

Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 5, 1988; Designation List 199
LP-1338

MARK HELLINGER THEATER (originally Hollywood Theater), 217-239 West 51st Street, Manhattan. Built 1929; architect, Thomas Lamb.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1023, Lot 11.

On June 14 and 15, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Mark Hellinger Theater and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 34). The hearing was continued to October 19, 1982. Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eighty-one witnesses spoke or had statements read into the record in favor of designation. One witness spoke in opposition to designation. The owner, with his representatives, appeared at the hearing, and indicated that he had not formulated an opinion regarding designation. The Commission has received many letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Mark Hellinger Theater survives today as one of the few intact grand movie palaces in Manhattan, as well as one of the historic theaters that symbolize American theater for both New York and the nation. Built for Warner Brothers in 1929 as the Hollywood Theater, it showcased movies and then vaudeville until 1934, when it was first converted for use as a legitimate theater.

Warner Brothers was one of the great studios dominating American filmmaking in the 1920s. Having successfully developed sound movies, the company in 1928 embarked on a campaign to buy or build theaters in which to exhibit its new sound productions. In 1929, Warner Brothers hired Thomas Lamb to build a Broadway/Times Square showcase, the Hollywood Theater, to compete with the rival Paramount and Roxy theaters. The Hollywood was the last of the great movie palaces erected in the Times Square area during the 1910s and 1920s, and the only one there surviving intact today.

Thomas Lamb was New York's most prolific designer of movie theaters. Although active also in legitimate theater design, Lamb is best known for his more than 300 movie theaters, built all over the world. Of the enormous movie palaces he designed in New York, the Hollywood is one of the few surviving intact. Lamb's design for the Hollywood, one of his last before the Depression put an end to the building of movie palaces, is extravagant within and most unusual without. Inside, the theater exhibits a lavish display of Baroque-inspired gilded plaster statuary and wall and ceiling paintings, in the tradition of the great movie palaces. The Hollywood's exterior, however, is an unusual combination of modernistic elements.

Beyond its significance as the last built and sole intact survivor of the great midtown movie palaces, the Hollywood/Mark Hellinger also represents a typical and important aspect of the nation's theatrical history. Converted for the legitimate stage just five years after its construction, and later renamed for columnist, screenwriter and producer Mark Hellinger, the Hellinger has shared in the history of Broadway theater, and has served as home for half a century to countless numbers of the plays through which the Broadway theater has come to personify American theater. As such, it continues to help define the Broadway theater district, the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage theaters in the world.

The development of the Broadway Theater District

The area of midtown Manhattan known today as the Broadway theater district encompasses the largest concentration of legitimate playhouses in the world. The theaters located there, some dating from the turn of the century, are significant for their contributions to the history of the New York stage, for their influence upon American theater as a whole, and in many cases for their architectural design.

The development of the area around Times Square as New York's theater district at the end of the 19th century occurred as a result of two related factors: the northward movement of the population of Manhattan Island (abetted by the growth of several forms of mass transportation), and the expansion of New York's role in American theater. The northward movement of Manhattan's residential, commercial, and entertainment districts had been occurring at a steady rate throughout the 19th century. In the early 1800s, businesses, stores, hotels, and places of amusement had clustered together in the vicinity of lower Broadway. As New York's various businesses moved north, they began to isolate themselves in more or less separate areas: the financial institutions remained downtown; the major retail stores situated themselves on Broadway between 14th and 23rd Streets, eventually moving to Herald Square and Fifth Avenue after the turn of the century; the hotels, originally located near the stores and theaters, began to congregate around major transportation centers such as Grand Central Terminal or on the newly fashionable Fifth Avenue; while the mansions of the wealthy spread farther north on Fifth Avenue, as did such objects of their beneficence as the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹

The theater district, which had existed in the midst of stores, hotels, and other businesses along lower Broadway for most of the 19th century, spread northward in stages, stopping for a time at Union Square, then Madison Square, then Herald Square. By the last two decades of the 19th century, far-sighted theater managers had begun to extend the theater district even farther north along Broadway, until they had reached the area that was then known as Long Acre Square and is today called Times Square.

A district of farmlands and rural summer homes in the early 1800s, Long Acre Square had by the turn of the century evolved into a hub of mass transportation. A horsecar line had run across 42nd Street as early as the 1860s, and in 1871, with the opening of Grand Central Depot and the completion of the Third and Sixth Avenue Elevated Railways, it was

comparatively simple for both New Yorkers and out-of-towners to reach Long Acre Square. Transportation continued to play a large part in the development of the area; in 1904 New York's subway system was inaugurated, with a major station located at 42nd Street and Broadway. The area was then renamed Times Square in honor of the newly erected Times Building.² The evolution of the Times Square area as a center of Manhattan's various mass transit systems made it a natural choice for the location of legitimate playhouses, which needed to be easily accessible to their audiences.

The theater business that invaded Long Acre Square at the end of the 19th century consisted of far more than a few playhouses, for at that time New York was the starting-point for a vast, nationwide entertainment network known as "the road." This complex theater operation had its beginnings in the 1860s when the traditional method of running a theater, the stock system, was challenged by the growing popularity of touring "combination" shows. In contrast to the stock system, in which a theater manager engaged a company of actors for a season and presented them in a variety of plays, the combination system consisted of a company of actors appearing in a single show which toured from city to city, providing its own scenery, costumes, and sometimes musical accompaniment. Helped by the expansion of the nation's railroads after the Civil War,³ the combination system soon killed off the majority of stock companies. By 1904 there were some 420 combination companies touring through thousands of theaters in cities and towns across the country.⁴

Of crucial importance to the operation of the combination system was a single location where combination shows could be cast, rehearsed, tried out, and then booked for a cross-country tour. Since New York was already regarded as the most important theater city in America, it is not surprising that it became the headquarters for the combination system. In addition to the many theaters needed for an initial Broadway production for the combinations before they went on tour, New York's theater district encompassed rehearsal halls, the headquarters of scenery, costume, lighting, and makeup companies, offices of theatrical agents and producers, theatrical printers and newspapers, and other auxiliary enterprises. Close to the theater district were boarding houses catering to the hundreds of performers who came to New York in the hope of being hired for a touring show or a Broadway production.

As theaters were built farther uptown, the auxiliary enterprises also began to move north. By the turn of the century,

the section of Broadway between 37th Street and 42nd Street was known as the Rialto. Theater people gathered or promenaded there. Producers could sometimes cast a play by looking over the actors loitering on the Rialto; and out-of-town managers, gazing out of office windows, could book tours by seeing who was available.⁵

The theater district that began to move north to Long Acre Square in the 1890s was thus a vast array of business enterprises devoted to every facet of theatrical production.

The movement of the theater district north along Broadway had proceeded at a steady pace during the latter part of the 19th century. The Casino Theater was opened on the southeast corner of Broadway and 39th Street in 1882. A year later, it was joined by a most ambitious undertaking--the construction of the Metropolitan Opera House on Broadway between 39th and 40th Streets. In 1888, the Broadway Theater was erected on the southwest corner of Broadway and 41st Street. Five years later, the American Theater opened its doors at Eighth Avenue between 41st and 42nd Streets, as did Abbey's Theater at Broadway and 38th Street and the Empire Theater at Broadway and Fortieth Street.

It remained for Oscar Hammerstein I to make the move into Long Acre Square itself. At the close of the 19th century, Long Acre Square housed Manhattan's harness and carriage businesses, but was little used at night, when it seems to have become a "thieves' lair."⁶ In 1895 Hammerstein erected an enormous theater building on Broadway between 44th and 45th Streets. The original plan for the Olympia called for a "perfect palace of entertainment--which would have included three theaters, a bowling alley, a turkish bath, cafes and restaurants."⁷ Only part of this visionary plan ever became a reality. On November 25, 1895, Hammerstein opened the Lyric Theater section of the building, and a little over three weeks later he inaugurated the Music Hall section. Never a financial success, the Olympia closed its doors two years after it opened. Nevertheless, it earned Hammerstein the title of "Father of Times Square."

