



1460

**United States Department of Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Orpheum Theater
other names/site number

2. Location

street & number	216 State Street	N/A	not for publication
city or town	Madison	N/A	vicinity
state Wisconsin	code WI	county Dane	code 025 zip code 53703

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets _ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant _ nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer - Wisconsin

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property _ meets _ does not meet the National Register criteria.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

Orpheum Theater
Name of Property

Dane County
County and State

Wisconsin

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:
 entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
 determined eligible for the
National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
 determined not eligible for the
National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
 removed from the National
Register.
 other, (explain:)

Edson H. Beall

1-23-08

for

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as
as apply)

private
 public-local
 public-State
 public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

building(s)
 district
 structure
 site
 object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources
in the count)

contributing	noncontributing
1	0 buildings
0	0 sites
0	0 structures
0	0 objects
1	0 total

Name of related multiple property listing:
(Enter "N/A" if property not part of a multiple property
listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources
is previously listed in the National Register**

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/THEATER

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/THEATER

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Art Deco
Renaissance

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation CONCRETE
walls BRICK
roof ASPHALT
other STONE

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Orpheum Theater
Name of Property

Dane County
County and State

Wisconsin

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance

1927-1957

Significant Dates

1927

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Rapp & Rapp

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Orpheum Theater
Name of Property

Dane County
County and State

Wisconsin

9. Major Bibliographic References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous Documentation on File (National Park Service):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- X State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State Agency
 - Federal Agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - x Other
- Name of repository: Orpheum Theater

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 16 305530 4771700
Zone Easting Northing

3 _____
Zone Easting Northing

2 _____
Zone Easting Northing

4 _____
Zone Easting Northing

See Continuation Sheet

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	Elizabeth L. Miller, Historic Preservation Consultant, on behalf of the	date	15 June 2007
organization	Madison Trust for Historic Preservation	telephone	608-233-5942
street & number	4033 Tokay Blvd.	zip code	53711
city or town	Madison	state	WI

Orpheum Theater

Dane County

Wisconsin

Name of Property

County and State

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional Items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name/title	Henry Doane	date	15 June 2007
organization	216 State Street LLC	telephone	608-255-8755
street&number	P.O. Box 1829	zip code	53701-1829
city or town	Madison	state	WI

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects, (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Orpheum Theater
Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

The Orpheum Theater was designed by Chicago architects C.W. Rapp and George L. Rapp, nationally-prominent theater designers.¹ Completed in 1927,² it is composed of two sections: the two-story front section that houses the lobby, and the rear auditorium section, which is the equivalent of six stories. The front section displays Art Deco styling, while the rear section is utilitarian in appearance. The Orpheum is constructed of load-bearing cream brick in common bond on a poured concrete basement. The lobby section faces State Street and has a front façade finished with tan brick and smooth-faced limestone. The Orpheum has a secondary street façade along one side of the auditorium section; this facade is veneered with dark red brick. Both sections have parapeted, composition roofs. The slightly-sloped roof of the lobby section steps up toward the auditorium section. The auditorium section has a gambrel roof except at the north end, over the backstage, where there is a two-level, slightly-sloping roof.

DESCRIPTION

The Orpheum Theater is located on a polygonal-shaped block in Madison's central business district. Due to the odd configuration of the block, the theater's front (lobby) section faces State Street and the rear (auditorium) section overlooks West Johnson Street. On both streets, the theater forms part of a continuous commercial streetscape.

The footprint of the Orpheum Theater measures 35 feet across the front (State Street) façade, 90 feet along the west wall of the lobby section, and 80 feet along the south wall of the lobby section. The auditorium section measures 122 feet along the northwest (West Johnson Street) and southeast facades, and 132 feet along the northeast and southwest facades (see attached site plan).

The front of the Orpheum Theater faces south (see photo 1). The first story front façade was remodeled in 1967 and now features tan brick veneer framing four pairs of glass doors. The appearance is not too different from the original, which consisted of several pairs of glass doors, with posters covering the narrow wall on either side of the doors, and a lighted signboard across the front at

¹ C.W. Rapp and George L. Rapp, "Theater in Madison, Wisconsin for the Orpheum Circuit Erected by the Beecroft Building Company," Plans, 7 November 1925.

² "New Orpheum Combines Comfort, Beauty in Interior Furnishings," *Wisconsin State Journal*, 27 March 1927, p. 6.

