

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE: California
COUNTY: San Francisco
FOR NPS USE ONLY
ENTRY DATE <b>MAY 27 1975</b>

### 1. NAME

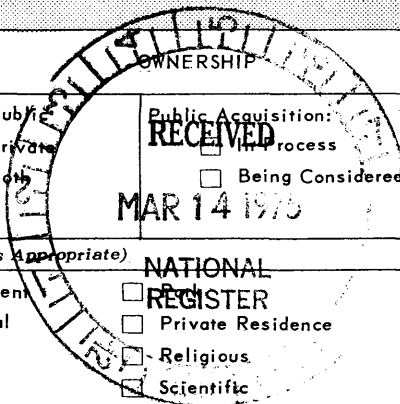
COMMON:	GEARY THEATRE
AND/OR HISTORIC:	Columbia Theatre

### 2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER: 415 Geary Street			
CITY OR TOWN: San Francisco,		CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: Fifth California	
STATE California 94102	CODE 06	COUNTY: San Francisco	CODE 075

### 3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Object <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Structure	<input type="checkbox"/> Public <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Both	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restricted <input type="checkbox"/> Unrestricted <input type="checkbox"/> No
PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Educational <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial <input type="checkbox"/> Military <input type="checkbox"/> Museum	<input type="checkbox"/> National Register <input type="checkbox"/> Private Residence <input type="checkbox"/> Religious <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) _____ _____ <input type="checkbox"/> Comments _____ _____



SEE INSTRUCTIONS

### 4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME: Crocker National Bank (as trustee of the Mary E. Cryan Trust)			
STREET AND NUMBER: 1 Montgomery Street			
CITY OR TOWN: San Francisco	STATE: California	CODE 94104	CODE 06

### 5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.: Recorder's Office, San Francisco City Hall			
STREET AND NUMBER: Polk Street at McAllister Street			
CITY OR TOWN: San Francisco	STATE: California	CODE 94102	CODE 06

### 6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY: "San Francisco Theatre: W.P.A. Research Project #10677"			
DATE OF SURVEY: 1940 <input type="checkbox"/> Federal <input type="checkbox"/> State <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> County <input type="checkbox"/> Local			
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS: San Francisco Public Library, Main Branch			
STREET AND NUMBER: Larkin at McAllister Streets			
CITY OR TOWN: San Francisco	STATE: California	CODE 94102	CODE 06

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7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

(Check One)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good
<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Deteriorated
<input type="checkbox"/> Ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> Unexposed
(Check One)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Altered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unaltered
<input type="checkbox"/> Moved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Original Site

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (If known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The theatre was constructed in the years 1908-1910. Photographs document that the exterior appearance of the building has not changed. Neither photographs nor written statements have been located which describe the interior as it appeared in 1910; however, since the interior appearance today is completely faithful to the style of theatre design prevalent in 1910, and the materials used are of that era, there is general agreement that the interior, as well as the exterior, has not changed (except for carefully-installed extra lighting positions, discussed below in the narrative).

The theatre seating capacity totals 1,456, including 573 seats on the orchestra floor, 484 in the first balcony and 399 in the second balcony.

The exterior of the theatre reflects the late Victorian tradition and blends elements of neo-classicism with evidences of a baroque influence. The facade is primarily of brick. The wrought iron marquee is unaltered, although some glass pendants have not remained.

The theatre exterior also contains noteworthy adornments, such as the "tragedy" and "comedy" masks above the two principal entrance doors, and molding in the form of bucolic imagery.

The lobby of the theatre provides a graceful bridge between exterior appearance and visual impact of the auditorium space. The neo-classic influence is seen again in the decorative pilasters. Natural wood highlights both the lobby and the walls of the house.

Inside the theatre at the orchestra level, the impact of the auditorium is arresting. At once visible are the three seating levels, the decorative proscenium with its carved false perspective, the charmingly wrought detail on the exterior of the proscenium boxes, and the shallow ceiling chandelier enhanced by painted radiations of a sunburst effect.

The proscenium opening is 36-feet wide and variable in height, due to the opportunities for flexible positioning of the vertical-rise curtain.

The orchestra and balcony boxes are located on either side of the proscenium at each level of seating.

Inspection of the balcony foyers and especially the balcony seating areas reveals a blended continuation of the orchestra seating perspective, with the added appointment of wall carvings of cherubim at play and theatrical symbols which are ageless--the lute, the harp, the mask and the tokens of Bacchus.

Seating throughout the theatre is unusually fine, providing excellent acoustical balance with visual perception  
[see continuation on Form 10-300a]

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Continuation Sheet)

STATE California	
COUNTY San Francisco	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE
MAY 27 1975	

(Number all entries)

[#7] [Description continued, page two]

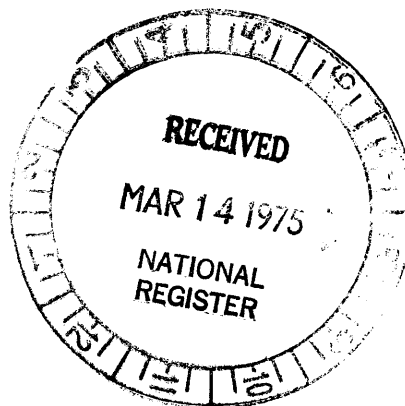
except for the rear of the second balcony. In this rarely-used seating location the traffic noises from Geary Street compete for attention with the words spoken on stage.