By the turn of the century Hammerstein had built two more theaters in the Long Acre Square area, and in the years 1901-1920 a total of forty-three additional theaters appeared in midtown Manhattan, most of them in the side streets east and west of Broadway. Much of this theater-building activity was inspired by the competition between two major forces in the industry, the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shubert Brothers, for control of the road. As each side in the rivalry drew its net more tightly around the playhouses it owned or controlled, the other side was forced to build new theaters to house its attractions. The result was a dramatic increase in the number of playhouses, both in New York and across the country. After World War I, as the road declined and New York's theatrical activity increased, the general economic prosperity made possible the construction of thirty additional playhouses in the Times Square area, expanding the boundaries of the theater district so that it stretched from just west of Eighth Avenue to Sixth Avenue, and from 39th Street to Columbus Circle.⁸

The stockmarket crash of 1929 and the resulting Depression caused a shrinkage in theater activity. Some playhouses were torn down, many were converted to motion picture houses, and later to radio and television studios. From the time of the Depression until the 1960s no new Broadway playhouses were constructed. Fortunately, the theaters that survive from the early part of the century represent a cross-section of types and styles, and share among them a good deal of New York's rich theatrical history.

(MMK)

Notes

1. The discussion of the northward movement of Manhattan's business and theaters is based on Mary Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, N.J.: James T. White and Co., 1973), pp. 130-131, 168-170.
2. W.G. Rogers and Mildred Weston, Carnival Crossroads: the Story of Times Square (New York: Doubleday, 1960), pp. 39-78; Howard B. Furer, New York: A Chronological and Documentary History 1524-1970 (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1974), p. 34 ff.; The New York Subway (New York: Interborough Rapid Transit Co., 1904; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, n.d.).
3. Alfred L. Bernheim, The Business of the Theatre (New York: Actors Equity Association, 1932; reprint ed., New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), p. 26.
4. Jack Poggi, Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 6.
5. Brooks Atkinson, Broadway, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 11.
6. Philip Paneth, Times Square, Crossroads of the World (New York: Living Books, 1965), p. 20.
7. Henderson, p. 263.
8. Henderson, p. 195-196.

The Movies

Pioneer attempts to photograph movement had been made in Europe and America long before there was any recognition of technical or commercial potential. In 1867 Edweard Muybridge and J. D. Isaacs electronically released the shutters of a row of cameras to produce serial photographs of a galloping racehorse. The next step was taken in the 1880s by the French physician E.J. Marey who, while studying movement, produced the first motion picture filmed with a single camera. This was followed in 1889 by Thomas Edison's kinetograph (a camera using rolls of coated celluloid film) and his immensely successful kinetoscope. The latter was marketed in 1893 as a device for viewing peep-shows, and soon became a standard feature in penny arcades. Scientifically, it launched an epoch of earnest experimentation. By 1896 research had advanced sufficiently to allow Edison and his associate Thomas Armat to screen the first successful motion picture before a paying American audience.¹

Initially motion pictures were used to supplement vaudeville, but by 1902 a Los Angeles theater took the risk of featuring them alone. Success generated imitation and three years later the first movie theater, complete with lavish decorations and a piano, opened in Pittsburgh.² Dubbed a "nickelodeon" because of its \$.05 admission, it presaged the countless

nickelodeons which, during the next decade, would appear in virtually every American town.

The business and art of motion pictures developed hand-in-hand. At first uncritical audiences were thrilled by films of anything that moved. Especially popular was Robert Paul's footage of stormy seas breaking over a pier in Dover, England.³ Nothing like it had never been seen indoors. Such early efforts were soon replaced by more sophisticated plot-centered films with scenes arranged artificially to tell a story. Advanced processing and film editing followed soon after, helping the director to produce as many as two films per week. By 1910 the motion picture industry required a growing legion of specialists, not the least of whom were its "stars." Actors like Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Rudolf Valentino signed exclusive contracts with production studios which sold, and later leased, their films to exhibitors.

During World War I America emerged as the dominant force in the motion picture industry, witnessing the formation of the giant Hollywood studios of MGM, RKO, Warner Bros., Universal and Twentieth-Century Fox. The spectacular growth of still silent movies was temporarily threatened by radio in the early 1920s, but was reinvigorated with such film extravaganzas as Cecil B. deMille's "Ten Commandments," James Cruze's "Covered Wagon" (the first epic western), and in 1925, "Ben Hur," the greatest worldwide success that the industry had ever produced. The real breakthrough, however, came in 1926 with "The Jazz Singer," starring Al Jolson. It was the first sound track movie to be released. The slightly later introduction of Technicolor catapulted motion pictures into their Golden Age. Sumptuous movie palaces were built and numerous legitimate theaters were converted for the viewing of the more than 500 films produced annually in America. Flourishing throughout the Depression and war years, the two-decade reign of the motion picture industry faltered only in the early 1950s when it was undermined by increasingly popular television.

(JA)

Notes

1. Raymond Fielding, The American Newsreel, 1911-1967 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 4.
2. Alexander Park, "Fifty Years Ago...The First Movie Theatre," Box Office, June 4, 1955, pp. 20-21.
3. Fielding, p. 6.

Warner Brothers and the Talkies

One of the handful of giant studios dominating the young movie industry in the years after World War I, Warner Brothers Pictures was incorporated in 1923. The company had begun making films, however, in 1912, and its history dated back to 1906, when the four Warner brothers,

Harry, Albert, Sam and Jack, began exhibiting silent films in a storefront in New Castle, Pennsylvania.¹ The Warners' first important full-length feature film, My Four Years in Germany, was released in 1918.²

In 1925, two years after its incorporation, Warner Brothers undertook several major changes which had a profound impact on its future. First, the company became a publicly owned corporation. Second, it changed its distribution policy, discarding the former "state rights franchise" system, in which individual distributors in each state held monopolies on Warner Brothers distribution rights, and opting instead to handle its distribution directly. Rather than creating a new company for this purpose, Warner Brothers acquired the Vitagraph Company, the oldest and best-known such company in the country.³ The third major change was a commitment by Warner Brothers to the development of sound movies.⁴

In 1924-25, Western Electric had experimented with techniques for synchronizing silent films with taped speech and music. Warner Brothers began experimenting along the same lines. In 1926, as work progressed, Warner Brothers formed the Vitaphone Corporation to continue the development of sound movies. On August 26, 1926, at the Warner Theater in New York, Vitaphone presented Don Juan, a silent film with synchronized sound starring John Barrymore. Just over a year later, on October 26, 1927, Al Jolson premiered in The Jazz Singer, described by Warner Brothers as "the first Vitaphone feature length picture to include singing and talking sequences." Sam Warner, who had nurtured Warner's commitment to sound and the creation of The Jazz Singer,⁵ died in Hollywood on the evening of its premier, apparently of exhaustion.

With the success of The Jazz Singer, film exhibitors around the country, who had been reluctant to invest in the expensive technology required for the presentation of sound movies, began to convert, and the rush to sound was on. Warner Brothers followed up on its lead in July 1928 by presenting what it called the first "all-talking feature motion picture," The Lights of New York. This film was followed by Al Jolson in The Singing Fool.⁶

Later that same year, Warner Brothers moved to become a major exhibitor of its own new sound films, by purchasing the Stanley Company of America. In one stroke the company acquired control of over 225 Stanley theaters in the mid-Atlantic states, which it could then move to equip for sound.⁷ From 1928 until 1931, adding to the Stanley chain, Warner Brothers built many more theaters to exhibit its new sound films. In New York, Warner Brothers built a major movie palace, the Hollywood, to showcase its new sound movies in the Broadway theater district.

The novelty of sound movies, and the great success of The Jazz Singer, helped make Warner Brothers a major force in the industry, and enabled the company to survive the Depression. Warner Brothers' role in the development of the "talkies" has assured the company's position in the history of movie making.

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Notes

1. Arthur Knight, "Fifty Years of Warner Brothers," in The Warner Brothers Golden Anniversary Book, Arthur Wilson, ed. (New York: Film and Venture Corp., 1973), p. 9.
2. Knight, p.9; and Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., A Financial Review and Brief History: Report to Stockholders, January 15, 1946 (New York: Warner Bros., 1946), p. 3, available in the Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library. For more on the history of Warner Brothers see Michael Freedland, The Warner Brothers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).
3. Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., A Financial Review, pp. 3-4. Vitagraph had been founded in 1896.
4. Ibid., p.6.
5. Ibid., pp. 6-8. For more on sound, see Harry M. Geduld, The Birth of the Talkies: From Edison to Jolson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).
6. Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., A Financial Review, p. 9.
7. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

The Movie Palace: Theater for Everyone

Warner Brothers, in building theaters in which to exhibit its sound pictures, entered a field traditionally dominated by independent exhibitors.