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Orpheum Theater
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transom level.³ At the second story, the original, smooth-faced limestone finish has been retained. It is enriched with Art Deco abstract coats-of-arms, volutes and cartouches. Stone pilasters separate the narrow, second-story windows, which display 1/1 double-hung sash configuration. A rectangular canopy marquee extends over the sidewalk across the front façade of the theater. This marquee is capped with a lighted sign reading: ORPHEUM, and bordered with small lights. The canopy appears to be original.⁴ Above, a tall, vertical marquee reading: ORPHEUM rises from the roofline (see photo 2). Originally, both marquees read: NEW ORPHEUM. The vertical marquee replaced the original sometime between 1940 and 1954.⁵ The existing vertical marquee is similar to the original, but simpler.

The secondary street façade, which is the northwest façade of the rear (auditorium) section, is set close to the sidewalk on West Johnson Street (see photo 3). The overwhelming mass of this façade is relieved by courses of brick soldiers at storefront level, giving a striped appearance. A water table and a belt course of limestone frame the first story. Above, the wall rises to the parapet. The north end of the parapet steps up, marking the backstage portion of the auditorium. At the south end of the façade, there are two groups of metal doors exiting the auditorium. A metal fire escape rises to a pair of metal doors at the second story, and to a second pair of metal doors at the third story. Although the backstage was remodeled into a second theater in 1967, the exterior was not altered. This section features a central recessed entrance with a pair of broad, metal doors. This was originally the "scenery entrance," and provided direct access to the stage. Just south of the entrance a ticket window appears. It is currently boarded. At each of the second and third stories in the backstage section, there are four openings, all boarded.

The east and west facades of the lobby section and the northeast façade of the auditorium section are very close to adjacent buildings and do not have openings. The southwest façade of the auditorium section has one, multi-paned casement window high in the wall (see photo 4).

The southeast façade of the auditorium section overlooks an alley that empties into a modern parking ramp (see photo 5). At the south end of this façade, a fire-escape climbs to a pair of metal doors at the second story, and a single metal door at the third story. At the north end, the backstage section

³ Angus McVicar, photographs, 12 April 1927 and 9 September 1936, published in Zane Williams, *Double Take: A Rephotographic Survey of Madison, Wisconsin*, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002,) pp. 166 and 168.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Angus McVicar, historical photographs, Sound and Visual Archives, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

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Orpheum Theater
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exhibits three windows at each of the first and second floors. Those at the first story are boarded, while 2/2 double-hung sash windows are found at the second story. These windows have concrete sills. A concrete ramp slopes down toward basement level, providing access to a recessed entrance into the backstage section, and to two pairs of metal doors exiting the auditorium.

On the interior, the ticket lobby is located inside the front entrance. The ticket lobby was remodeled in 1967, although the terrazzo flooring was retained. Originally, the ticket lobby had black and gold wall finishes and an elaborately frescoed ceiling. The ticket booth was an island in the middle of the lobby. Two small offices are located on the second floor above the ticket lobby. The ticket lobby opens into the grand lobby, a two-story open space that retains its original French Renaissance appearance, including two broad terrazzo staircases with bronze handrails flanking the lobby, foliated moldings, swags, brass wall sconces, a marble statue ("The Young Shepherd"), and two large vases (see photo 6).

The concession stand was set at the back of the grand lobby, between two of the pairs of doors that exit the auditorium. In 2000, the concession was remodeled to create an open kitchen and a counter for restaurant use (see photo 6, background). A dozen tables, arranged around the grand lobby, provide seating for the restaurant.

A wide foyer curves from the grand lobby along the west wall of the auditorium. The auditorium can be entered at any of four levels. Another wide foyer appears at the mezzanine level, and a narrower one provides access at the "intermediate" level (above the mezzanine), while the balcony level at the top has stair halls separated from one another by the projection booth. The French Renaissance styling, inspired by Louis XIV's palaces at Versailles and Fontainebleau,⁶ carries from the grand lobby through the foyers and the auditorium. The foyers retain their original walnut-veneer paneling, foliated wall stencils, simple classical ceiling moldings, and plastered ceiling (see photo 7, mezzanine foyer, with original carpeting). When the Orpheum opened, the ground floor and mezzanine foyers formed a "peacock alley" promenade where patrons could stroll and visit with each other before and after performances. Small restrooms, located at either end of the mezzanine and intermediate level foyers, are part of the original plan. The foyers and staircases were carpeted; the original carpeting has been replaced except in the mezzanine and intermediate level foyers. The basement foyer retains its original plan with two restrooms, and an ornate marble drinking fountain with cherubs.