The advancements in lighting technology for the stage which have occurred since 1910 have made the existing positions inadequate for modern lighting equipment. Happily, the added positions for instruments were thoughtfully installed and can be removed without damage to the theatre building.

The original design did not include sufficient dressing room areas. An annex building was attached to the Geary Theatre with three floors of dressing room space and costume construction facilities. The year(s) of the subsequent construction of the annex is not documented.

An uncommonly large basement and under-stage area makes possible the storage of inactive scenery and property pieces, and can be used as a "green room" for actors.

After 65 years the appearance of the Geary Theatre -- both interior and exterior -- remains faithful to its historical period, and stands as a very fine example of theatre design philosophy and theatre architecture as these existed in the early years of the 20th Century.



**SIGNIFICANCE**

PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- |  |                                       |                                       |  |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-Columbian | <input type="checkbox"/> 16th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 18th Century | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 20th Century |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15th Century  | <input type="checkbox"/> 17th Century | <input type="checkbox"/> 19th Century |  |

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known) **1906-1910 (post-earthquake reconstruction)**

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

- |  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal              | <input type="checkbox"/> Education              | <input type="checkbox"/> Political           | <input type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prehistoric             | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering            | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion/Philosophy | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Historic                | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry               | <input type="checkbox"/> Science             | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture             | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention              | <input type="checkbox"/> Sculpture           | _____  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Social/Humanitarian | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Theater  | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce                | <input type="checkbox"/> Military               | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation      | _____  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications          | <input type="checkbox"/> Music                  |  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation            |   |  |  |

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The 1906 San Francisco earthquake precipitated a crisis without precedent in the history of the American theatre. San Francisco -- renowned for the variety and the frequency of its cultural events, "the only city in the United States, outside of New York, where a high-salaried player could be assured a long and lucrative run" <sup>1</sup> -- suddenly and devastatingly lost all eight of its downtown theatres in the fiery holocaust which followed the April 18 quake.

Fortunately, culture-conscious citizens considered the replacement of these performing spaces as an important part of reconstruction activities. During the years 1906-1911, eight new theatres were built in downtown San Francisco. Each represented the very latest achievements in theatre design and technology, as well as luxurious elegance and comfort for audiences. The illustrious theatre tradition of the city resumed almost immediately.

Half a century later, however, San Francisco theatres were again in crisis. This time, the danger came not from an Act of God but from acts of men. As Herb Caen wrote in 1957:

San Francisco's "theatre belt," which once boasted eight first-rate houses running simultaneously, has shrunk considerably of late, owing to the impact of television and movies and the diminished number of travelling companies. The "belt" now contains three theatres, and is perhaps more accurately described as a "garter." <sup>2</sup>

The three theatres referred to by Caen were the Alcazar, the Curran and the Geary. The Alcazar was torn down in 1962 to make room for a parking lot. The Curran, built after the Geary but still standing, is now operated on merely a four-wall rental basis for out-of-town touring musicals, with no particular regard to history or heritage.

Of the eight theatres built during the years of earthquake reconstruction, only the Geary has remained in continual year-round operation as a professional theatre, faithfully and reverently maintained for its historical

[continued on Form 10-300a]

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

San Francisco Theatre: W.P.A. Research Project #10677, Volumes I - XVII, San Francisco Public Library  
 Samuel Stark Theatre Collection, Stanford University Library  
 Edmund M. Gagey's The San Francisco Stage: A History (Greenwood Publishing, 1950)  
 California Historical Society Quarterly, 25:235 and 33:46  
 Also numerous passing references in guidebooks and memoirs.

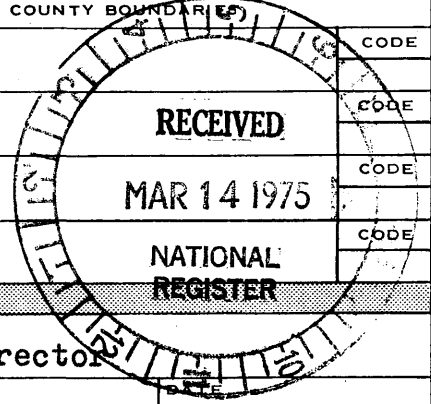
10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			OR	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
NE	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
SE	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
SW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
				North	West	
				37 - 47 - 13	122 - 24 - 33	

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY:  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE
STATE:	CODE	COUNTY:	CODE



UTM  
195520  
418212  
HL

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE:  
**Margaret Opsata, Associate Development Director**

ORGANIZATION:  
**American Conservatory Theatre Foundation**      08-15-74

STREET AND NUMBER:  
**450 Geary Street**

CITY OR TOWN:  
**San Francisco**

STATE:  
**California 94102**      CODE: 06

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National  State  Local

Name: [Signature]

Title: State Historic Preservation Officer

Date: JAN 2 1975

NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

[Signature]  
 Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date: 5/27/75

ATTEST:

[Signature]  
 Keeper of The National Register

Date: 5-27-75

RECEIVED  
Form 10-108  
(July 1969)  
MAR 14 1975  
NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

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[#8] [Statement of Significance continued, page two]

accuracy as well as its excellence as a performing space.

