

FROM GHOST LIGHTS TO CURTAIN CALLS: PRESERVING GEORGIA'S  
HISTORIC THEATRES

by

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(Under the Direction of Scott Nesbit)

ABSTRACT

Thanks to community advocacy and willingness to accept change over time, historic Georgia theatres have survived the odds. This thesis examines the history of these theatres, the factors that led to their preservation, and the processes by which these buildings have been saved.

INDEX WORDS: Theatre, Theater, History, Georgia, Playhouse, Restoration, Preservation, African American, Preservation Advocacy, Albany Municipal Auditorium, Austin Theatre, Rylander Theatre, Morton Theatre, Fine Arts Building, Fine Arts Theatre, Fox Theatre, Imperial Theatre, Grand Theatre, Springer Opera House, Liberty Theatre, Pearce Auditorium, Old Opera House, Hawkinsville Old Opera House, Grand Opera House, Douglass Theatre, Russell Auditorium, Rome City Auditorium, Waycross City Auditorium.

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Diane and Jack Holbrook, and the memory of Vinetta Lynch.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In spite of supernatural overtones, a **ghost light** is a practical piece of theatre lighting equipment. These are simple, often bare bulb lamps on crude posts that are left on stage, switched on as the rest of the theatre lights go dark. With the theatre empty these light shine as beacons waiting for the safe return of actors, actresses and patrons. **Curtain calls** occur following a production's final curtain. Actors and actresses emerge from the world of the play, taking appreciative bows before a hearty round of applause. Both ghost lights and curtain calls represent two of the most recent eras of American theatre, the days in which the audience and actors left the stages silent, as well as the rousing applause for their return, many years and dollars later.

Eighteen historic stages are currently operational in the state of Georgia. It is important to understand the factors that led to their preservation. This affords a better understanding of the role of preservation in Georgia's theatrical past as well as its future.

American theatre flourished in the nineteenth century with the rise of private opera houses. These stood as symbols of a community's culture and were so named to avoid distasteful associations with "theatre."<sup>1</sup> Vaudeville theatre with its multitude of acts and variety did not aim as high, instead aiming to entertain the masses which had been brought into cities by the Industrial Revolution, which also provided them with a degree

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn, George D., and Richard L. Poole. *The Opera Houses of Iowa*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993, 6.

of disposable income.<sup>2</sup> These cities also became interested in the entertainment of its citizens, investing in large city auditoriums. As motion pictures began to grow in popularity in the early twentieth century, more and more theatres were adapted into cinema use or abandoned altogether for the new form of entertainment. Some of these theatres however decided to cling to their live theatre roots and include a stage, creating the playhouse-cinema hybrid. All the while these theatres both unified a segregated society under one roof, they also drove physical wedges between the races. Dwindling interest in stage productions and the shift to motion pictures as the primary mode of American entertainment led to the conversion or abandonment of a great majority of live theatre venues. As more and more playhouses disappeared, universities took control of the legacy of American theatre. A rise in the importance of campus theatre buildings and supporting spaces resulted. The midcentury witnessed the demolition of many downtown playhouses due to emerging entertainment media, including films, as well as other influences including the increased reliance upon automobiles that made suburban living a viable option.<sup>3</sup> From the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until now, the remaining historic playhouses avoided the wrecking ball due to diligence by local organizations, government, and advocates.

Because of the work of so many Georgians, we now witness the stories of their survival complete with near-death experiences. Despite physical changes, changes in tastes, and economic pressures, these theatres live on to tell us their stories. These stories reach back across ages and oceans. For instance, Georgia playhouses exhibit features

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<sup>2</sup> Mielziner, Jo. *The Shapes of Our Theatre*. New York, NY: Clarkson N. Potter, 1970, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Condee, William Faricy. *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005, 154-156.

from theatre's ancient origins. They also retain characteristics of later European development. The earliest Georgia theatres represent the era of the American Opera House. Built soon after, and sometimes in concurrent use, the Vaudeville-oriented theatres of the state tell the story of a theatre movement targeted at everyday people who were now able to afford the luxury of entertainment. The city auditoriums of Georgia reflect the local government investment in the newly expanded audience. This expanded audience included African-Americans as well, and accommodations for segregation were created or adapted in response. Cinema-playhouse hybrids show the coming wave of entertainment in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The university theatre spaces carried on the legacy of the arts, which had been largely pushed aside in the private sector in favor of motion pictures.

This thesis aims to understand how these playhouses survived decades of changes and threats. In doing so, it shows that historic Georgia playhouses serve as reminders of the power of preservation advocacy and commitment. Recognizing the importance of each of these spaces by private citizens, municipal governments, non-profit organizations and others was key to their survival. Their activism and belief in the theatre as an important part of their community fabric spared these buildings from the wrecking ball and a future of silent stages. Changes to these theatres were inevitable. They typically adapted to the changing entertainment market, embracing motion pictures when the popularity and profitability of the movies was great. This adaptation occasionally resulted in the destruction of original playhouse material, but without the adaptation, these theatres had little chance of survival. Other theatres were born capable of both stage entertainment as well as cinema and were able to adapt to market demand for cinema by

shifting to film-heavy programming, phasing out stage components. This flexibility proves to be an important lesson as these historic theatres move ahead. They must be aware of their community's needs and be able to address those in order to keep the applause ringing into the future.

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This examination observes historic playhouses in Georgia constructed for the purpose of live theatre. By definition, such theatres will include a stage feature. Some of these resources, such as the Rylander Theatre in Americus, might have also been built as a cinema. For purposes here, however, theatres constructed for cinema only will be excluded. Similarly, historic cinemas that later were converted to playhouses, such as Valdosta's Dosta Theatre will also be excluded. Some resources might be housed in a building with other uses. The Fine Arts Theatre at the University of Georgia is an example of such resource. As these resources are examined it may be important to examine the history and development of the entire building in addition to the specific details of the theatre space itself. The definition of "historic" for our purposes follows the National Register of Historic Places suggestion of 50 years or older. Most playhouses concerned are much older than this. The oldest resource, the Springer Opera House, dates back to 1871.

When discussing the preservation work of these theatres, we will distinguish work according to the Secretary of the Interior's four treatments of historic properties. These include preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. Reconstruction work does not apply to the resources examined here, however. The term, "renovation," will also be used to distinguish general maintenance work and updates. This may include

technological updates such as improved lighting grids or sound systems. It may also include comfort and aesthetic changes such as paint and upholstery work.

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No comprehensive literature exists regarding the landscape of historic Georgia theatres. A previous University of Georgia Master of Historic Preservation thesis examined a limited number of these theatres. This thesis, "African American Theaters in Georgia: Preserving an Entertainment Legacy" by Jason Ellerbee was concerned with the specific treatment of African American theatres in the state and considered only four historic resources. Larger surveys of the historic theatres of other states do exist, however, as do studies of the evolution of American theatre resources. These books are referenced throughout. Other books provided specific details on each theatre. In addition, newspapers and other documents supplied details.

*Theatres* by Andrew Craig Morrison and *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century* by David Naylor and Joan Dillon provided much of the background regarding the evolution of American theatres. Morrison's work contained information regarding the second story opera house style. It also provided insight into the role Vaudeville played in design element of theatres across the country. He also connected the presentation of moving pictures to increased profitability, as well as the general change in theatre design aesthetics as programming shifted to motion pictures. His work also explained reasoning behind the vacancy of so many downtown theatres.

*American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century* by David Naylor and Joan Dillon provided similarly invaluable framing work. This provided an understanding of early American theatre buildings and an explanation of why these are



extremely rare across the nation. They documented the function and importance of an opera house to towns and communities. He also differentiated the two primary opera house styles, grand European edifices and scaled down, more modest theatres. His work discussed the shift in attitudes that led to the abandonment of stage for the promise of the silver screen. To a lesser extent *History of the Theatre* by Oscar G Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, considered an authoritative text on theatre history, provided further guidance for the context of the world surrounding the origins of these theatres.

Books from other regions and states about their theatre resources put into context the culture of American theatre. A pitfall of simply applying these studies to Georgia resources is that special conditions dictated very specific reactions. Some trends in one state or region might have been seen to a lesser degree or not at all in other. Therefore the national theatre books previously mentioned were used in conjunction to keep history correctly framed. *Actors, Audiences, and Historic Theaters of Kentucky* by Marilyn Casto and *The Opera Houses of Iowa* by George D. Glenn and Richard L. Poole are examples of such examinations. Another example, *Ohio's Historic Opera Houses* by Michael Hurwitz offers a more personal view of its state resources. William Faricy Condee's *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia* provided further insight into the decline of theatre popularity. It also helped establish general characteristics of opera houses. Naming conventions for these theatres were also exposed, as were motivations for the second-story opera house design. Condee also discussed motivations for municipal involvement in theatre construction and operation as well as an explanation of Chatauquas.

Considering individual theatres in Georgia, the most useful research tools were site visits. It was important to see these theatres in three-dimensional space. This helped to better understand the intended audience experience and overall function of the space. It also provided opportunities to note details and features not visible in press photos and likely not well documented. The greatest examples of such omissions are the interpretation, modification, or eradication of dedicated segregated spaces and conventions. Little discussed and little seen, viewing these spaces was a very visceral learning experience, seeing racism in solid wood and plaster. Visiting these theatres also allowed opportunities to talk with theatre staff. They shared stories of daily operations, past struggles, renovation and restoration woes, and looming concerns for the future.

Other resources used for this examination include National Register nomination forms, theatre-specific books and documents, articles, and county histories. In order to prove a site or district worth of listing in the National Register of Historic Places historical significance must be established in the nomination form. As such, details on construction, programming, and even renovations are found in these. The quality of the information included should always be scrutinized. During the early years after the National Register's establishment in 1966, documentation is often much more sparse than nominations written more recently. While older nominations of individual properties might still provide necessary details and backgrounds, National Register district nomination forms may have little or no detailed information. Because of the wide discrepancy in the level of detail in National Register nomination forms, some were more useful than others. Of course, some theatres were not listed at all, so this resource was not inherently available for every theatre.

Documents provided by the theatres also provided historical detail and, in some cases, outline specific renovation and restoration work. These documents came in the form of informational booklets such as *History of City Hall and Auditorium* from Hawkinsville's Old Opera House. They also included special programs, from grand re-openings for example. They were also in the form of educational documents for visitors or potential renters and donors. In two instances, entire books were dedicated to individual theatres. *In Order of Appearance: Chronicling 135 Years on America's Most Celebrated Stage* by F. Clason Kyle and Lewis O. Powell and *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker* by Kristi Casey Sanders gave detailed insight into the origin and evolution of two of Georgia's most well known theatres. Newspaper, journal, and magazine articles provided details as well. They documented openings, restoration efforts, and programming.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM ANCIENT NECESSITY TO AMERICAN INDULGENCE

Before examining the factors that led to the preservation of Georgia theatres, an examination of pre-American theatre is necessary. This enables an understanding of the greater context of theatre. The origins of theatre reach back beyond the ancient world. Ancient theatre sought to explain the world to the masses. Dramatic tales of gods and mortals told the tales of the natural world and human nature. Over the centuries theatre has both flourished and been driven deep into the shadows. Some features of this ancient heritage are still found today in Georgia's historic playhouses. Common theatrical terms such as *scene*, *vomitorium*, and *orchestra* date back to the ancient world.

While theatre flourished throughout the ancient period, this was not the case in periods subsequent. After the fall of Rome, theatre disappeared into the dark ages. Minstrels and other performers continued to perform, but there is little documentation regarding theatre as an essential part of a community. The church was responsible for the resuscitation of theatre, using it as a tool to spread the Word.<sup>4</sup> Theatre once again reached the masses during the Renaissance. Theatres were often round with an open-air pit in the center. Balconies and boxes, home to more aristocratic society, circled this area.<sup>5</sup> Eventually the open-air style lost favor as roofed theatre buildings became the norm. As theatre rose in prominence, so did the voices of its detractors. In the middle 1600s theatre

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<sup>4</sup> Brockett, *History*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-120.

was even outlawed in England, accused of returning to its vulgar roots.<sup>6</sup> Ever resilient, theatre survived into the Restoration. The prototype for American theatres was established. It consisted of a covered audience area with seating clustered on the floor and often in boxes or balconies. There was also a proscenium arch or “picture frame” surrounding the stage. Early American versions of these grand theatres were considerably simpler, even crude in design and construction.<sup>7</sup> However, they too fought against the negative perceptions of theatres and theatre performers that had pervaded Europe.

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Among historic Georgia theatres one era of American theatre lacks any explicit expression. No colonial theatres are represented in today’s inventory. Some identifiable factors may be identified to explain this phenomenon. Very few American colonial theatres survived at all. Early Colonial theatres were not constructed as permanent buildings. The earliest theatre constructed was in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1716. It was converted into a courthouse in 1745.<sup>8</sup> Colonial theatres were designed with a similar plan to those from the European Restoration. There were marked differences, however. Most importantly, unlike the archetypes in Europe, the Colonial theatres were not designed by trained architects, but by master builders. They also provided the sheltered interior space required by the climate of the colonies, but offered very little decoration or elaboration, particularly on the exterior. They also suffered from a lack of audience comfort with crowding, disrepair, and obscured sightlines.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>7</sup> Naylor, *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, 18-21.

<sup>8</sup> Brockett, *History*, 224.

<sup>9</sup> Morrison, Andrew Craig. *Theaters*. New York: W.W. Norton & ;, 2006, 15-16.

As cities grew and changed, these rather lackluster, plain buildings were expendable. This included those in the early post-Colonial era as well. New construction in a developing America swallowed even those in the largest cities. Even the first permanent theatre in America, the Chestnut Street Theatre, constructed in 1794 in Philadelphia fell victim. Despite a noteworthy façade redesign in 1805 by Henry Latrobe, it too was demolished.<sup>10</sup> Georgia is not alone in its lack of an extant Colonial or early post-Colonial theatre.

Fires often reduced these early theatres to rubble. On occasion these fires wiped out entire blocks of downtown areas. Repeated fires wiped out Augusta theatres.<sup>11</sup> The great fire of 1916 wiped out large sections of Augusta's downtown and cotton warehouses as well.<sup>12</sup> The threat of theatre fires was not strictly a pre-twentieth century phenomenon either. In 1903 a devastating fire in Chicago's Iroquois Theatre killed 600. This loss of life was attributed to a lack of fire exits and a faulty fire curtain.<sup>13</sup> The incidents such as this triggered safety regulations for theatres across the country.<sup>14</sup>

Often mistakenly regarded as Georgia's oldest theatre, the **Savannah Theatre** is an example of one such theatre reduced to flames in the nineteenth century. In fact, multiple iterations of the Savannah Theatre on the same site have succumbed to fire. The current exterior of the Savannah Theatre hardly reads as a nineteenth century opera house, and for good reason. Famed architect William Jay designed the first Savannah

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<sup>10</sup> Naylor, David, and Joan Dillon. *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Wiley & Sons, 1997, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Koch, Mary Levin. "Entertaining the Public: Music and Drama in Antebellum Georgia." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (Winter, 1984), 518-519.

<sup>12</sup> Scavullo, Charles, Executive Director. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 29, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Sector, Bob. "The Iroquois Theater fire." *Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 1903.

<sup>14</sup> Naylor, *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, 18-21.

Theatre in 1818. The design was relatively simple. Its three-story stucco exterior was marked by a central pediment section. Inside, the theatre with its proscenium arch held 1000 patrons in orchestra seating, boxes, and a gallery. Fires struck this theatre twice, destroying the Jay-designed elements. Little remained of the theatre at all when in 1894 remodeling project largely constructed an all-new theatre. It was renamed The Savannah Opera House. Fire struck again in 1906, leaving only exterior walls behind. Construction on yet another theatre followed and in 1931 the theatre was converted to a movie theater. More fires followed in 1944 and 1948. The current theatre, built as a cinema, opened in 1950. In the 1980s it was converted into a playhouse, in keeping with the spirit of the original Savannah Theatre's intent.<sup>15</sup>

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While authentic colonial theatres no longer exist in the United States, what do remain are the first signs of American town grandeur, the opera houses. Time and again, citizen advocacy and an adaptable nature emerge as factors in the survival of historic Georgia opera houses. It is important to note that this stately name is not exclusively indicative of the entertainment programming appearing on these stages. Surely operas and operettas filled these theatres at times, but these were not theatres devoted solely to that art. Instead, the title of "opera house" more accurately reflects its place of pride and importance within a community. Some of these towns, small in number, might have equally small and modest opera houses. However, these theatres were still symbols of their community, marking their accomplishments and unity no matter how meager.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nesmith, Pamela. "Savannah." *Southern Theatre* 35, no. 2 (1994), 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Naylor, *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, 16.

“Opera House” typically conjures images of the massive theatres in Europe such as La Scala. These palatial buildings were designed in grand fashion by renowned architects. In America, master builders at best largely designed theatres. Generally, American opera houses did not approach the size and grandeur of their European colleagues. There were a few examples of this larger, grander design in nineteenth-century America, but these were rare. More commonly American theatres were scaled down versions of the European opera house.<sup>17</sup> Opera houses were often located in large buildings centrally located within a downtown area. They were also typically stone or brick and often had “Opera House” emblazoned on the building.<sup>18</sup> While differences exist across the spectrum of these resources, some of these common characteristics are seen in the historic theatres of Georgia, particularly regarding its placement and massing within a city or town. The name of “Opera House” has multiple variations. In order to avoid the negative connotations as well as the municipal banning of “theatres” the terms “opera house” and “academy of music” were often used.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably the most pure example of the large scale American opera house, **Macon’s Grand Opera House** opened in 1884 as the Academy of Music.<sup>20</sup> The Academy was a training school for male singers.<sup>21</sup> Architect Alexander Blair designed the building in Gothic style resembling such cathedrals complete with a large rose window. Made of red brick the façade towered over four stories with a gabled roof

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<sup>17</sup> Naylor, *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Condee, *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Macon Grand Opera House, Macon, Bibb County, Georgia, National Register #70000196.

<sup>21</sup> Mavity, Bob, Technical Director. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 26, 2015.



running across and another gable facing forward containing an arched entrance and the rose window. Behind this front section was the theatre space itself.<sup>22</sup> A ring of practice rooms surrounded the performance space.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1 - Macon Grand Opera House original facade. From *History of Macon: The First One Hundred Years 1823-1923* by Harriet F. Comer.

Inside the theatre audience members were greeted with a massive gilded proscenium with griffon head motifs on either side. Other plasterwork included rose designs. Patrons could sit in four different areas: on the orchestra floor, six boxes on each

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<sup>22</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

<sup>23</sup> Mavity, interview.

side on three levels, a balcony, and a “peanut gallery” upper balcony. Overall capacity was more than 2400 with almost half of that located on narrow, steeply pitched benches in the “peanut gallery.” These were named for the inexpensive concessions theatregoers in these cheaper seats would purchase. At the Grand, ushers would sweep shells from the floor into exterior chutes for disposal.<sup>24</sup>

The elaborate Gothic-inspired façade of Macon’s Grand Opera House was lost in a 1905 renovation by architect W. R. Gunn.<sup>25</sup> He designed Hawkinsville’s Old Opera House a few years later.<sup>26</sup> Previously known as the Academy of Music, the Grand Opera House originally had a small plaza and steps leading to its gothic rose windowed façade. In this 1905 renovation this plaza area was lost when a seven-story rectangular office building was built over it. The theatre space remained intact and largely unaltered, and a theatre lobby was added to the ground floor of the office building leading through to the theatre.<sup>27</sup> Commercial spaces flanked the entrance to this lobby.<sup>28</sup> The renovated theatre opened with a musical comedy theatre production on February 1, 1905.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Hawkinsville City Hall-Auditorium, Hawkinsville, Pulaski County, Georgia, National Register #73000638.

