

WILTERN THEATRE HISTORY

Opened October 7, 1931 as the Warner Bros. Western Theatre with "Alexander Hamilton" as the opening attraction.

The city refused to close Wilshire Blvd. for the opening, so Warner Bros. built a temporary bridge across the street as a grand entrance and called it "The Bridge of Stars."

The building had been commissioned in 1929 by Henry de Roulet and the Pellissier family. The building was known as the Pellissier Building. Warner Bros had the theatre on a lease but closed it in less than a year due to poor business.

It was reopened in the mid-thirties and called the Wil Tern or Wil-Tern. It was operated by Fox West Coast and several independent operators. The name soon lost the hyphen and space, becoming the Wiltern Theatre

Warner Bros. returned as operators in the late 1930's and it was advertised as Warner's Wiltern and later the Stanley Warner Wiltern.

In 1956 the building was sold by the Pellissier family to Franklin Life insurance Co. and the building became known as the Franklin Life Building.

Pacific Theatres acquired the theatre from Stanley Warner (along with most of the other southern California RKO-SW holdings) in the late 60's and was the final operator for the building as a movie theatre.

It closed in 1979 and was stripped and slated for demolition.

Only the intervention of a group of local preservationists saved the complex from being demolished. (The preservation of the Wiltern was one of the Los Angeles Conservancy's first victories in its fight to preserve the architectural heritage of the City.)

It was saved from the wrecking ball again in 1984 by developer Wayne Ratkovich and restored to its original opulence by theatre wiz Ray Shepardson and Los Angeles architect Brenda Levin. The theater had been poorly maintained—many of the murals and plasterwork were damaged, many of the fixtures had been sold off or pillaged, and portions of the ceiling had crashed onto the ground floor seats. It had also been used as the primary location for the film *Get Crazy*, which caused further damage. To restore the theater to its original state required some expert craftsmanship to repair what was there from A.T. Heinsbergen, the son of the original painter and some creativity to replace what had been lost including salvaging vintage Art Deco seats from the soon to be renovated Paramount Theater in Portland, Oregon. Further, while it was originally designed and run as a movie theater, Ratkovich wanted to convert the Wiltern into a performing arts center that could host live concerts and Broadway-level stage performances—which entailed opening up the rear wall and extending the stage and stage house of the theater back fifteen feet. After a four-year renovation the Wiltern Theatre finally opened again to the public on May 1, 1985 (under the management of Bill Graham Presents) with a UCLA sponsored engagement of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

Architects: G. Albert Lansburgh did the theatre, Morgan, Walls & Clements did the exterior, retail spaces and office tower, now known again as the Pellissier Building.

The decorator for the theatre was Anthony Heinsbergen. His son Tony worked on the 1984-84 restoration.

The most dramatic element of the design is the sunburst on the ceiling of the auditorium, with each ray its own Art Deco skyscraper—G. Albert Lansburgh's vision of the future of Wilshire Boulevard.

The exterior terra cotta was by the Gladding-McBean Co. in a custom color that became known as "Pellissier Green." The blue-green glazed architectural terracotta tile-covered tower is an example of French Zig-Zag Moderne styling.

Seating: 2,344 originally. The main floor was resealed in 1985 but subsequent modifications in 2002 removed the 1,200 permanent seats on the ground floor and leveled the floor into 5 terraces to allow for a variety of configurations from a standing room only crowd of 2,300 to a more intimate seated arrangement holding 1850 people. The loge and mezzanine levels in the balcony continue to offer fixed theater seats. The venue remains one of the largest theaters in Los Angeles.

Status: Live music venue. SFX obtained the lease for the operation of the Wiltern in July 2000, and its successor companies Clear Channel Entertainment and now Live Nation have continued to present a wide range of performances at the Wiltern.

Pipe Organ: When the Wiltern Theatre first opened it housed the largest theater pipe organ in the western United States, a Kimball 4/37, now removed. It was last played in 1979. The Los Angeles chapter of the American Theater Organ Enthusiasts worked to restore the theater's 37-rank Kimball pipe organ in 1962, reputed to be the largest one in Los Angeles at the time—and held recitals there through the late 1960s and into the mid-1970s.

The Wiltern in the Movies: The Wiltern Theatre has been used for lots of movie and commercial shoots. In "American Hot Wax" (Paramount, 1978) it was the Brooklyn Paramount, complete with change of neon on the marquee and vertical signs. Primary shooting location for the film "Get Crazy" 1983. "Barton Fink" 1991 used the lobby like a hotel lobby.