⁶ "New Orpheum Combines Comfort, Beauty in Interior Furnishings."

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Orpheum Theater
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The auditorium was designed to seat 2,500 and retains a high degree of integrity.⁷ It features private boxes, a large balcony, and elaborate, gold-toned ornamentation on the proscenium, balcony, private boxes, and walls (see photos 8, 9 and 10). Stenciling in classical and foliated patterns, and brocade tapestries, appear on the walls. The original wall-mounted light fixtures and chandeliers of ormolu gold and crystal are still in evidence. Ceiling-mounted cove lighting and small lights mounted on the outside of the seat at the end of each row still function. The "Davis Annunciators," built-in placard holders for vaudeville, are still in place on either side of the stage. The stage was blocked off in 1967 to create a second theater. Originally, the stage was flanked by four levels of dressing, practice and storage rooms, with additional space for performers beneath the stage. These spaces and all the riggings are intact. The floors of the auditorium were covered with carpeting in a pattern of black, gold and red. This carpeting has been replaced, as has the original seating upholstery, which was slightly less plush and brown in color.

Much of the basement beneath the auditorium is unexcavated, although there are several small rooms for storage and mechanical equipment. A lounge in the basement was composed of a smoking area for both sexes connected to smaller lounges and restrooms that were gender-segregated. The smaller lounges remain but have modern bathroom fixtures. Many basement finishes are original and include terrazzo, ceramic-tile-and-plaster walls, classical ceiling moldings, and plaster ceilings.

ALTERATIONS

Alterations to the Orpheum Theater are limited to the remodeling of the ticket lobby, first-floor front façade and backstage area (1967), and the installation of a kitchen and counter where the concession stand was located (2000). These alterations do not compromise the historic integrity of the Orpheum Theater because the auditorium, grand lobby and foyers, which were the most ornate spaces and the spaces most associated with the movie palace building type, retain excellent integrity. Although some windows are boarded, the original openings are intact.

⁷ Angus McVicar, photograph, c. April 1927, published in Stuart D. Levitan, *Madison: The Illustrated Sesquicentennial History, Volume 1, 1856-1931*, (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 232.

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Orpheum Theater
Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin

SUMMARY

The Orpheum Theater is architecturally significant at the local level under *Criterion C*, as a fine and intact example of an early twentieth century "movie palace," and as the work of master theater architects, C.W. Rapp and George L. Rapp. The Orpheum is also historically significant under *Criterion A*, in entertainment and recreation, for its more than 80 years as a movie theater. Between 1910 and 1930, a time also known as the "movie palace era," motion pictures evolved from a novelty to a form of entertainment with mass appeal. By the end of the 1920s, motion pictures had become an important cultural phenomenon that helped establish and shape twentieth century American popular culture and taste, as happens today. The Orpheum Theater is the best representative of the movie palace era in Madison, and the only one in which movies are still regularly shown. The period of significance extends from 1927, the date of the building's completion, through 1957, the fifty-year cut-off date.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: BRIEF HISTORY OF MADISON

The original plat of Madison was surveyed for James Duane Doty in 1836, who named the community in honor of the fourth President of the United States. It was incorporated as a village in 1846 with a population of 626. In 1848, Wisconsin became the 30th state, and Madison was named the state capital. The same year, the University of Wisconsin was founded. Tremendous growth followed. When Madison was chartered as a city in 1856, its population stood at 6,864. By that time, the city's character as a center for government and as a college town was firmly established. Growth stalled during the Civil War, taking off again in the 1870s, when excellent train service enabled Madison to become a regional commercial center. In the 1880s and 1890s, Madison became a manufacturing center as well. At first, agricultural implements and machine tools were produced, by companies such as Fuller and Johnson. In the early twentieth century, the French Battery Company (later known as Ray-o-Vac) and Oscar Mayer were established. The development of a vigorous manufacturing sector, and the quadrupling of the student body at the University of Wisconsin were major factors spurring Madison's growth from the seventh largest city in the state in 1910, to the third largest by 1930.⁸ Today, Madison remains a government and university community with thriving commercial and manufacturing enterprises.

