

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

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered APR 25 1986

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic Showboat Theatre

and/or common

**2. Location**

street & number 1705 N.E. Pacific St., University of Washington — not for publication

city, town Seattle — vicinity of

state Washington code 053 county King code 033

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	n/a	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: vacant

**4. Owner of Property**

name University of Washington

street & number 301 Administration Building

city, town Seattle — vicinity of state Washington 98195

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. King County Administration Building

street & number 5th and James

city, town Seattle state Washington 98104

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

Washington State Inventory  
title of Cultural Resources has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date 1985  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation

city, town 111 W. 21st Ave., KL-11, Olympia state Washington 98504

# 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved    date _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

**Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance**

The Showboat Theatre is a frame structure designed to resemble a Mississippi River "showboat," built on concrete pilings driven into Lake Union approximately forty feet off the shore of the University of Washington campus in Seattle. The structure measures approximately 144 feet in length, 47 feet in width, and boasts several levels, including an auditorium with stage, a promenade deck, a full basement, and several dressing and storage rooms. A false hull, unfinished beneath the water line, extends the full-length of the structure. The height of the hull from the water to the promenade deck (amidship) is nine feet. The frame of the structure is sheathed on the exterior with fir siding and on the interior with plasterboard. Decorative wooden scrollwork ornaments the decks.

Access to the Showboat is provided by wooden gang planks. The main gangplank leads past the box office into a spacious lobby at the auditorium level with a cloak room and kitchen. Stairs lead to the upper promenade deck and lower covered decks. The auditorium section of the building is one story in height, 95 feet in length, and measures 24 1/2 feet from water level to the flat tar and gravel roof. The auditorium has a sloped floor, 220 seats arranged in continental style, and aisles on both sides of the hall. The forward roof of the auditorium is open to the public and equipped with guard rails and pilot house. (A portion of the railing is in disrepair.)

The stage section is 51 feet in depth, 47 feet in width, and measures 42 feet from the stage floor to the ceiling. The stage itself has dynamic symmetry and measures 35 feet deep, and 35 feet high and contains a built-in revolving stage. A permanent plaster dome cyclorama at the rear of the stage gives a sense of sky to outdoor scenes. The proscenium opening is 11 feet high and 19 feet wide. The rear portion of the stage section contains dressing and storage rooms. A full basement level extends beneath both the auditorium and the stage and contains general utility rooms, a public lounge, restrooms, and a stage manager's apartment.

The Showboat Theatre is reminiscent of the old South with its waterfront setting bordered with weeping willows. Although some of the interior trim has been removed, the cloak room remodeled, and the brass rail that surrounded the orchestra pit lost, the theatre building still retains most of its historic character.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

**Specific dates** 1937–1938 **Builder/Architect** John Ashby Conway & James Hicken

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Showboat Theatre on the University of Washington campus is historically significant for its association with the growth of theatre in Seattle and the study of dramatic arts in the State of Washington. Conceived by University professor and playwright Glenn Hughes and constructed in 1937–1938 with Works Progress Administration (WPA) labor, the Showboat was the first small theatre in the country built exclusively for training university students. The completely self-supporting theatre was more than a student laboratory, however. Presenting dramatic productions fifty weeks a year, the Showboat soon became a cultural institution in Seattle, offering theatrical opportunities for students and audiences alike and creating a foundation for future theatrical development in the city.

### Historical Background: Glenn Hughes and the UW School of Drama

The creation of the Showboat Theatre was inextricably associated with Glenn Hughes. Professor Hughes, director of the School of Drama, was a nationally recognized pioneer in the fields of little theatre and dramatic education. He founded the department in 1930 and remained its director for over thirty years. During that time, Hughes established strong student repertory groups, conducted research into the theatre history of the Northwest and theatre model making, created travelling theatre programs, and was a leader in the Federal Theatre project of the WPA. At the heart of Hughes' teaching lay the strong conviction that dramatic education should be based on practical experience in theatres built exclusively for student use.<sup>1</sup>

Hughes was convinced that students were not well served by the large, multi-purpose auditoriums that existed on most college campuses in the early twentieth century. "The college theatre operates under obvious limitations," Hughes wrote. "It still fails in most instances to supply its community with regular dramatic fare. Typically a college play is presented for two or three performances in a large auditorium and there is a dark period of a month or more between plays. Such a policy...does not offer a substitute for

<sup>1</sup>Hallie Flanagan, Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre, New York: Benjamin Blum, 1940, p. 43.

