Form No. 10-300 (Rev. 10-74)

PH0505692

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

DATA SHEET

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SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC Saenger Theatre**

AND/OR COMMON
Saenger Theatre

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER 1111 Canal Street

__NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN
New Orleans __ VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT
2nd - Lindy Boggs

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
Louisiana	22	Orleans	071

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
__DISTRICT	__PUBLIC	X OCCUPIED	__AGRICULTURE	__MUSEUM
X BUILDING(S)	X PRIVATE	__UNOCCUPIED	__COMMERCIAL	__PARK
__STRUCTURE	__BOTH	__WORK IN PROGRESS	__EDUCATIONAL	__PRIVATE RESIDENCE
__SITE	**PUBLIC ACQUISITION**	**ACCESSIBLE**	X ENTERTAINMENT	__RELIGIOUS
__OBJECT	__IN PROCESS	__YES: RESTRICTED	__GOVERNMENT	__SCIENTIFIC
	X BEING CONSIDERED	X YES: UNRESTRICTED	__INDUSTRIAL	__TRANSPORTATION
		__NO	__MILITARY	__OTHER:

OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME A. B. C. Interstate Theatres, Inc.

STREET & NUMBER
1010 Oliver Road P.O. Box 4520

CITY, TOWN
Monroe __ VICINITY OF

STATE
Louisiana

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Archives of Conveyance Office (Book 514 Page 33)

STREET & NUMBER
421 Loyola Avenue

CITY, TOWN
New Orleans

STATE
Louisiana

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE None known

DATE

__FEDERAL __STATE __COUNTY __LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
__EXCELLENT	__DETERIORATED	__UNALTERED	X ORIGINAL SITE
X GOOD	__RUINS	X ALTERED	__MOVED DATE_____
__FAIR	__UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Saenger Theatre is an impressive example of a 1920's movie palace. The reinforced concrete structure rises to a height of 4 stories and has brick faccia. It occupies the rear half of a city block bounded by Canal Street, Rampart Street, Basin Street and Iberville Street. (Iberville Street is at the rear of the building) When the Saenger was built, Saenger Theatres, Inc. was unable to gain control of the entire block. So the theatre was constructed at the rear of the block and access from the front (Canal Street) and the sides (Rampart and Basin Streets) was provided by a system of grand hallways. Actually there are three such two story hallways which eminate from the theatre. One proceeds forward, between a pair of 4-story brick commercial buildings, to a grand entrance on Canal Street (the main entrance). The other two hallways proceed sideways to lesser entrances on Rampart and Basin Streets. Taken together, the hallways form a "T" shaped configuration with the top of the "T" pressing against the theatre proper.

The theatre proper and the aforementioned three hallways are the subject of this nomination. The commercial buildings which share the block with the theatre are not part of the nomination.

The theatre itself is massive with a wide balcony at the rear and a 52 foot by 35 foot stage with a procenium height of 30 feet. There is also an electrically operated worm-gear lifting orchestra pit which will hold 40 musicians. All of the stage machinery and lighting equipment is in good condition.

The stage area also contains a Robert Morgan theatre organ which lifts. It cost the Saenger Amusement Co. over $100,000 at the time of its installation. With over 2000 pipes and 7 precussion instruments, the organ is in excellent condition and is still used for concerts.

Originally the auditorium contained 3400 seats, however, some were taken out in a 1964 renovation which will be described later.

The interior style of the main theatre space is "atmospheric." This theatre style was invented by architect John Eberson. The auditorium at the Saenger was termed "a magnificent amphitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky---an Italian garden, a Persian court---where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of cloud drifted".

Actually this open court-yard effect is achieved by articulating the theatre walls and the procenium as a series of false building facades and archades, set around a quadrangle. The facade elements are varied in height, finished with proper roof lines, and capped with the beginnings of Spanish red tile roofs. Much of this "facade" work is done in marble. This courtyard configuration is surmounted by a vast curved ceiling on which the appearance of sky and clouds is achieved through painterly illusion. The ceiling is inset with point lights to give the effect of stars. Day, night, or sunrise

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7. Description (cont'd)

effects can be produced with the use of the lighting equipment.

The stage is flanked by an unusually wide pair of colossal pilasters of the composite order. The procenium is surmounted by a wide paneled entablature with gilt shallow relief carving, mediallions, a large central cartouche with cherubs, and a heavy corbel table with false roof. Flanking the stage area, on the side walls, is a pair of false building fronts which superficially resemble Baroque church facades. Both are based on the triumphal arch motif, both have central recessed niche areas with statuary, and both have large plaster urns at the parapet level. Although they were termed "Florentine Renaissance" at the time of the theatre's construction, each one is in fact an accumulation of Baroque, Mannerist, Renaissance and Rococo, details liberally garnished with gilt relief work, statuary and metal work.