<sup>27</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

<sup>28</sup> Mavity, interview.

<sup>29</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

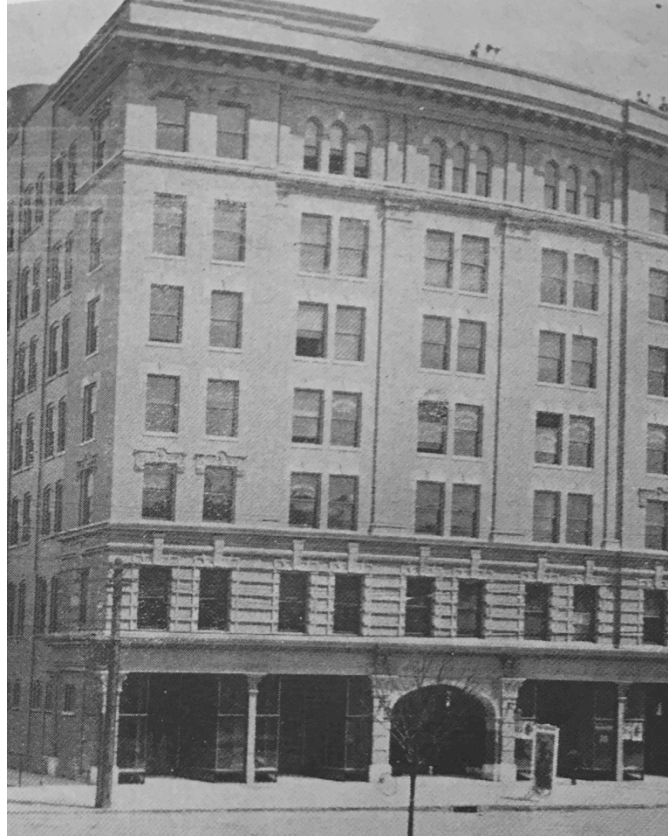


Figure 2 - Macon Grand Opera House 1905 office block addition. From 1970 grand opening program, *The Grand Opera House*.

In 1897 Brenau College and Conservatory opened the doors to their new auditorium, later named **Pearce Auditorium**. The surrounding building, Bailey Hall, cost \$15,000 to complete.<sup>30</sup> It is a rare Georgia example of an auditorium with a Second Empire style exterior. Inside there is intentional reference to European opera houses, complete with balcony and boxes. Stained glass windows lined the house and a ceiling fresco, “Aeneas at the Court of Dido”, heightened the grand décor.<sup>31</sup>

More common were smaller, more modest theatres, often tucked above street level commercial businesses. This form of opera house existed across the country in

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<sup>30</sup> *Facts about Pearce Auditorium*. Brenau University.

<sup>31</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Brenau College District, Gainesville, Hall County, Georgia, National Register #78000987.

ranges of city sizes.<sup>32</sup> These theatres were often operated by the owner of the storefront space below as a commercial enterprise. Located in large, centrally located buildings, these theatres occupied the second and sometimes third floor. Placing theatres above commercial spaces allowed owners to operate multiple businesses under one roof. The ground-floor storefronts were easily accessible to daily customers or perusing pedestrians, while the upstairs theatre was a destination that patrons specifically planned to attend.<sup>33</sup> In this way the power of the impulse buy influenced nineteenth century theatre design. Shoppers were able to easily enter a store to purchase items. These theatres held surprisingly large numbers of patrons. In Georgia, examples of this type are the Springer Opera House in Columbus, the Morton Theatre in Athens, and the Austin Theatre in Fort Valley.

The **Springer Opera House** opened in Columbus in 1871 as one such theatre. The Public Hall Association was formed in Columbus on June 20, 1869 to procure land and funds for a new city theatre. Private individuals formed this organization and newspaper articles sought to solicit donations and potential locations. This newspaper, the Columbus Enquirer announced on May 31, 1870 that a major stakeholder and location had been found.<sup>34</sup> Mr. F. J. Springer was a German immigrant who owned a Columbus grocery store.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Morrison, *Theaters*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Condee, *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Kyle, F. Clason, and Lewis O. Powell. *In Order of Appearance: Chronicling 135 Years on America's Most Celebrated Stage*. Columbus, Ga.: Communicorp, 2006, 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 20.

Work began soon afterward building the new theatre above his existing store. The architect for this new Columbus theatre was Daniel Matthew Foley.<sup>36</sup> Delays due to lumber and brick shortage aside, the project proceeded largely on schedule. The new Opera House opened on February 21, 1871 with a concert performance by Trinity Church. Newspaper accounts praised the theatre's aesthetics and sound, predicting it would prove attractive to international touring companies. It remained in this form for almost 30 years before a 1901 renovation made it a large-scale opera house more in the vein of Macon's Grand Opera House. It is this later form we see today.

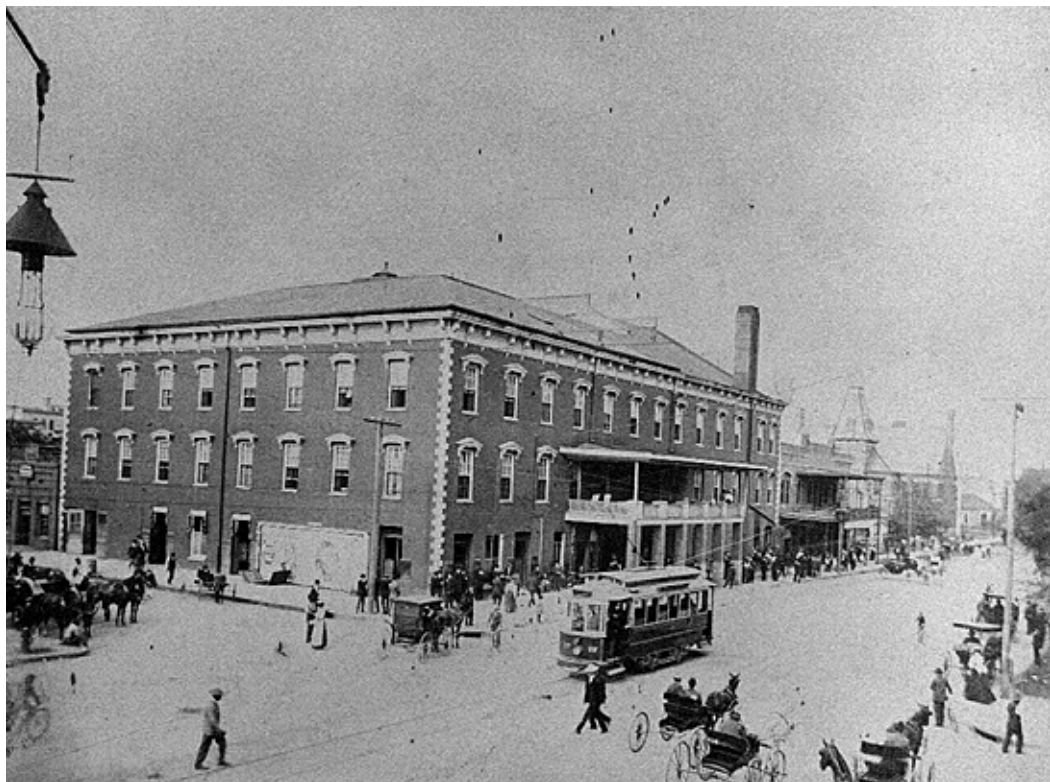


Figure 3 - Springer Opera House ca. 1895-1900. Photo from *Vanishing Georgia*, Georgia Division of Archives and History, Office of Secretary of State (<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/vanga/>)

The **Morton Theatre** opened less than a decade later in Athens. When it was constructed in 1909 the Morton Building in Athens was considered the largest building

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<sup>36</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Springer Opera House, Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia, National Register #70000214.

built, owned, and operated by an African-American. That this was located in the Deep South is surprising, it was not alone. Monroe Bowers “Pink” Morton was born to a white father and former slave mother. When he built the Morton Building he had already become a successful businessman in the Athens area. He owned 25 other buildings and even published the *Progressive Era*, a local black paper.<sup>37</sup> It was first marketed as an opera house for African-Americans. While it did not have the flash and luxury of other theatres in town, such as the Colonial Theatre, it was considered to be a place for more high-class entertainment.<sup>38</sup> In opposition to beliefs of the time regarding African-Americans, the Morton Theatre was not predestined to be second-rate.



Figure 4 - Morton Building with "Pink" Morton. From "Encore Performance." *Preservation*, August 1, 2012.

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<sup>37</sup> Fauntleroy, Glenda. "Encore Performance." *Preservation*, August 1, 2012, 41-42.

<sup>38</sup> Southern, Eileen. "Pink Morton's Theater, Black Vaudeville, and the TOBA: Recovering the History, 1910-1930." In *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*. Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 1992, 231.

The Morton Theatre itself was constructed in the middle two floors of the four-story Morton Building. Other spaces were occupied by black professionals and businessmen, further cementing this part of downtown Athens as the epicenter of African-American business and culture. It was named “Hot Corner.” The theatre was built to accommodate 800 patrons, including seating along its horseshoe-shaped balcony.<sup>39</sup>

The most modest of these second-story Opera Houses, the **Austin Theater** in Fort Valley, Georgia began its life known as Slappey’s Opera House. A Fort Valley businessman, George Slappey, announced plans in June 1916 to construct a new dry goods store in downtown Fort Valley with a community auditorium housed above. The build’s cost was originally estimated at \$8000. Similar to the design of the original Springer Opera House, the store occupied the ground floor of this new building; the second floor served as the orchestra level of the theatre house with the third floor providing a balcony area. About seven months later with a budget that had swelled to \$15,000, the new Fort Valley opera house opened. A touring theatre production inaugurated the new stage on January 3, 1917. A full house of 750 patrons attended this production of *Peg of My Heart*. Community events were also held there, including a charity Fiddler’s Convention in 1919.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Southern, "Pink Morton's Theater", 231.

<sup>40</sup> Powell, Billy. *Echoes from the Valley*. Macon, GA: Indigo Custom Pub., 2006, 119-120.

## CHAPTER 3

### AMERICAN THEATRE GOES MAINSTREAM

Adaptability was a key factor to the survival of theatres after the turn of the century. An improved economy put more money in American pockets.<sup>41</sup> As more Americans could afford to spend money on entertainment, new forms of entertainment spread throughout the United States. Two of these forever altered the landscape of American theatre as well as American towns from coast to coast. These forms were vaudeville and motion pictures. These changed Americans' minds about what it meant to go to the theatre. No longer was entertainment meant only for the socially elite. The middle class demanded access to a variety of theatrical entertainment.<sup>42</sup>

American **vaudeville** was exactly that, a form of theatre largely unique to the United States. The name itself has roots in French theatre, but connections to that form are loose at best. American vaudeville began as far back as the 1860s. An evening of vaudeville consisted of a wide variety of entertainment. This included animal acts, called "dumb acts", singers, dancers, comedians, minstrels, and even female impersonators. These types of performances were found in concert saloons originally.

Vaudeville had been born of more crude acts, but was cleaned up and commodified. Tony Pastor was an instrumental figure in this commercialization of

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<sup>41</sup> Mielziner, Jo. *The Shapes of Our Theatre*. New York, NY: Clarkson N. Potter, 1970, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Hodin, Mark. "The Disavowal of Ethnicity: Legitimate Theatre and the Social Construction of Literary Value in Turn-of-the-Century America." *Theatre Journal*, 2000, 211.



vaudeville. In fact, the birth of American vaudeville in 1881 is attributed to the opening of his own theatre that included vaudeville programs.<sup>43</sup>

The popularity of vaudeville soared and companies soon formed to handle bookings around the country. Taking advantage of the vast railroad networks that were forming across the country, these booking companies sought to book their acts around the country. They developed a stranglehold on vaudeville content and performers, ensuring palatable entertainment that appealed to average Americans. They fined or blacklisted performers that broke regulations. So dedicated were they to this new “wholesome” entertainment, that one even offered babysitting services during shows.

The vaudeville circuits made an impact on American theatre as its own unique style but it also impacted theatre design as well. Touring vaudeville programs needed to be able to make easy adjustments to every stop on their tours. Because of this, stage dimensions became more standardized. Additionally scenery became more portable for ease of changing between acts as well as transporting from city to city. Large wooden flats fell out of favor for canvas drops that could be rolled and loaded onto trains easily, but also flown in and out quickly on fly systems that were installed.<sup>44</sup>

Vaudeville reached its peak between 1890 and 1930.<sup>45</sup> It was overtaken by one of its own variety acts, motion pictures. In 1896 the projected film debuted. Early versions of films were shown as acts in vaudeville program for years and tiny screening rooms, called nickelodeons, opened for the express purpose of presenting the silent, usually plotless films. However, as the films grew from these crude forms and newsreels into a

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<sup>43</sup> Wilmeth, Don B. *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*. Cambridge [England: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 478-479.

<sup>44</sup> Morrison, *Theaters*, 20-22.

<sup>45</sup> Brockett, *History*, 332.

more story-focused media with longer running times, the opportunities to make a profit on them led to their invasion of traditional playhouses and vaudeville theatres. Since owners required fewer employees necessary to screen a show, and they owned the films outright, filling a large theatre house with patrons meant a huge rise in revenue.<sup>46</sup> This promise of a more profitable theatre set the stage for the takeover of motion pictures.

These new forms of theatre made their way into theatres across the country. A night at the theatre was more accessible than ever. Four developments occurred as a result of the embracing of this theatre for the masses. First, existing opera houses made alterations to their programming or even make significant changes to their theatre spaces to accommodate vaudeville. Second, new theatres were constructed to combine all of the forms of entertainment under one roof. Third, cities joined the theatre movement in order to provide entertainment for their communities and elevate community pride. Finally, theatre audiences expanded to African-Americans and theatres were built or altered to accommodate segregated patrons. All of these developments may be seen in historic Georgia playhouses.

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Sometimes the impact of vaudeville was merely a change in programming at Georgia opera houses. The **Morton Theatre**, in fact, is now most remembered for its days as a vaudeville theatre. While it opened as a place of high-class entertainment in line with opera houses, soon it began to present the vaudeville acts for which it is now famous. In November 1911 the first vaudeville booking was presented, “The Original

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<sup>46</sup> Morrison, *Theaters*, 22-25.

Dandy Dixie Minstrels,” which had received national press.<sup>47</sup> The vaudeville programming at the Morton included “tab” shows, which were a more polished and designed variety.<sup>48</sup> Originally designed with the African-American community in mind, the extraordinary programming made the Morton Theatre a popular attraction to occasional white patrons as well.<sup>49</sup> Famous acts such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey played the Morton Theatre stage during its heyday.<sup>50</sup>

In many cases this new form of entertainment made significant changes in the theatre buildings themselves. The most noticeable theatre alteration occurred at the **Springer Opera House** due in part to the introduction of vaudeville to its programming. In 1900 the first large-scale renovation to the Springer Opera House was undertaken to better accommodate the growing touring theatre and vaudeville business. More room was needed for stage space, more elaborate sets, areas for greater actor comfort, as well as a more comfortable audience experience. The building was largely gutted and the footprint was expanded. The theatre was no longer tucked above Springer’s store as an afterthought. Renowned theatre architect, J. B. McElfatrick, known particularly for New York City’s Grand Opera House and Knickerbocker Theatre among others, was hired to design the new Springer Opera House. He based the design of the new theatre upon his earlier design of the Empire Theatre in New York. While he left the original lobby intact, the stage itself was enlarged and reoriented. New hotel rooms surrounded this larger theatre space.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Southern, "Pink Morton's Theater", 232.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>49</sup> Fauntleroy, "Encore Performance.", 41-42.

<sup>50</sup> Southern, "Pink Morton's Theater", 242.

<sup>51</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 154.

With the addition of vaudeville stars the Springer Opera House developed an impressive list of stars gracing its stage. Over the years many nationally and internationally renowned actors, artists, and personalities entertained its patrons. These included Buffalo Bill (1875), Oscar Wilde (1881), Tom Thumb (1876 & 1883), Booker T. Washington (1895), Will Rogers (1904), John Philip Sousa (1906), Irving Berlin (1918), and Franklin D. Roosevelt (1928).<sup>52</sup>

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Many Georgia theatres were designed specifically for maximum flexibility. These were able to show the full variety of plays, vaudeville, and motion pictures. No longer hemmed by the design demands of a commercial storefront, these theatres began to express their own design ideas. Architectural styles appeared such as the Italianate and Colonial Revival. A central lobby entrance was standardized as well. Storefronts continued but as supporting businesses flanking the theatre entrances. These include the Imperial Theatre in Augusta, the Rylander Theatre in Americus, and the Grand Theatre in Cartersville.

Built in 1917 Augusta's **Imperial Theatre** was initially named the Wells Theatre and was designed by prolific architect C.K. Howell.<sup>53</sup> The Colonial Revival stone and brick building included commercial spaces that flanked its lobby. The two-story façade building was constructed first, followed by the auditorium space behind.<sup>54</sup> It was named for owner and theatre businessman, Jake Wells.<sup>55</sup> This naming convention mirrored

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<sup>52</sup> NR, Springer Opera House.

<sup>53</sup> *A History of the Imperial Theatre*. Imperial Theatre.

<sup>54</sup> Scavullo, interview.

<sup>55</sup> Deas, Mike. "Imperial Theatre's 90th Anniversary to Be Feted with Showing of 'Gone With the Wind'" *Augusta Chronicle*, February 19, 2008.

previous opera houses, which had been named for their builders and owners. The Wells was intended to serve as a venue for both live stage performance and movies.<sup>56</sup> The theatre opened, albeit briefly, on February 18, 1918. Charlie Chaplin appeared on its stage as part of a tour to raise war funds. Soon after, the outbreak of Spanish Flu and ensuing avoidance of public spaces are cited as a primary causes of its closing.<sup>57</sup> Less than nine months after opening, the 1500 seat Wells Theatre closed its doors on October 7, 1918.<sup>58</sup>

It reopened the following year as the Imperial Theatre on December 11, 1919. It changed hands again in 1939 and was owned by Augusta Amusements, which later built the Miller Theatre for motion pictures nearby. At least twelve theatres for live performances and motion pictures dotted the downtown Augusta area. In addition to films and stage performances the Imperial hosted other events including a memorial in 1924 for former President Woodrow Wilson, who had spent time in Augusta as a boy.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Scavullo, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Deas, "Imperial Theatre's 90th Anniversary" *Augusta Chronicle*.

<sup>58</sup> *A History of the Imperial Theatre*.

<sup>59</sup> Deas, "Imperial Theatre's 90th Anniversary" *Augusta Chronicle*.



Figure 5 - Imperial Theatre 1918 (as The Wells). Courtesy of the Imperial Theatre.

