

A Historical Synopsis of the League of Historic American Theatres

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The League of Historic American Theatres was incorporated in 1976 by an eclectic group who were interested in old theatres--for one reason or another--and the real hidden agenda in uniting historic playhouses across the country was to try and reconstruct the old touring circuit...but that's another story.

The League's statement of purpose has evolved somewhat over the past decade, but the original and fundamental goals for the organization have been substantially fulfilled. The League defines an historic theatre as one built prior to 1953*, which has one or more of the following attributes:

- is an architecturally significant structure deemed worthy of preservation;
- has played an important role in the history of the American stage;
- can be used as a performing arts facility.

**Staff note: the benchmark age LHAT uses for determining whether a theatre is historic, and therefore eligible for membership, is 50 years or older. Theatres aged less than 50 years who wish to join are considered on a case by case basis based on the three attributes the theatre possesses as described above.*

The founders were essentially a weird gang--Michael Price from the Goodspeed Opera House, Bob Stoddard, then at the Grand Opera House in Wilmington, Delaware, and most important, probably, Gene Chesley, a theatre professor in design from the University of California in Davis. Gene was important because he had independently put together the beginnings of theatres, built for live theatrical production, in the United States prior to 1910. This was an increasingly interesting document, as more old theatres were falling to the wrecker's ball every day--particularly in downtown locations, in even the smallest cities and towns, as urban renewal had its impact across the country. Some areas were, with the help of strong local preservation groups, or even zoning laws, restoring and preserving their downtown--and were cleverly using the ancient opera house in their town as a keystone to mobilize this effort. People could get passionately involved with saving an old theatre where they had enjoyed live shows or films in childhood--there was an emotional connection. So frequently, the campaign to "Save the Theatre" and restore it to former glory became the anchor in major downtown restoration efforts.

The initial question before Price, Stoddard and Chesley was, "Is there a need for a service organization who can unite these restoration efforts in a common cause, and be useful in helping people with no knowledge of theatre architecture, technical specifications, restoration techniques, etc. achieve their aims with their local hall?" Was anybody else covering this area? The Theatre Historical Society published a terrific magazine, *Marquee*, but their members were primarily focused on old movie palaces. Their annual conference consisted of visits to these theatres, with photo opportunities for conferees. ACUCAS, (The Association of College, University and Community Arts Administrators), existed to assist presenting organizations, but with a focus on booking--certainly not preservation and restoration. The same was true of ISCAA, (International Society of Performing Arts Administrators), and IAAM, (International Association of Auditorium Managers). So Stoddard spearheaded the formation and incorporation of this new organization, the League of Historical American Theatres, and did a mailing to potential members using Gene Chesley's list. The response was quite amazing with the aforementioned Goodspeed, Grand in Wilmington. Springer Opera House in Columbus, Georgia, Academy of Music in Philadelphia and Brooklyn, Dock Street in Charleston, Ford's Theatre in Washington, Ohio

in Columbus, Pabst in Milwaukee, What Cheer in Iowa, and the Wheeler in Aspen--among others, joining as charter members accompanied by miscellaneous professionals--Conrad Schmitt Studios, Rambusch Studios, Country Roads Theatrical Seating, various architects and theatrical suppliers, and individuals. A Board of Directors was established, and an office set up, pro bono, at the Grand Opera House in Wilmington.

The League's initial conference took place in New Harmony, Indiana on June 3, 1977. Attendance was small, (41 representatives from 26 theatres), but enthusiastic. Successive annual meetings were held in various parts of the country where ample historic theatres would warrant a convenient tour by bus and car--they were: Kansas City; Goodspeed and Environs; Georgia; Wisconsin; Southern Ohio and Kentucky; Mid-Atlantic region; Pittsburgh and Cleveland; Colorado; and New York City. Membership grew along with attendance at the conferences, and the League in ten years was an established and important asset to the national preservation movement.

In a struggle for financial stability, the League's Board learned some painful but realistic lessons. Service organizations are nearly impossible to raise money for--interested givers are already funding the constituent organizations. The League's only significant gift came from the National Endowment of Arts, and was restricted to the organization, collation, and re-locating of the Chesley Collection, (Gene Chesley's own personal library of materials on old theatres), to the theatre library at Princeton University after Gene's untimely death in 1981. And the publication of an up-dated list of historic theatres in America.