The American movie palace, a truly unique national institution, developed and reached its peak in the short period between World War I and the Great Depression.¹ Home for a cross between music-hall entertainment and traditional theater, with the addition, as technology permitted, of movies, the movie theater emerged in the 1920s as a luxurious and often exotic palace. Designed to look like a Parisian boudoir, an old Spanish town, or an Indian, Chinese, or Egyptian temple, the theaters often seated several thousand people, and offered vaudeville, organ recitals, orchestras, comedians, magicians, and a full-length feature film -- all for twenty-five cents.

In the decades preceding television, the movie palace provided Americans with their major form of entertainment, and families returned every week to their neighborhood movie house to see the latest show. Almost every town in the country had at least one movie theater; larger cities had large theaters downtown and smaller neighborhood houses scattered around the city. In Chicago, the Balaban & Katz chain claimed to have six theaters, "five in the Loop and one near your home." In New York, the outer boroughs had major theaters as well as smaller neighborhood houses. Loew's, the city's largest chain, had, besides its flagship Loew's State Theater in Times Square, a series of "Wonder Theaters" throughout the

Metropolitan area: the Loew's 175th Street in Upper Manhattan, the Loew's Paradise in the Bronx, the Loew's Valencia in Queens, the Loew's Kings in Brooklyn, and the Loew's Jersey in Jersey City, each of which seated over 3000 people.

The movie palaces were built by a small group of people. Loew, Keith, Albee, Fox, Balaban & Katz, all started as small-time entertainers, and gradually emerged as entrepreneurs controlling hundreds of theaters each in national circuits.² The only major figure in the industry who never built an enormous chain was Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel; his Roxy Theater, however, the 6000-seat "Cathedral of the Motion Picture" at 50th Street and Seventh Avenue, was the epitome of the type, and his greatest creation, Radio City Music Hall, was the most famous theater in the country.

The number of architects who designed movie theaters was also small. By the far the greatest number of the palaces were designed by a handful of specialists including John Eberson, Rapp & Rapp, C. Howard Crane, Thomas Lamb, Walter Ahlschlager, B. Marcus Priteca, and G. Albert Lansburgh. Some of the architects specialized in certain styles, while other architects were attached, at first, to a specific chain or region. Thomas Lamb was partial to the Adamesque style in his early years, while Rapp & Rapp designed most of their theaters in a regal French manner. Rapp & Rapp were Midwesterners and for many years were house architects for the Balaban & Katz chain in Chicago, although they eventually came to New York and designed Paramount and Loew's theaters as well. C. Howard Crane, another Midwesterner, did many of the Fox theaters, first in the Midwest and then elsewhere, before working in England. Walter Ahlschlager designed the Roxy Theater, and also a smaller Roxy venture, the Beacon Theater on Broadway at 74th Street.

Several of the movie palace architects started as designers of "legitimate" theaters on Broadway and its equivalent in other cities. Crane, Lamb, and Eberson all worked as legitimate theater architects, and it is not surprising that their early ventures in movie palaces were adaptations of the classical styles with Adamesque details common for the legitimate theaters of the 1910s and 1920s. Lamb, who designed a number of Broadway houses, not only brought the Adamesque style to his early movie palaces, but continued to use it well on into his career. The trend to more exotic architectural styles, however, was evident as early as 1913, when Lamb's own Regent Theater on 116th Street in Harlem was modeled on the Doge's palace in Venice. Designed as Roxy's first New York theater, the Regent has been claimed as the country's first true movie palace.³

In the 1920s, the great period of movie palace design, the styles became fantastically eclectic. Theaters called "The Rialto," "The Rivoli," "Tivoli," "The Granada," "The Oriental," "The Paradise," and similarly suggestive names, were designed in styles reminiscent of Baroque Spain, ancient Egypt, Hindu India, the Far East, southern Italy, and occasionally Colonial New England. The reasons for this explosion of exotic designs were many. A.J. Balaban, founder of the Balaban & Katz chain, wrote of bringing the fabulous sights of the world into the neighborhoods for the mass of people who could not otherwise see them, and of creating palaces where anyone with a quarter could feel like a king for a few hours.⁴ Marcus Loew once remarked, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies,"⁵ and the fantastic architectural settings of the theaters were unquestionably

part of the fantasy or escape involved in going to the movies. To these observations it may be added that movie theater architecture flourished in the last decades in which the derivation of architectural styles from historic sources was generally considered acceptable. The movie palaces might best be understood as the last romantic fling of American eclecticism, before the emergence of "modernism" in its various forms.

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Notes

1. The two basic works on the history of the American movie palace, on which the following account is largely based, are Ben M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), and David Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981). Charlotte Herzog's "The Movie Palace and the Theatrical Sources of Its Architectural Style," Cinema Journal 20 (Spring 1981), 15-37, discusses the influence of architectural antecedents such as vaudeville theater and penny arcades on movie palace design. The quarterly issues of Marquee, the publication of the Theatre Historical Society since 1969, are another invaluable source.
2. For a typical history see Carrie Balaban, Continuous Performance (New York: Balaban Foundation, 1964), the biography of A.J. Balaban, founder of Balaban & Katz.
3. Naylor, p. 40.
4. Balaban, p. 100.
5. Naylor, p. 10.

Thomas Lamb

Thomas Lamb (1871-1942) was among the world's most prolific theater architects. During his years of active practice Lamb designed over three hundred theaters throughout the world. Many of these stood as prominent landmarks in their respective communities. Not only was Lamb responsible for an enormous number of theaters, but his designs exemplify the adaptation of the revival styles popular with the wealthy to buildings designed for use by the masses. The vast majority of Lamb's commissions were for movie theaters, many built with a scale and richness reminiscent of the great palaces of Europe.

Lamb was born in Dundee, Scotland; his family moved to the United States when Lamb was still a child. He studied at Cooper Union, graduating in 1898 with a Bachelor of Science degree. The only architectural courses that Lamb took at Cooper Union were mechanical drawing and acoustics;¹ it remains unclear where he received more detailed training in architecture.

His obituary in the New York Times notes that he "was for a time a civil service building inspector."² This may account for all or some of his training. Lamb was working as an architect as early as 1904 when he undertook alterations to the Gotham Theater at 165 East 125th Street,³ but he does not seem to have opened an active practice until about 1908. Although his earliest commissions, as listed in the firm's account books, include work on the St. Nicholas Skating Rink at 157 West 66th Street, the Grand Central Depot, and factories, lofts, stables, and residences, many of his earliest commissions were for theaters.⁴ These quickly became Lamb's specialty and account for well over ninety percent of his designs.

Lamb's most important early commission came in 1908 when Marcus Loew asked him to draw up specifications for movie theaters.⁵ This coincided with the beginning of the Loew company's growth as a major motion picture theater chain. Lamb's association with the firm continued until his death and he designed most of Loew's major American theaters as well as theaters for the firm in Canada, England, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Mexico, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Trinidad, Honduras, Sweden, South Africa, and even in Tokyo, Bombay, and Shanghai. In addition he designed the firm's office headquarters, the Loew's State Building (1921) on Broadway and West 45th Street, which incorporates the Loew's State Theater.

Although he worked for Marcus Loew as early as 1908, many of Lamb's early theaters were legitimate playhouses, including two that survive in the Times Square area. The earlier of these is the Empire (1911-12, originally the Eltinge) on West 42nd Street, an extremely fine Beaux-Arts style structure with a facade of terra cotta. In 1912 Lamb worked on the Cort Theater, an elegant house on West 48th Street modeled on the Petit Trianon at Versailles. The styles chosen by Lamb for the exteriors of these theaters are similar to those used by contemporary theater architects such as Herts & Tallant at their Lyceum Theater (1903) and The Brooklyn Academy of Music (1908), and Carrere & Hastings, architects of the Lunt-Fontanne Theater (1909-10) and the Century Theater (1909, demolished).

Lamb is generally credited with having designed the first "deluxe" theater built exclusively for movies -- the Regent Theater, a Venetian Renaissance style structure built in 1913.⁶ The building still stands on Seventh Avenue and West 116th Street, although it is now a church. The Regent was soon followed by several commissions for enormous theaters on Broadway including the Strand (1914, demolished), Rialto (1916, demolished), and Rivoli (1917), and culminating in the design for the 5,230-seat Capitol (1919, demolished) at Broadway and West 51st Street. This theater was described as being "the last word in perfection in equipment, comfort, and luxury."⁷ These theaters coincide with and were followed by many others designed both for the leading theater chains of the day such as Loew's, Proctor's, Keith's, RKO, and Trans-Lux, and for smaller entrepreneurs. Lamb designed both monumental movie palaces and small neighborhood and showcase theaters. These are represented in the Times Square area by the interior of the Harris (originally the Candler) Theater, 1912, located within the Candler Building on West 42nd Street; the Embassy (now Embassy I) on Broadway at 48th Street, a small theater designed in 1925; and the Mark Hellinger Theater (originally the Hollywood, 1929) on West 51st Street, a large movie palace later converted to legitimate use.