On January 10, 1910, Father and the Boys with William Crane opened the theatre, then known as the Columbia. It replaced the quake-destroyed "first" Columbia which had been located three blocks away (on Powell between Ellis and Eddy), and was under the same management.

The "first" Columbia (built in 1892 as the Stockwell and renamed in 1895) had been home to the famous company of Augustin Daly, which contained such major stars as Otis Skinner, Ada Rehan and John Drew, as well as a principal road house for the major productions of the Klaw-Erlanger theatrical syndicate.

Upon opening in 1910 the Columbia Theatre continued in the tradition of its namesake by presenting outstanding companies and stars of international reputation, including Sarah Bernhardt, Nazimova and Isadora Duncan. By 1917 the Columbia was the only San Francisco theatre offering legitimate drama.

Following management changes between 1924 and 1928, when the theatre briefly became the Wilkes and then the Lurie, it opened under its present-day name, the Geary. This occurred on February 6, 1928, with Pauline Fredericks in her starring vehicle, The Scarlet Woman. (For a two week period, between December 25, 1924 and January 7, 1925, the Geary name was used during the engagement of Olga Petrovna in Hurricane, then abandoned again until 1928).

The chronicle of legendary performances on the Geary Theatre stage grew more illustrious with each passing year. The best-known include George Arliss (in The Merchant of Venice, 1928), the Stratford-Upon-Avon Festival Company (1928), Edward G. Robinson (1928), Basil Rathbone (1928), Frederic March (1928), the epic stage version of The Birth of a Nation (1930), Ethel Barrymore (1931, 1939 and 1943), Menasha Skulkin and the Yiddish Theatre (1932), Ina Claire (1935), Maurice Evans (Hamlet and Richard II, 1940), Paul Muni (1940), Alexander Woolcott (The Man Who Came to Dinner, 1940), Ethel Waters (1941), Boris Karloff (Arsenic and Old Lace, 1942), Paul Robeson and Jose Ferrer (Othello, 1945), Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (1945 and 1948), Katherine Cornell (The Barrets of Wimpole Street, 1947), Cornelia Otis Skinner (Lady Windermere's Fan, 1948) and Dame Judith Anderson (Medea, 1948, and Hamlet, 1970).

Its superb acoustical quality caused the Geary to be sought after for musical performances, which included grand opera, comic opera, operetta, musical drama and chamber music concerts. A survey conducted in 1938 of most favored houses for opera in San Francisco between 1850 and 1938 found the Geary

[continued on Form 10-300a, page 3]

California

San Francisco

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NATIONAL  
REGISTER

(Number all entries)

[#8] [Statement of Significance continued, page three]

ranked sixth, even though it had been in existence only some 30% of this time and was primarily a non-musical house.

Geary Theatre audiences have also enjoyed a variety of other forms of the performing arts, including such diverse themes as magic (Blackstone in 1947, Dante in 1948), marionettes and classical dancers.

Since 1967 the Geary has been the performing home of the nation's most highly acclaimed resident professional repertory theatre company, the American Conservatory Theatre. It is fitting that the Geary became the stage upon which this company built its international reputation, continuing an unbroken tradition of 65 years of theatrical excellence within the distinguished building.

By comparison to the age of theatres in other parts of the country, the Geary may seem young. Viewed in the perspective of San Francisco's unique history, however, the Geary is the oldest existing downtown theatre in the city, with a heritage so entwined with the growth of the American theatre in the 20th Century that its architectural and theatrical significance is worthy of attention from present and future generations.

Although the Geary was constructed before acoustics became a science applied to theatre design, by sheer accident the building possesses the correct acoustical properties for excellent audibility without the use of microphones. This fortunate fact makes the Geary one of the very few early 20th Century houses anywhere which has not required interior alterations to improve upon poor acoustics. Intact, the Geary is still acoustically superior to those theatres which have been modified or built more recently, in the opinion of theatre directors, architect, musical directors and others who have performed in the Geary Theatre. Thus, the Geary is of significant interest to theatre architects as well as theatre-goers.

<sup>1</sup>Gladys Hansen, ed., San Francisco: The Bay and Cities. (New York: Hastings House, new revised edition, c. 1973), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>Herb Caen, Guide to San Francisco (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday and Company, 1957), p. 189.

Note: The Geary Theatre was designed by the noted San Francisco architectural firm of Bliss and Faville.