The **Rylander Theatre** in Americus was also constructed as a hybrid cinema-playhouse. C. K. Howell also designed the Rylander Theatre.<sup>60</sup> It was a symmetrical façade brick building with a stylized temple front located in the middle of the block on Lamar Street. It opened on January 21, 1921 with the stage production of *Lightnin'*. Tickets to this opening night production ranged from \$1 for gallery seating to \$5 for box seating. Motion pictures were shown at the Rylander a month later.<sup>61</sup>

Motion picture houses in downtown Americus were not new. The Opera House located nearby had attempted already to adapt to the coming wave of motion pictures. It

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<sup>60</sup> Gore, John. *A History of Stage and Platform in Americus, Georgia, 1854-1930*. 1983, 37.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

was faced with new competition from the new Rylander Theatre. While the Opera House had moved away from stage productions and had begun showing motion pictures only, it was hampered by the march of advancing technology. The Rylander was equipped for the new motion pictures with sound, whereas the Opera House was only able to show silent films, which it did until 1930.<sup>62</sup> The double-threat of the Rylander's stage and superior projection equipment kept it alive for decades before it closed its doors in the 1950s.<sup>63</sup>

Cartersville's Opera House, which was also a second-story type of opera house, was destroyed by fire in 1923.<sup>64</sup> On the site of this, a replacement theatre, the new **Grand Theatre** was constructed. In 1924 the theatre opened as a venue for film as well as live events on its small stage. Shorts and newsreels were also shown and even public meetings were held at the Grand. The first "talkie" debuted on May 9, 1929 and signaled a change in direction for the playhouse-cinema hybrid.<sup>65</sup> A new focus on motion picture programming soon followed, as did a facelift for which its later restoration was based. This 1930s cinema renovation will be discussed later.

Arguably the most famous theatre in Georgia, the **Fox Theatre** was also designed for both live stage events as well as motion picture screenings. The Yaarab Shrine of Atlanta first envisioned the most famous theatre in Georgia, Atlanta's Fox Theatre. Also known as "Shriners" this organization began plans for a new headquarters in 1922 when they purchased land at the intersection of what are today Ponce De Leon and Peachtree Street. They wanted the building to be a multipurpose facility to both house their offices

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<sup>62</sup> Gore, *A History of Stage and Platform in Americus*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Barrett Case, Leila. "Splendor of the Historic Rylander Theater Thrives." *Americus Scene*, July 1, 2008, 16.

<sup>64</sup> "Early Morning Fire Monday Played Havoc." *The Bartow Tribune*, November 15, 1923.

<sup>65</sup> *The Grand Theatre - Timeline*. Grand Theatre.

and meetings rooms but also supplement income with other rental spaces including a theatre space to be used for plays, concerts, and other events.

Fundraising progressed over the next three years until the Shriners reached their \$1 million goal in 1925. In order to design this versatile space they held a design competition.<sup>66</sup> An Atlanta firm, Marye, Alger and Alger, won this competition. French-born architect Ollivier Vinour was the plan mastermind. Later the changing of the firm's name to Marye, Alger and Vinour reflected his accomplishments.<sup>67</sup>

June 14, 1928 marked the laying of the cornerstone for the new Yaarab Temple Mosque. Unfortunately for the Shriners, Vinour's grand plans inspired by the Arab and Egyptian worlds quickly drained their construction funds. These were depleted within six months.<sup>68</sup>

Funding for the remaining construction was secured when Fox Film Corporation agreed to lease the space over a twenty-one year period for the sum of \$3 million. Provisions were included that allowed the Shriners to keep some of their spaces inside the building as well as opportunities to use the coming theatre. This new lease also resulted in some design alterations by Fox's own architect, C. Howard Crane. Most notably the entrance was relocated from the onion dome section along Ponce to Peachtree Street where the iconic "Fox" marquee was placed.<sup>69</sup> Commercial rental spaces surrounding the theatre were added.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Sanders, Kristi Casey. *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker*. Atlanta, Ga.: Atlanta Metropolitan Publishing, 2009, 8.

<sup>67</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*, no. 39 (2012).

<sup>68</sup> Sanders, *The Fox Theatre*, 8.

<sup>69</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.

<sup>70</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Fox Theater, Atlanta, Fulton County, Georgia, National Register #74002230.



When Atlanta's Fox Theatre finally opened on Christmas Day, 1929, theatregoers we met with a stunning sight.<sup>71</sup> The new building covered 250,000 square feet on nine different levels.<sup>72</sup> The theatre itself was 65,000 square feet.<sup>73</sup> It had a movie screen in addition to its stage, which measured 80 feet wide at the proscenium. Minarets, onion domes and masonry patterns reflecting Islamic architecture reflected a Moorish skyline. Inside the theme was carried throughout. The result was pure escapism. The embracing of this lavish style made opulence attainable to all levels of society.<sup>74</sup> Lobbies and public areas were lavishly appointed in Moorish detail. Egyptian elements abounded as well, riding the popularity of all things Egyptian triggered by the 1922 discovery of King Tut's tomb. The interior of the theatre itself resembled a Moorish courtyard with ornate plaster trim and an Arabian skyline topping the massive elaborate proscenium. Above were twinkling lights that resembled the night sky. This middle-Eastern influence was in large part due to the ritual origins of the Shriners, for whom the building had been originally built. Up to 5000 patrons could sit in the balcony, loge, or on the floor. Heating and air conditioning systems kept these patrons comfortable.<sup>75</sup>

The opening program reflected the multipurpose nature of the Fox. The two showings of this opening program included musicians (one being organ music on the world's largest Möller organ), newsreels, a dance act, the seminal Mickey Mouse cartoon, *Steamboat Willie*, and a feature film, *Salute*.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Sanders, *The Fox Theatre*, 20.

<sup>72</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.

<sup>73</sup> NR, Fox Theater.

<sup>74</sup> Naylor, David. *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981, 31.

<sup>75</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.

<sup>76</sup> Sanders, *The Fox Theatre*, 20.



Figure 6 - Fox Theatre grand opening, Christmas 1929. From *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker*, by Kristi Casey Sanders.

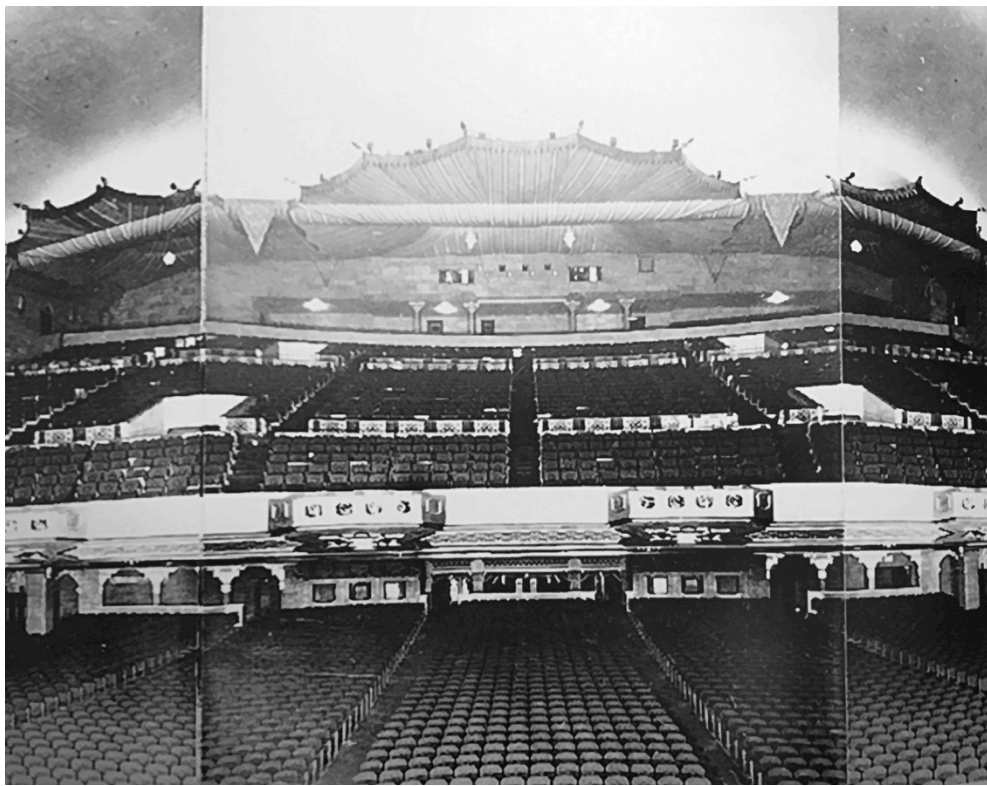


Figure 7 - Fox Theatre historic interior. From *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker*, by Kristi Casey Sanders.

Municipal governments joined the expanded theatre business as well. They wanted to indicate the town's investment in culture and the arts by constructing massive permanent municipal buildings.<sup>77</sup> Sometimes these were stand-alone auditoriums such as the Albany Municipal Auditorium, the Macon Auditorium and the Waycross City Auditorium. They were also adjoined to city office space as in Rome's City Hall and Auditorium and Hawkinsville's Old Opera House. Whatever the particular arrangement, some distinguishing characteristic can be discerned. Among Georgia's resources the most defining of these is its singular presence in the city. These buildings read as independent and massive. Unlike the majority of private theatres, which more inconspicuously blend into the commercial storefront landscape, these municipal theatres do not. Most of them are situated on a plot with noticeable setback or even large plazas. The most modest of these in Georgia, Hawkinsville's Old Opera House, is the closest to a zero-lot line, but still remains a very independent public building. As public buildings these theatre spaces also exhibit clear entranceways that were easy to identify from a distance by new patrons.

Plans to construct the **Albany Municipal Auditorium** were announced in 1915. Its construction was largely due to efforts by the Albany chapter of the Chatauqua Society.<sup>78</sup> Chatauquas were tours or organizations that developed first in 1874 in Chatauqua, New York. These delivered a Christian message in a more entertaining environment. Performers, preachers and lecturers were all be part of a day's entertainment and education.<sup>79</sup> . An older wooden structure had previously housed their activities but had been designated unsafe. The new Albany Municipal Auditorium opened

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<sup>77</sup> Condee, *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia*, 14.

<sup>78</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Municipal Auditorium, Albany, Dougherty County, Georgia, National Register #74000673.

<sup>79</sup> Condee, *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia*, 129.

on October 4, 1916 with the operetta, *The Lilac Domino*. The new building was home to seating for 1800, and its price tag was \$63,000, which was \$23,000 over the approved bonds for its construction.<sup>80</sup>

The auditorium, a three-story brick building, was designed by architect Anthony Teneycke Brown, who also designed Atlanta's Forsyth Theatre Building.<sup>81</sup> It is relatively unadorned. Minimal decoration included a marble band around the building below the roofline, brick pilasters above the entrance topped with marble stylized capitals and a small frieze, a small cartouche above this frieze, and flat metal awnings with corner acroteria, which guided patrons to the entrance.

Inside a semi-circular lobby was similarly unadorned in cream and gold paint.<sup>82</sup> The theatre house was an oval with the notably deep stage located along one of the long sides. Seating was divided into four areas, the orchestra level, a loge level above, a large balcony above that, and three boxes on each side. Suspension rods attached to the ceiling supported the balcony.<sup>83</sup> Other spaces in the building included dressing rooms and offices.<sup>84</sup>

Programming at the Albany Municipal Auditorium was varied. It included many touring acts. Al. G Fields Minstrels and Sousa's Band, who had also appeared at the Springer, made stops here.<sup>85</sup> The famous actress Sara Bernhart also appeared. In addition

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<sup>80</sup> "History." *Albany Municipal Auditorium Premiere Performance Program*, March 6, 1990, 16.

<sup>81</sup> NR Municipal Auditorium.

<sup>82</sup> NR Municipal Auditorium.

<sup>83</sup> Burnett, Roger, Events Manager, and Ken Lovelace, Technical Coordinator. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 23, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> NR Municipal Auditorium.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

to these touring acts and plays, films, and local groups filled the auditorium over the years.



Figure 8 - Albany Municipal Auditorium ca. 1920. Photo from *Vanishing Georgia*, Georgia Division of Archives and History, Office of Secretary of State (<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/vanga/>)

The **Macon Auditorium** was completed in 1925 and provides a striking example of public architecture as applied to a theatre space. This new multiuse downtown building cost over \$500,000 and was designed by New York architect Edgerton Swartwout with local Macon architecture firm Dennis and Dennis working as associate architects. This massive Greek Revival building in centered around a domed theatre space, the Great Hall, capable of holding 4000 patrons. Surrounding this space in a square configuration were smaller halls, a gallery and kitchen facilities. It boasted the largest copper-covered dome in the world, which was substituted for the original design's cost-prohibitive masonry dome. Around the perimeter of this building was an Indiana limestone Doric

colonnade supporting a weighty entablature.<sup>86</sup> The end result was an imposing Classical monument to the arts and culture of the South and Macon.<sup>87</sup> Inside the auditorium space, marble and plaster decorated the theatre. A mural depicting the story of Macon was above the proscenium. A balcony was designed to blend into the orchestra seating below. The floor of this orchestra seating was flat to allow for as many uses of the Great Hall as possible, from stage performances to automobile shows.<sup>88</sup> This building was designed to be a center of public entertainment and tourism.

Decades later the **Waycross City Auditorium** was constructed. Built in 1937 as part of the Works Progress Administration program, the city auditorium symbolized not only city, but also state and federal investment in municipal theatres and auditoriums. It was used for a variety of community entertainment. From pageants, stage productions, and even basketball games to an early Elvis concert, the Waycross City Auditorium slowly fell into disuse.<sup>89</sup> It was eventually shuttered.

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<sup>86</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Municipal Auditorium, Macon, Bibb County, Georgia, National Register #71000262.

<sup>87</sup> *Program for the 1979 Dedication of Macon's City Auditorium*. Macon, GA, GA, 1979.

<sup>88</sup> NR, Municipal Auditorium.

<sup>89</sup> Carter, Nickie. "Fashion Show At City Auditorium Perhaps Best Ever?" *Waycross Journal Herald*, November 14, 2014.



Figure 9 - Waycross City Auditorium 1937. Works Progress Administration in Georgia - photographs, 1936. MS 996. Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries.

Other city theatres were attached to city offices, bringing municipal works under one roof. Such was the case at the **Hawkinsville Old Opera House**. Its current name might be misleading as to its origins, but Hawkinsville's Old Opera house actually began its life as the Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium. In 1907 the building was commissioned. W. R. Gunn, with offices in Macon and Atlanta was hired as the architect. Architect Gunn was known for guaranteeing perfect theatre acoustics or a full refund.<sup>90</sup> It was built on an empty corner lot in downtown at Broad Street and Lumpkin Street.<sup>91</sup> The Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium was opened to the public in 1908.<sup>92</sup>

The building was a rectangular two-story brick building with another partial story concealed beneath its hipped roof in the rear. A pediment-topped arch clearly marked the entrance to this Beaux Arts inspired building. A large lobby and hall were flanked by

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<sup>90</sup> NR, Hawkinsville City Hall-Auditorium.

<sup>91</sup> According to 1906 Sanborn Map.

<sup>92</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium*. 2001 Restoration Edition ed. Hawkinsville.

municipal offices and contained a small windowed box office to the left.<sup>93</sup> Audience members continued straight ahead through a doorway into the rear of the orchestra level of the auditorium. To either side of this doorway were stairs leading to the balcony seating. Corinthian columns rose from the orchestra to support the balcony. Seating was designed to accommodate the 576 fixed folding wooden seats. A large brass medallion was above the audience and cleverly concealed a ventilation opening.<sup>94</sup>

Its stage, at 75' wide, 60' deep, and 18' high, allowed for large scenery required by touring companies. It included a central trap as well. The stage's main curtain was a canvas oil painting. The striking curtain depicted a pastoral scene surrounded by a gilded frame and billowing red curtains. The fly loft above the stage could accommodate eight separate drops.<sup>95</sup>

During the Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium's early years, it served as a home to many touring production companies. The railroads played a particularly large role in the booking and success of the auditorium. Hawkinsville was located along a line connecting Atlanta to Jacksonville and Miami. Touring companies stopped between shows in those cities. Other more local lines passed through Hawkinsville as well. This easy access to transportation made Hawkinsville a popular spot of touring companies traveling across the state. In addition, the trains provided far-flung regional audience members with quick, convenient travel into town for various productions. One train

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<sup>93</sup> Stewart, Julie, Office Manager/Production Coordinator. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 16, 2015.

<sup>94</sup> Long, Susan. "Hawkinsville's Historic Opera House Is Enjoying New Life." *Middle Georgia Magazine*, February 1, 1990, 42.

<sup>95</sup> NR, Hawkinsville City Hall-Auditorium.



company even offered special fare rates for those coming to see productions at the auditorium.<sup>96</sup>

Over the years a wide range of entertainment was booked for the auditorium. During the early years, touring companies reigned supreme here. The touring Chatauqua Assembly, played the auditorium in 1916.<sup>97</sup> Other touring productions included George M. Cohan's *The Little Millionaire* as well as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*. A more controversial production, *The Girl from Rector's* also appeared on the auditorium stage. Its depiction of questionable sexual morals raised eyebrows. A public statement in the local newspaper assured audiences it would not be offensive as reputed.<sup>98</sup> Vaudeville touring companies appeared as well. They produced evenings of variety, with singers, musicians, actors, comedians, dancers and more. These types of shows had been around since the early 1800s. One of the most famous of these, Al G. Fields Minstrel Show appeared at the auditorium. Adding unexpected diversity to the Hawkinsville stage, a German touring company produced the Oberammergau Passion Play here in 1936.<sup>99</sup>

On a larger scale in northwest Georgia, construction began on the **Rome City Hall and Auditorium** in 1915.<sup>100</sup> It was designed by architect A. Teneyck Brown.<sup>101</sup> He also designed Albany's Municipal Auditorium that year as well. After some funding delays, the building opened in 1916.<sup>102</sup> The auditorium itself debuted with a grand

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<sup>96</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium*.

<sup>97</sup> NR, Hawkinsville City Hall-Auditorium.

<sup>98</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium*.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Belzer, Jim, Facilities Manager. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 21, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Between the Rivers Historic District, Rome, Floyd County, Georgia, National Register #83000193.

<sup>102</sup> Belzer, interview.

opening performance of the musical comedy, *A Day at Coney Island*, on Thursday, September 28, 1916.<sup>103</sup>

The brick and stone Neoclassical building had a two-story rectangular building at its center. Two stone giant order Tuscan columns highlighted the two-story recessed entry, flanked by brick pilasters and topped with a small cornice. Other architectural highlights of this main section facade were elaborate pediments over first floor windows and large modillions along the roofline cornice. Attached to either side of this main building were similarly styled brick and stone one-story wings.

Inside, a large lobby was flanked by city offices and stairways to either side leading up to the balcony. Doors in the center of the lobby led inside to the auditorium's orchestra seating. The total number of seats was a staggering 1,850.<sup>104</sup> Small columns supported the sloped balcony above. This balcony also connected to the box seating. There were two boxes on either side, four in total.

Much like the Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium in the decade prior, the Rome's new auditorium building also served the community as the hub of city business. City Hall offices were located on either side of the lobby and above. These included offices for the fire department, the mayor, the tax collector, and the police department complete with jail.

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<sup>103</sup> "Grand Opening of City Auditorium (ad)." *The Rome Daily Chronicle*, September 21, 1916.