Most of the theaters designed prior to 1930 have classically-inspired interiors based on 17th-century Baroque or 18th-century English (Adamesque) and French (Louis XVI) neo-classical style architecture. The Harris, Embassy, and Mark Hellinger have fine Baroque-inspired detail with heavy, boldly modeled plasterwork. The style most closely identified with Lamb is the Adamesque, based on the work of Lamb's fellow countryman, the Scots-born architect Robert Adam. The restrained elegance of the Adamesque is visible in at least two surviving New York City theaters -- the Victoria (1917) on West 125th Street, and the Jefferson (1921) on East 14th Street. The French influence is visible at the Cort, and at the Academy of Music (1926; now the Palladium) on East 14th Street. All of Lamb's interiors were designed in conjunction with decorating firms such as the Rambusch Decorating Co. It is not known what type of relationship existed between theater architects and designers. Lamb was definitely responsible for the layout of each theater and for the exterior design. It seems probable that he established the style of design for the interiors and he may, in many cases, have actually designed the ornamental detail. The decorating firm most probably was responsible for small ornamental details, color choice, draperies, furnishing, and so forth.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Lamb's movie theater designs became extremely exotic. This stylistic development may have been in response to a desire on the part of theater owners to attract more customers through ever more bizarre design. Among Lamb's more exotic theaters were the Loew's Triboro (1931, demolished) in Astoria with its Mayan facade and Hispano-Moresque interior; the Loew's Pitkin (1929, vacant) on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn, with its Moorish/Hindu exterior and Hispano-Moresque foyer and auditorium; and the Loew's 175th Street (1930, now the United Church) which has an exterior similar to that at the Pitkin and an interior with a Southeast Asian flavor.

Unfortunately, many of Lamb's theaters in New York City have been demolished. Among his surviving theaters not already mentioned are the RKO Keith's Flushing (1928, now triplex), an atmospheric theater with a Spanish Baroque interior; the Brooklyn Strand (c.1918, vacant) on Fulton Street and Rockwell Place, a classical revival style house; and the 81st Street Theater (c.1913) on Broadway, a simple terra-cotta building.

Although best known for his theaters, Lamb occasionally accepted other commissions and his work includes loft buildings, factories, stables, hotels, religious structures, etc. In New York, the most notable among these buildings are the Paramount Hotel (1927-28) at 235-245 West 46th Street, a brick, terra-cotta, and marble-faced structure with elaborate ornament on its arcaded base and setback roofline; and the Pythian Temple (c.1926, now apartments) at 135 West 70th Street, a massive structure adorned with glazed terra-cotta and cast-stone forms of Egyptian and Assyrian derivation. Both of these buildings have a theatrical flare and it is not surprising that their architect specialized in the design of theaters. Lamb was also the architect of the second Madison Square Garden on Eighth Avenue, and in 1932 he received an honorable mention for his entry in the international competition to design the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow.

At his death in 1942 Lamb was still actively involved in the design of theaters. A comment in Architectural Forum written in 1925 sums up Lamb's career:

All of Mr. Lamb's work uniformly shows care and study, not only in the plans of his theaters, but also in their architectural treatment and decorative furnishings, in which he is preeminently successful.⁸

Lamb's death coincided with the end of an era in theater design, for after World War II the need for large theaters declined. Many of Lamb's finest theaters were demolished, others were subdivided, and others sold for new uses or simply abandoned. The few surviving Lamb theaters are relics of a past age and are reminders of an elegant period in theater design that has, sadly, passed.

(ASD)

Notes

1. Information on Lamb's years at Cooper Union courtesy of the Cooper Union Archives, New York.
2. Thomas Lamb, obituary, New York Times, February 27, 1942, p. 17.
3. Special thanks to Michael R. Miller of the Theater Historical Society for this information.
4. Lamb's job book and architectural drawings are in the collection of Avery Library, Columbia University, New York.
5. Thomas Lamb, obituary, New York Herald Tribune, February 27, 1942, p. 16.
6. David Naylor, American Picture Palaces (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981), pp. 40-41.
7. "The Work of Thomas W. Lamb, Architect," Architectural Forum, 42 (June 1925), 377.
8. Ibid.

The Hollywood Theater

Warner Brothers began planning their New York movie palace in early 1929, a year after their acquisition of the Stanley theater chain put them into the business of operating theaters.¹ Looking for a prominent position in New York's entertainment district, they chose a site on West 51st Street near Broadway.

Although the Broadway/Times Square area had been associated originally with proscenium-arch theaters, by the 1920s the legitimate stage was sharing the theater district with movie theaters. Since 1914, when the Criterion Theater had emerged as New York's first motion picture show place, nearly a dozen other movie theaters had appeared on Broadway.² Together with the numerous legitimate playhouses in Times Square, they transformed the area into the city's entertainment center, and simultaneously inflated its property values beyond the reach of all but the most prosperous tenants.

Warner Brothers hired Thomas Lamb to design their new Broadway theater. Lamb had done work for Warner Brothers briefly in the early part of the decade, making designs for two proposed theaters (one in New York and one in South Dakota) in 1922.³ Most of his work for Warner Brothers, however, occupied the years 1929-1931, and included, besides the Hollywood, a number of alterations to New York theaters (the Strand, the Winter Garden, the Beacon), the design of the Warner Brothers Studio at 321 West 44th Street, and proposals for theaters in Brooklyn, N.Y.; Cincinnati, Oh.; Mt. Vernon, N.Y.; Torrington, Conn.; Oakland, Calif.; Hackensack, N.J.; Albany, N.Y.; and Washington, D.C.⁴

By building a major movie palace in New York, Warner Brothers was entering into competition not only with the chains controlled by exhibitors like Marcus Loew, but also with other movie-makers like Paramount. In the heart of the theater district, in 1922, Loew's had built an office building and theater complex, the Loew's State (demolished) designed by Thomas Lamb, on the east side of Times Square. Paramount had built a headquarters office building on Times Square in 1925-27, with the adjoining 4000-seat Paramount Theater (demolished) that was a marvel of French-inspired splendor designed by theater architects Rapp & Rapp. On Seventh Avenue and 50th Street, Samuel Rothafel, better known as "Roxy," had hired Louis Ahlschlager to design the opulent 6000-seat Roxy Theater (demolished), "the Cathedral of the Motion Picture," which opened in 1927. With such competition, it was not surprising that Warner Brothers commissioned from Lamb an extraordinarily luxurious movie palace. The period from initial plans to opening day, however, spanned the beginning of the Great Depression, and it was a tribute to Warner Brothers' powers of survival that the project went ahead.

Warner Brothers commissioned Lamb to design a movie palace, seating approximately 1600, with stage facilities for the live vaudeville acts that still accompanied films in most of the larger movie theaters. The theater was initially named the Hollywood after the still new, yet already legendary, movie-making capital of the western world. It occupied a site on the north side of West 51st Street, between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, and did not have any frontage on Broadway. Warner Brothers, however, arranged for a passage to Broadway through an adjoining building, to provide an auxiliary entrance from the famous theater street (this has since been closed; the main entrance on West 51st Street is currently used).⁵

Lamb's design was an opulent movie palace on a par with any of the great movie theater interiors of the 1920s. Its plush Baroque spaces, adorned with sumptuous gilded plasterwork, statuary, and murals, carried on the tradition of the American movie palace.

The exterior of the Hollywood, however, was a somewhat unusual design. The exteriors of movie palaces in general tended to be plainer than their interiors. Sometimes the most lavish theater interiors were hidden behind simple brick walls; in other cases, the exterior betrayed some of the stylistic characteristics of the interior. In the case of the Hollywood, Lamb's exterior design bears no stylistic relationship to the interior Baroque, reflecting instead modernistic trends.

