National Bank of Pasadena has supervised also in the details of contracts, both of these public-spirited men acting for the Community Guild, of which the general board is Captain Paul Perigord, Mr. Hiram Wadsworth, C. J. Hall of the

Pacific Southwest Bank, W. D. Lacey, T. W. Smith, Dr. James McBride and Frank H. Sellers, with Mr. Morin as consulting attorney.

With great interest we penetrated the mysteries of the theatre tower and basement, sharing with Mr. Sellers an eager pleasure in the perfection of appliance and modern equipment. Never before had we realized why a stage tower is necessary in a two-story building used as a theatre, or why theatre buildings in commercial centers are only partly available for offices.

Here the tower has become the main architectural feature, sharing only with George Washington Smith's beautiful white tower of the Lobera Theatre in Santa Barbara the distinction which is its due. Growing out of the internal use and necessity of its construction, criticized by the best architectural acumen, and carried to completion by Mr. Dwight Gibbs, architect, and Mr. Alson Clark, artist, whose study of decoration and architectural skyline has been at the service of the Playhouse for months, this tower stands for much in the community, the value of which will develop year after year.

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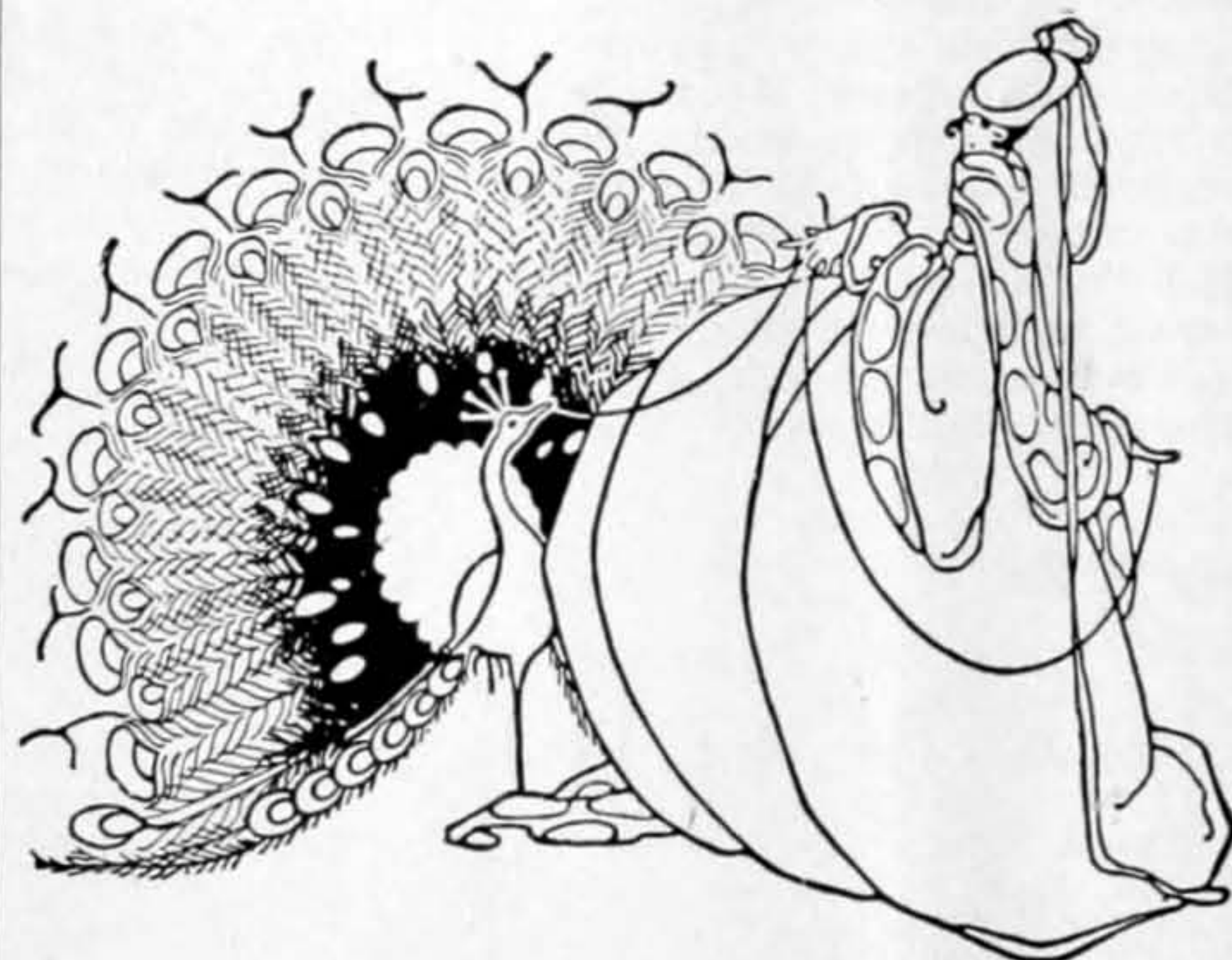


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