⁸ David V. Mollenhoff, *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*, (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1982), excerpted from entire book; and Robert C. Nesbit, *Wisconsin: A History*, (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), p. 549.

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Orpheum Theater
Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Orpheum Theater is an excellent example of the "movie palace," a building type erected in the 1920s and the 1930s. The earliest motion picture venues were typically converted stores or warehouses, which, like the utility hall, had few amenities. The interior was a long, open room, and the film was projected onto a wall painted white, or onto sheets. If there was seating, it consisted of moveable chairs or benches, accommodating no more than 300 people. These early movie theaters, dating from the turn of the century, were often called "nickelodeons," because a ticket cost five cents.⁹

With the increasing popularity of movies, the nickelodeon was soon replaced by a building-type designed specifically for showing motion pictures: the movie theater. The era of the movie theater in Wisconsin began in 1903 and continues through the present. Movie theaters can be divided into two broad types: the movie theater and the movie palace. Both types were located in the downtown business district during the historic period (prior to 1957). A marquee advertising the latest show was placed over the entrance and could be illuminated at night. The auditorium was placed at ground level, entered through a wide passageway or lobby that opened onto a main street. The auditorium frequently included a platform stage in front of the screen for live productions, and had fixed, upholstered seating. A projection booth, rest rooms, air conditioning, and a ticket booth are other elements found in both movie theaters and movie palaces.¹⁰

The movie palace, erected in Wisconsin between 1924 and the late 1930s, was generally grander than the movie theater in every way. The movie palace was larger, with as many as 4,000 seats. It had balconies, with expansive lobbies and restrooms with lounges at each floor, an orchestra pit, and dressing rooms as well as practice spaces for performers. The lavish, spectacular interior of the movie palace is the element that most distinguishes it from the movie theater. Theater designers wanted moviegoers to feel as though they were in an exotic, faraway land or time period. Ancient Egypt, Venice, the palace at Versailles, the Taj Mahal, Moorish Spain, and Ancient China inspired many a movie palace interior. In contrast, the movie theater was generally smaller, with a simple interior finish, and was constructed both before and after the era of the movie palace.¹¹

⁹ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Performing Arts and Motion Pictures," (1998), pp. 5-8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

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Orpheum Theater
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Early twentieth-century motion picture promoters worked with architects such as C.W. Rapp and George L. Rapp to create a new and very modern building type that would attract customers, pamper them, and provide the technical facilities required to operate movies. This new building type was called the movie palace. The movie palace combined state-of-the-art motion picture and vaudeville facilities with an opulent setting that surrounded theater-goers with the trappings of the wealthy, yet was accessible to anyone who could pay the admission price. During the 1920s, American movie palace interiors were designed in one of three modes: the royal palace, which drew on European Renaissance and Baroque precedents for decoration; the exotic, inspired by traditions as varied as Moorish, Latin American, Persian, Egyptian, Chinese, and Indian; and the atmospheric, with fantastic sky or weather patterns on the ceiling.¹²

Two outstanding movie palaces were built in Madison: the Capitol Theater and the Orpheum Theater. The Capitol Theater, at 213 State Street, stood opposite the Orpheum and was built in 1927-1928. Both theaters were designed by the distinguished theater designers, Rapp and Rapp.¹³ The Capitol's Moorish exterior and Spanish-influenced interior placed it firmly in the exotic category. In 1974, the Capitol Theater was transformed into the Madison Civic Center. The auditorium was restored, but the rest of the building was severely altered. In 1998, construction began on the Overture Center, which occupies the block that includes the Capitol Theater. The Capitol Theater auditorium was incorporated into the Overture Center, reduced in seating capacity and remodeled, while retaining and reproducing some of its original details. On the exterior, only the delicate Moorish tower that embellished the Capitol has been preserved. On the interior, the grand lobby, auditorium seating, and many decorative elements have been lost. As a result, the Capitol Theater can no longer be identified as a movie palace.

The Orpheum Theater incorporates all the distinguishing elements of the movie palace building type and retains a high degree of integrity. The Orpheum's Art Deco exterior was masterfully integrated with the French Renaissance-inspired, royal palace interior. The 1967 remodeling altered the first story of the front façade, ticket lobby, and backstage area. However, the auditorium, grand lobby, and foyers are intact. Opulent light fixtures and chandeliers, marble staircases, terrazzo flooring, walnut-veneer paneling, and elaborate decoration on the walls and ceilings, especially in the auditorium, all survive. The unaltered grand size and scale of the auditorium is also notable in a time when theater-goers have become accustomed to the diminutive modern-day cinema.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Katherine H. Rankin, "Intensive Survey of the Historic Resources of Madison," Report Prepared for the Madison Department of Planning and Development, 1995, no page numbers.

