



Photos by BRIAN WALSH / Los Angeles Times

The Orpheum showed its last movie on Thursday. The new owner plans to use it for live performances and TV and film shoots.

Ushering In a New Era

Historic Movie Theaters Will Reopen as Performing Arts Centers

By LOUIS SAHAGUN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The Palace and the Orpheum, two grand historic theaters built on Broadway in the 1920s, showed their final films on Thursday before closing for renovations and planned revivals as performing arts centers. Both opened as vaudeville theaters offering as many as eight acts a day, and gained renown by featuring stars such as Lena Horne, Nat King Cole, Donald O'Connor, Judy Garland and Sammy Davis Jr.

That era ended in 1948, when Ed Sullivan arrived on television. For the past 50 years, they have been movie houses operated by Metropolitan Theatres, a family-owned company that once managed 12 movie palaces on the busiest thoroughfare in downtown Los Angeles.

The closure after Thursday night's films at the Orpheum and Palace ended the Corwin family's connection to downtown film exhibition, said Metropolitan chairman of the board Bruce Corwin.

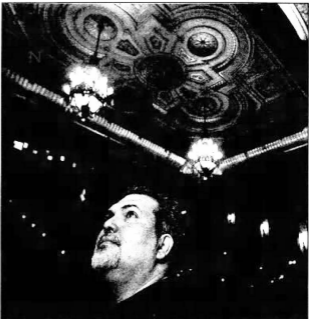
Late last year, Metropolitan sold the Palace to redeveloper Tom Gilmore. The Orpheum's lease ran out on Dec. 31, when Metropolitan sold it to Anjac Fashion Buildings.

However, Metropolitan continued to sublease the theaters whose stages, lobbies and ceilings are ornately decorated with golden and marble flourishes.

Corwin cited rising downtown rents, dwindling business and enormous maintenance costs among reasons for bowing out of the Orpheum, which has a fancy brass ticket booth in front and an ornate marble lobby.

"We had it for 67 years, so this is an emotional ending to my family's involvement," Corwin said. "But it's not the end of the end. It's just the end of an era."

The new owner intends to renovate the place, then offer it for live performances and television and film shoots, according to Ed Kelsey, Anjac's director of facilities.



Jon Olivan, the Orpheum's director of special events, hosted a small party after the final show.

Admiring a ceiling decorated with gold leaf, Kelsey said, "we'll be closing for six months to bring it up to modern standards with new seats, lighting, sound systems, stage rigging and bathrooms. After that, it'll be better than ever and available for filming, church groups, even occasional concerts."

Tentative plans call for reopening in July or August "with three or four events, maybe a pop act, a Latin act and a classical performance—all for charity," Kelsey said.

Only a handful of patrons

turned out for the Orpheum's final offering, the feature-length cartoon "The Emperor's New Groove." Nonetheless, Jon Olivan, the theater's director of special events, cut cake and poured champagne at the snack counter for friends and supporters.

Among them was Steve Markham, 78, founder of Friends of the Orpheum, a volunteer group which for years has kept the old theater's carpets clean and chandeliers sparkling, even wiping decades of cigarette smoke off the cream and gold marble walls.

"Judy Garland was discovered

on this very stage, and Sammy Davis Jr. appeared here when Jack Benny was the master of ceremonies," he said. "Benny met his wife Mary at the May Co. across the street."

Leaning against one of the first candy counters, he added, "there are six floors of dressing rooms here, even animal rooms for cat and dog acts, and big brass doors at the entrance."

"So I'm very sad it's the end of one era," he said. "But I'm really excited about reviving it as a performing arts center."