Second, our membership is poor--just as with all the not-for-profit arts--so dues had to be maintained at an accessible level. A mighty effort was made to broaden the membership base, and conference fees were designed to create a built-in profit each year. In that way, the League stabilized direct expenses, and attempted to keep overhead costs at a bare minimum (we have maintained office space, at no cost, at: the Grand Opera House, Wilmington, Delaware; the Goodspeed Opera House, East Haddam, Connecticut; The National Theatre, Washington, D.C.; and in recent years, thanks to the gracious hospitality of the National Trust, at Decatur House, also in Washington). The Board is all volunteers, and the office is operated by a part-time, paid, executive director and an intern from American University.

A service organization exists to serve--if we can't identify a constituency who needs our services, we should cease to exist. So with the League, those services are directed at a membership which is, in many ways, finite... We have identified, in our recent work on up-dating the national list, a great many "new to us" old theatres--but "that's all there is, there is no more," and many of those buildings uncovered by John Frick and Carlton Ward in their research will never be restored, never be operational--for one reason or another. So if the League maintains an active membership of something in excess of 150 theatres, (augmented by those same professional and interested individual members), that is our market area to serve.

These theatres range in size and prominence from the tiny mid 1800's opera house over the police station and city hall in a small Connecticut town to the Philadelphia and Brooklyn Academies of Music, and this is the scenario: Six blue-haired ladies in the little Connecticut town discover that their beloved, but-dormant-for-the-last-20 years, opera house is about to be razed--the wrecker's crane is on the way down the street. They are hysterical. They call the local historical society to ask what to do--the historical society refers them to our Washington office. Our Executive Director mobilizes the forces by phone, and within hours, the Mayor, the editor of the local newspaper, and other prominent and influential citizens of the Connecticut town have received telegrams from members of the League's Board, (representing some fairly high-powered arts institutions across the country), suggesting that a stay be placed on the demolition of the facility until the value and potential of the theatre can be determined. The League offers to send someone, for

travel/accommodation expenses only, to do a free consultation for a citizen committee on the subject of this old theatre--discussion:

- 1) is the theatre worth saving?;
- 2) Can it be restored and how much will it cost?;
- 3) Could a new theatre, a better theatre be constructed for less money?;
- 4) How does the community feel about the old theatre?;
- 5) Is there an audience in the town to support not only the restoration effort, but its operation after completion--and for what kind of entertainment product?;
- 6) Can the theatre be exploited as a model restoration project in the community?;
- 7) Are there local art groups, desperate for a performance space, who could utilize the theatre were it to be modernized technically, and will they lend their support and that of their boards, etc.??;
- 8) How to find the right (a) architects (b) theatre consultants (c) marketing and programming advice, and (d) experts on preservation law and potential grants.

The answer to the first question may be "No", the theatre is not worth saving. It possesses no redeeming architectural value, all the interior detail has long since been destroyed or removed, it is technically or structurally impossible to salvage, its stage or auditorium house configurations are simply not feasible for any reasonable future use. If that's the case, give it up, quit the fight, and let them tear it down. It's simply not worth the effort and angst.

Fortunately, that "no" answer is the exception. Most old theatres were wonderfully over built, had tons of charm and personality (unlike most new construction), and with reasonable modification can accommodate contemporary production demands.

So those are the people we aim to help--and who else is equipped to do so? The National Trust can't answer theatre-specific restoration questions--they refer those folks to us. And we have, over the years had a positive impact. We were co-signers with Actors Equity Association, the Trust the NYC Municipal Arts Society, and Landmarks in the suit to save the Hayes and Morosco Theatres in New York City--unsuccessfully, obviously, despite all pressure. And we took heat from potential donors to the League for taking that position and aligning ourselves with that movement. How could we not--our organizational mandate is to save and restore historic theatres.

