



Jay Jensen
Executive Director

HISTORY OF THE ORPHEUM THEATRE

- Oct. 16, 1921** The Hennepin Theater, constructed at a cost of \$1 million, opens in the "golden age of the showplace, the theater's Belle Epoque." A crowd of 70,000 attends a performance featuring the Marx Brothers in the theater billed as the largest vaudeville house in the country. Across the street, the historic State Theatre -- the largest, most elaborate and carefully planned presentation house between Chicago and the Pacific Coast -- has already opened. Together with the Shubert, New Lyric, the Pantages (later the Mann) and new Garrick theaters, they form the famed "White Way" which lines Hennepin Avenue and makes it the premier theater district of the upper Midwest.

The theater is owned by the Orpheum, one of two major vaudeville circuits, and becomes a major outlet for entertainers such as George Jessel, Jack Benny, Burns and Allen and Fanny Brice. Best seat in the house: 47 cents. Kids' seats: nine cents. Special feature: playroom and day-care services for children.

- 1927** A \$100-million vaudeville/film merger connects the vaudeville circuits with two motion-picture organizations.
- 1929** Famous singing comedienne Sophie Tucker performs.
- 1930** At the height of the Depression, in keeping with a national plan of RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum), the Orpheum agrees to provide ticket-sale jobs to help desperate people make contacts with patrons for other jobs.
- 1932** Theatergoers flock to hear famed Pola Negri of the silent screen speak and sing for the first time in his long movie career.
- 1933** Orpheum installs a new sound system, said to be unexcelled in the Northwest, similar to one at Radio City in New York, to do justice to a performance of "Little Women."
- Orpheum acquired by Singer Chain, a Chicago theater group.
- 1935** Folies Bergere' Revue. "To bring it to Minneapolis, the Orpheum Theatre has practically mortgaged the balcony seats."
- 1940s** Orpheum continues to be used for movies, touring productions of Broadway shows and concerts by live orchestras such as Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman and Harry James.

Minneapolis Community Development Agency

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Equal Housing and Employment Opportunity

- 1940 *Gone with the Wind* comes to the Orpheum. Intent on being the first to see it, theatergoers form a solid column out the theater doors, down Hennepin and around the corner on Ninth Street.
- 1953 New wide 25'x 55' screen -- "Miracle Mirror Cinemascope," with stereophonic sound -- installed, the first in Minneapolis, opening with "Thunder Bay."
- 1959 Ted Mann purchases theater and brings in a dozen Broadway touring productions until 1965, including *Bye, Bye, Birdie*; *Fiorello*; *The Miracle Worker*; *Advise and Consent*; *A Thurber Carnival*.
- 1967 Live productions return with the Theatre Guild Subscription Series, including headliner *Fiddler on the Roof*.
- 1970 Mann sells theater to General Cinema Corp. for \$5.7 million. Backlit marquee installed, replacing an ornate rectangular one dating from the '40s.
- 1979 Theater is redone from top to bottom in preparation for opening of *A Chorus Line*. Lobby and theater ceilings, intricately sculpted with scroll and leafy designs, are painted over with a soft mushroom beige. "Spiffier and up-to-date" chrome box-office windows are installed; ticket sales are computerized.
- 1984 Bob Dylan and brother David Zimmerman purchase the theater; Zimmerman refurbishes in "warm, living-room colors."
- 1987 Broadway touring companies balk at coming to the Orpheum because it badly needs repair, lacks air conditioning, and sits in a deteriorating area. Broadway promoters leave because of financial losses.
- 1988 The Orpheum is silent. City officials and developers agree it is key to revitalization of downtown Hennepin Avenue. Large chunks of peeling paint, a sign of major roof deterioration, hang from the auditorium ceiling. An archaic air-conditioning system, which uses a pump to bring water from an underground well, leaves theatergoers perspiring. Ancient boilers cost \$7,000/month to heat the building.
- June 24, 1988 Minneapolis City Council votes to purchase (\$1.4 million) and rehab (\$600,000 for stabilization, new roof, carpeting and other urgently needed repairs), paid with a \$2-million loan from the MCDA revolving Development Account, which uses tax-increment funding.
- Oct. 1988 Grand reopening, with "bright lights and big stars" -- Broadway shows, concerts and comedy, including *South Pacific*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and Dorothy Hamill's *Nutcracker on Ice*.

March 1992 City Council approves Orpheum expansion to further improve and expand theater and allow staging of large Broadway mega-productions such as *Miss Saigon* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

Oct. 1988 City Council approves issuance of revenue bonds for renovation and expansion, to be repaid through a two-dollar historic-restoration surcharge on Orpheum and State tickets.

Jan. 1, 1993 Restoration begins.

June 16, 1993 *Miss Saigon* explodes all Twin Cities single-day theater-ticket sales, nearly surpassing the Broadway record: \$449,000 for 8,000 tickets.

Nov. 21, 1993 Public Open House scheduled for reopening of Orpheum Theater.

Jan. 11, 1994 Opening performance of *Miss Saigon*.

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