

# Theater's makeover for a century

After a \$1-million restoration, the Palace reopens for 'Sunset Boulevard'

BOB POOL

The crowds who filed into the Palace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles may have felt like they were stepping a century back in time.

The polished marble near the entrance gleamed, and the gold leaf around the giant pastoral murals that flank the theater's stage glistened. Eleven hundred brand-new red velvet seats awaited theatergoers there to watch Billy Wilder's 1950 classic, "Sunset Boulevard."

Sunday's three sold-out screenings marked the 100th anniversary of the venerable theater at 630 S. Broadway, which first opened its doors on June 26, 1911, as a vaudeville house.

They also showcased the \$1-million restoration of the hall whose 40-foot stage has spotlighted entertainers ranging from Fred Astaire to Harry Houdini to Sarah Bernhardt.

The theater was called



BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times

**RENEWAL:** Painters touch up the gold-colored trim around a mural at Shahram Delijani's newly refurbished Palace Theatre.

the Orpheum when it opened; it was renamed the Palace in 1926 when a larger Orpheum theater was built down the street.

"At first, we thought we would just do a little light renovation for its centennial," said Shahram Delijani, whose family owns

the Palace and three other historic downtown theaters. "But then we decided to really restore it."

One part of the theater is different from the original, however: its third-level balcony.

When the theater opened, the upper "gallery" level was earmarked

for non-white theatergoers. Reportedly designated "Negroes Only," it featured bench seating, had separate restrooms and could be reached only through an outside entrance. Historians have noted that such an arrangement was unusual in [See Palace, AA4]



# L.A.'s Palace celebrates a milestone

[Palace, from AA1] a city that, in those days, was more tolerant than other places.

Delijani said he has his own plans for the upper level.

"I'm going to flip it. I'm going to turn it into a VIP area," he said.

Craftsmen in charge of the theater renovation stripped away as many as seven layers of paint from walls and original hardwood wainscoting. They uncovered the hall's original wallpaper, and Delijani was able to replicate it, along with the original color scheme.

"Returning this to its original condition is a heart-warming experience," said Los Angeles artist Teale Hatheway, who restored a fireplace mantel in a hallway leading to a restroom area. "It's nice to be part of something that will be here for many years to come."

The theater was built well to begin with, added artist Debi Cable, who helped restore its marble work. "This building's bones are spectacular," Cable said.

Designed by architect G. Albert Lansburgh, the theater sported a Renaissance revival facade with decorative panels depicting the muses of vaudeville — music, song, dance and drama — created by Spanish sculptor Domingo Mora.

Its interior featured a French look, with garland-draped columns, hand-painted murals on the ceiling and a row of electric lights that outlined the balcony and called attention to its 1911 modernity.

Because it initially had no sound system, Lansburgh paid close attention to the theater's acoustics and seating arrangement; no seat is farther than 80 feet from the stage.

Lansburgh, who is said to have been influenced by a devastating Chicago fire, which killed more than 600 theatergoers in 1903, designed the Palace to have 22 fire escape exits and one of the city's first interior sprinkler systems.

During the theater's early years, vaudeville stars appearing on its stage included Al Jolson, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers and Will Rogers.

After the live shows were moved to the new Orpheum theater in 1926, the Palace became a silent movie theater that screened newsreels and shorts.

In the 1930s, it became a first-run movie house for features with sound.

Those familiar with the Palace describe its renovation as spectacular.

"When you came in here before the restoration, you didn't want to stay," theater expert Ed Kelsey said. "There was a mildew smell, the seats were worn out, and paint was peeling."

Sunday's 100th anniversary event benefited the Los Angeles Conservancy, a preservation group that, for 25 years, has organized screenings in historic downtown theaters through its Last Remaining Seats program.

Seats were also featured at the theater's original 1911 opening, when they were



Photographs by LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

**CLASSIC:** A crowd files into the Palace Theatre on Sunday as the theater celebrates its 100th birthday. The theater on Broadway in downtown Los Angeles opened on June 26, 1911, as a vaudeville house.



**PACKED HOUSE:** The audience at the newly renovated Palace Theatre on Broadway in downtown Los Angeles watches "Sunset Boulevard."