Thomas Lamb was not unusual among theater architects in his unswerving commitment to an eclectic use of traditional stylistic elements. It was only in the 1930s, in the last movie palaces built, that theater architects turned to the contemporary Art Deco. Nevertheless, during the mid-to-late 1920s modernistic trends became so strong that even the most traditionalist among the theater architects came under their sway, if only in the matter of theater exteriors. Rapp & Rapp, another major firm of theater architects, specialized in theater interiors designed in a manner reminiscent of the French Beaux-Arts style. Their French-inspired Paramount Theater on Times Square, however, was housed inside a stepped ziggurat-like office tower rising to an illuminated globe, clearly showing modernistic influence.

Lamb's Loew's State theater and office building of 1922 reflected classical influence both inside and out. His 1929 Hollywood Theater, however, like Rapp & Rapp's Paramount, combined an eclectic interior with a modernistic exterior. Rather than using Art Deco motifs, however, Lamb appears to have used elements from early 20th century modern buildings in much the same way that he used elements from monuments of the Baroque or of the Italian Renaissance -- as good source material for a contemporary eclectic pastiche.

Two possible sources for Lamb's design appear to be major early works of modern architecture: the Helsinki Railroad Station, in Finland, by Eliel Saarinen, built 1904-14, and the Unity Temple, in Oak Park, Illinois, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1906.

Finnish-born architect Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950) had become a major figure on the American scene in the early 1920s with his runner-up entry in the 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower competition. Moving to this country in 1923, he settled in Michigan where during the remainder of the 1920s he designed the famous and influential Cranbrook Academy, which he then served as president in the 1930s.⁶ Lamb would very likely have been familiar with his work.

The Helsinki Railroad Station was Saarinen's most famous public building in Finland, and a major early work.⁷ The elements of Lamb's design which appear to have been borrowed from it are the monumental paired sculptural figures, each holding a glass globe, flanking the railroad entrance. Lamb's figures are single rather than paired, and much smaller, but the resemblance is striking. Their placement is also similar: those in Helsinki flank the entrance to the train station, those in New York flank the entrance to the theater; in both places the flanked entrance includes a projecting marquee. Other details apparently inspired by the Helsinki Railroad Station include the vertical corbeling effect, in stone at Helsinki, in brick on the Hollywood.

The western wing of the facade of the Hollywood is suggestive of Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple (1906), although other similar Prairie School works might have served as a model. Wright (1867-1959) published extensively during the late 1920s, and his work would certainly have been known to Lamb.⁸ His drawing for the Unity Temple was published in the January 1928 issue of The Architectural Record.⁹ Although not a direct copy, the western wing of the Hollywood bears some similarity to Unity Temple: the flat projecting overhang supported on ribbed corbels is suggestive of the more prominent projection and Mayan-inspired piers that top the Temple; the proportions of the rectangular blank brick wall beneath are similar to those of the wall beneath the Temple's overhang.

The Hollywood Theater opened in 1930 as a major motion picture house; vaudeville performances were added in 1932. As early as 1934, however, Warner Brothers converted the house for use as a legitimate stage theater. In 1936 the Hollywood's entrance was moved from Broadway to West 51st Street, and the theater was renamed the "Fifty-first Street Theater." Briefly in 1937, and again during the War years through 1948, the theater reverted to films; its name oscillated between "Hollywood" and "Fifty-first Street," and for one year, 1947, was "the Warner Brothers Theater." In 1948, however, the theater returned to legitimate stage use, and was renamed for Mark Hellinger. For most of its life, the Hollywood/Hellinger has been one of the Broadway legitimate stage theaters.¹⁰

(AR)

Notes

1. New York City Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Permit 294-1929.
2. The Criterion was followed by the Strand, Warner's, and the Colony on 42nd Street, as well as by the Capitol, Rivoli, State, New York, Rialto and Cameo motion picture theaters. See Adolph Zukor, "Influence of the Motion Picture," Broadway: The Grand Canyon of American Business (New York: The Broadway Association, 1926), pp. 109-110.
3. Thomas Lamb, Job Book, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York; job numbers 1969 and 1970.
4. Thomas Lamb, Job Book, job numbers for alterations: 2955 (Strand), 2967 and 2981 (Winter Garden), and 2993 (Beacon). Job number for the studio: 2902. Job numbers for proposed theaters: 2939 (Cincinnati), 2956 (Brooklyn), 3041 (Mt. Vernon), 3050 (Torrington), 3052 (Oakland), 3069 and 3134 (Hackensack), 3074 (Albany), 3105 (Washington).
5. Thomas Lamb, Job Book, job number 2914.
6. R. Craig Miller, "Saarinen, Eliel and Saarinen, Eero," Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architecture (New York: The Free Press, 1982); Albert Christ-Janer, Eliel Saarinen: Finnish-American Architect and Educator (Rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Detroit

Institute of Arts and Metropolitan Museum of Art, Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision, 1925-1950 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), passim.

7. The Helsinki Railroad Station was published in "Buildings by Eliel Saarinen," American Architect 124 (September 26, 1923), pls. For more on the station see Marika Hausen, "The Helsinki Railway Station in Eliel Saarinen's First Versions, 1904," Taidehistoriallisia Tutkimuksia-Konsthistoriska Studier 3 (1977), 57-114.
8. For Wright's publications in the late 1920s see Robert L. Sweeney, Frank Lloyd Wright: An Annotated Bibliography (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc. 1978), pp. xxxi-xxii, 33-43.
9. Frank Lloyd Wright, "In the Cause of Architecture, I: The Logic of the Plan," Architectural Record, 63 (Jan 1928), 54.
10. For a detailed account of these early changes in name and function see below, p. 19 ff.

The Broadway Theater in American Theatrical History

With its conversion to the legitimate stage, the Hollywood joined the number of playhouses still standing in the Broadway theater district which share among them over eighty years of American theatrical history. In the early years of the century, when American theater was still heavily influenced by Europe, the theaters played host to such great international stars as Sarah Bernhardt, Eleonora Duse, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and to adaptations of such European successes as The Merry Widow and Floradora.

It was in the Broadway theaters that the beginnings of a distinctly American drama could be seen in the Western melodramas of David Belasco, the social comedies of Clyde Fitch and Langdon Mitchell, and the problem plays of Edward Sheldon and Eugene Walter. With the rise of the "little theater" movement in the second decade of the century, it seemed that theatrical leadership had passed from Broadway to such experimental "art" theaters as the Provincetown Playhouse and the Neighborhood Playhouse. Before long, however, the innovations of the little theaters infused Broadway with new life. Beginning with the production of Eugene O'Neill's first full-length play, Beyond the Horizon, on Broadway in 1920, the playhouses of Broadway presented the work of a new generation of playwrights, including, in addition to O'Neill, Maxwell Anderson, Philip Barry, S.N. Behrman, Rachel Crothers, Sidney Howard, George S. Kaufman, George Kelly and Elmer Rice.

The Depression of the 1930s brought with it a new concern with political and social issues, and the dramas presented in the Broadway playhouses reflected that concern. Commercial producers gave us plays by Lillian Hellman, Robert E. Sherwood, and Thornton Wilder, while the Group Theater and other new organizations introduced such writers as Clifford Odets and Sidney Kingsley. The Broadway theaters continued to house challenging plays during the 1940s and 1950s, when new talents such as

Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and William Inge first began writing for the theater.

Meanwhile, musical comedy had blossomed from the adaptations and imitations of European operetta popular at the turn of the century to a uniquely American art form. By the 1940s and 1950s the works of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and many others, were being exported from the stages of Broadway to theaters around the world.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of ferment and change, both in and out of the theater. As in the 1920s, the impetus for theatrical experimentation came from outside of Broadway, and as in the 1920s, the experimentation helped to revitalize the Broadway theater. Today, the playhouses of Broadway are showcases for the best plays of the Off- and Off-Off Broadway theaters, as well as for exciting productions from theatrical workshops, regional theaters, and outstanding foreign companies.

Having moved gradually northward all during the 19th century, New York's theater district finally came to rest at Times Square, where it has remained for almost ninety years. The economic Depression of the 1930s discouraged speculative ventures such as the construction of new theaters, while after prosperity returned in the wake of World War II, the cost of renting land and constructing a theater was prohibitively high. The northward movement of the theater district may also have been discouraged for a number of years by the existence of the Sixth Avenue Elevated Railway, which crossed from Sixth to Ninth Avenues at 53rd Street, thereby providing a natural northern boundary for the theater district.¹

Although built as a movie palace, the Hollywood Theater was in the heart of the legitimate theater district. Converted early for the legitimate stage, and renamed the Mark Hellinger, the theater has partaken for most of its life in the history of the Broadway stage. As one of the Broadway theaters surviving today in the theater district, the Mark Hellinger contributes to the totality of the district's history by virtue of its participation in that history.