The founders of the League had this dream of reviving the old touring circuit--noble but unrealistic, as it turned out. Everyone was desperate for 'product" (still are...) and thought the answer might be this consortium of historic theatres who could guarantee x number of weeks in compatible facilities. Except they're not compatible in anyway but age. A terrific attraction at the Brooklyn Academy of Music couldn't begin to fit the Fulton Theatre in Lancaster, Pa., and might not work for that audience either. It became clear early in discussions of this circuit concept that any joint property would have to be staged, designed and programmed to the "lowest common denominator". This being the smallest stage, least technically equipped, least experienced stage crew, etc. and this simply didn't work for the larger halls (they were primarily the ones with enough capital to make the commitment in the first place). So that plan was jettisoned in favor of a strong annual conference on "how to's" and that's where we find ourselves today.

The League's annual convention consists of a spectacular tour of historic theatres (some members, some not) by charter bus, with stops at historic hotels, historic restaurants, historic rest stops... And continuing throughout the length of the conference are seminars, workshops, case-studies, discussions and volumes of information exchanged between and among conferees--usually over a four or five day period in early summer.

Special guests are invited to participate, sharing their particular area of expertise--Brendan Gill, Ellen Burstyn, Mayor Edward I. Koch, Gerald Schoenfeld, and others joined us at various conferences.

The other priorities, in addition to the conference, are a monthly bulletin, the maintenance and acquisition of new materials for the Chesley Collection at Princeton, and the publication of the National Directory of Historic Theatres. Regional representatives selected by the League's Board organize mini-conferences and tours of their respective regions, conduct membership campaigns in their areas, and encourage and promote items for inclusion in the League's bulletin from their several-state area. Membership supports these activities, and at the moment we're holding our own.

Clearly, there is a need for the services the League provides--and we'll take some credit for having saved a few theatres from destruction, and for helping others to get through the early restoration phase and into successful operation. The big guys help the little guys, and the results are exciting and very rewarding. Below is a brief case study of how the League has been able to help one of its member theatres:

In 1980, the Thalian Hall Commission joined the League of Historic American Theatres. At that time, the Thalian Hall project was virtually at a standstill. The first phase of the renovation had been completed with the restoration of the auditorium, but the facility was under-utilized with only one real tenant, the Community Theatre. The next scheduled phase of renovation was to be the revitalization of the stage house and the necessary technical improvements. However, this part of the project was not getting anywhere and nobody seemed to know what to do next or how to proceed. The organization had no identity separate from the Community Theatre, and therefore had little credibility.

In the past six years there has been a complete reversal for this project and much of this success is attributed to our participation in the annual League conferences. These conferences, with their informative sessions, case studies, theatre tours, and one-on-one connections with theatre managers from all around the country, have provided us with a great many new ideas and new approaches to our project. At the 1982 conference I had the opportunity to talk with a number of theatre consultants. In 1982 we hired Theatre Projects to develop a feasibility study for Thalian Hall; this was a direct result of meeting Iain Macintosh at the League's conference. This study, when it was completed in 1983, was the basis for our inclusion in a city wide bond issue. The successful passage of the issue in 1985 provided \$1.7 million for the renovation of the Hall.

In 1984 we took advantage of the League's free consulting service by bringing in Judith Daykin for a management consultation. Ms. Daykin's visits began a process which has led to the reorganization and expansion of the Board of Trustees, and a resolution of our relationship with the Community Theatre. In 1985, we once again brought in a League consultant, Jean Rosenthal Associates, to further refine the Thalian Hall Master Plan. At the 1985 conference, after talking to many theatre managers who had been through similar renovations, I realized that we had skipped an important part of our planning process. This led to the development of a programming study so that the proposed renovation would solve the problems of the future and not of the past.

During the past six years, rental income has grown from \$6,000 annually to over \$30,000 annually and use of the facility has quadrupled. Thalian Hall has become one of the most important assets to the community and our recent feasibility study for the Capital Campaign

shows that of the 52 community leaders interviewed, 100% supported the Thalian Hall Renovation Project.

The success of the Thalian Hall Project simply would not have occurred if we had not become involved with the League of Historic American Theatres. The ideas and thoughts gained from the conferences and through the expertise of their members have had an enormous impact on Thalian Hall and on our role within the community.

The League is a passionate hobby. These theatres are our heritage, our ancestors, part of our past, an important part of our present. They deserve the heroic efforts expended in saving them and turning them into functioning, productive jewels in America's cultural crown.