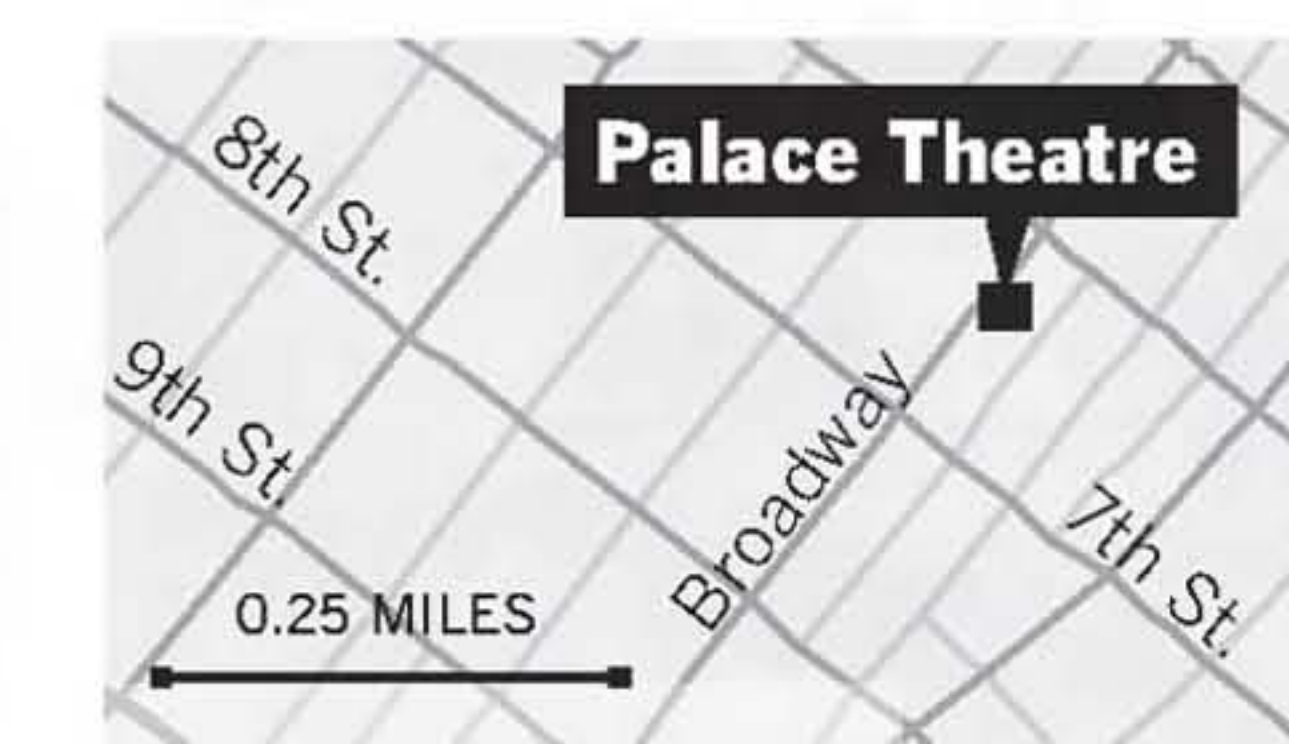
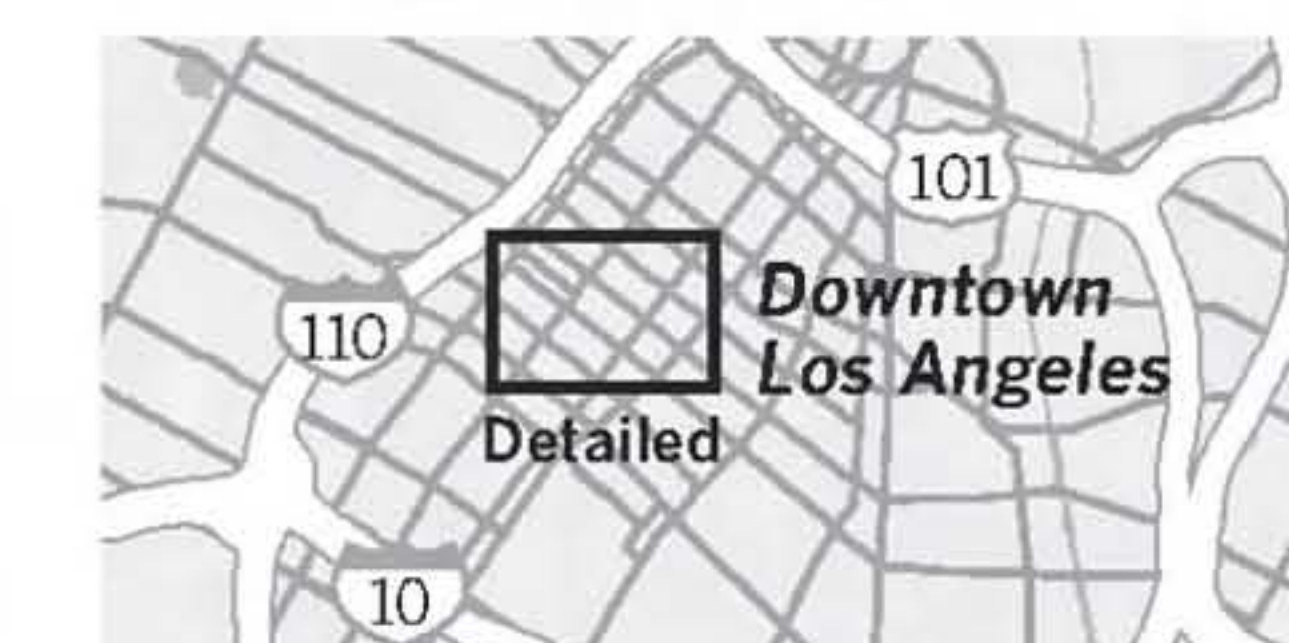
"auctioned" as a fundraiser that benefited a Los Angeles organization called Associated Charities.

Delijani said regular pro-

gramming at the Palace will begin July 28 with an appearance by the Lucent Dossier troupe, which will stage a live circus-burlesque show.

He said the Palace, along with the Los Angeles, State and Tower theaters, are his father's gift to the city.

Developer Ezat Delijani



Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas

MAX HENDERSON Los Angeles Times

is an immigrant from Iran who was forced out of his country by the 1970s revolution.

Now 34, Delijani said he grew up "running around and playing" in the ornate Los Angeles Theatre after his father saved it from the wrecking ball in the 1980s.

"My dad was so thankful to this country for taking us in," he said. "These four theaters are my Dad's legacy."

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