<sup>104</sup> Belzer, interview.



**Figure 10 – Rome City Hall and Auditorium 1953. Courtesy of The City of Rome.**

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The expanded audience for theatre had grown to include African-Americans in the early twentieth century. This posed issues in an America divided as “separate but equal” by Jim Crow laws. Laws separated the public along racial lines. This separation existed in all forms of public lives from schools and stores to entire areas of towns. Even after the laws changed, the custom of segregation remained. In some areas segregation even continued far beyond the change in laws. Movie theatres, in fact, struggled with desegregation into the 1960s.<sup>105</sup>

Every theatre was segregated in some way. This may have been through the overt control of entry and seating, or more implicitly. Theatre owners eager to make money off of this new market made accommodations. This resulted in segregated seating areas. These came in a variety of forms. It was sometimes divided from the white audience seats

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<sup>105</sup> Feagans, Janet. "Atlanta Theatre Segregation: A Case of Prolonged Avoidance." *Journal of Human Relations* 13, no. 1 (1965), 208.

by a barrier. Sometimes this seating was even relegated to a separate balcony. Regardless of the arrangement, African-American seating was placed in the least desirable area of the theatre. Both of these segregated seating solutions exist in historic Georgia playhouses.

The more simple barrier style existed in Cartersville's Grand Theatre, Augusta's Imperial Theatre, and Atlanta's Fox Theatre. Cartersville's **Grand Theatre** seated African-American patrons in the far back of the house. This seating was in the form of rows of benches on risers separated from the rest of the theatre by a solid half wall. The theatre itself had a steep rake, but no balcony. A dedicated vomitorium in the rear of the theatre gave African-American audience members access to these seats. Additionally there was a segregated lobby, entrance stairs and even bathrooms located below this section of seats. The segregated door on the façade still exists, and booth operators used the stairwell until they were blocked in the 2003 renovation. One white patron even recalled times in which her African-American maid took her to the theatre, entering through the segregated entrance, and passed her over the separating wall to sit with her friends in the whites-only section.<sup>106</sup>

The segregated seating area that once resided at the rear of the theatre is no longer extant. The area is used for storage and a technical booth. Risers and remains of the stairs, lobby, and restrooms remain. A wall now blocks off this area, however the half-wall that severely marked the segregation line is still highly visible.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Cox, Terri, Program Director. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 21, 2015.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 11 - Grand Theatre segregated seating barrier as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

**The Imperial Theatre** in Augusta employed a very similar design mechanism for segregated races. An external entrance on the side of the building served as the segregated entrance. A stairwell led up to the balcony. Along the way a box office window on a second landing served as the dedicated box office. After another flight of stairs, African-American patrons emerged at the rear of the balcony. At the Imperial seating was even farther removed, tucked in the rear rows of the steep balcony. A short wall towards the middle of the balcony area kept the races divided.<sup>108</sup> Today, this wall still exists, as do the stairs, entrance, and box office area. Only the half wall in the balcony is open and visible to the public. However it has been altered to allow free passage throughout the balcony.

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<sup>108</sup> Scavullo, interview.



Figure 12 - Imperial Theatre segregated seating barrier as seen today. Photograph by the author.

Atlanta's **Fox Theatre** had a similar arrangement. Black patrons were required to purchase tickets from a separate side box office. They then climbed external brick stairs to their seats in the uppermost section of the balcony. Today this stairway still exists as a fire exit.<sup>109</sup>

The Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium (the **Old Opera House**) relegated black citizens to its upper balcony, divided from the lower balcony by a half wall. They also accessed this area via a small stairway on the northern side of the building, far away from the large lobby entry to the west that whites enjoyed. A small windowed box office was located at the very top of this segregated stairway. African-American audience members entered through a short and nondescript adjacent door that opened out into the

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<sup>109</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.

very rear of the house along the uppermost rim of the upper balcony where they were required to sit. Historically only whites were allowed to sit in the lower balcony or orchestra.<sup>110</sup> One performance was a notable exception when famous gospel singer, Rosetta Tharp filled the auditorium with an African-American audience, while the few white attendees saw roles reversed and were seated in the upper balcony.<sup>111</sup>



Figure 13 - Hawkinsville Old Opera House segregated box office window as seen today.

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<sup>110</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium.*

<sup>111</sup> Long, "Hawkinsville's Historic Opera House Is Enjoying New Life.", 42.



**Figure 14 - Hawkinsville Old Opera House segregated entrance in back of balcony. Photograph by the author.**

In an even more striking division of the races many theatres seated African-Americans in a separate balcony. Examples of these can be seen in Americus's Rylander Theatre, Albany's Municipal Auditorium, Columbus's Springer Opera House, and Macon's Grand Opera House. Seating in the **Rylander Theatre** was arranged in four major areas, the orchestra seating on main floor, box seating at the corners of the balcony, balcony seating, and an upper level of gallery seating. Gallery seating was designated as "colored" seating. Though these seats were the farthest from the stage, they were at least identical to the audience seats found elsewhere in the theatre.<sup>112</sup> This was a remarkable and unique feature of the Rylander. A separate entrance and box office to right of the main entrance was designed for African-American patrons. A special hallway and stair

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<sup>112</sup> Gore, *A History of Stage and Platform in Americus*, 37.



led up to this third tier of seating. However, during productions staged by the “Chitlins” vaudeville touring circuit, this segregated seating was flipped. Targeted at African-American audiences, the booking company allowed African-Americans in the orchestra, box seating, and balcony seats, while whites were relegated to the gallery seating. Today the segregated box office is not extant, but the stairwell still exists as part of an exit-only passage.<sup>113</sup>



**Figure 15 - Rylander Theatre segregated stairwell as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Similarly African-American patrons in the **Albany Municipal Auditorium** entered through a dedicated side entrance. They climbed stairs along the house left side of the theatre to their seats in the upper balcony. Nothing remains today of this stairway.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Stanley, Heather, Managing Director. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 8, 2015.

<sup>114</sup> Burnett and Lovelace, interview.

The upper gallery of the **Springer Opera House** in Columbus, Georgia was also used for segregated African-American seating prior to integration. Seating was differentiated from the remainder of the house seats. As opposed to traditional upholstered seating, the gallery seating consisted of long benches made of light iron framing with wooden board seats and backs. A side entrance and separate stairwell led to this seating area. This gallery was not originally constructed for such a purpose, however. The simple wooden bench seating and entrance were originally used for patrons' carriage drivers. They put their horses and carriages in the livery stable adjacent and then sneak up the narrow passage to the upper gallery. This ensured that patrons made timely departures upon the closing of the production.



**Figure 16 - Springer Opera House gallery seating as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

The massive “peanut gallery” of Macon’s **Grand Opera House** had similarly been designed to hold over 1,000 lower-class white citizens.<sup>115</sup> Over time, this became the segregated seating area for African-Americans. An external box office and stairway led to the upper balcony level of the theatre. Hidden from practically all white patrons below, African-American theatregoers were virtually invisible. Today the “peanut

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<sup>115</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

gallery” still exists with its wooden pews solidly intact. This balcony has been blocked away from audiences; a large technical booth now rests in the center front rows.



**Figure 17 - Macon Grand Opera House "peanut gallery" as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

The existence of the Douglass Theatre also in Macon may be attributed to the Grand Opera House’s segregated seating. African-American Charles Douglass had attended a performance at the Opera House and was instructed to sit in the upper balcony during a performance. His wife had difficulty climbing into the “peanut gallery.” Douglass decided to build his own theatre, to be named the Douglass Theatre, where this indignation would not occur.<sup>116</sup>

African-American patrons received a more dignified theatre experience during this expanded audience era of American Theatre, at least from within their own theatres’

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<sup>116</sup> Mavity, interview.

walls. “Pink” Morton had built his own African-American opera house, the Morton Theatre, and other African-American hybrid cinema-playhouse theatres were launched as well. Examples of these are the aforementioned Douglass Theatre in Macon and the Liberty Theatre in Columbus.

Much as Morton had done, Charles H. Douglass built his own African-American theatre in Macon. **The Douglass Theatre** opened in 1921 for both vaudeville acts and motion pictures. Mr. Douglass had built two smaller theatres in Macon prior to this, but the new Douglass Theatre was a larger, more advanced space. Seating ranged from 750 to 800. The interior was decorated with Nubian masks along the balcony, acknowledging African heritage, while its exterior was in a more common Classical Revival style.<sup>117</sup> This allowed patrons to celebrate their heritage inside the theatre while the outside conformed to the acceptable cityscape.

Letters between the Douglass and the Theatre Owners Booking Association, a company that booked African-American vaudeville acts reflected a wide variety of entertainment at the Douglass Theatre. These offer a look at some of the programming of a small city African-American vaudeville theatre. One from December 15, 1924 described vaudeville bookings and a potential play production:

Dear Mr. Douglass --

As you know, from my wire of today, you are booked with the following for next week --

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<sup>117</sup> Cyriaque, Jeanne. "The Douglass Theatre Celebrates 90 Years: A Hidden Treasure No More." *Reflections*, May 1, 2012, 1.

Miss Marie Boatner and partner, salary \$85.00. DeWayman Niles, one of the best Acrobats in the business, salary \$45.00, and, Doorkey Singleton, a good eccentric dancer, salary \$45.00.

You will notice that this only gives you one girl, and on account of next week being Christmas week, I believe [sic] it would be advisable to add a fourth Act. However, if you cannot use but three, wire me upon the receipt of this letter, and I will cancel Doorkey and substitute a team, but will wait until I hear from you, before securing a team.

These three Acts will come to you from the Eighty-One Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia.

For the week of December 29th, you are booked with the Mae Wilson "BROWN BEAUTIES" ten people, and will come to you from the Brooklyn Theatre, Wilmington, N. C. salary \$300.00 Kindly place tickets in care of Jesse Cobb, Manager of the show.

For the week of January [sic] 5th, can give you the LaFayette Players, in their new production "THE UNBORN". You know all the details about this play from my previous letter, and you also know the merits of this Company. This show will play Atlanta two weeks, opening December 22nd and 29th, and you can place 8 tickets to C. H. Moore, Crystal Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.<sup>118</sup>

Other entertainment at the Douglass included illusionists, religious plays, Native American vaudeville acts and event boxing events. Motion pictures also played a large

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<sup>118</sup> Available at *The Blues, Black Vaudeville and the Silver Screen, 1912-1930s: Selections from the Records of Macon's Douglass Theatre* database (<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/douglass/dbr062.php>).

part of the Douglass Theatre's original programming. These included serials as well as full-length feature films. These included silent films as well as those with sound, including the first of its kind, *The Jazz Singer*.



Figure 18 - Douglass Theatre 1925. From *Macon's Black Heritage: The Untold Story* by Catherine Meeks.

In Columbus, white Martin Theatre chain owner Roy E. Martin built the **Liberty Theatre** in 1925. It was designed to be both an African-American movie theater as well as a performing arts center.<sup>119</sup> Reasoning behind its construction is unclear. Martin may have simply realized that money was to be made in African-American entertainment market. More compassionate reasoning suggests that white supporters of the arts thought that African-Americans should have their own performing arts facility. Pressures from nearby Ft. Benning might also have been a factor.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sumbry, Josiah. "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater." *Columbus Sunday Ledger-Enquirer*, July 1, 1984, Comings and Goings sec.

<sup>120</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Liberty Theater, Columbus, Muscogee County, Georgia, National Register #84001208.

It was a modest brick building. The inside was similarly sparse with no grand design characteristics as seen at the Douglass.<sup>121</sup> As the only theatre and performing arts center in Columbus, it sat about 550.<sup>122</sup> In addition to movies, stage entertainment such as vaudeville shows and minstrel acts played the Liberty. As part of the “Chitlin Circuit” booking service the Liberty hosted many African-American touring acts.<sup>123</sup> Acts included Columbus natives Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.<sup>124</sup> Even the great Jackie Robinson delivered a speech there. In an interesting turn, the popularity of such programming led to some seats being reserved for white patrons.<sup>125</sup>

In 1955 a remodeling project updated the look of the Liberty, which remained the Martin Theatre chain’s sole African-American theatre. The façade was given a facelift, adding a new marquee, glass tiles, and other accents. Inside, the lobby was renovated, acoustic curtains were added, and windows were blocked. The Liberty managed to remain economically viable for almost two additional decades, closing in 1973.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> NR, Liberty Theater.

<sup>122</sup> Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater."

<sup>123</sup> Cyriaque, Jeanne. "African American Theatres in Georgia." *Reflections*, May 1, 2001, 5.

<sup>124</sup> Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater."

<sup>125</sup> NR, Liberty Theater.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.





Figure 19 - Douglass Theatre ca. 1950s. Photo from *Vanishing Georgia*, Georgia Division of Archives and History, Office of Secretary of State (<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/vanga/>)

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As the popularity of motion pictures soared, arguably spurred as much by movie exhibitors as the interest of the general public, live theatre was relegated to supporting roles. The profitability of motion pictures proved difficult to ignore, and the American public saw the motion picture as an advancement of the country's entertainment, viewing theatre as passé.<sup>127</sup> The design for theatres showing motion pictures experienced change as well. The ornament and decoration that had been embraced during American theatre's opera house and even early movie palace years began to disappear as theatres focused on their motion picture programming.<sup>128</sup> New features were added to accompany the reinvention of theatres into cinemas. These included eye-catching lighted marquees. Box

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<sup>127</sup> Naylor, *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, 35.

<sup>128</sup> Morrison, *Theaters*, 266.

seats were often removed or covered. Projection booths took over large sections of balconies as well. These reinventions sometimes resulted in the loss of a theatre's original design.<sup>129</sup> The wide variety of changes that occurred in this shift toward motion picture programming may be seen across the landscape of historic Georgia playhouses.

The most significant change in a theatre's designed occurred at Fort Valley's **Austin Theatre**. After the original owner, George Slappey, died in 1934 the theatre formerly known as Slappey's Opera House was purchased by the Martin-Thompson theatre chain. It is unclear what alterations were made to the theatre while it was owned by this Georgia-based movie theatre chain. A few years later, however, drastic changes were made to the Austin. Two men from Columbus purchased it on January 28, 1938. Extensive changes were made to the theatre including the removal of the store from the ground floor and making the theatre occupy the entire building. The orchestra seating and stage were then located to the ground level much in the way the Springer too was renovated to relocate its main theatre area. The original orchestra level on the second floor then contained the balcony. Seating capacity was greater than before at between 800 and 850. The remains of the third floor housed the projection booth. It reopened about nine months later in October 1938. The new interior was not the only difference. It was also renamed the Peach Theater with lighted marquee announcing its new name. The Peach Theater operated until the early 1970s.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Naylor, *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, 35.

<sup>130</sup> Powell, *Echoes from the Valley*, 121.

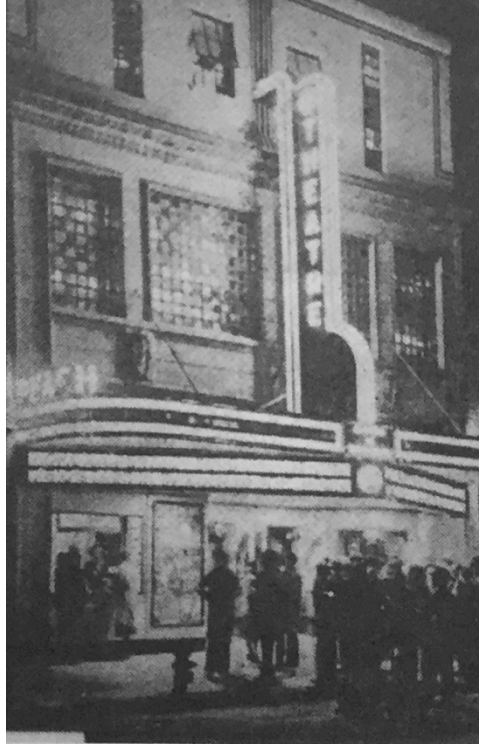


Figure 20 - Austin Theatre 1938 grand re-opening (as the Peach Theatre). Photograph from *Echoes from the Valley* by Billy Powell.

The **Grand Opera House** in Macon also received a physical makeover as a motion picture theatre. Renamed “The Grand” it was converted into a cinema around 1930. Changes include the covering of the orchestra pit. The Grand fell out of use as a motion picture theatre by the early 1960s.<sup>131</sup>

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Sometimes the shift to cinema was more subtle. This was the case at several historic Georgia theatres including the Hawkinsville **Old Opera House**. In the 1940s it became the city’s cinema when the Thompson Theatre, built as a motion picture theater burned.<sup>132</sup> The auditorium became its surrogate and showed typical motion picture

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<sup>131</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

<sup>132</sup> Long, "Hawkinsville's Historic Opera House Is Enjoying New Life.", 41.

presentations, including multiple different movies per week as well as serials and newsreels.<sup>133</sup>

Prior to signing a contract to show motion pictures in 1915, the **Springer Opera House** in Columbus had shown some of Edison's Vitascope films. As with theatres across the country, live theatre programming at the Springer gave way to more and more film showings. Ethel Barrymore's *The Love Duel* by Lili Hatvany, a national tour aimed at the heyday of the stage touring companies was ironically the final major stage production at the Springer in 1931.<sup>134</sup> The Martin Theatre Chain eventually acquired the theatre. Occasional concerts and local programming accompanied the Springer's film schedule until it closed in 1958.<sup>135</sup>

The **Morton Theatre** in Athens experienced a similar significant programming shift. As interest in motion pictures grew and vaudeville declined, the Morton added motion pictures to its programming. Silent films had played the Morton alongside vaudeville acts, but it too moved to motion pictures for its dominant programming. During the 1930s, while some artists occasionally performed on its stage, including Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, it was nevertheless known as a black *movie* theatre.<sup>136</sup> The **Rylander Theatre** in Americus similarly shifted its programming. By the 1930s live stage events had all but disappeared from its stage.<sup>137</sup> It continued to show films until the 1950s.

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<sup>133</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium*.

<sup>134</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 155.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>136</sup> Southern, "Pink Morton's Theater", 243.

<sup>137</sup> Gore, *A History of Stage and Platform in Americus*, 40.

Augusta's **Imperial Theatre** converted to a full-time motion picture theater in 1929 and managed to keep its doors open longer than others. In the years that followed a variety of facelifts occurred to keep the converted movie theatre contemporary. In the 1950s a major overhaul gave the interior a new look, including new seating and additional facilities such as a concession stand. Another renovation in the 1960s also gave the lobby and house new looks. New marquees updated the front of the theatre over the years as well. It remained a popular cinema until dwindling receipts led to its closing on September 22, 1981.<sup>138</sup>



Figure 21 - Imperial Theatre 1927. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.

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<sup>138</sup> *A History of the Imperial Theatre.*



Figure 22 - Imperial Theatre 1933. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.



Figure 23 - Imperial Theatre 1939. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.



Figure 24 - Imperial Theatre 1947. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.



Figure 25 - Imperial Theatre 1954. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.



Figure 26 - Imperial Theatre 1966. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.

