

Orpheum Theater

1212 Baltimore
completed 1914, demolished 1961

by Barbara Magerl

The name “Orpheum Theater” usually invokes images of the imposing movie theater near 12th and Baltimore. But the Orpheum, a dominant chain in vaudeville’s heyday, first unfurled its banner in Kansas City in 1898. The Ninth Street Opera House at 9th and May had burned and was rebuilt by local owners in the 1890s. Martin Lehman, former manager of the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, came to town and leased the structure, as the first Orpheum Vaudeville Theater outside California.

After losing \$11,000 the first season, the competitive Lehman went door to door in many neighborhoods, offering free tickets. He especially wanted to convince women that his vaudeville shows, unlike often vulgar variety productions, were ‘high class’ entertainment. His sales pitch was, in today’s vernacular, try it - you might like it. His salesmanship had excellent results.



Need for a larger theater arose just as the theatrical area was shifting a bit south. Buoyed by Lehman’s achievements, the Orpheum Theater Corporation decided to build an extravagant theater at 1212 Baltimore. It would rise at the same time as the Muehlebach Hotel next door. The group’s decision to invest \$500,000 for the land and building confirmed that Kansas City was an important theater town. Orpheum executives believed a luxurious setting was part of the total theater experience and selected one of the most important theater architects in the country.

Gustave Albert Lansburgh was blessed by good timing. He returned home to San Francisco, one month after the devastating 1906 earthquake, with a new diploma in architecture from the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He and a partner worked two years in reconstruction of buildings near the city center. They also

designed a \$1 million Orpheum Theater, which led to Lansburgh's reputation as an acoustics expert and the title "dean of American theater architecture." Along with other commissions, he became the primary architect for the Orpheum chain. One biographer said he "made the trappings of the rich available to the general public," as the new enterprise proved.

The five-story tall structure, 100 feet wide by 146 feet deep, was built of steel and concrete. Like numerous other theaters of the period, it was in the popular French Renaissance style. But the Orpheum design reflected Lansburgh's personal love of the Paris Opera House, acquired as a student in the French capital.

The impressive facade had a multi-story middle section above the entrance doors, with six large Corinthian columns alternating with massive French windows. Panels of Grecian figures depicting the arts capped the windows and above these was an elaborate frieze. Slightly recessed niches flanked by columns with an elaborate art piece enhanced the corner areas. The facade was terra cotta, reportedly the largest and finest pieces of it ever produced. It resembled Tennessee marble so newspapers called the building "the Marble Edifice."

Beyond the five exterior doorways and double vestibule was an arched lobby with a marble floor. The complex mosaic pattern took six weeks to lay by hand. The first floor seated nearly 1,000 people; two balconies with loges brought the seating up over 2,200.

The audience could sit in one of many boxes, with four on each side of the lower floor and mezzanine. Or they could select from eight boxes on each side of the top floor, stair stepped for clear views. Rosettes, arches, and fluted columns with gilded capitals decorated the walls. A dome 40-feet wide resembled a star-filled sky.

A mural 47 feet by 7 feet, "The Dance of the Young," rose above the proscenium arch. It took four months to complete at a cost of \$2,000. New York artist William de Leftwich Dodge arrived to oversee installation of his artwork. Dodge's work decorated many New York buildings including the Astor Hotel. At the time of the opening, he was preparing murals for the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, collaborating with Lansburgh who was on the architectural committee. A downtown art store sponsored an exhibit so Kansas Citians could view more of his work.

French carpets, silk draperies, and gilded carvings provided an elegant atmosphere, with a color scheme of French gray, light blue, burnt orange, and gold. The utilitarian asbestos stage curtain was painted to resemble velvet, and had a decorative silk velour curtain behind it. There were 1,700 stage lights which could “produce any lighting effect from sunrise to sunset,” according to theater owners.

Performers had 22 dressing rooms, while the orchestra had a large room under the orchestra pit. Because Midwest theaters often closed due to summer heat, a new ‘washed air’ process provided a cooling system. “We will be able to operate this house ten months of the year instead of eight,” Lansburgh said, which meant more income for the client. Although built for live performances, the building was designed to accommodate sound films if they proved successful. The jury was still out on that question. The architect promised that people seated in either balcony would be able to hear every word of “talking pictures” distinctly.

In an era when many people combined a downtown shopping trip with a theater outing, the Orpheum offered creature comforts. The ladies’ lounge on the upper level had sofas, chairs, desks, and dressing tables, plus a maid. French windows opened to small balconies above Baltimore. The gentlemen had a smoking room and lounge with comfortable chairs on the lower level. There were two box offices, one for telephoned reservations only. All this was offered for an admission ranging from ten to seventy-five cents.

The long anticipated Orpheum opened its doors on December 26, 1914. Attending the event were leading citizens and theater devotees, plus theatrical VIPs. The Orpheum Corporation hired special railroad cars to bring in vaudeville executives from both coasts. The manager was Lawrence Lehman, Martin Lehman’s son.

The premiere show had eight acts, including a news film, dancers, several comedians, and a singer from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The house orchestra was directed by M. A. Lenge. All 2,200 plus seats were filled. *The Kansas City Star* labeled the event “conspicuously brilliant.”

After the Willis Wood Theater burned in 1917, the Orpheum became a mecca for live shows. Headliners treading the boards included top stars like Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Will Rogers, Sarah Bernhardt, and Lillian Russell. In 1921 the other leading vaudeville company, Pantages, built a theater (later named the Tower) on

12th Street near McGee. But the Orpheum remained a top favorite until the Midland opened in 1929.

The Orpheum Corporation spent \$1.5 million in 1921 to build the Mainstreet Theater at 14th and Main. By 1926 shows that had been booked into the Orpheum were scheduled at the Mainstreet, and the Orpheum "went dark." A rarely mentioned factor in the decline of vaudeville attendance was the impact of radio. In 1928 Massachusetts business tycoon Joseph P. Kennedy, whose investments included Radio Corporation of America (RCA), bought controlling interest in the merged Keith/Orpheum Circuit. RCA promoter Kennedy dictated that Orpheum performances would be broadcast live. Patrons wondered why they should pay to go to a theater if the family could stay home and hear the same show. Then the Great Depression and talking movies quietly buried vaudeville.

The Mainstreet was wired for sound and soon presented live shows combined with the latest films. Yet, in the 1930s the Mainstreet closed, and in 1938 the Orpheum, then owned by RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum), reopened as a movie house. Its first film featured Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in "Carefree." The Orpheum became a beloved first-run movie house.

When Fox Midwest acquired the theater in 1948, they did a major renovation and on a random schedule booked live performances by famous stars of stage and screen. The marquee touted names of Hollywood and Broadway luminaries, especially Henry Fonda in "Mr. Roberts," and Broadway stars Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy, husband and wife, in "The Four Poster."

Saluted as "the finest theater in the country" when it opened, the Orpheum had been a venue for vaudeville, the silver screen, and Broadway style productions. In 1956 the Trianon Hotel Company, which owned and operated the Muehlebach Hotel, bought the property from Fox Midwest. The 18-story Muehlebach Towers addition, at the southeast corner of 12th and Wyandotte, increased the hotel's need for exhibit space and a new ballroom. The once elegant theater, a favorite of many Kansas Citians, was razed for the Muehlebach Convention Center. Like its predecessor the Orpheum, the show house on Baltimore yielded to downtown progress.

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Lansburgh (G. Albert) Collection, 1891-1939. Online Archives of California.

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