(MMK)

Notes

1. Stanley Buder, "Forty-Second Street at the Crossroads: A History of Broadway to Eighth Avenue," West 42nd Street: "The Bright Light Zone" (New York: Graduate School and University Center, CUNY, 1978), p. 62.

The Mark Hellinger as a Playhouse¹

The Hollywood opened as a motion picture palace on April 22, 1930, with Hold Everything. For the next twenty years the theater alternated between movies, vaudeville, and the legitimate stage.

Vaudeville was introduced in 1932, two years after the theater opened, and alternated with film for another year. When Warner Brothers announced in 1934 that the Hollywood would become a legitimate theater, they "reopened" it on December 13 with Calling All Stars, a revue with Martha Raye, Ella Logan and Judy Canova. In October 1935, the Hollywood showed Max Reinhard's cinematic opus Midsummer Night's Dream. Late in 1936, George Abbott's Sweet River opened. Based on Uncle Tom's Cabin, the play lasted only five performances. That same year the theater's entrance was moved from Broadway to 51st Street, and the theater renamed the "Fifty-first Street Theater."

In 1937 the theater reverted to a film policy, and was renamed the "Hollywood," with Paul Muni's acclaimed film The Life of Emile Zola. A return to the legitimate stage on October 17, 1938 was marked by Knights of Song, a play based on the lives of Gilbert and Sullivan. George White's Scandals moved to the Hollywood in 1939 from the Alvin, with a cast including Willie and Eugene Howard, Ella Logan, Ben Blue, and Ann Miller.

In 1940, with the opening of Laurence Olivier's stage production of Romeo and Juliet, the theater's name reverted to the "Fifty-first Street." Besides Olivier, the cast included Vivian Leigh, Dame May Whitty, Edmond O'Brien, and Cornell Wilde. Bango Eyes followed in 1941 with a cast including Eddie Cantor and Virginia Mayo.

During the war years and through 1948 the theater was again used for movies. In 1949, Warner Brothers sold the theater which was returned to legitimate use and was renamed the Mark Hellinger in honor of the Broadway columnist, author and motion picture producer who had died two years earlier. The Hellinger has retained its title and remained a legitimate house ever since.

The first production in the newly reopened theater was All for Love with Grace and Paul Hartman. The musical review Two on the Aisle opened in 1951 starring Burt Lahr and Delores Gray, and played 279 performances. In 1952, Guthrie McClintic produced two Greek tragedies with the national Theater of Greece: Electra and Oedipus Tyrannus. Four years later the Hellinger's greatest production opened. Lerner & Loewe's My Fair Lady garnered unanimous critical acclaim and has remained one of the stage's most memorable musicals. Directed by Moss Hart, the cast included Julie Andrews, Rex Harrison, Robert Coote, Cathleen Nesbitt and Stanley Holloway.

The 1960s saw a number of popular productions at the Mark Hellinger. Fade In/Fade Out by Comden and Green opened in 1964 with Jack Cassidy, Carol Burnett and Tina Louise. On a Clear Day You Can See Forever opened in 1965 and played 273 performances. In 1967 Melina Mercouri appeared in Illya Darling, a musical version of Never on Sunday. The first show of 1969 was the popular Dear World with Angela Lansbury, Milo O'Shea and William Larson. It was followed by Coco with Katharine Hepburn.

In 1971 the tremendously popular musical Jesus Christ Superstar opened at the Mark Hellinger. A musical of another style followed later in the decade: Timbuktu!, based on Kismet, opened in 1978 with Melba Moore and Eartha Kitt. Sugar Babies closed the decade at the Hellinger and continued

its run into 1983. Its cast included Mickey Rooney and Ann Miller. Tango Argentino (1985-86) was the Hellinger's most recent hit.

(EH, PD)

Notes

1. This production history of the Mark Hellinger Theater, condensed from the fuller version in the Appendix, is based on listings compiled by Actors Equity and submitted as testimony at the Landmarks Preservation Commission's public hearings of June and October, 1982. Their submission has been checked by Landmarks Commission staff against George Freedley, "Broadway Playhouses," bound typescript of the "Stage Today," 1941-43, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library; The Best Plays of....[annual] (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1899-present); Theatre World [annual] Daniel Blum, editor (New York: Theatre World, 1946-present), The Biographical Encyclopedia & Who's Who of the American Theater, Walter Rigdon, editor (New York: James H. Heinman, Inc., 1966); Edwin Bronner, The Encyclopedia of American Theater, 1900-1975 (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., Inc., 1980); Gerald Bordman, Oxford Companion to American Theatre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Mark Hellinger -- the namesake

The Hellinger theater takes its current name from columnist, playwright, and former Warner Brothers producer Mark Hellinger (1903-1947). First a successful Broadway columnist with a reported 18,000,000 readers, Hellinger became a dynamic Hollywood screenwriter and producer. He himself acquired something of the aura of the gangsters and Broadway characters about whom he wrote. According to his obituary in the New York Times, "Mark Hellinger's career was like a three-horse win parley with the first horse Gossip, the second Tears, and the third Murder. All three paid off heavily."¹

Son of a prestigious Manhattan lawyer, Hellinger abandoned a job in advertising to be a reviewer of plays and movies at Zit's Weekly. Two years later he moved to the Daily News covering the same territory. The experience thus gained in Broadway's demi-monde resulted in contacts with both hoodlums and theatrical celebrities which became the solid background of Hellinger's later Hollywood gangster films.

By 1925, Hellinger had changed the way that the theater was covered by the media; he was the first reporter to cover Broadway as a news source.² Writing a Sunday column under his own by-line, Hellinger turned out a series of brief vignettes called "About Town" and later "Goin to Town" [sic]. The popularity of his weekly columns eventually led to their becoming a daily feature.

Although Hellinger had limited literary skill, he was able to play on what he perceived to be the public's inclination towards sentimentality, a technique he called "heart squeezing."³ In 1930, he left his Daily News

column to take on the entire feature page of The Mirror and the King Feature Syndicate. There he developed another theatrical column first, "the feud," an advertising stunt used to popularize an actor and his critic. Rudy Vallee served as Hellinger's first "victim."

In the early 1930s Hellinger published collections of short stories about the theater and his news "beat," Moon Over Broadway (1931) and Ten Million (1934). He also collaborated on two screen-plays dealing with court crime, Night Court produced by M.G.M. in 1932, and Broadway Bill, an early Frank Capra picture about horse racing, produced by Columbia in 1934 and later billed as the "top turf pic ever made."⁴ Hellinger drew from his experiences of the 1920s and '30s to produce "hard-hitting" films for Hollywood. From 1937 to 1941, serving as an associate producer with Warner Brothers, he made The Roaring Twenties with James Cagney, Brother Orchid, They Drive by Night, Torrid Zone, and High Sierra with Humphrey Bogart.

After several changes of allegiance, and a stint covering World War II for the Hearst papers, Hellinger returned to Hollywood in 1943 as an autonomous, independent producer for Universal Pictures. There he created three staples of the "tough guy B-movie" genre: Swell Guy, about "a hero who was really a heel";⁵ The Killers, an adaptation of the Ernest Hemingway short story, with Burt Lancaster; and Brute Force, featuring Burt Lancaster as a sadistic prison guard, one of his most controversial roles. The posthumously released Naked City, Hellinger's love song for his hometown, dramatized the lives of New York City's homicide squad.

In his private life, Hellinger maintained the image of Broadway he publicized. He kept in his garage a four-door bullet-proof black sedan used in the infamous "Eighty-First holdup." The car was willed to Hellinger by a mob friend who "met with an unfortunate accident."⁶ The car sides, complete with bullet holes, read like "braille of the Roaring Twenties"⁷ to Hellinger. In keeping with the image, Hellinger wore black-blue shirts with large, white silk ties, denying ownership of even one plain white shirt in his collection of two hundred. In a 1947 interview before his sudden death, Hellinger was described by Charles Marion Boone as "a colorful fast-talking Broadway character of the Winchell school given to...references to men as 'Pappy' and women as 'darling.'"⁸

(PD)

Notes

1. Mark Hellinger, obituary, New York Times, December 22, 1947.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Mark Hellinger, obituary, New York Herald Tribune, December 22, 1947.
5. Charles Marion Boon, "A Masculine Note from Hollywood," unidentified clipping in the Mark Hellinger Clipping File, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library, p.66.