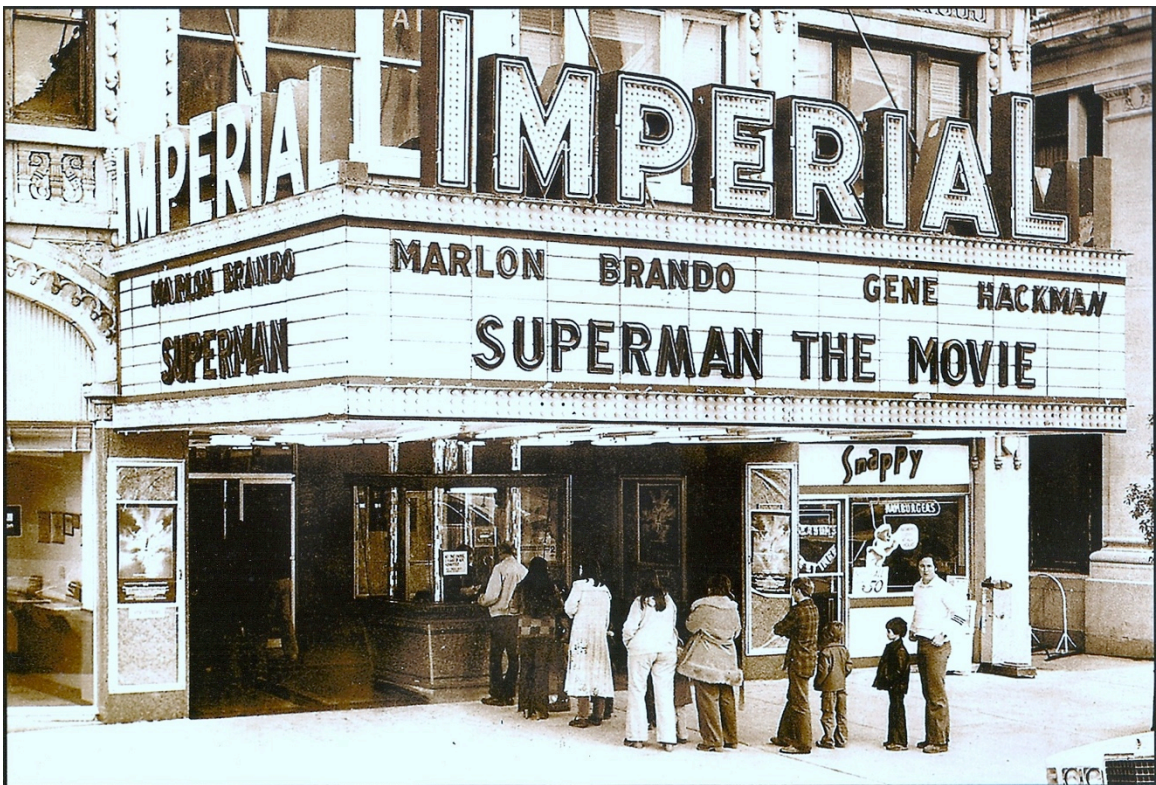


Figure 27 - Imperial Theatre 1978. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.





Figure 28 - Imperial Theatre 1979. Courtesy of Imperial Theatre.

Atlanta's **Fox Theatre** had continued into the 1970s showing motion pictures. However, as residents flocked to the suburbs, the Fox, which had previously been home to a variety of entertainment and movie premieres, was often reduced to less prestigious entertainment including "Blaxploitation" films.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.



Figure 29 - Fox Theatre showing a second-run film in 1973. From *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker*, by Kristi Casey Sanders.

Cartersville's **Grand Theatre** made the shift in programming to primarily motion pictures around 1928.<sup>140</sup> This shift began as a subtle move but triggered a renovation in 1930. A new Beaux Arts-inspired façade was added.<sup>141</sup> The lobby entrance was also altered. A more recessed entry was bisected by a central box office with doors along either side.<sup>142</sup> The stage was used occasionally but it remained in operation as a movie theater for several decades.<sup>143</sup> During this time it changed hands and became part of the

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<sup>140</sup> "'Ain't It Grand!' This Weekend Will Showcase Cartersville Theater's History." *The Daily Tribune News*, October 18, 2006.

<sup>141</sup> *The Grand Theatre - Timeline*.

<sup>142</sup> Cox, interview.

<sup>143</sup> "'Ain't It Grand!' This Weekend Will Showcase Cartersville Theater's History."

Martin Theatre chain. It eventually closed in the summer of 1977 with the showing of the film *Silver Streak*.<sup>144</sup>

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Aside from the most damaging blow, the development of the motion picture industry, a multitude of other developments led to the decline of the business of stage theatre. Safety laws, triggered by events such as the fire at the Iroquois, discouraged second story theatres. The automobile also provided access to entertainment further afield but also entertainment in the driving experience itself. Radio and phonographs grew in popularity as well, capturing entertainment dollars. High school gymnasiums and auditoriums also refocused the attention of the community away from the opera house by providing other venues and forms of entertainment. Due to increased booking prices and diminished quality, by the 1930s, the touring stage companies were significantly reduced.<sup>145</sup> Larger cities often remained as stops for these companies, but the smaller cities that had once been a vital part of their business were left out of touring plans. Smaller towns in particular suffered a huge loss of theatre exposure as a consequence. As a reaction to this loss the Little Theatre and University Theatre movements were formed. In order to provide theatrical culture and training to their communities, organizations including land-grant universities began their own theatre departments. These university theatres assumed this vital step in continuing the heritage of American theatre. The design of these theatre facilities was unique. While facilities first mimicked large theatres, they soon found these spaces to be unwieldy and opted for a different approach. The ideal design concept of these theatres became one of flexibility. Instead of simply

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<sup>144</sup> *The Grand Theatre - Timeline*.

<sup>145</sup> Condee, *Coal and Culture Opera Houses in Appalachia*, 154-156.

housing one large theatre, these organizations often opted for a large building that was able to accommodate multiple uses. Typically multiple smaller theatres were housed in addition to classrooms, studios, and offices. Under one roof, these organizations could provide a multitude of programs, while also providing outreach to the future of American theatre artisans.<sup>146</sup>

Early in this movement to engender greater interest in the arts on collegiate campuses, the **Russell Auditorium** was constructed on the campus of Georgia College and University, then Georgia State College for Women, in Milledgeville. In 1926 Russell Auditorium and Arts Hall was constructed to replace a previous auditorium space that had burned two years prior. This brick Classical Revival building housed a theatre and supporting offices and classrooms.<sup>147</sup> The classical interior featured tray ceilings and elaborate classical trim, including corner arches that resembled balconies and held the auditorium's organ pipes. This theatre provided a range of stage performances for the campus and Milledgeville community from pageants to an appearance by Bob Hope.<sup>148</sup>

In Athens however, a prime example of this type of theatre architecture stands on the campus of the University of Georgia. In 1941 the **Fine Arts Theatre** was constructed as a space inside the university's Fine Arts Building.<sup>149</sup> This was constructed by the Public Works Administration. The PWA was a federal organization established to create jobs with the construction of public roads, structures, and buildings. The Fine Arts

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<sup>146</sup> Mullin, Donald C. *The Development of the Playhouse; a Survey of Theatre Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, 153-155.

<sup>147</sup> Wilson, Bob, Georgia College & University Historian, " RE: Russell Auditorium," Private e-mail message to author, February 23, 2015.

<sup>148</sup> Bergeron, Keith, Building Manager. Interview with author. Tape recording. February 14, 2015.

<sup>149</sup> "A New Georgia Theatre." *Theatre Arts*, 1940, 534.

Building was constructed as a home to all the three fine arts departments, drama, music, and art. Prolific Georgia theatre firm, Howell and Tucker, based in Atlanta, designed it.<sup>150</sup> Other work included the Rylander, the Imperial and Savannah's Lucas Theatre, which opened as a cinema, but added a small stage a few years later. It was also the most expensive building ever built on the university campus at the time, totaling \$450,000.<sup>151</sup>

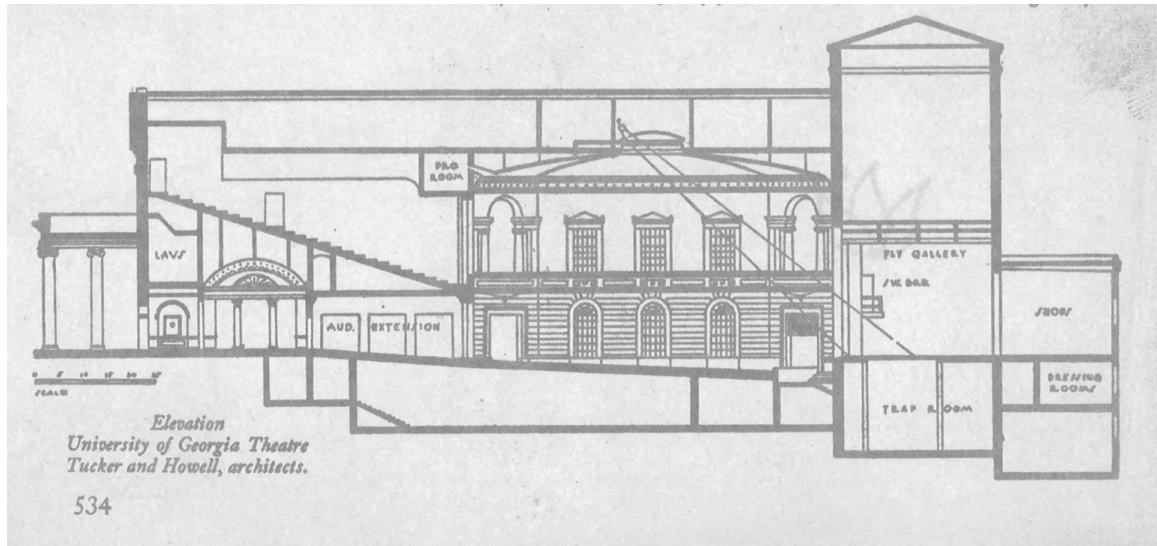


Figure 30 – Fine Arts Building section. From *Theatre Arts*, 1940,

The Fine Arts Building was constructed as a T-shaped brick building in the Beaux Arts style. Recalling the look of a public building, the façade was Palladian in design. A central, dominant section was fronted by a two-story portico with limestone columns topped by Doric capitals and rising from Temple of Ilissus bases. Three sets of doors led in to a foyer and lobby area. Above these doors, artist-in-residence Jean Charlot painted a mural depicting the three departments housed.

<sup>150</sup> "A New Georgia Theatre.", 535.

<sup>151</sup> "New \$450,000 Fine Arts Building To Be Dedicated May 31." *Georgia Alumni Record*, May 1, 1941, 164.

graphed on kodachrome at the angle of projection. The projections were clear and unusual changes of mood were obtained by playing a three-circuit set of strip-lights directly on the mages.

COSTUME design has been made to serve as an extra-curricular medium at the Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, High school, for correlating art, history and drama in the backstage workshops. Alberta Johnson acts as coordinator with the goal of teaching her students to express the play rather than themselves in their designs. Miss Johnson buys the fabrics for the entire production with the single characters and their groupings in mind and with due consideration for color, texture and pattern. Students do the research through books, museums, the theatre and their own surroundings. Bulletin boards crowded with first quick

background for the annual Shakespearean plays.

EARL PARDOE at Brigham Young University has been experimenting with the management of his lights and sound entirely from the back of the auditorium. With his electrician and sound technician, he directs all plays from the rear with perfect light and sound cues, and he commends the method to all ambitious directors.

ALLEGHENY COLLEGE at Meadville, Pennsylvania, celebrates a 10th anniversary of the Department of Dramatic Art, with extensive additions to the theatre and its equipment. As in many of the newer or reorganized theatre plants, there are now not only two stages, a workshop, costume room and theatre library, but a studio and control room for radio plays. The theatre company offers both long

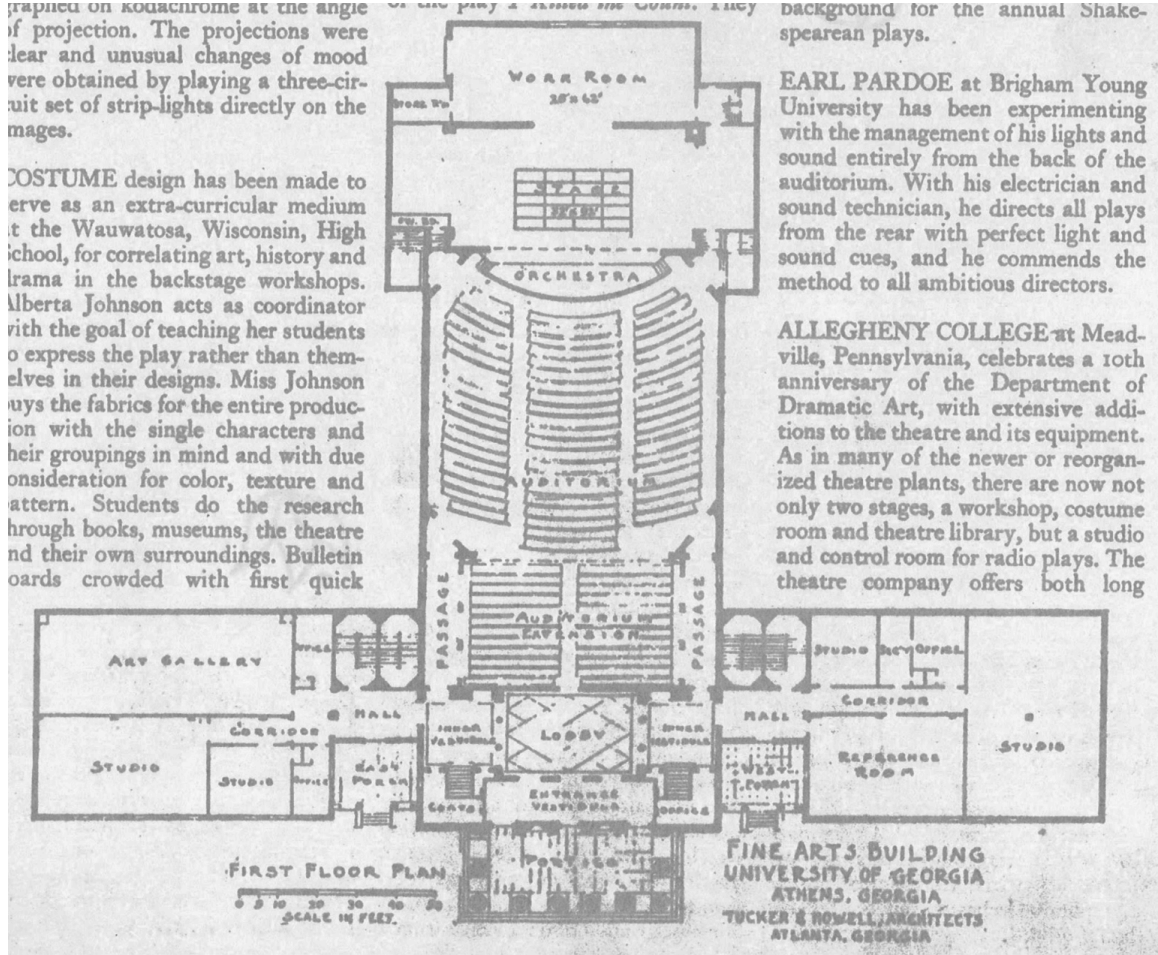


Figure 31 - Fine Arts Building main floor plan. From *Theatre Arts*, 1940,

To either side of this central section were large two story rectangular wings. The facades of these are lined with large metal casement windows. Between these wings and the central section were recessed hyphens. These included additional entrances covered by single story porches. Above the doors here were murals reflecting the department housed in each particular wing. A mural reflecting the art department was in the eastern hyphen, while one reflecting the music department was located in the western hyphen.

The drama department was housed in the center and rear wing of this T-shaped plan. This section reflected the common practice that developed after the decline of touring companies. In addition to studios, practice rooms, galleries, offices and

classrooms, there were multiple theatres housed under one roof. The smallest theatre was the Arena Theatre. The appropriately named Cellar Theatre located in the basement was larger and could hold approximately 100 patrons. Located behind the main entrance and lobby the massive Fine Arts Theatre was the building's showpiece. This classically designed interior was octagonal in nature with box features in the four corners at a second story height. It held 1800. This included seating in the orchestra as well as a balcony. The balcony itself could be closed off to accommodate smaller productions.<sup>152</sup> Above the balcony was a projection booth as well.<sup>153</sup> These practices further highlight the versatility and multiuse nature of theatres constructed for this purpose, particularly those in a university setting.



**Figure 32 – Fine Arts Building façade ca. 1940s-1950s. Courtesy of the UGA Department of Theatre & Film Studies.**

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<sup>152</sup> "New \$450,000 Fine Arts Building To Be Dedicated May 31.", 164-166.

<sup>153</sup> "A New Georgia Theatre.", 534.



Figure 33 – Fine Arts Theatre view towards stage from the balcony. Photograph from *Georgia Alumni Record*, May 1941.

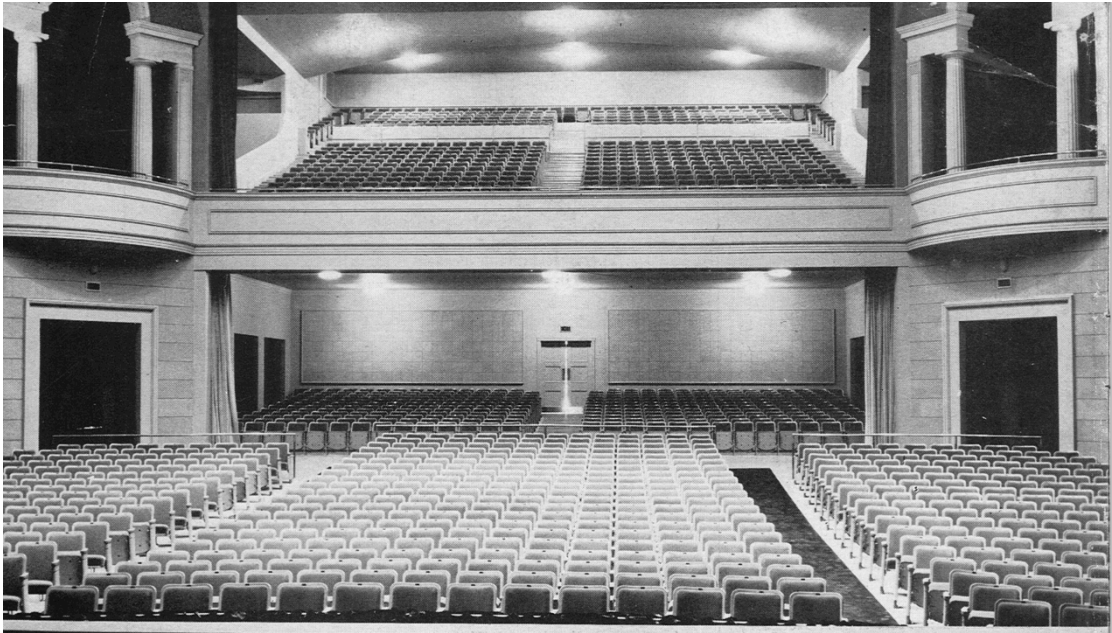


Figure 34 - Fine Arts Theatre view towards the balcony from the stage. Photograph from *Georgia Alumni Record*, May 1941.



## CHAPTER 4

### SILENT STAGES AWAKEN

Community involvement was a key factor to the survival of historic Georgia theatres. American theatres were public institutions regardless of their ownership. Theatres were symbols of communities even if private individuals owned them. The stories of their revival reflect this public ownership. Without public support these theatres would have remained shuttered.