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Orpheum Theater
Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin

In addition to the flamboyant décor characteristic of the movie palace, the Orpheum Theater embraced the latest technology, not only to present motion pictures and stage live performances, but to make the patrons comfortable. Climate control was paramount and the Orpheum's ventilation system continuously exchanged the air and maintained a constant temperature in the theater. For summer cooling,

...air will be drawn in from outside and conducted through water sprays and washed of all impurities so that it is clean as well as fresh...[and]...through the operation of these compressors, the theater always is supplied with iced drinking water.¹⁴

The lighting in the Orpheum auditorium also reflected state-of-the-art technology, which had to be bright enough to allow patrons to find their seats while the movie was playing, yet not distract those already seated. The Orpheum features cove lighting, opaque globes, crystal chandeliers and small lights on the side of the seat at the end of each row. Like many movie palaces, the Orpheum's auditorium also housed two large organ chambers. Other features designed for the comfort of patrons were incorporated into the finest movie palaces, such as the Orpheum, including smoking lounges for both sexes, a "cosmetique salon" for ladies with dressing tables and mirrors, and bathrooms with attendants and the latest plumbing fixtures.¹⁵

When the Orpheum opened on 31 March 1927, it became the first venue in Madison to run a continuous program, from 1 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. daily. This ambitious programming was generally confined to the movie palaces of the very largest cities. The program alternated vaudeville performances with films, running each three times a day, with the entire program changing on Sundays and Thursdays.¹⁶

The Orpheum Theater is a good example of the hundreds of movie palaces Rapp and Rapp designed during the 1920s. Cornelius Ward Rapp (1861-1927) and George Leslie Rapp (1878-1942) were among the leading theater designers in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. C.W. Rapp began his career working with his father, who was a carpenter and architect in Carbondale, Illinois. C.W. Rapp opened his own office in 1891. George L. Rapp studied architecture at the University of Illinois and then worked for Chicago architect Edward Krause. In 1906, the brothers formed a partnership under

¹⁴ "New Orpheum Combines Comfort, Beauty in Interior Furnishings."

¹⁵ Ibid., and "New Orpheum to Open on State Street on Thursday," *Capital Times*, 30 March 1927.

¹⁶ "New Orpheum to Open on State Street on Thursday."

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Orpheum Theater
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the name, Rapp and Rapp. In 1917, Rapp and Rapp became the architects for the Balaban and Katz chain of theaters (later part of Paramount Pictures). They quickly established themselves as one of the top three theater-designing firms in the country, along with Thomas W. Lamb and John Eberson. Although skilled in all three theater interior styles (royal palace, exotic, and atmospheric), Rapp and Rapp most often employed the royal palace mode. The firm was particularly inspired by the French Renaissance designs of the palaces of Louis XIV, most notably Versailles.¹⁷ Many have been demolished or severely altered.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: ENTERTAINMENT AND RECREATION

The Orpheum Theater is the best representative of the movie palace era in Madison, and has been a venue for screening films for more than 80 years. Across the nation between 1910 and 1930, motion pictures evolved from a novelty to a form of entertainment that appealed to nearly everyone and helped establish and shape American popular culture.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the first nickelodeons appeared, capturing the public's imagination with pictures that moved as if by magic. While present-day movie-goers might not be impressed by the brief, flickering, silent, black-and-white films of the day, they were truly amazing to early theater patrons. By 1910, the country was in the grip of a motion picture craze. Successful motion picture producers and promoters often came from vaudeville and possessed both keen business acumen and a highly-developed sense of showmanship. Balaban and Katz (later part of Paramount Pictures), Marcus Loew (associated with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), and Keith-Albee-Orpheum (later part of RKO), among others, established regional and national networks of theater to provide a wide distribution for the films they produced or promoted.¹⁸

Madison had supported several theaters during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The grandest of these was the Fuller Opera House at 5-10 West Mifflin Street (demolished), an ornate theater erected in 1890, which hosted high-quality and popular entertainment through the 1890s. During the first decade of the twentieth century, motion pictures began to take hold in Madison. The Fuller Opera House began showing movies regularly and nickelodeons popped up in storefronts and arcades around the downtown. The city's first motion picture/vaudeville theaters were also built during this time.