6. Mark Hellinger, obituary, New York Journal American, December 24, 1947.
7. Ibid.
8. Boone, pp. 66-67.

Description¹

The Hellinger Theater has a long, asymmetrically organized modernistic facade, which is divided into two sections -- a towered portion encompassing the entrance and a lower portion expressing the wall of the auditorium and the stage house. The two portions are linked by the use of patterned brickwork and vertical design motifs. The towered entrance portion contains five pairs of bronze and glass entrance doors set below transoms and a modern marquee. The entrance opening is flanked by tall, stylized herm-like figures, reminiscent of the work of Eliel Saarinen, holding lanterns in the form of globes. The wall rising above the marquee takes the form of a tower and is expressed in brick in shades of gold and brown set in vertical patterns. A sign armature projects from the wall. Terra-cotta panels with vertical fluting terminating in stylized urns holding plant forms above cast-stone panels further accentuate the vertical qualities of the tower. This is terminated by a zigzag-edged parapet. Ribbed brickwork flanking the tower steps towards the auditorium wall at the west and the adjacent building at the east. Display boxes are placed on the ribbed brickwork at ground floor level.

To the west of the entrance the auditorium and stage house wall are articulated as a unit. The brick base, now painted, set on a granite water table which is a continuation of that on the tower portion, is articulated by horizontal bands of dark brown brick. The horizontality is interrupted by two openings for exits from the auditorium, original display boxes framed in surrounds of stepped brick headers, an office door, a large door for scenery and props, the stage door, and windows in the stage house area. Above the base the wall of the auditorium is indicated by a large panel created by brick set in soldier courses. Above the panel a copper cornice with abstract ornament is carried on long stylized brackets, also executed in brick, flanking octagonal stone panels. The overall effect is reminiscent of Wright's Unity Temple design. A sloping roof rises behind the cornice. The wall portions flanking the large panel are punctuated by blind openings with grilles on the east and window openings on the west and terminate in ribbed brickwork. The brickwork of the westernmost portion of the facade beyond the stage door takes the form of shallow piers, flanking window openings. The upper portion of the stage house is set back from the facade and faced with plain brick.

(MP)

Notes

1. Architecturally significant features are underlined.

Conclusion

The Mark Hellinger Theater survives today both as the sole surviving intact grand movie palace in the Broadway/Times Square area, and as one of the historic playhouses that symbolize American theater for both New York and the nation.

Built as the Hollywood Theater by Warner Brothers in 1929, the theater is a physical manifestation of the impact that Warner Brothers' innovations in sound had on moviegoers and on New York. Designed by Thomas Lamb, New York's most prolific theater architect, its exterior is a pastiche of early 20th century modernistic elements, an unusual source for a building type generally treated with an eclectic approach to historical styles.

Converted for the legitimate stage just five years after its construction, the Mark Hellinger Theater has served for half a century as home to countless numbers of the plays through which the Broadway theater has come to personify American theater. As such, beyond its significance as a movie palace, it continues to help define the Broadway theater district, the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage theaters in the world.

The preparation of this report has involved the work of a number of consultants supervised and edited by Anthony W. Robins (AR), Deputy Director of Research. Individual authors are noted by initials at the ends of their sections. The consultants were Margaret Knapp (MMK), Andrew S. Dolkart (ASD), Eugenie Hoffmeyer (EH) and Peter Donhauser (PD). Gale Harris of the Research Department supplemented the research, verified the citations and sources, and provided editorial assistance. Marjorie Pearson (MP), Director of Research, wrote the description. Research Department staff who contributed to the report include Marion Cleaver, Virginia Kurshan, Susan Strauss, and Jay Shockley.

The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission gratefully acknowledges the assistance rendered by many concerned citizens in studying the Broadway theaters. Special thanks are due the New York City Planning Commission; Community Planning Board 5, Manhattan; the New York Landmarks Conservancy; the Actors Equity Committee to Save the Theaters; and the individual theater owners.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Mark Hellinger Theater (originally the Hollywood Theater) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, New York State, and the nation.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Mark Hellinger Theater was built as the Hollywood Theater, the last movie palace to be constructed in the Times Square area; that it was built by Warner Brothers to be the Broadway showcase for the sound movies which that company pioneered and which transformed the course of American film-making; that it was designed by Thomas Lamb, New York's most prolific theater architect, in an unusual style reflecting the influence of early modernist architecture; that its significant architectural elements include a tower with fluted modernistic piers, an entrance flanked by stone figures holding globe lights, and a cornice supported by stylized brackets; that it was converted to legitimate stage use five years after its opening, and survives today as one of the historic theaters that symbolize American theater for both New York and the nation; that for over half a century the Mark Hellinger Theater has served as home to countless numbers of the plays through which the Broadway theater has come to personify American theater; and that as such it continues to help define the Broadway theater district, the largest and most famous concentration of legitimate stage theaters in the world.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Mark Hellinger Theater (originally the Hollywood Theater), 217-239 West 51st Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1023, Lot 11, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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APPENDIX

The following production history of the Mark Hellinger Theater is based on listings compiled by Actors Equity and submitted as testimony at the Landmarks Preservation Commission's public hearings of June and October, 1982. Their submission has been checked by Gale Harris and Susan Strauss of the Research Department staff against George Freedley, "Broadway Playhouses," bound typescript of the "Stage Today," 1941-43, Billy Rose Theater Collection, Lincoln Center Branch, New York Public Library; The Best Plays of....[annual] (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1899-present); Theatre World [annual] Daniel Blum, editor (New York: Theatre World, 1946-present), The Biographical Encyclopedia & Who's Who of the American Theater, Walter Rigdon, editor (New York: James H. Heinman, Inc., 1966); Edwin Bronner, The Encyclopedia of American Theater, 1900-1975 (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., Inc., 1980); Gerald Bordman, Oxford Companion to American Theatre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

1930 - 1934

(In use as a cinema.)

1934

CALLING ALL STARS 12/13/34 (35 perfs.) book and lyrics by Lew Brown, music by Harry Akst; with Lou Holtz, Martha Raye, Ella Logan, Judy Canova and Jack Whiting.

1936 (renamed the 51st Street Theater)

SWEET RIVER 10/28/36 (5 perfs.) by George Abbott, based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin; with Betty Philson, Matt Briggs and Walter Price.

1937

(In use as a cinema)

1938

KNIGHTS OF SONG 10/17/38 (16 perfs.) by Glendon Allvine; with Nigel Bruce, John Moore and Monty Woolley.

1939

GEORGE WHITE'S SCANDALS 11/16/39 (120 total perfs.) by Matt Brooks, Eddie Davis and George White; music by Sammy Fain, lyrics by Jack Yellin; with Willie and Eugene Howard, Ann Miller, Ben Blue and Ella Logan. (First opened at the Alvin Theater 8/28/39.)

1940

ROMEO AND JULIET 5/9/40 (36 perfs.) by William Shakespeare; with Laurence Olivier, Vivian Leigh, Dame May Whitty, Edmond O'Brien and Cornell Wilde.

1941 (renamed the Hollywood)

BANJO EYES 12/25/41 (126 perfs.) by Joe Quillan and Izzy Elinson, based on a play by John Cecil Holm and George Abbott, lyrics by John Latouche and Harold Adamson, music by Vernon Duke; with Eddie Cantor, Virginia Mayo and Jacqueline Susann.

1942 - 1949

(In use as a cinema.)

1949 (renamed the Mark Hellinger)

ALL FOR LOVE 1/22/49 (121 perfs.) by Sammy Lambert and Anthony B. Farrell; with Milton Frome and Grace and Paul Hartman.

GILBERT AND SULLIVAN REPERTORY 10/4/49; with Earle MacVeigh, Robert Eckles, Morton Bowe and Robert Riggs.

THE MIKADO 10/4/49 (7 perfs.).

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE 10/10/49 (8 perfs.).

TRIAL BY JURY/H.M.S. PINAFORE 10/17/49 (8 perfs.).

TEXAS L'IL DARLIN 11/25/49 (221 perfs.) by John Whedon and Sam Moore, music by Robert Emmett, lyrics by Johnny Mercer; with Kenny Delmar, Mary Hatcher and Betty Lou Keim.

1950

TICKETS PLEASE 11/5/50 (245 total perfs.) (First opened at the Coronet Theater 4 27/50.)

BLESS YOU ALL 12/14/50 (84 perfs.) sketches by Arnold Auerbach, music and lyrics by Harold Rome; with Pearl Bailey, Jules Munshin, Mary McCarty and Byron Palmer.