Several factors led to the vacancy of American theatres. The physical design of stage theatres was not always conducive to conversion in movie houses. Box seats and horseshoe balconies found in many of these theatres were especially problematic. Also, the flourishing of the television industry provided Americans with easy access to entertainment from the comfort of their own homes.<sup>154</sup> The location of these homes also spelled trouble for theatres. Widespread automobile transportation allowed the public to live farther outside of city downtowns. As homes spread to the new world of suburbs, so did businesses. Downtowns were no longer the unrivaled focal points of communities. The theatres that had previously thrived in these downtowns had fewer and fewer potential audience members. As downtowns experienced this change, theatres often found themselves in the crosshairs of developers and property owners looking to take advantage of the changing downtown landscape. Some theatres survived with few or no dark days. However, many that survived the wrecking ball faced extended periods of

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<sup>154</sup> Morrison, *Theaters*, 351-352.

vacancy. With this vacancy came damage and neglect. Across the historic Georgia playhouses we can see the range of danger and risk these theatres faced.

The theatres that survived did so due to a variety of forces. In some cases local citizens banded together to save their theatres, once symbols of their community. In other cases, municipal governments took the initiative with public backing to save the buildings for their communities. Non-profit organizations also rallied support to keep these theatres intact and breathe new life into them. They all recognized the deep history of these venues and understood the importance of these institutions in the fabric of their communities. These theatres watched as the towns grew and changed. This sense of continuity would not exist in a newly constructed theatre. Thanks to all of these types of support for preservation, historic Georgia playhouses have been passed down through the generations. Such is the story of American preservation on the whole. Community activism and support is essential to the preservation of places of importance to the public. These places may be important on a national scale, or as these theatres prove, they may be important keystones to an entire town or community.

Citizen-led activism played lead roles in the revival of Columbus's Springer Opera House, Macon's Grand Opera House, Macon's Douglass Theatre, Athens's Morton Theatre, Columbus's Liberty Theatre, Atlanta's Fox Theatre, Cartersville's Grand Theatre, and Hawkinsville's Old Opera House. Local citizens formed the Springer Board of Trustees in 1964. Threats to demolish the **Springer Opera House** had swirled around the then-vacant theatre. This committee succeeded in purchasing the building from the owner.<sup>155</sup> Attempts to reopen the Springer Opera House had already failed in

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<sup>155</sup> NR, Springer Opera House.

1961 and 1963 by Columbus Little Theatre and Columbus Arts Council respectively. When the doors did finally open in 1965, its new debut was comparatively modest. The repairs had resulted in a useable but far from well-appointed space for theatrical productions. Some of this basic work included new orchestra seats, new roof, repaired plaster ceiling, and features that met new safety requirements. These new safety requirements, in addition to a substantial projection booth prevented the balcony from being used. A grand drape was hung and rudimentary stage lighting completed this basic package. Some other notable work during this time included converting the house gas lighting to electric but retaining original globes and as much of the fixtures as possible. Primarily concerned with interior work, the 1965 renovation also removed a metal marquee from the front of the theatre that had been relocated from a nearby cinema, the Grand Theatre.

Removal of a 1900 addition, a brick and wooden marquee on the theatre's façade was the first significant exterior work to be done on the Springer. In 1971 this featured was removed. A wrought iron balcony and canopy took its place.<sup>156</sup> The work received accolades from the Society of American Travel Writers who attributed the successful renovation solely to the people of Columbus.<sup>157</sup>

Another interior renovation occurred in 1984, adding steel beams to the building's structure. This allowed for office space, a library, and technical storage.<sup>158</sup> The most large-scale renovation work in the Springer's history took place beginning in 1997. Funding of this renovation began when the Bradley-Turner Foundation announced a

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<sup>156</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 328.

<sup>157</sup> NR, Springer Opera House.

<sup>158</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 328.

challenge grant. They donated \$25 million to a group of eight arts-affiliated Columbus organizations. The Springer Opera House, along with the Liberty Theatre were to be among the beneficiaries. Columbus donors far surpassed this matching challenge grant. The final total of the funds raised was \$102 million.<sup>159</sup> Their portion of these funds plus a donation from long-time benefactor and Coca-Cola heiress, Emily Woodruff established funding for the massive restoration.<sup>160</sup>

The late-90s restoration work sought to fully bring back the 1901 Edwardian design of the Opera House. Work was estimated at \$11 million. When this restoration began, the restoration architects undertook intense investigation in order to trace the Springer's past wallpaper and paint work. They successfully uncovered lost wallpaper designs, paint colors, and paint detail. With a clear idea in mind of what the theatre would have looked like over time, they settled on the 1901 appearance and began a complete renovation. This included interior design work by famed interior restoration designer Reneau de Beauchamp.<sup>161</sup>

The lobby was restored to its Edwardian splendor, as was the botanical-influenced trim that traced along walls, ceiling areas, and around the proscenium. A balcony lobby was added, removing the previous narrow hallways designed to keep the classes segregated in the original design.<sup>162</sup> Work also provided significant upgrades behind the scenes. This included many technical upgrades, electrical rewiring, and new dressing

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<sup>159</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 329.

<sup>160</sup> Pierce, Paul, Producing Artistic Director. Interview with author. Tape recording. January 9, 2015.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

rooms. A larger, improved orchestra pit was added.<sup>163</sup> Additionally, new construction adjacent provided a studio and reception area. Completed on January 9, 1999, the entire process took only about one year to complete.<sup>164</sup> The theatre now seats 720 audience members, 463 in the orchestra and boxes and 234 in the lower balcony. The upper balcony is used only for the lighting and sound booth, though the original wood and iron benches remain.<sup>165</sup>



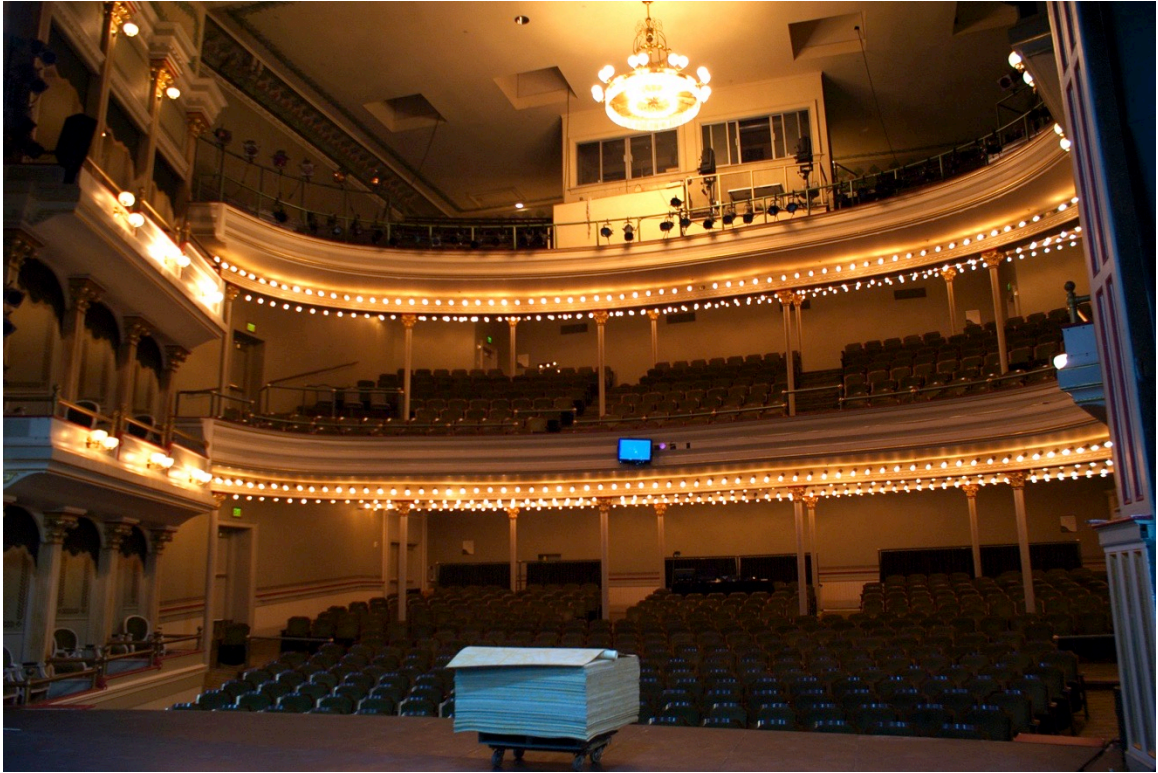
**Figure 35 - Springer Opera House view of the stage from rear orchestra as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

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<sup>163</sup> Lampert-Greaux, Ellen. "Polishing a Georgia Peach; the Springer Opera House." *Entertainment Design Magazine*, September 1, 2000, 20.

<sup>164</sup> Clason, *In Order of Appearance*, 329-330.

<sup>165</sup> Lampert-Greaux, "Polishing a Georgia Peach; the Springer Opera House.", 20.



**Figure 36 - Springer Opera House view from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Demolition threatened Macon's **Grand Opera House** in the late 1960s as well. A non-profit group formed called Macon Arts Council, Inc., led by its president, Val Sheridan, to save the theatre from this fate. They submitted a plan to restore the theatre, which was approved in April 1968 by the Bibb County Commission. Local donors helped to fund the work. Macon Arts Council member, architect Mrs. Ellamae Ellis League designed the restoration work.<sup>166</sup> The work sought to return the theatre to its 1905 glory, converting it back to a live performance venue from a stint as a motion picture theater. In addition to restoring what had been lost, altered or damaged over the years, modern theatre technology was also incorporated. New padded seating and technical upgrades

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<sup>166</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

were added. It reopened April 6, 1970.<sup>167</sup> The theatre was added to the National Register later that year.

Over the years ongoing updates and restorations took place, including updated seating. More of this work was undertaken after Macon's Mercer University leased the Grand from the local government. This lease was largely symbolic, costing Mercer only \$1 per year. The agreement held that the municipal government was charged with the building's exterior, while Mercer was responsible with interior renovations and maintenance. Work included new electrical systems and updated décor and finishing. In 2005, the outgoing Mercer University president made the restoration of the Grand Opera House part of his final legacy. Federal and local grants funded this large-scale renovation. Work included research to discover the theatre's original interior design scheme. A striking new paint job followed.<sup>168</sup> The problematic stage floor was replaced and additional HVAC units were installed.<sup>169</sup> Twinkling stars much like those in the Fox Theatre were added to the painted sky on the Grand's ceiling.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> NR, Grand Opera House.

<sup>168</sup> Mavity, interview.

<sup>169</sup> Fain, Travis. "121-Year-Old Building Getting a \$1M Summer Makeover - Making the Opera House Even More Grand." *The Macon Telegraph*, June 3, 2005.

<sup>170</sup> Mavity, interview.



Figure 37 – Macon Grand Opera House side elevation as seen today. Photograph by the author.



Figure 38 – Macon Grand Opera House façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.

While vacant, the **Douglass Theatre** in Macon, a 1911 African-American theatre, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Its doors had closed in 1972, but in



1974 it was included in the Macon Historic District as a contributing resource.<sup>171</sup> Threats to demolish Macon's Douglass Theatre led a group of citizens to take a stand for the empty theatre. Georgia's Historic Preservation Division was integral to the theatre's future. A former state congressman first reached out to them for help and in 1979 they awarded the Douglass Theatre a Historic Preservation Fund grant. This grant was used to complete the first steps of reactivating the property, evaluating the condition of the building. Stabilization efforts followed. Over many years the theatre sat empty, but the City of Macon looked for funding options.

In 1997 Macon's Douglass Theatre reopened its doors. With its African design elements intact, it was once again the advanced theatre it had been born to be. Technical enhancements included the ability to screen IMAX films. Additional spaces were also added to the theatre during this time.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Cyriaque, "The Douglass Theatre Celebrates 90 Years", 1.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 2.



Figure 39 - Douglass Theatre façade as seen today. Photo from the Macon Film Guild website (<http://www.maconfilmguild.org/history.html>)



Figure 40 - Douglass Theatre interior as seen today. Photograph from Charles R. Sheridan & Co. General Contractors website (<http://www.chrissheridan.com/douglasstheatre.html>)

The restoration of the Morton Theatre in Athens was made possible through a public partnership with a non-profit corporation. After a small fire in the projection booth in 1954, the fire marshal determined that one small egress was insufficient for fire safety regulations.<sup>173</sup> The theatre's doors closed, although the commercial spaces remained in use. As early as 1973 preservation efforts began from the private sector. Bond Properties owner John T. Bond purchased the building and intended to restore the vacant theatre space. Funding issues prevented his plans from coming to fruition, but new hope arrived in 1978.<sup>174</sup>

The Director of Athens-Clarke Cultural Affairs Office began to increase awareness and interest in the theatre's restoration. The Morton Theatre Corporation formed as a non-profit. With support from government and community funds the Morton Theatre Corporation purchased the building in 1980 and began fundraising efforts for the restoration.

Structural issues were the first to be addressed in the renovation process. Restoration architects Frontier Contracting added steel reinforcement to the building. The theatre's rare post and timber roof remained in remarkably good condition in spite of heavy rain infiltration issues. The pressed-metal ceiling that had been added nearly a decade after opening did not fare as well, but with elements from the closed Coca-Cola Bottleworks facility, the ceiling was repaired. Columns beneath the balcony had not

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<sup>173</sup> Green, Lynn Battle. E-mail message to author, March 2, 2015.

<sup>174</sup> Flurry, Amy Williams. "Show Time at the Morton." *Athens Magazine*, February 1, 1994, 18.

matched originally, but the restoration kept these mismatched features intact. Only the stage floor was completely rebuilt, having fallen into the floors below during vacancy.<sup>175</sup>

Reagan-era federal policy dealt a damaging blow to the Morton's in-progress restoration. The cuts in federal funding sources stalled the work. Fundraising efforts by the Morton Theatre Company were unable to fulfill the nearly \$2 million needed for restoration costs. The city partnered with the non-profit to help secure the funding. This was accomplished through 1987 SPLOST legislation, which assessed four cents over four years. In addition to restoration funds, this income provided for full time staffing of the theatre.

Once the funds were raised, restoration efforts were once again engaged. Seating capacity after the renovation was 550 and included complete ADA compliance. The Morton seating was an example of another historic property supplying essential pieces. Most of the Morton's seating had been removed or damaged, so historic seating was brought in from a turn of the century theatre in Ohio, which explains why the iron end caps of the seats are emblazoned with an "O."<sup>176</sup> The Morton Theatre opened once again in 1993.

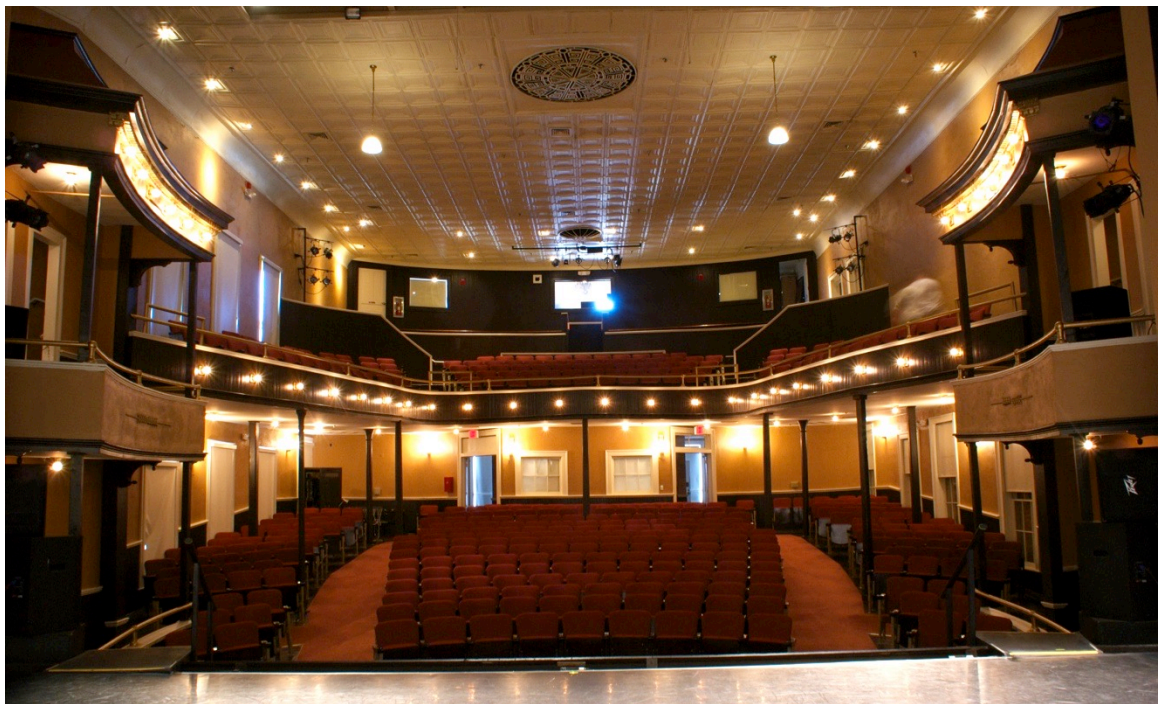
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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>176</sup> Flurry, "Show Time at the Morton.", 18-19.



**Figure 41 - Morton Theatre before restoration. Courtesy of Morton Theatre.**



**Figure 42 Morton Theatre view from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Another African-American theatre, the **Liberty Theatre** in Columbus, sat silent for only a decade when restoration efforts began. It closed in 1973 and with a perceived threat from urban renewal, action was taken by concerned citizens.<sup>177</sup> It had been donated by Martin Theatres in 1980 to the William H. Spencer Golden Owlettes.<sup>178</sup> This group for African-American women soon took action against the threat of urban renewal.<sup>179</sup> It was listed in the National Register in 1984 as a first step. Fundraising plans began to return this former hub of Columbus African-American entertainment to its former glory. Donations and smaller grants funded the initial work. The 1955 façade and protruding marquee were removed. Work included structural bolstering as well as aesthetic and technical upgrades.<sup>180</sup>

Much needed funding for the restoration came in 1993 from a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. This grant sponsored by the Owlettes and the City of Columbus was part of a larger city redevelopment plan.<sup>181</sup> The Liberty Theatre Cultural Center Inc. was created as a non-profit for the purpose of restoring the theatre with these funds. In 1995 the deed was transferred from the Owlettes.<sup>182</sup> With this funding secured more work began. In 1997, after years of work led by private citizens in conjunction with the City of Columbus, the Liberty Theatre

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<sup>177</sup> Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater."

<sup>178</sup> Holland, Mark. "Renovation Set to Begin on Historic Liberty Theater." *Columbus Sunday Ledger-Enquirer*, June 19, 1995.

<sup>179</sup> Sumbry, "'Give Me Liberty' Efforts Breathe Life into Theater."

<sup>180</sup> Ellerbee, Jason. "African American Theaters in Georgia: Preserving an Entertainment Legacy (UGA Masters Thesis)." 2004, 47.

<sup>181</sup> Cyriaque, Jeanne. "African American Theatres in Georgia." *Reflections*, May 1, 2001, 5.