¹⁷ David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), p. 43.

¹⁸ David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987), pp. 17-18.

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Orpheum Theater
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These were the Majestic Theater at 115 King Street (built 1906, extant, currently a venue for live music), and the Amuse Theater at 16 East Mifflin Street (built 1910, remodeled by Rapp and Rapp as the Strand in 1917, demolished). Madison's first theater designed solely for motion pictures opened in

1909. This was the Grand Theater (demolished), located at 204-06 State Street, just east of the Orpheum. Movies had become so popular in Madison by this time that patrons were turned away from the door of the Grand nightly for its first nine months.¹⁹

Movie going continued to increase in Madison through the 1910s. By 1913, there were eight theaters in the city showing movies only, and two more that hosted both live performances and films. The equivalent of one in ten residents went to the movies every day.²⁰ Motion picture/vaudeville theater chains expanded into Madison during this time. Among the first of these was the first Orpheum Theater at 11-15 Monona Avenue (now Martin Luther King Boulevard, demolished), part of the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit.²¹

In 1915, the Madison Board of Commerce conducted a survey of the recreational habits of city residents. This survey showed that one in five residents attended a movie theater every Sunday and that some 25,000 people, the equivalent of the entire population of Madison, went to the movies each week.²² Clearly, movies had become one of the leading forms of entertainment in the city, touching the lives of nearly every Madison resident. The city's first movie palace appeared soon after. This was the Strand at 16 East Mifflin Street (demolished). Rapp and Rapp created the 1,500-seat Strand Theater by remodeling an earlier movie house, the Amuse.²³ The Strand was lavish, but not quite as lavish as later movie palaces.

The height of movie palace construction in Madison occurred between 1925 and 1929. Three movie palaces were erected during this time: the Orpheum, the Capitol and the Eastwood.

The Orpheum Theater was designed by Rapp and Rapp in November 1925 for the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit.²⁴ By the time the Orpheum opened in 1927, RKO had acquired Keith-Albee-

¹⁹ Mollenhoff, p. 428.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Rankin, no page numbers.

²² Madison Board of Commerce, *Madison, The Four Lake City: Recreational Survey*, (Madison, Wisconsin: Board of Commerce, 1915), p. 52.

²³ Mollenhoff, p. 428.

²⁴ Rapp and Rapp.

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Orpheum. The \$750,000 cost to build the Orpheum was largely financed by the Beecroft Building Company in Madison, headed by Dr. William Beecroft. Beecroft was a dentist, whose support of local theaters earned him the nickname, "Mr. Theater."²⁵

The Orpheum opened as the New Orpheum Theater on Thursday, 31 March 1927, at 1 p.m. A.G. Schmedeman, mayor of Madison, spoke at the dedication. The program was performed three times that day, running continuously through 11 p.m., initiating what would be the daily schedule. The program included a newsreel; a "photoplay" (film) called, "Nobody's Widow," with organ accompaniment; and vaudeville acts. More than 7,000 people attended the Orpheum on its opening day. Countless more "...were turned away or became tired of waiting in the lines which at times were extended to the exits on West Johnson Street."²⁶

The Capitol Theater (now inside the Overture Center, altered) was financed by a group of businessmen from Milwaukee and Madison; it opened 21 January 1928. Its location directly across State Street from the Orpheum created a small theater district in Madison. Like the Orpheum, the Capitol was designed by Rapp and Rapp, and presented both motion pictures and live performances. The Capitol soon became primarily a movie theater, while live performances were staged at the Orpheum as late as 1973.²⁷ The Orpheum began hosting live performances again in 2000.

The Eastwood Theater, located at 2088-2098 Atwood Avenue (now the Barrymore, altered), was completed in 1929. It was not quite as elaborate as the Orpheum or the Capitol theaters. The Eastwood was the first movie theater in Madison constructed outside the central business district. Located in a neighborhood commercial area, the Eastwood was also the last movie theater built in Madison until 1966, when the first suburban movie house was erected, the Hilldale Theater (demolished 2007).