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

Center Aisle Communal Theatre Newspaper. St. Paul, MN, August 27, 1941.

Gates, Charles. The First Century at the University of Washington. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961.

Houghton, Norris. Advance from Broadway. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1941.

(cont.)

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreege of nominated property less than one

Quadrangle name Seattle North

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

### UTM References

A 

1	0	5	5	1	7	8	0	5	2	7	7	3	6	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

E 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

F 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

G 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

H 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

**Verbal boundary description and justification** The nominated property is a rectangular structure measuring approximately 144 feet by 47 feet built on pilings about 40 feet from the shore of Lake Union and described thusly: a portion of the following excluding all other structures but including the structure commonly known as the Showboat Theatre: (cont.)

### List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	n/a	code	county	code

state	n/a	code	county	code

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Leonard T. Garfield, Architectural Historian

organization Archaeology & Hist. Pres. date February 24, 1986

street & number 111 W. 21st Ave., KL-11 telephone (206) 586-2901

city or town Olympia state Washington 98504-5411

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation 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.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Jacob E. III*

title State Historic Preservation Officer date June 19, 1985

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

date 4/25/86

Keeper of the National Register *Jerry A. [Signature]*

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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the regular year round schedule of the defunct stock companies."<sup>2</sup> Instead, Hughes maintained, a year round schedule of student productions was necessary to provide professional experience for students and contribute meaningfully to the community's cultural life. To this end, theatres built expressly for student use were a cornerstone of Hughes educational theories.

Genesis of the Showboat

The need for student theatres seemed particularly urgent in the early 1930s, as Seattle's long history of stock theatre was coming to a close. No legitimate theatres arose in their place.<sup>3</sup> In Hughes' mind, the time had come to take action. "I could see no university funds coming our way, so I decided that we could raise and build our own theatres. I studied the problem for a year and then came to some important conclusions. One was that the legitimate theatre was as dead as a doornail and that drastic measures must be taken to revive it. By 1931 there were no resident companies and no road shows in Seattle. Only movies. My job was to change the picture, and I felt that the university had a real obligation in this matter. Teaching dramatic literature is not enough. Plays need to be performed. But to have a new look - freshness and novelty."<sup>4</sup>

At first Hughes found temporary stages for his students, and plays were presented in lodge rooms, storefronts, a downtown hotel penthouse, and in a small theatre located near the University district. The plays were well received and "as a result of good business and economical management we showed regular profits on our productions and these we put into a building fund." The extra money would help achieve Hughes' goal - to build permanent student facilities "on campus where we belong."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre, New York: Samuel French, 1951, p. 488.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Katherine Rohrer, The History of Seattle Stock Companies from Their Beginnings to 1934, Seattle: UW Press, 1945.

<sup>4</sup>Glenn Hughes, letter to UW President Charles Odegaard, February 6, 1961, Glenn Hughes Correspondence, UW Library.

<sup>5</sup>Glenn Hughes, The Penthouse Theatre, New York: Samuel French, 1942, pp. 13-23.

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By the mid-1930s, Hughes was ready to begin planning for the new structures. "Because we were beginning to feel a little cramped in our little Studio Theatre (off campus) we decided to make our first campus theatre one with a standard stage and to let a campus penthouse come later." The standard stage, of course, was the Showboat Theatre. But, in addition to being the first permanent student theatre on campus, Hughes wanted the new facility to be a unique structure, a "novelty in the American theatre." According to Hughes:

"I was insistent on the idea of making each of our proposed campus theatres distinctive. I wanted to dramatize the theatres themselves. And after considering the various possibilities, I concluded that an ideal theatre for our use would be one built on water."<sup>6</sup>

Thus was born the idea of the Showboat Theatre.