<sup>182</sup> Holland, "Renovation Set to Begin on Historic Liberty Theater."

reopened its doors. They received another infusion of funds that year when a citywide fundraising drive benefitted them along with the Springer Opera House.<sup>183</sup>



Figure 43 - Liberty Theatre façade and addition as seen today. Photograph by the author.



Figure 44 - Liberty Theatre interior as seen today. Photograph by the author.

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<sup>183</sup> Pierce, interview.

After suffering under the weight of poor attendance Atlanta's **Fox Theatre** was sold to Southern Bell Company in 1974.<sup>184</sup> They planned to relocate regional headquarters on the land occupied by the Fox.<sup>185</sup> A group of concerned citizens met with Mayor Maynard Jackson in July 1974 to devise a plan to save the Fox. They formed Atlanta Landmarks, Inc. with this aim in mind.<sup>186</sup> However, after the evening showing of *The Klansman* on January 2, 1975, the Fox Theatre closed its doors seemingly forever.<sup>187</sup>

The "Save the Fox" public campaign was largely responsible for the future of the Fox. This campaign was engineered to churn up support for the preservation of the Fox. The resulting public outcry to save the theatre persuaded Southern Bell to delay demolition of the Fox Theatre for 6 months, offering the theatre for repurchase. The \$3.3 million price tag looked impossible. In March of 1975 Southern Bell agreed to leave the Fox alone if Atlanta Landmarks could raise \$1.8 million and purchase another parcel on the block. Southern Bell would then build their regional offices there instead of at the Fox Theatre's address. Five Atlanta banks extended loans to Atlanta Landmarks two months later to purchase that land. The land was traded and the Fox Theatre was spared the wrecking ball.<sup>188</sup>

The Fox was still far from its glory days. Damage and neglect over the years left the building in woeful shape. In place, however, since its purchase by Atlanta Landmarks, a dedicated Restoration Department worked full-time to return the theatre to its shining past. Water damage along the walls was among the first issues addressed.

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<sup>184</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.

<sup>185</sup> Sanders, *The Fox Theatre*, 54.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.



During this early work they also discovered that some features of the theatre were far less than meets the eye. For instance, doors believed gilded with gold were actually painted tin.

Restoration and maintenance continues today. The full-time staff has uncovered many once lost features of the original design, including detail work in the Egyptian Ballroom that had been painted over as well as reproduction carpeting from a small found scrap.<sup>189</sup> Because of their vigilance the repairs occur on a revolving basis so that the theatre never closes.<sup>190</sup> Funding for this continued work comes from ticket surcharges and rent from the event spaces.<sup>191</sup> The Fox Theatre Institute was created in 2008 to assist historic Georgia theatres return to their glory days.



Figure 45 - Fox Theatre view towards the stage from the balcony as seen today. From *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker*, by Kristi Casey Sanders.

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<sup>189</sup> Sanders, *The Fox Theatre*, 74.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>191</sup> "The Atlanta Fox Theatre." *THS Annual*.

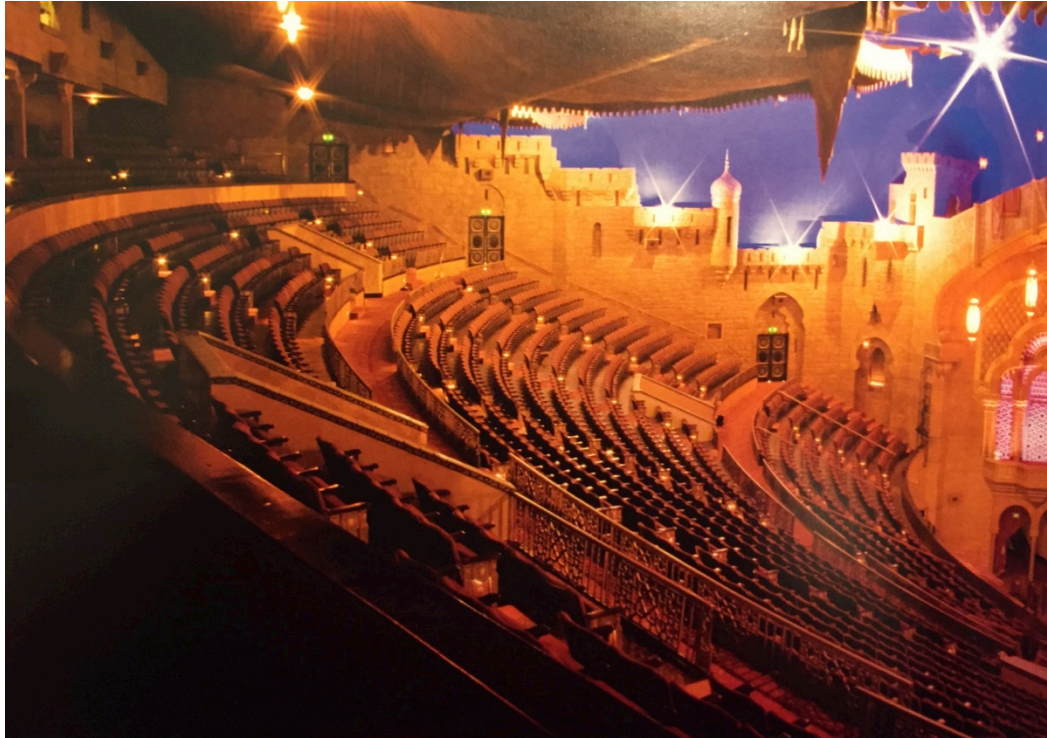


Figure 46 - Fox Theatre view across the balcony as seen today. From *The Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia: The Memory Maker*, by Kristi Casey Sanders.

The **Grand Theatre** in Cartersville closed in 1977 as a movie theater in the Martin Theatres chain. Some live performances remained after the movie chain left. These included concerts and pageants. For some time, a local community theatre, the Pumphouse Players worked out a deal with the new owners and performed their productions on the Grand's small stage. Once this agreement ended some years later, the future of the Grand was doubt.

The success of the "Save the Fox" campaign inspired locals to seek similar action in Cartersville. They launched their own "Save the Grand" campaign. A private, anonymous donor acquired the Grand as part of a larger foundation and began plans to renovate the Grand into a live performing arts venue. Throughout 1988, the Grand was transformed. Work included providing a larger stage that included an orchestra pit and removable front stage apron. A fly loft was added, raising the roof above the stage.

Among the most striking elements removed during this work were backlit panels from the ceiling that resembled stained glass. These had been too damaged to retain. On the exterior, the opulent 1930 façade was restored and retained. The new stage-oriented Grand Theatre reopened in 1989.

Not long after this initial renovation, the Grand acquired the gas station adjacent to the rear of the stage. It was connected and converted into much-needed dressing room space. In 2003 another renovation was underway. During this, work converted the former commercial space to the right of the central lobby to concession space and reception area. The lobby itself was reworked; removing the recessed central box office and pushing the glass entry doors flush with the façade. On the floor of the lobby, a large “G” and markings denote the location of the removed box office and entry doors.



**Figure 47 - Grand Theatre lobby floor with interpretive marking. Photograph by the author.**

Inside the house, the removable stage apron was made permanent. Keeping up with contemporary codes and demands, a sprinkler fire suppression system was added. Floor lighting was being added into the concrete floor of the house when the slab collapsed due to areas beneath that had eroded. A completely new floor was poured with reinforcement.



Figure 48 - Grand Theatre façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 49 - Grand Theatre interior as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Though the “Save the Fox” campaign was arguably the most famous theatre restoration movement in the state, the revival of Hawkinsville’s **Old Opera House** was similarly compelling. While the Fox restoration was triggered by citizens and later supported by business and municipal interest, the work to revive the Hawkinsville Old Opera House was solely in the care of concerned Hawkinsville citizens. In 1953, a local theatre group, the Pulaski Players first took interest in the Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium. Municipal use of the building had waned by then. A new City Hall rendered the building obsolete by 1954 and this group of 45 locals came together with the interest of preserving the building. After their inaugural production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our*

*Town*, the group produced six more plays over the next two years. In 1955 they repainted and tiled the lobby hall.<sup>192</sup>

After this initial preservation effort the Old Opera House faced more significant challenges. Not only did it dodge the wrecking ball due to concerned citizens, it did so with little or no cooperation of municipal forces. In fact, local government could have been considered openly combative to restoration efforts of the historic venue.

After the new City Hall was constructed adjacent to the Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium and the Pulaski Players disbanded in 1954 and 1955 respectively, the venue experienced less frequent use. A production of *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt in 1972 was the final stage production in the auditorium for a decade. The leaking roof was a major problem for the building. Local proponent of the building's restoration, Carl Kimberly, asked the Landscape Architectural Department from the University of Georgia for a building condition assessment. Suggested work was estimated between \$35,000 and \$85,000.

Carl Kimberly and other citizens got the Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. In the Statement of Significance portion of the National Register application, they wrote:

“The Old Opera House has been used as a city hall, theater, library, club house and temporary church when necessary. It still has the largest seating capacity in Pulaski County and the arrangement of the seats and the general acoustic qualities of the space are very good. The opportunity exists for providing an intimate theater, civic and museum facility, while

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<sup>192</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium.*

at the same time preserving something unique to the town and to the period.”<sup>193</sup>

They were able to receive two grants in subsequent years for the building’s renovation. These grants were lost when the city failed to execute necessary conditions. The Pulaski Historical Commission formed in 1977 to set about taking control of the building.<sup>194</sup> The PHC soon read the disheartening headline, “HAWKINSVILLE OPERA HOUSE DOOMED,” on April 19, 1977.

“On April 12, the City Commission voted to tear down the Old Opera House, apparently ending a 24-year old struggle with local historians who wanted to restore the brick structure. The vote to raze the building, a unanimous commission decision, opposed the wishes of the Pulaski Players and the Pulaski Historical Commission.”

The demolition plans were halted when the PHC sued the city. They also secured grant money to help fund restoration efforts. By the end of the 1977 PHC and the city reached an agreement. PHC were given a five-year lease and began their restoration work immediately.<sup>195</sup>

After the Pulaski Historical Commission acquired a five-year lease from the city for Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium, now known as the Old Opera House, restoration work began on the same day as the lease was signed. The first major issue this work addressed was the pressing issue of a long-time leaking roof. First the roof trusses were repaired. Reroofing began with a company from Macon but was not completed due

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<sup>193</sup> NR, Hawkinsville City Hall-Auditorium.

<sup>194</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium.*

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

to difficulty related to the roof of the fly loft. A Hawkinsville roofer took over the project and reroofing was completed in March 1980.

During this time, the vacant offices downstairs that had once housed municipal offices during its days at the City Hall were occupied. The Chamber of Commerce raised local funds to locate an office there. The United Daughters of the Confederacy also took up residence in one of the offices.<sup>196</sup>

Work that followed included repairs to the floor and the balcony. A local electrician rewired the building, installed a heating and cooling system, and devised a pump system to prevent the frequent basement flooding. Molding and column capitals were restored and woodwork and plaster was restored. The theatre's most striking feature, its oil painting stage curtain had been badly damaged. A University of Georgia Art professor, Dr. Lawrence Graham headed up a team of students who duplicated the original painting for the mere cost of the paint. The new curtain made its debut in late 1982.<sup>197</sup>

Another local theatre group was formed in 1981 to help with the restoration. Known as The Opera House Players they performed in various venues around Hawkinsville and raised approximately \$1,650 dollars and donated over 300 hours of physical labor. After their efforts and the efforts of many other local citizens the Old Opera House reopened its doors on December 2, 1982. The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation lauded the efforts of these determined citizens who fought to save and restore the building, awarding their work with a 1984 Outstanding Restoration Project Award, saying, "It is not likely that any town its size – or twice its size for that matter –

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<sup>196</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*



has accomplished what Hawkinsville has, thanks to the Pulaski Historical Commission,” and “In the face of opposition from local politicians, all of whom voted to tear down the old city hall and auditorium, the Pulaski Historical Commission secured an injunction, prevented the demolition and signed a five-year lease to restore this building to a useful relationship with the community.”<sup>198</sup>

A second restoration effort for Hawkinsville’s Old Opera began in 1999. Another condition assessment was ordered, and the cost of work was estimated at around \$1.7 million. \$1.7 million was then funded by voter-approved Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, also known as SPLOST. Work began in July 2000 and was completed one year later. Work included the installation of a new tech booth in the balcony with new sound and lighting systems. Basement dressing rooms were added. Heating and plumbing were addressed as well, and a new rainwater control system was installed. Safety issues were addressed such as an added sprinkler system as well as structural work. New features were added to enhance the theatre’s versatility, including a kitchen and projection equipment.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Long, "Hawkinsville's Historic Opera House Is Enjoying New Life.", 41

<sup>199</sup> *History of City Hall and Auditorium.*



**Figure 50 - Old Opera House exterior as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 51- Old Opera House stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



Figure 52- Old Opera House interior from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.

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Government entities were not always the antagonists in the revival of historic Georgia playhouses. In fact, they played the largest roles in reopening Fort Valley's Austin Theater, Americus's Rylander Theatre, and the Albany Municipal Auditorium.

The **Austin Theater** in Fort Valley had already undergone a few identity changes in the past. First it was Slappey's Opera House, renamed the Austin Theatre afterwards, converted to a cinema, and then almost completely rehabilitated as a larger movie theatre, the Peach Theater. After the movie theatre closed and it changed hands again, it experienced yet another identity crisis and was remodeled as a department store for a while.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Powell, *Echoes from the Valley*, 121.

In 1999 Fort Valley’s Austin Theatre was donated to the city. It had been an opera house and dry goods store, a movie theatre, and a department store over the years. \$500,000 in SPLOST funds were approved in 2004 to help the Fort Valley Downtown Development Authority begin renovation plans of the theatre.<sup>201</sup> Renovation work removed additions made over the years. Façade work reflects its early twentieth century roots. Windows were restored. A new marquee announced the Austin. Paint detail was added and a recessed entry was restored. The overall effect of the work resulted in an exterior restoration to the 1938 renovation. Conspicuously missing is the appropriate Peach Theater marquee that ran both vertically down the center of the façade and horizontally across with “Peach” in lights on either end.



**Figure 53 - Austin Theatre before restoration. Courtesy of Fort Valley DDA.**

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<sup>201</sup> Powell, *Echoes from the Valley*, 123.



**Figure 54 – Austin Theatre façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Currently a look inside reveals a heavily adapted space almost unrecognizable as a theatre. This makes the historical accuracy of the theatre’s moniker and marquee much more understandable. A modest lobby with room for a concession stand and audience rest

area leads to a hallway ended by double doors. Through those doors lies the orchestra level of the theatre. Inside the house the walls on the lower level are painted cream with squared pilasters and sound boards. Above is a similar cornice at the foot of exposed brick walls with large burgundy panels which make up the second floor walls. The stage is a raised wooden area with two stairs across the full length that stretches wall-to-wall with no wing space or side exits. There are two upstage exits and backstage area. The house floor is flat, perhaps a side-effect of the late twentieth century department store rehabilitation. Seating is not permanent. Stackable chairs and tables are used. This allows for more black box-style versatility. Seating is also available in the second floor balcony. This area is accessed by stairs in the lobby. The stairs are worn marble and were in the building when it underwent renovation.<sup>202</sup> These are likely from the 1938 “Peach Theatre” iteration, but could even be part of the original opera house design, providing a luxurious approach to the upstairs theatre. On this second floor is access to the technical booth in addition to the balcony, which is set up with four levels of risers and stackable chairs.

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<sup>202</sup> Lambert, Kathy, Fort Valley Main Street Director, "Austin Theater in Fort Valley," Private e-mail message to author, January 20, 2015.



**Figure 55 - Austin Theatre view of the stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 56 - Austin Theatre view from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

The **Rylander Theatre** in Americus sat vacant for four decades. Forgotten and unnoticed by an entire generation, plans to revive the theatre first began in 1992.<sup>203</sup> The massive Richardsonian Windsor Hotel just down the street had avoided the wrecking ball and was in the middle of a multimillion-dollar renovation. Then Mayor Tom Gailey pushed for the historic theatre's reactivation. The project was estimated at \$3.5 million but did not begin until 1997, under Mayor Russell Thomas Jr.

The renovation was not without its challenges. Plaster, ill suited to the humidity of the climate, had not survived well. A hole in the ceiling had allowed water to enter and wash down the house-left wall. As a result, almost all of the plasterwork decoration on the walls had been wiped bare. Luckily enough of the decoration still remained on the opposing wall to create a mold, which was used to restore the original plasterwork design.<sup>204</sup> A Möller pipe organ was installed as one of only two in Georgia – the other being the famous one at Atlanta's Fox Theatre.<sup>205</sup>

The installation of the donated organ posed a technical problem for the new HVAC system being installed. The previous system used a now-missing boiler and rooftop swamp cooler. The new system, which reused some existing ductwork and ventilation, was not be able to use the area now occupied by the organ pipes. The contractor managed to work around this and installed a system far less expensive than originally suggested.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Barrett, "Splendor of the Historic Rylander Theater Thrives.", 16.

<sup>204</sup> Stanley, interview.

<sup>205</sup> Barrett, "Splendor of the Historic Rylander Theater Thrives.", 18.

<sup>206</sup> Norland, Jim. "Community Spirit, History Put Spotlight on This Contractor." *Air Conditioning, Heating and Refrigeration News*, 2000, 8-9.



After two years of work, the Rylander Theatre held a grand opening on October 1, 1999 as a 75<sup>th</sup> birthday gala for former President Jimmy Carter, a Sumter County resident himself.<sup>207</sup> This initial restoration totaled \$4.5 million dollars.<sup>208</sup> Technical upgrades and maintenance work continue including plaster work on the back wall of the gallery which continues to be caused by infiltrating rain water during the theatre's dark years.<sup>209</sup>



Figure 57 - Rylander Theatre facade as seen today. Photograph by the author.

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<sup>207</sup> Barrett, "Splendor of the Historic Rylander Theater Thrives.", 16.

<sup>208</sup> "The Future of the Rylander: Community Theater Needs Community." Americus Times Recorder. Accessed January 8, 2015.

<sup>209</sup> Stanley, interview.



Figure 58 - Rylander Theatre view of the stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.



Figure 59 - Rylander Theatre view from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.

After over half a century of use, the **Albany Municipal Auditorium** went dark in April 1972.<sup>210</sup> It had fallen into disrepair over the years. Ceilings and walls lost much of their paint, but the building was considered sound. Despite this, demolition had been proposed.<sup>211</sup> A National Register nomination was written afterwards, and the auditorium was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974. Demolition was avoided, but the theatre remained dark.

More than a decade after avoiding the wrecking ball, in 1986 the Albany Municipal Auditorium was allocated funds by the City Commission for its restoration.<sup>212</sup> The local firm David Maschke & Associates was hired to perform the work. Asbestos abatement had left little for the firm. They used historic photos, newspapers, and oral histories to discern the auditorium's original appearance. They determined original materials and techniques and attempted to recreate those as accurately as possible.

Work in 1947 had cannibalized the box seats in order to install heating ductwork. Much like the 1970s work in the Fine Arts Theatre in Athens, the addition of these flat spaces altered the sound quality. The restoration removed the ductwork and obscuring panels and returned the box seating to the house, helping to correct the sound issues. Modern air conditioning was installed, along with new electrical wiring, as to be hidden from public view.<sup>213</sup>

Modern technical upgrades were added including lighting and sound systems. A hydraulic stage apron was installed as well to allow for flexibility in stage productions

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<sup>210</sup> "History." *Albany Municipal Auditorium Premiere Performance Program*, 16.