Completing the court yard is a pair of two story archades with Corinthian columns, medallions in the spandrels, and ballustrade statuary. The archades extend beyond the balcony to the rear of the theatre space. They provide a transition space to the various recessed areas off the main theatre.

The design also provides for generous smoking rooms as well as a second floor art salon which was removed in 1964.

The aforementioned grand access hallways are divided into bays by shallow and slender panels formed of marble. Display cases occupy the ground floor bays and on the second floor the bays are occupied by Mannerist aedicule motifs formed of coins, many of which have inset mirrors.

At one time the main hall, which leads from the theatre to the main entrance on Canal Street, had four massive crystal chandeliers hanging from the painted beam ceiling. These chandeliers were acquired from the Chateau Pierrefonds D'Olse by the Saenger Company when the theatre was built. Today only one of the four remains.

The exterior of the theatre proper has no ornamental treatment except for the Rampart Street side which is sparingly garnished in classical details. Each entrance portal, however, is articulated as a separate facade from the surrounding building mass. The most opulent of these is the Canal Street entrance with its second story limestone grand niche which has flanking Corinthian columns and internal coffering. Less elaborate, the Rampart Street entrance has a limestone faccia with an arch motif and the three

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7. Description (cont'd)

theatrical muses carved in the upper portion. The Basin Street entrance is noted only by a few changes in the brick work, but it is distinct from its surroundings.

In 1964 the following changes were made. A second theatre was installed in the balcony which necessitated the removal of the art salon, the installation of escalators, and the construction of a light wall at the balcony level to separate the new theatre from the old theatre space. Some of the seats were also removed from the balcony and some of the theatre's art collection, including three of the main chandeliers were sold. However, the pieces sold were mainly reproductions and their disapearance does not leave a noticeable void. Inasmuch as mostof the art objects were reproductions, the art salon was not a major source of significance for the theatre, and it disappearance does not impair the significance of the theatre greatly.

Finally, the aforementioned light wall is not a major intrusion upon the main theatre space. This is because the wall is set back upon the upstairs balcony. The theatre users' orientation is to the front, or the side perhaps, but rarely is it to the rear. Also because the wall is recessed back from the front of the balcony, it is hardly less noticeable. In any case the wall could be easily removed.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
__PREHISTORIC	__ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	__COMMUNITY PLANNING	__LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	__RELIGION
__1400-1499	__ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	__CONSERVATION	__LAW	__SCIENCE
__1500-1599	__AGRICULTURE	__ECONOMICS	__LITERATURE	__SCULPTURE
__1600-1699	X ARCHITECTURE	__EDUCATION	__MILITARY	__SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
__1700-1799	__ART	__ENGINEERING	__MUSIC	X THEATER
__1800-1899	__COMMERCE	__EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	__PHILOSOPHY	__TRANSPORTATION
X 1900-	__COMMUNICATIONS	__INDUSTRY	__POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	__OTHER (SPECIFY)
		__INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1927 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Emile Weil

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Architectural

The Saenger Theatre is a 1920's movie palace of the first rank, a fact which is demonstrated by its large size with almost 3400 seats.

Its first rank status is shown by the extensive use of marble, statuary, and carving, notably in the niches and above the false facades. Its status is also shown by the extensive use of free standing columns, colossal pilasters, triumphal arch motifs, grand archades, and elaborately garnished ancillary areas off the main theatre space. It is significant that these impressive architectural elements were used to articulate the interior rather than the usual superficial wall applique of lesser theatres.

The architect for the Saenger Theatre was Emile Weil, a practitioner of prominance in New Orleans in the early 20th century. His other commissions include the Whitney Bank, the Canal Bank, Jerusalem Temple and the original Tulane University Stadium.

In addition, the Saenger is a theatre of the "atmospheric" type, a variety of theatre which created the illusion of night and day and other outdoor effects through the use of lighting and interior decoration. Atmospheric theatres, which were always in the minority, are rapidly disappearing.

Theatrical

Since its construction the Saenger has been the most important theatre in New Orleans. With the City's largest auditorium, the Saenger was usually the place where major touring shows and films opened when they came to the area.

In addition, by the late 1920's Saenger Theatres, Inc. had gained control of 320 theatres in eleven Southern states and in the Caribbean. Of these the Saenger Theatre in New Orleans was the largest and most elaborately built. It was for example the only Saenger owned theatre with a lifting orchestra pit.