Construction of the Showboat

The design and construction of the new theatre represented the collaborative efforts of Hughes and two of his drama school colleagues - John Ashby Conway, the school's artistic director, who designed the theatre, and James Hicken, the school's technical director, who provided the architectural plans. Construction costs were provided by the drama department's building fund, a \$10,000 loan from the University, and a WPA grant for labor which was valued at about \$60,000.<sup>7</sup> (Hughes was a leading figure in the Federal Theatre project of the WPA and was closely associated with its projects in Washington State.)

During construction, two events helped reinforce campus and community support for the project - a strike by stagehands and another strike by student radicals which forced Hughes to close the other small theatres that he was operating off campus. Those unfortunate events underscored the need for a self-sustaining theatre located on the campus - exactly the kind that was being built on the Lake Union shore.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Hughes, Penthouse Theatre, pp. 13-23.

<sup>7</sup> Seattle Times, September 25, 1938.

<sup>8</sup> Glenn Hughes, Penthouse Theatre, pp. 18-21.

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In addition to the novel architecture, the completed theatre incorporated several technical innovations. The theatre featured a proscenium stage with a built-in revolving floor, a permanent cyclorama at the rear of the stage, perfect dynamic symmetry, and remote control lighting. The experience was something quite new for students at the UW. During its early years, the "boat" carried crew; students responsible for maintenance lived in galley and upper deck apartments. As one writer has noted, the "technical laboratory of stagecraft enabled students to learn by doing in the most advanced environment possible."<sup>9</sup> While the students took advantage of the technical aspects of the structure, audiences revelled in the promenade decks and lakeside setting which simulated the showboats of an earlier generation. When the theatre officially opened on September 22, 1938, the theatre was a critical and popular success. Variety magazine, like others, saluted "the first student theatre of its kind sponsored by a University." The new theatre was a milestone in the school's history, an important improvement over the theatre facilities of the past.

The Showboat and Dramatic Education

Just as important as the technical innovations were the educational benefits of the Showboat. The 220 seat auditorium fulfilled Hughes' concept of a small theatre. With limited seating, the potential audience for each production was spread over a longer time, thus giving students a chance to experience a professional schedule and giving audiences a convenient range of dates. Secondly, the intimacy achieved in a small auditorium heightened the audience's appreciation of the performance - a necessary requirement in the age of the motion picture. Finally, the small theatre did not overburden the ability of the young performers to project. For the next several decades the Showboat Theatre provided fifty weeks of drama each year to audiences in Seattle, thus creating an entirely new role for student theatre in the region. Indeed, as late as the 1950s, Hughes reported that only "in a few cases have small theatres been constructed for the use of college players (and) in only one case has a professional schedule been followed: at the University of

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<sup>9</sup>Karen Kane, "The Showboat: Endangered Tradition," Landmarks, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 14-15.

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Washington in Seattle where two small theatres, the Showboat and the Penthouse, operate publicly six nights per week every week of the year."<sup>10</sup>

Unlike most student theatres of the time, the Showboat was not only educational, it was lucrative. The theatre was completely self-supporting and surplus profits provided scholarships for needy students, lab equipment for student use, and books for the school's comprehensive drama library. At the same time, the theatre provided excellent exposure for the student actors: soon after it opened, the theatre became a scouting field for Warner Brothers and MGM. Just as importantly, the Showboat offered special opportunities for the larger community.

Not only were opening nights gala social events, well documented in newspaper society columns of the day, but the theatre had extended a community wide invitation to civic organizations seeking to raise funds. Private fund raising performances at the theatre were continued for at least 25 years. By the end of the first season alone, more than 98 groups had participated in this unique opportunity. In the 1940s, the Showboat increased its community outreach and instituted a program of children's theatre to attract a new audience to the university's program. According to Gerandine Siks, professor emeritus of the UW school of drama, "these early theatre beginnings in the Showboat Theatre sparked and kindled the imaginations of theatre leaders who now produce theatre for children" in Seattle.<sup>11</sup>

The Showboat in Seattle Theatre History

The role of the Showboat in the history of Seattle theatre is clear. At a time when stock theatres were dying and student theatre was limited to confined quarters off campus, the Showboat provided a legitimate stage that served to "connect the era of the stock companies to the current live legitimate theatre."<sup>12</sup> It was clear from the start that the

<sup>10</sup>Glenn Hughes, A History of the American Theatre, p. 488.