1951

TWO ON THE AISLE 7/19/51 (279 perfs.) lyrics and sketches by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Jule Styne; with Burt Lahr and Delores Gray.

1952

THREE WISHES FOR JAMIE 3/21/52 (91 perfs.) by Charles O'Neal and Abe Burrows, music and lyrics by Ralph Blane; with Charlotte Rae, John Raitt and Anne Jeffreys.

S.M. CHARTOCK'S GILBERT AND SULLIVAN COMPANY 10/20/52 with Robert Rounseville, Robert Eckles, Martyn Green, Lillian Murphy and Mary Roche.

THE MIKADO 10/20/52 (8 perfs.).

THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE 10/27/52 (8 perfs.).

TRIAL BY JURY/H.M.S. PINAFORE 11/3/52 (8 perfs.).

IOLANTHE 11/10/52 (8 perfs.).

ELECTRA 11/19/52 (6 perfs.) by Sophocles; with Katina Paxinou.

OEDIPUS TYRANNUS 11/24/52 (10 perfs.) by Sophocles; with Katina Paxinou.

1953

HAZEL FLAGG 2/11/53 (190 perfs.) by Ben Hecht based on the film Nothing Sacred; lyrics by Bob Hilliard, music by Jule Styne; with Helen Gallagher, Jack Whiting and Thomas Mitchell.

1954

THE GIRL IN THE PINK TIGHTS 3/5/54 (115 perfs.) by Jerome Chodorov and Joseph Fields, music by Sigmund Romberg, lyrics by Leo Robin; with Jeanmarie, Alexandre Kalioujny, Brenda Lewis, Charles Goldner and Gregory Hines.

BALLET ESPAGNOLS TERESA & LUISILLO 10/31/54 (33 perfs.).

HIT THE TRAIL 12/2/54 (4 perfs.) by Frank O'Neill; with Irra Pettina and Robert Wright.

1955

PLAIN AND FANCY 1/27/55 (461 total perfs.) by Joseph Stein and Will Glickman, lyrics by Arnold B. Horwitt, music by Albert Hague; with Barbara Cook, Douglas Fletcher Rodgers and Will Able. (Moved to the Wintergarden 4/15/55.).

ANKLES AWEIGH 4/18/55 (176 perfs.) by Guy Bolton and Eddie Davis, music by Sammy Fain, lyrics by Dan Shapiro; with Betty Kean, Jean Kean and Lew Parker.

ANTONIO 10/2/55 (37 total perfs.).

1956

PLAIN AND FANCY 1/2/56 (returned from the Wintergarden).

MY FAIR LADY 3/15/56 (2,717 total perfs.) book and lyrics by Alan J. Lerner based on Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw, music by Frederick Loewe; with Julie Andrews, Rex Harrison, Stanley Holloway, Cathleen Nesbitt and Robert Coote. (Moved to the Broadhurst 2/28/62; later moved to the Broadway 4/1/62.)

1964

RUGANTINO 2/6/64 (28 perfs.) by Pietro Garinei and Sandro Giovannini; with Nino Manfredi.

FADE OUT/FADE IN 5/26/64 (271 total perfs.) book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Jule Styne; with Jack Cassidy, Carol Burnett, Tina Louise, and Tiger Haynes. (Show closed 11/14/64, reopened 2/15/65 with Dick Shawn in Jack Cassidy's role.)

1965

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER 10/17/65 (273 perfs.) book and lyrics by Alan J. Lerner, music by Burton Lane; with John Cullum and Barbara Harris.

1966

A JOYFUL NOISE 12/15/66 (12 perfs.) by Edward Padula; with John Raitt, Susan Watson, Tommy Tune and Swen Swenson.

1967

MARTHA GRAHAM DANCE COMPANY 2/21/67 (24 perfs.).

ILLYA DARLING 4/11/67 (319 perfs.) by Jules Dassin based on the film Never on Sunday; music by Manos Hadjidakis, lyrics by Joe Darion; with Melina Mercouri, Orson Bean, Hal Linden and Titos Vandis.

1968

I'M SOLOMON 4/23/68 (7 perfs.) by Anne Crosswell and Dan Almagor; with Dick Shawn, Karen Morrow and Garrett Morris.

MARLENE DIETRICH 10/3/68 (69 perfs.).

1969

DEAR WORLD 2/6/69 (132 perfs.) by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee based on the Madwoman of Chaillot, music and lyrics by Jerry Herman; with Angela Lansbury, Milo O'Shea and William Larson.

COCO 12/18/69 (332 perfs.) book and lyrics by Alan J. Lerner, music by Andre Previn; with Katherine Hepburn, George Rose, Bob Avian, Will B. Able and Jeanne Arnold.

1971

ARI 1/15/71 (19 perfs.) by Leon Uris; music by Walt Smith; with Constance Towers.

MAN OF LA MANCHA 5/25/71 (2329 total perfs.) book by Dale Wasserman with Charles West and Gaylea Byrne, music by Mitch Leigh, lyrics by Joe Darion. (First opened at the ANTA Washington Square Theater 11/22/65.)

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR 10/12/71 (720 perfs.) lyrics by Tim Rice, music by Andrew Lloyd Webber; with Ben Vereen, Jeff Fenholt and Yvonne Elliman.

1974

AS YOU LIKE IT 12/3/74 (8 perfs.) by William Shakespeare; with an all male cast, starring David Schofield, Gregory Floy and John Nettleton.

1975

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH 9/9/75 (7 perfs.) by Thornton Wilder; with Elizabeth Ashley, Alfred Drake and Charlotte Jones.

1976

1600 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE 5/4/76 (7 perfs.) by Alan J. Lerner, music by Leonard Bernstein; with Ken Howard and Patricia Routledge.

PORGY AND BESS 12/7/76 (122 total perfs.) book by DuBose Heyward, music by George Gershwin, lyrics by DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin; with Donnie Ray Albert and Esther Hind. (First opened at the Uris Theater 9/25/76.)

1977

SHENANDOAH 3/29/77 (1050 total perfs.) by James Lee Barrett, Peter Udell and Philip Rose; music by Gary Geld, lyrics by Peter Udell; with John Cullum and Donna Theodore. (First opened at the Alvin Theater 1/7/75.)

LOU RAWLS ON BROADWAY WITH THE MFSB ORCHESTRA 11/23/77 (15 perfs.); with Lou Rawls, Althea Rogers, Debbie Morris and Cindy Jordan.

1978

TIMBUKTU! 3/1/78 (221 perfs.) by Luther Davis, based on Kismet, music and lyrics by Robert Wright and George Forrest; with Melba Moore, Eartha Kitt and Ira Hawkins.

PLATINUM 11/12/78 (33 perfs.) by Will Holt and Bruce Vilanch; with Alexis Smith and Lisa Mordente.

1979

SARAVA 2/23/79 (140 perfs.) book and lyrics by N. Richard Nash, music by Mitch Leigh; with Tovah Feldshuh, P.J. Benjamin and Michael Ingram.

THE UTTER GLORY OF MORRISSEY HALL 5/13/79 (1 perf.) by Clark Gesner and Nagle Jackson; with Celeste Holm.

SUGAR BABIES 10/8/79 (1,208 perfs.) by Ralph G. Allen, lyrics by Dorothy Fields and Al Dubin, music by Jimmy McHugh; with Mickey Rooney and Ann Miller.

1982

A DOLL'S LIFE 9/23/82 (5 perfs.) book and lyrics by Betty Comden & Adolph Green, music by Larry Grossman; with Beth Joslyn and George Hearn.

1983

MERLIN 2/13/83 (199 perfs.) book by Richard Levinson & William Link, music by Elmer Bernstein, lyrics by Don Beach, magic by Doug Henning; with Chita Rivera and Doug Henning.

1984

OLIVER (Revival) 4/29/84 (17 perfs.) by Lionel Bart; with Braden Danna, Ron Moody and Patty LuPone.

1985

GRIND 4/16/85 (79 perfs.) by Fay Kanin, music by Larry Grossman, lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh; with Ben Vereen, Stubby Kaye and Leilani Jones.

TANGO ARGENTINO 10/9/85 (200 perfs.) with Juan Carlos Copes and Maria Nieves.



Mark Hellinger Theater
217-239 West 51st Street
Manhattan

Built: 1929-30
Architect: Thomas W. Lamb

Photo: LPC