<sup>211</sup> NR Municipal Auditorium.

<sup>212</sup> "History." *Albany Municipal Auditorium Premiere Performance Program*, 16.

<sup>213</sup> Maschke, David M.G. "The Restoration." *Chautauqua! Celebration '90*. Albany, 1990, 7-8.

but also provide ease of loading equipment from the basement level below the stage.<sup>214</sup> Audience comfort was also accommodated. In addition to the new heating and cooling system, the theatre seats were historically correct but added upholstery and padding.<sup>215</sup> These seats number 950 after the restoration, which was a significant drop from the original seating of 1802.<sup>216</sup>



**Figure 60 - Albany Municipal Auditorium façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

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<sup>214</sup> Burnett and Lovelace, interview.

<sup>215</sup> Maschke, "The Restoration." *Chautauqua! Celebration '90*, 7-8.

<sup>216</sup> Burnett and Lovelace, interview.



Figure 61 - Albany Municipal Auditorium view of the stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.

The most recently restored historic Georgia theatre, the **Waycross City Auditorium**, had fallen into disuse after over two decades of success following its 1937 opening. It had been relegated to occasional basketball games and finally as a yearly polling location on Election Day.<sup>217</sup> The City of Waycross, backed by citizen vote, approved funding for the renovation of the Waycross City Auditorium in the form of a SPLOST. After years of fundraising and construction, the Waycross City Auditorium opened its doors once again in February of 2014. Though the original balcony is gone, the auditorium is capable of holding almost 650 patrons.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Cooper, John Scott. "Public Gets To See 'Miraculous,' Transformed City Auditorium." *Waycross Journal Herald*, February 12, 2014.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.



Figure 62 - Waycross City Auditorium interior as seen today. Photograph from The City of Waycross website (<http://www.waycrossga.com/blog/city-auditorium/>)

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Restorations in Georgia have primarily been undertaken by non-profit organizations or local governments, however Augusta's **Imperial Theatre** is a rare example of a private entity taking the reigns of a playhouse restoration. In 1981 the Imperial closed its doors. It had been converted to a cinema in 1929 and had survived many decades solely as such. Demolition plans threatened the theatre in 1984. Community support worked to hold off these plans. Soon after, a private company, Latco Construction purchased the Imperial. They secured an agreement with local organizations, the Augusta Opera and the Augusta Players and reopened the doors as a performing arts center in 1985.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> *A History of the Imperial Theatre.*

A non-profit board was established in 1992. Upgrades, restoration, and renovation work has continued over the years. New seating arrived in 2002. From 2006 to 2007 a new marquee, which harkened back to a historic design was added, as well as a new sound system. A challenge grant in 2012 succeeded in securing \$1 million in SPLOST funding. Recently HVAC upgrades to supporting areas of the theatre were completed.<sup>220</sup>



Figure 63 - Imperial Theatre façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.

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<sup>220</sup> *A History of the Imperial Theatre.*



Figure 64 - Imperial Theatre view of the stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.

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Four theatres in Georgia managed to keep their doors open since their inaugural performances, only closing for renovation work. All these have been under municipal or collegiate control. The University of Georgia's **Fine Arts Theatre** received its first interior renovation in 1976. Previously, the theatre had received praise for its high quality acoustics.<sup>221</sup> This changed as the 1976 renovation significantly altered the dynamics of the theatre space. It eradicated the original design of the house décor. Dark, flat panels covered the walls, proscenium, decorative boxes located in each corner of the theatre. Additionally, the signature dome over the audience was covered. The unrecognizable redesign also resulted in the balcony being permanently closed. It was converted into classroom space with a crude stage area. The overall result of the interior redesign of the

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<sup>221</sup> "New \$450,000 Fine Arts Building To Be Dedicated May 31.", 164.



Fine Arts Theatre was minimalist design aimed at more focus on what was onstage as opposed to the surrounding atmosphere of the house. This simplification of the once elaborate space also resulted in disastrous acoustics.<sup>222</sup> The flat wall panels and lowered roof produced excessive sound slapping in many areas of the theatre and general absorption of sound.

After over 30 years, the Fine Arts Theatre finally received a much-needed restoration. University architect Scott Messer, along with consultation by department head Dr. David Saltz, began work in 2008 to return the interior to its former glory. Computer testing confirmed the damaged acoustics.<sup>223</sup> The flat wall panels that had flanked the house were removed. The boxes hidden beneath were irrevocably damaged. The dome above the audience was also uncovered. Evidence for the restoration efforts came in the form of a few historic photos, original blueprints, and written descriptions. Photos revealed the original appearance of some of the walls, damaged boxes, and similarly damaged proscenium arch. Using the historic photos as guidance, the features were reconstructed. During this restoration, some alterations were made to improve the overall experience, both for patrons and theatre professionals. The house floor received a steeper rake to accommodate better audience sightlines. A technical booth was relocated from the former balcony area to the rear of the house to allow for easier adjustment and operation of the lighting and audio-video systems. The restored theatre was dedicated on April 23, 2010 with a scene from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

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<sup>222</sup> "New \$450,000 Fine Arts Building To Be Dedicated May 31.", 31.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.



**Figure 65 - Fine Arts Theatre after 1976 renovation. From 1976 reopening program.**



**Figure 66 - Fine Arts Theatre view of the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 67 - Fine Arts Theatre view from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Georgia College and State University's **Russell Auditorium** also remained open over the years. Minimal alterations visible to patrons occurred. At some point since its construction in 1926, a motion picture projection booth was added. Around 2001 steel structural enhancements reinforced the fly loft, added technical upgrades, and made the stage apron permanent. More recently windows lining the theatre that had been curtained off were repaired. Shades were also added to allow flexibility during a variety of uses.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Bergeron, interview.



**Figure 68 - Russell Auditorium façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 69 - Russell Auditorium view of the stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 70 - Russell Auditorium view from the stage as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

Similarly, the **Rome City Auditorium** managed to remain open since its opening day in 1916. After almost a century of use, the Rome City Auditorium experienced its share of renovation work. Much of this work modernized these historic spaces. In 1966 necessary lobby restrooms were added, resulting in a loss of 103 auditorium seats.<sup>225</sup> An elevator was added sometime in the late 1970s. However, with the exception of a period from 1988 to 1989 the auditorium has been in continuous use. This short dark period was due to a more extensive renovation. The work included new, more comfortable seating. This reduced the seating to 1,100. During this process, the rake of the orchestra was increased. The uppermost rows of seats were removed, blocked off, and a technical booth was added for light and sound operators. An annex was also added to the back of the theatre for dressing room areas. Subsequent work included the removal of the rear row of

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<sup>225</sup> Belzer, Jim. "Rome City Auditorium." Lecture,, , April 10, 2010.

orchestra seats to accommodate motorized wheelchairs in 2012.<sup>226</sup> After all the years and alterations the theatre remains in heavy use by the community.



**Figure 71 - Rome City Auditorium façade as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 72 - Rome City Auditorium view of the stage from the balcony as seen today. Photograph by the author.**

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<sup>226</sup> Belzer, interview.



Figure 73 - Rome City Auditorium view of the balcony and orchestra as seen today. Photograph by the author.

Also in heavy use today and over the years, Brenau University's **Pearce Auditorium** remained open as well with modest change. It closed briefly in late 1981 for a \$1.7 million renovation, reopening the following spring.<sup>227</sup> The most drastic change occurred to its seating capacity, a phenomenon common among operational historic theatres. Seating changes dropped the capacity down almost 500 seats from the original seating of 1,200 to just over 700.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> *Facts about Pearce Auditorium.*

<sup>228</sup> Haddocks, Robert. "The Curtain May Rise on a New Cultural Era - Brenau Opens Burd Center." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 4, 2002. Accessed February 15, 2015.



Figure 74 - Pearce Auditorium interior as seen today. Photograph from Brenau University website (<http://catalog.brenau.edu>)

The **Macon Auditorium** also managed to stay open since its construction in 1925. Restoration was undertaken in 1979 that cleaned and repaired limestone work, addressed damaged windows and doors, and updated electrical systems.<sup>229</sup> A 2011 SPLOST funded water-sealing the basement. Renewal of the SPLOST in 2017 could allocate funds to the long-silent organ system, a Moller like those in the Fox and Rylander.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> *Program for the 1979 Dedication of Macon's City Auditorium.*

<sup>230</sup> Gaines, Jim. "Rare Organ Hidden in Macon City Auditorium." *The Telegraph (Macon)*, August 10, 2014. Accessed February 15, 2015.





**Figure 75 - Macon Auditorium from the street as seen today. Photograph by the author.**



**Figure 76 - Macon Auditorium interior as seen today. Photograph from Charles R. Sheridan & Co. General Contractors website (<http://www.chrissheridan.com/cityauditorium.html>)**

As adaptation in the past was a large factor in the survival of these theatres, continuing to adapt and change is ensuring their future. They began life as homes for the live theatre. Many experienced moves away from this form of entertainment in favor of

the more novel motion pictures. Ironically, as historic theatres removed their shutters and again welcome patrons, it was more often as a home to live theatre, leaving motion pictures out of the core of their programming.<sup>231</sup> As these theatres adapted for survival in the past, so will they need to continue to adapt. The lessons from the survival of historic Georgia playhouses teach that understanding the needs of each community is vital to the continued success of these theatres. Some theatres survived based upon a wide range of programming while others followed specific ideas of what their communities desired.

Some of Georgia's historic playhouses remain true to their historic programming plan. Programming at the **Albany Municipal Auditorium** is handled by the city. An umbrella organization handles its programming in addition to other spaces such as the Albany Civic Center. This programming reflects its original programming approach. Local productions, concerts, and touring acts appear on its stage. The Albany Symphony Orchestra calls it home, performing several concerts yearly.<sup>232</sup> The **Waycross City Auditorium** also remains true to its original programming ideals. Booked through the City of Waycross, the flexible space is available as a rental space for a wide range of events, from trainings and reunions to stage productions and concerts.<sup>233</sup> The **Douglass Theatre** in Macon also remains true to its original programming approach. It books a variety of entertainment from contemporary films and broadcast events such as the Met Opera live. It also hosts lectures and stage plays.

The **Fine Arts Theatre** at the University of Georgia is programmed as part of the UGA Performing Arts Center, which operates other performance spaces on campus.

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<sup>231</sup> Morrison, *Theaters*, 352.

<sup>232</sup> Burnett and Lovelace, interview.

<sup>233</sup> Cooper, "Public Gets To See 'Miraculous,' Transformed City Auditorium."

University Theatre productions typically utilize the space once a semester with additional performances in the black box and Cellar Theatre. Other programming includes concerts, dance performances, lectures, and graduation ceremonies, such as the spring College of Environment + Design ceremony. The **Russell Auditorium** at Georgia College and State University functions in much the same way, staging theatre department productions as well as outside productions and campus-wide events. Brenau University's **Pearce Auditorium** follows a similar approach. Much like its original mix of collegiate and community events, today multiple area colleges and community organizations utilize the space for productions and events.

Mercer University staff now manages programming at the **Macon Grand Opera House**. The space operates primarily as a rental venue. While the university does sponsor events in the theatre, the main focus of booking is on local groups and booking agents.<sup>234</sup> Productions include stage plays, musical revues, touring musicians, and performances by the Macon Symphony Orchestra.

The **Rylander Theatre** is operated by the Theatre and Cultural Authority and owned by the City of Americus.<sup>235</sup> It retains its playhouse-cinema programming roots. In January 2014, for example, it played host to a screening of the cinema classic *Gone with the Wind* as well as a touring Second City improv production. Additionally, it is used for lectures, conferences, and community theatre, including the Sumter Players. When the Historic American Theatre conference was held in Atlanta in 2008, the Rylander was one of the tour stops along with the Springer Opera House in Columbus.<sup>236</sup> Educational

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<sup>234</sup> Mavity, interview.

<sup>235</sup> Barrett, "Splendor of the Historic Rylander Theater Thrives.", 16.

<sup>236</sup> Barrett, "Splendor of the Historic Rylander Theater Thrives.", 18.

outreach is an important part of the Rylander's programming as well, including special performances and summer theatre camps.<sup>237</sup>

On a grander scale, the **Fox Theatre** also programs a variety of acts similar to its original concept. These include large touring Broadway productions, such as *The Book of Mormon* and *Wicked*. A range of concerts and comedy acts appear onstage as well as dance acts and the occasional special film screenings.

Some historic theatres of Georgia embrace only certain aspects of their original programming scheme. The **Grand Theatre** in Cartersville, once a hybrid cinema-playhouse, now focuses on live events only. Part of a non-profit foundation, it operates as a rental venue with a variety of live events on their stage, from gospel concerts, to local plays. Once a hub of public life in Cartersville, their goal is to stay as connected to their local community as possible. Education programs are an essential element of their programming. These include youth acting classes and summer camps, as well as a seniors acting group. Outreach programs include work with a local history museum to provide living history type performances for local schools. Programming involving local talent is particularly popular at the Grand. Similarly, the **Liberty Theatre** in Columbus and the **Imperial Theatre** in Augusta were originally constructed for dual purposes but their programming today is focused on live stage events. The **Macon Auditorium** has strayed somewhat from its multipurpose beginnings, primarily hosting stage-only events such as concerts and comedians.

A few of Georgia's historic theatres place high, if not exclusive, focus on community events. Fort Valley's **Austin Theater** remains busy. In addition to movie

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 17.

showings twice a month, the stage is booked for a variety of entertainment by the city. From plays to fashion shows, the versatility afforded by the interior renovation suits their programming well and is reflective of the needs and interests of the Fort Valley community.

Still run under the auspices of Rome municipal government, the **Rome City Auditorium** operates as a rental house today. Local ballet recitals, stage productions and talent shows occupy a large part of the community-oriented programming. In addition, it plays host to lectures and speakers and some touring productions. It is also home to the Rome Symphony and has been the site of Miss Georgia USA Pageant.<sup>238</sup>

The **Morton Theatre** provides a unique example of historic theatre administration organization. Non-profit Morton Theatre Corporation (MTC) and Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services Department (ACCLS) both operate the space. While the board of MTC is responsible for operating policy, public outreach, and marketing, ACCLS handles day-to-day operations and booking. This allows MTC to focus on celebrating the history of the downtown icon, while providing full time staff to deal with programming and technical assistance. This programming consists of touring acts, local community theatre productions, award programs, and other rental events.

Programming at Hawkinsville's **Old Opera House** (Hawkinsville City Hall and Auditorium) remains relatively faithful to its origins. Run by a non-profit, there is no booking for touring companies, but it is typically booked for concert performances today, reminiscent of the musical components of the vaudeville shows that graced its early

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<sup>238</sup> Belzer, Jim. "Rome City Auditorium, Rome's Historic People's House." Lecture,, Rome.

stage. Additionally it serves as the contact point for community school children and theatre with tours and summer programming.<sup>239</sup>

Now the official “State Theatre of Georgia.” The **Springer Opera House** proudly stands as a rare historic theatre that produces its own programming. Not merely a presenting theatre, the Springer produces its own classic, contemporary, and original productions. Design elements are also typically produced in-house. Costume and scene shops were constructed adjacent to the stage area when the Springer reopened its doors in 1965. While it did present motion pictures historically, today such programming is limited to rare special events, using digital projection equipment.<sup>240</sup>

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In addition to developing programming there are other challenges historic theatres face. Older buildings, especially of the grand size common in theatres, need regular maintenance. Even theatres that have been extensively restored and repaired may experience residual damage from days of vacancy and neglect. The Rylander’s continued moisture problem is a tangible reminder of this. Continued work at the Morton provides another example. Maintenance and improvements continue on a regular basis. Recent work in the theatre included repairs to the wood floors of the house. While the main floor was replaced, the balcony inherited the flooring from below. An elevator to access the stage is being installed, and a new HVAC system will be installed over the summer. Cartersville’s Grand Theatre and Atlanta’s Fox Theatre also have ongoing maintenance and restoration work in place.

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<sup>239</sup> Stewart, interview.

<sup>240</sup> Pierce, interview.

Advancing technology also poses problem. As the film industry moves toward 100% digital delivery of new releases, theatres wishing to keep new releases in their programming will have to upgrade to this expensive technology. At the Macon Grand Opera House, Technical Director Bob Mavity faces an impending change in technology that will dramatically affect his theatre. The theatre is lined with bare bulb lighting. Crystal chandeliers accentuate the side boxes. These incandescent bulbs will soon be unavailable, as energy conservation demands the use of lower consuming lighting technology such as compact fluorescents and LED bulbs. Currently neither of these newer lighting technologies is able to accomplish the same atmosphere of the incandescent. A colder light hue and lack of smooth dimming work against the design aesthetic of the theatre. It had originally been designed for the warm hues of gas lighting, but incandescent mimicked this look. As lighting technology develops matching the look and function of bare bulbs will be essential to the integrity of design in many theatres including Macon's Grand Opera House and Hawkinsville's Old Opera House as well.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Mavity, interview.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

During this examination of historic Georgia theatres, two factors emerged as essential to the survival of these spaces. First, the adaptability of these buildings kept them relevant and connected to their communities for as long as possible. Even after closing these theatres retained a place of importance to local citizens. Second, these spaces were spared the wrecking ball due to community advocacy. The public outcry, fundraising, and physical labor preserved and reintroduced these magnificent spaces.

Two areas for future study will enable a clearer picture of the processes and factors leading to historic theatre preservation efforts in Georgia. The first logical expansion would be to examine historic movie theatres. The movie palaces and smaller theatres that dotted downtowns also suffered from the move of Americans out of city centers. Remaining historic cinemas are now ironically seeing new life often incorporating the type of entertainment they had once eclipsed, live theatre. Examining these buildings, specifically those that have been the focal point of preservation efforts, a fuller understanding of this new chapter of American theatre might be gleaned.

An area of particular interest that was outside the scope of this thesis is the interpretation of segregation spaces and features in contemporary restoration projects. Surely there is a potential conflict between telling a story on stage and telling a story with your theatre's own architecture. Often segregated seating areas, box offices, and stairways remain, but is there an obligation to tell these stories? If the story is told, how



does a theatre do that? How might theatres acknowledge missing segregation spaces and features as well?

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Examining historic playhouses of Georgia we can see a portion the history of American theatre unfolding in our communities and on our downtown streets. The influence of European development remains alive in Georgia theatres. The American opera house is also alive in our state. The influence of the uniquely American vaudeville theatre style can be seen in communities across Georgia. There also stand in the state bastions to the forgotten and neglected theatres as well as the university theatres that took control of advancing American theatre.

Historic theatre restoration and rehabilitation efforts in Georgia also reflect the wide range of historic theatre resources across the country. They are reflective in the physical process by which these theatres were given life. They are also reflective of the ways in which community involvement kept these theatres not just standing, but alive. As these theatres continue to be reactivated they are bringing theatre back to downtowns and communities across the state, indeed the country. Preservation is a part of the history of American theatre. As more theatres return to life thanks to preservation efforts, communities will once again have access to theatre arts that had deserted them during the middle half of the twentieth century. As historic Georgia theatres continue to experience rebirth, they reopen a long-closed chapter of American theatre across the state.

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