

San Gabriel Mission Playhouse, 1927

320 South Mission Drive

Opened: March 5th, 1927

Seating Capacity: 1,387

The Mission Play, by John Steven cc, was a three-hour pageant production that told the dramatic story of the founding of the California missions by the Franciscan Fathers under the leadership of Father Junipero Serra. Performed in San Gabriel, Ca, it was first staged in 1912 across from the San Gabriel Mission.

The story of “The Mission Play” began in 1901 when attorney John Steven McGroarty moved from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles to become a reporter and write columns for the Los Angeles Times, a post he kept for 40 years. A poet and a man of faith, McGroarty — while visiting Frank A. Miller, California visionary, founder of Riverside, and builder of the Mission Inn, — received the inspiration for “The Mission Play.”

Standing on Mount Rubidoux, in Riverside, in the shadow of a cross erected to the memory of Father Junípero Serra, McGroarty and Miller were moved to write and produce a play about Father Serra’s missionary work to the natives of California. Miller, a Congregationalist, became a major financial contributor to the production, along with railroad baron Henry P. Huntington and Los Angeles Times mogul Henry Chandler.

From 1922 to 1927, the Mission Playhouse was designed by Arthur Burnett Benton and William J. Dodd and built by McGroarty, adjacent to the San Gabriel Mission, to house the play. The playhouse’s architecture and design motif reflects Spanish, Native-American and Californian Culture; its facade was designed to resemble McGroarty’s favorite mission, San Antonio de Padua near Monterey, and is clearly the most identifiable aspect of the building and can be seen for miles. For the playhouse’s opening, King Alfonso XIII of Spain sent ten beautifully woven tapestries depicting Spanish provinces that still adorn the playhouse walls.

The San Gabriel Mission Playhouse is a magnificent and opulent theater steeped in history, complete with a beautifully carved and painted ceiling, a fully operational Wurlitzer Theatre Organ, and chandeliers that replicate the lanterns used on Spanish galleons which sailed around the tip of South America en route to California in the 1800’s.

After the end of the 1932 season and an astounding 3,198 performances, the effects of the depression, plus an attempt to produce it on Broadway, ended the long run of the play.

This landmark structure was soon returned to the holders of the mortgage where its future was in doubt. During the ensuing decade, the Mission Playhouse served as a movie theater. Then, during the severe housing shortage that occurred while WWII was being fought, the Playhouse dressing rooms were used as apartments.

It was in the mid 1940’s that a group of San Gabriel residents formed a citizen’s committee whose goal was to see the Playhouse purchased by the City. Although the first initiative was turned down by the voters in April of 1945, it was successfully passed in August of that year at which time the City purchased the Mission Playhouse and renamed it the San Gabriel Civic Auditorium.

During the 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake, one of its bell towers toppled off the roof and crashed into the storage room above the theater's foyer. The facade was restored, and because of damage caused by shoring up the ceilings during repairs, much of the lobby and auditorium ceiling required plaster and painting restoration. Today, the theater looks much as it did when the Mission Play was in production.

On September 26, 2007, the City renamed the theater again back to the original name.

The Wurlitzer Theatre Organ is one of the finest in the country. Originally built in 1927 in New York for the Albee Theatre in Brooklyn, this magnificent instrument was donated to the Playhouse in 1968 and was fully restored in 2009 with the aid of a generous donation from the Peter Crotty Charitable Foundation.