

The Alex in Glendale Makes a Comeback Again

■ **Theater:** The landmark Alexander will have a grand reopening as a performing arts and cultural center with an open house Sunday.

"It was like that, you know . . . the stars, the searchlights, the excitement. Very elegant—very posh. And so was Alex."

—From "Alexander Then and Now," written, directed and choreographed by Paul Shipton

By JEFF PRUGH
TIMES STAFF WRITER

GLENDALE—Flash back to the Roaring '20s, to a hang-out called the Sum Drug Store, where a young soda jerk named Morrison dishes up the best ice cream sodas in town.

His buddy at Glendale High School, a kid named Bob Caskey, works as a ticket-taker at the Alexander Theatre, where he soon becomes assistant manager—for \$17.10 a week.

Together, they cut a deal that's as sweet as two scoops of cherry-vanilla and a double feature: Caskey gets free sodas, and Morrison watches free movies.

From there, young Morrison goes on to earn a scholarship to USC, works summers as a carpen-

people of every generation share so many fond stories about the Alex."

For Sean Clark, who has coordinated the Alex's restoration on behalf of the city's Glendale Redevelopment Agency, the theater holds a special meaning: He and his wife-to-be spent their first date there.

Today, the Alex's latest reincarnation stands as testimony to a community's self-esteem, embodied in 1992 when the Redevelopment Agency purchased the building from Mann Theatres and the open-air forecourt from the Christian Science Church, all for \$837,556, then earmarked \$6.5 million in agency funding for restoration and upgrades.

But the theater's rebirth never would have happened without gritty perseverance by a ragtag cavalry of Glendale Historical Society activists, who suspected that the theater's days might be numbered.

Galloping to the Alex's rescue, they conducted a study in 1988 that urged saving the historic theater. Their cause got a boost from Life magazine, whose October, 1989,

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ANDREA HUMBERGER
past president, Glendale Historical Society

ter at Fox Studios, gets bit parts in the movies and plays the lead in a Western called "The Big Trail."

But all that happens before Marion Michael Morrison blazes even bigger trails to the Alexander's big screen and one day swaggers to an Oscar in the film "True Grit" . . . as John Wayne.

It happens before the Alexander—born in 1925 as one of Southern California's premier movie and vaudeville palaces—shortens its name . . . to Alex.

It happens, too, before the Alex would star in its own real-life suspense thriller—surviving a backstage fire in 1948, dodging bullets from TV's invasion in the 1950s, escaping the wrecking ball in the 1990s.

Now, downtown Glendale's born-again-and-again landmark is gussied up for a grand reopening as a performing arts and cultural center (seating capacity, 1,460).

The curtain goes up with a New Year's Eve gala featuring vocalist Robert Guillaume ("Phantom of the Opera"), host Peter Marshall and a homecoming by the Glendale Symphony Orchestra.

A free public open house, as well as the formal dedication and ribbon-cutting, will take place Sunday from noon to 3 p.m.

And soon, three big-name musicals will help christen the Alex's inaugural season: an adaptation of James Michener's novel "Sayonara" (Jan. 27 through Feb. 13), "Mame" (April 7-24) and "Fame, the Musical" (May 19 through June 5). All have been booked by the Alex's Pasadena-based operator, the Theatre Corp. of America.

Already, many are shouting "Bravo!" in Glendale. Some old-timers haven't seen such excitement since the days when Hollywood's glitterati flocked to the Alex's studio previews.

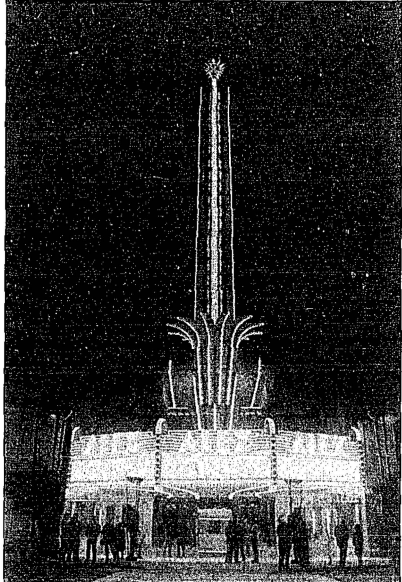
"The Alex is the most loved building in Glendale," says Andrea Humberger, the Glendale Historical Society's past president, who sits on the theater's board. "Here,

issue carried an article—"One-Hundred and One Things Worth Saving" in America—and cited just one single-screen movie house: the Alex.

To galvanize community support (and counter skepticism among city leaders), the historical society filled the Alex on successive nights in 1990 with a multimedia stage show—"Alexander Then and Now"—a song-and-dance, slides-and-film romp through the theater's and America's history. The show was written, directed and choreographed by Paul Shipton, a Broadway showman-turned Glendale resident, who died at 52 this month after a long illness, unable to live his dream of a reborn Alex.

With a goal of 150 dates next year (about 90 are filled) and 10,000 season subscriptions to the three musicals already sold, the Alex's promoters are optimistic about the theater's success.

Besides music and dramatic theater and the Glendale Symphony, the Alex stands available for dance companies, light-opera productions, headline entertainers, chamber orchestras and film retrospectives, documentaries and festivals, as well as lectures, town hall meetings and high school commencements. The promenade forecourt can accommodate social functions such as mixers, weddings and bar mitzvahs.



IRFAN KHAN / Los Angeles Times

Restoration of the 1,460-seat former movie palace cost \$6.5 million.

"A preferred preview house by most of the major studios, the Alex was Louis B. Mayer's personal favorite because of its incomparable acoustics. . . . They just don't build them like they used to."

—From "Alexander Then and Now."

What visitors will see before entering any of the events at the theater—designed by Glendale architects Arthur G. Lindley and Charles R. Selkirk—are open skies and 10 towering, newly planted palm trees, illuminated by floodlights. The massive twin columns flanking the front door carry out the Alex's Greek and Egyptian design so effectively that it's easy to wonder if you've stumbled onto the courtyard set of the epic film "Spartacus."

It's a setting that looks more lavish than even its \$6.5-million restoration price tag suggests.

"One study said it would cost between \$15 million and \$24 million to renovate this theater—which is ridiculous," says project manager Jack Germain of Glendale, adding that he and his co-developers from the Los Angeles-based Ratkovich Company restored the Wiltern Theatre for \$5.2 million.

Part of the restoration included what Germain calls "creating comforts." That meant improving sight lines, widening the stage and installing new lights, seats and fresh carpeting, as well as platforms for patrons who are disabled. It also

meant removing asbestos, meeting earthquake and other codes and putting in restrooms in the balcony (where none had existed) and expanding those on the main floor.

So now that Glendale has said, "The show must go on!" the star itself—the grand old Alex—can boast of not just cosmetic surgery but what its fan club hopes is a long-term lease on life.

About all that's missing is the late John Wayne himself, riding across center stage on horseback, tipping his hat to those who soon will sit where he long ago watched movies for free.

What better way to imagine toasting the Alex Theatre's new life—and his old hometown's true grit?