<sup>11</sup>Gerandine Brain Siks, letter to Showboat Foundation, January 8, 1986.

<sup>12</sup>Testimony from Donal Harrington, professor emeritus of drama at the University of Washington School of Drama, March 20, 1985, Seattle Landmarks Board meeting.

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theatre was something special. The University District Herald reported that the Showboat was "the most unique theatre of its kind anywhere, adding new lustre to the cultural, educational, and entertainment life of the city."<sup>13</sup> Almost a decade later, the University of Washington newspaper was still boasting of the facility: "Washington has the distinction of being the first university to establish theatres offering public performances every week of the year. The Showboat was the first to have long runs of these productions."<sup>14</sup>

The Showboat's success encouraged Hughes to build the renowned Penthouse Theatre, a structure devoted to theatre in the round. The Penthouse was completed in 1940. But even then, the Showboat continued to fill a special role. According to Professor Harrington, "Whereas the Penthouse was limited to plays adaptable to the drawing room style, the Showboat made available a broad spectrum of plays, both comic and tragic, from every period of drama history...Until 1984, the Showboat was still providing drama students and Seattle audiences with entertaining drama of all types and periods. The Penthouse, on the other hand, has not been used consistently for some time. In recent years...the Penthouse has been converted to the presentation of drama in the half round, for which it was never intended."<sup>15</sup> Wayne Johnson, the Seattle Times drama critic, also recognizes the significance of the Showboat in the history of Seattle theatre. Glenn Hughes' "legacy is clear in many areas of Seattle's theatre life," Johnson wrote, "and in no one place is it more clear than in the Showboat." According to Johnson, the Penthouse has historical significance but has been "rarely used since the vogue for theatre in the round passed. But...the Showboat regularly housed UW School of Drama productions of a consistently high level of achievement. Seattle audiences were thus given opportunities to see plays

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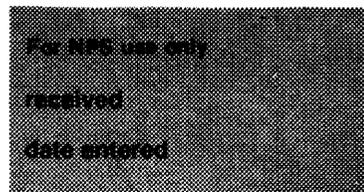
<sup>13</sup>University District Herald, September 23, 1938.

<sup>14</sup>University of Washington Daily, December 12, 1945.

<sup>15</sup>Donal Harrington, Professor Emeritus, UW, letter to Showboat Theatre Foundation, January 8, 1986.

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unlikely to be staged in other Seattle theatres because they had large casts and were therefore too expensive for nonacademic theatres."<sup>16</sup>

The Showboat was an innovative theatre, and others followed. In the decade after the Showboat was constructed, Washington State had 14 little or community theatres. Four of these were in Seattle and the Showboat was, of course, the first student theatre among them. During its first decades, the Showboat presented numerous plays and its stage played host to both established stars like Lillian Gish and rising stars like Francis Farmer. In June 1984, after 46 seasons, the University permanently closed the doors of the theatre. Today, the theatre - "once a linchpin of theatre in the Pacific Northwest," according to the Christian Science Monitor (May 10, 1985, p. 19) - is empty and unused and faces an uncertain future.

(Glenn Hughes died in 1964.)

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<sup>16</sup>Wayne Johnson, Seattle Times drama critic, letter to Showboat Theatre Foundation, January 16, 1986.

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- Hughes, Glenn. A History of the American Theatre. New York: Samuel French, 1951.
- Hughes, Glenn. "Experiment and Achievement," The Penthouse Theatre: Its History and Technique. New York: Samuel French and Co., 1942, pp. 13-23.
- Johnson, Wayne. "UW Wants to Pull Plug on Showboat," Seattle Times, April 15, 1985, p. C-1.
- MacGowan, Kenneth. Footlights Across America. New York: 1949.
- New York Sunday News, September 13, 1942.
- Players Magazine: A Journal of Educational Theatre in America. November 1944.
- San Francisco Chronicle, August 24, 1941.
- Variety, September 28, 1938.

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Government Lot 6, Blocks 18 and 18A of the Lake Union shorelands and its first supplement thereto, all in Section 16, Township 25 North, Range 4 East, W.M.