In spite of the Depression, attendance at movies continued to climb during the 1930s. After the peak year of 1946, movie attendance at downtown movie palaces declined, due to several factors. First, motion pictures were growing increasingly sophisticated, incorporating sound, and later, color; the movie and its stars attracted customers, with no need for the fancy setting of the movie palace. Second, during the 1950s and 1960s, the popularity and availability of television expanded, providing

²⁵ Carol Cartwright and Katherine H. Rankin, "Orpheum Theater," Madison Landmark Nomination, 21 October 1998, p. 3.

²⁶ "7,000 Witness New Orpheum Opening Bill," *Capital Times*, 1 April 1927, p. 1.

²⁷ Rankin, no page numbers.

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Orpheum Theater
Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin

an entertainment similar to motion pictures that was free and could be viewed in the comfort of your own home. Finally, as suburbia developed following World War II, movie theaters appeared in shopping malls close to the new residential neighborhoods, leaving downtown movie theaters and movie palaces playing to increasingly fewer patrons. In 1970, the first multi-screen movie theater (a triplex) in Wisconsin opened in Milwaukee, heralding a trend that continues. Today, theaters with more than four screens, shown in small, simple auditoriums, are the norm.²⁸ In contrast, many early twentieth century movie theaters have been altered or demolished. Few intact theaters of that era survive today.

In Madison, only four of the eleven buildings that were constructed for motion pictures prior to 1950 remain: the Majestic, the Orpheum, the Capitol, and the Eastwood. The Majestic, built in 1906, predates the movie palace era. Of the three surviving movie palaces, the Orpheum is the only one that is still operated as a movie theater, and it is by far the most intact.

CONCLUSION

The Orpheum Theater is architecturally significant as a fine and intact example of an early twentieth century movie palace, and as the work of master theater architects, C.W. and George L. Rapp. It represents the French Renaissance variant of the royal palace style of interior decoration, one of the three main types of movie palace interiors, and the one for which Rapp and Rapp were most noted. The Orpheum is also historically significant at the local level under *Criterion A* in entertainment and recreation, as the best representative of the movie palace era, when motion pictures began to shape twentieth century American popular culture and taste, a pattern that continues today. The Orpheum has served Madison's community as a movie theater for eighty years, and counting.

²⁸ Wisconsin Historical Society, pp. 7-8.

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Orpheum Theater
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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Orpheum Theater is located in Block 64 of the Original Plat of Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin, more particularly described as follows: beginning 208 feet E from the W corner of Block 64 on State Street, thence N to a point on NE line of Lot 3, 85 feet from State Street, thence SE to E corner of Lot 3, thence S along W line of West John Street, thence SE to E corner of Lot 3, thence S along W line of Dayton Building Company's replat to State Street, thence W on State Street 35 feet to point of beginning, all of Lot 4 except therefrom commencing at E corner of Lot 4, thence NWly along said lot line 10 feet, thence SWly and parallel to SE line of said lot to a point where prolongation of W line of Lot 1, Dayton Building Company's replat intersects said line, thence S to S corner of Lot 4, thence NEly to beginning; and lot 5, Block 64. The parcel contains less than one acre.

VERBAL BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The historic boundaries of the Orpheum Theater coincide with the legal boundary of the parcel on which the theater sits, and encompass all those resources historically associated with the theater.

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Orpheum Theater

Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin

Photo by Elizabeth L. Miller, April 2007

Negative on file, Wisconsin Historical Society

View of the south-facing (front) façade of the Orpheum Theater, looking north.

Photo 2 of 10

View of the south-facing (front) façade, looking northeast.

Photo 3 of 10

View of the northwest-facing (West Johnson Street) façade, looking southeast.

Photo 4 of 10

View of the northwest- and southwest-facing facades, looking east.

Photo 5 of 10

View of the southeast-facing façade, looking southwest.

Photo 6 of 10

View of the grand lobby. Note statue and vases at second story, restaurant kitchen and counter in background.

Photo 7 of 10

View of the mezzanine foyer, showing walnut paneling, original lighting and original carpeting.

Photo 8 of 10

View of the auditorium, looking from the stage toward the balcony and the left private box.

Photo 9 of 10

View of the auditorium from the balcony, showing part of the stage and the right private box.

Photo 10 of 10

View of the stage, showing ornate proscenium. Note "Davis Annunciators" flanking the stage.

ORPHEUM THEATER
216 State Street
City of Madison
Dane County, Wisconsin

Scale: 1"=60'