The New Orleans Times-Picayne and the New Orleans Item ran Saenger Sections on the day the theatre opened on February 4, 1927. "Their Dream Theatre Comes True" was the caption over the pictures of the four men who were the founders and top executives of the company. They were Julian H. Saenger, President; A. D. Saenger, Vice-President; E. V. Richards, Vice-President and General Manager; and L. M. Ash, Treasurer.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

The Times-Picayune, February 5, 1927, pg. 1,3 Saenger Section.
The New Orleans Item, February 4, 1927, Saenger Section.
History of Shreveport and Shreveport Buildings by Miss Lilla McLure and Mr. Ed. Howe, 1937, pp. 174, 175, 177, 271.
The Best Remaining Seats, Ben M. Hall, 1961.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY approx. 1½

UTM REFERENCES

	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
A	15	782530	3317330
B			
C			
D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The entire block which measures 128 ft. x 320 ft. is nominated, with the exceptions as follows. Begin in the sourthern corner, proceed N.E. for 63', thence NW at 90° 120½', thence SW at 90° 63' to Basin St., thence SE at 90° 120½' back to corner. Also begin in the eatern corner, proceed SW 44', thence NW at 90° 120½', thence NE at 90° 44' to North Rampart St., thence SE at 90° for 120½' back to corner.

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE: Mrs. Henrietta Ash Wittenberg; Albert Barry Henry, M. D. — Revised by Jonathan Fricker, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION: City Lights, Inc. — DATE: February 1977

STREET & NUMBER: 1629 Jefferson Avenue — TELEPHONE:

CITY OR TOWN: New Orleans — STATE: Louisiana

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL ___ STATE X 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.

[redacted] SIGNATURE Sandra Thompson

TITLE SHPO DATE Oct. 4, 1977

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Robert B. Rettig — DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION — KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER — DATE 11/25/77

ATTEST: Charles Adamy — KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER — DATE 11.23.77

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Saenger Theatre

8. Significance (cont'd)

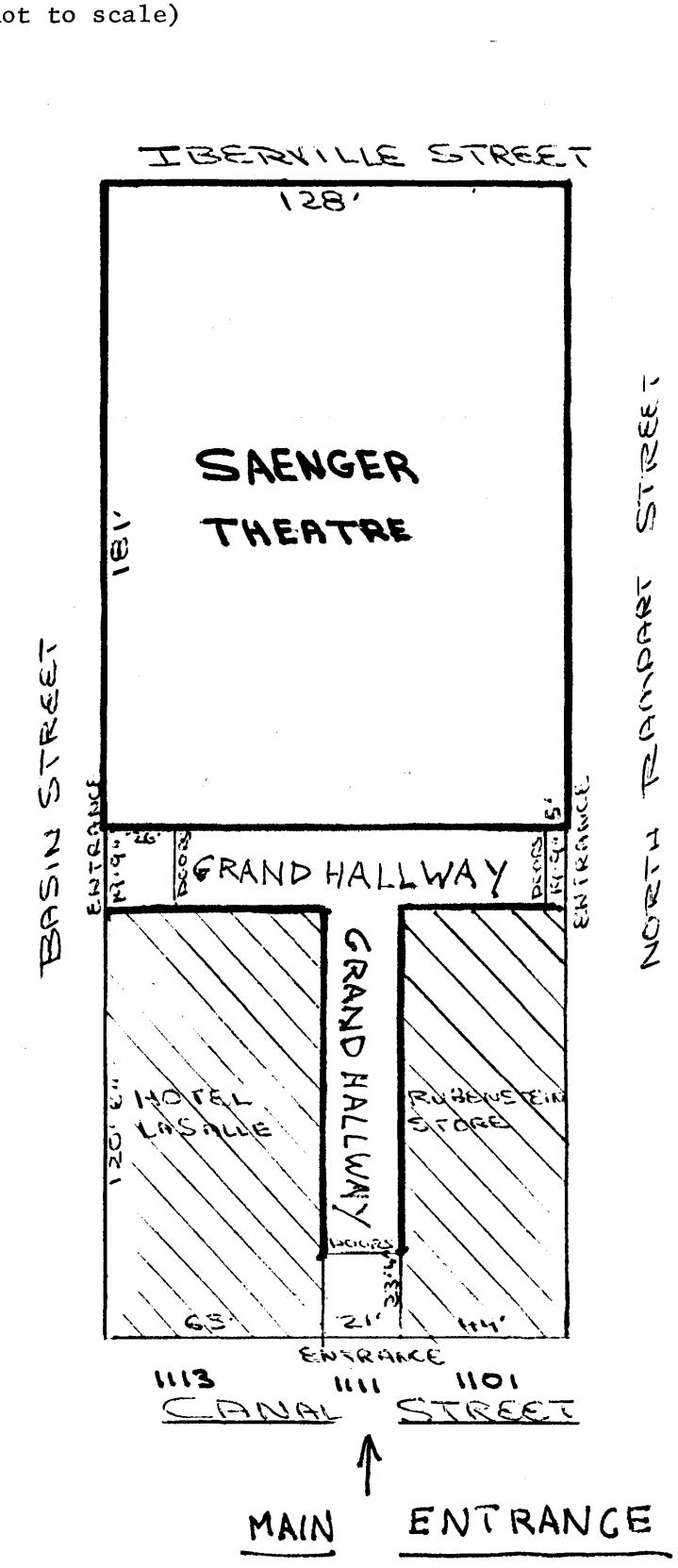
The chain of Saenger Theatres began in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1911 when Julian and A. D. Saenger built the Saenger Theatre at 620 Milan Street adjacent to the Saenger Drug Store which the brothers had operated for several years on the corner of Louisiana Avenue and Milan Street. For one year they booked vaudeville. Then Julian Saenger, seeing the future of the motion picture industry, discontinued vaudeville and installed projectors. This theatre is still in operation under the name The Capri.

E. V. Richards was the manager of the first Saenger Theatre. In 1912, the Saenger Amusement Company was formed. That name was retained until 1927 when it was changed to Saenger Theatres, Inc.

The first expansion policy was adopted when motion picture houses were opened in Texarkana, Monroe and Alexandria. The Saenger Amusement Company moved its offices to New Orleans when it bought out the Fichtenberg interests and built the Strand Theatre which opened on July 4, 1917.

Saenger Theatres, Inc. at the time it was sold to Paramount in 1929 for a sum in excess of ten million dollars comprised 320 theatres in eleven southern states,and also in Cuba, Jamaica, Panama and Puerto Rico.

Saenger Theatre
Floor Plan (not to scale)



STRIPED AREAS NOT SUBMITTED

Saenger Theatre Additional Documentation
New Orleans, Orleans Parish, LA

Part 3 State Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination 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 the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally.

3/10/06

Signature of Certifying Official/Title **Date**

Part 8

Applicable National Register Criteria: C
Area of Significance: Architecture
Period of Significance: 1927
Architect: Emile Weil
Builders: George J. Glover Co.

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The purpose of this addendum is to raise the level of significance for the Saenger Theatre to national. The theater was listed on the Register in 1977 for its statewide significance.

New Orleans' Saenger Theatre is nationally significant as a particularly impressive and intact movie palace in what was and is known as the "atmospheric" style. The goal of "atmospheric" theater designers was to transport patrons to a romantic outdoor setting -- complete with building facades, fountains, and above, a twinkling sky with clouds drifting by. A survey conducted by the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation in early 2006 found some 25 to 30 surviving first-rate atmospheric movie palaces across the country. Collectively these represent a nationally significant trend in movie palace design originated by John Eberson and copied by countless architects. Of these 25 to 30, the Saenger auditorium is among the most impressive because of its sheer scale (seating 4,000 when it opened in 1927), the extravagance of the design and the verisimilitude of the illusion.

Background:

The motion picture industry was born in the 1890s through a combination of experiments, principally in the United States and France. The earliest films were very short and could only be shown to a single person. Thomas Edison's laboratories were responsible for the Kinetoscope, a peep-show machine that used a roll of film about 40 feet in length. The viewer peered through a magnifying lens at images illuminated with an electric light. Edison was not interested in projecting the motion picture to gatherings of people

because he was convinced the whole thing was a passing fad.

The French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumiere, however, were more far-sighted. They developed the technique of projecting the film, and in December 1895 held their first screening for a paying audience in Paris. The Lumiere machine, called the Cinematographe, gave the medium the name it is known by in much of the world. The Edison laboratories quickly produced a similar machine, and the first commercially exhibited movie in the United States was shown in New York in April 1896.

Early venues for showing films were sometimes quite makeshift. Vaudeville theaters, town halls, and the like were pressed into service, with the program often combining film strips and vaudeville acts or plays. In 1905 Pittsburgh vaudeville magnate Harry Davis opened a purpose-built theater for movies, calling it a nickelodeon, combining the admission price with the Greek word for theater. By 1910 there were thousands of nickelodeons across the country. Some were mom-and-pop storefront theaters, while others were more elaborate purpose-built affairs. Films in the nickelodeon era generally lasted about ten minutes. The names of these establishments sometimes reflected the price (Nickel, Nickel Treat, Nickeldom), while others had names like Idle Hour and Dreamland.

Movie Palaces:

As movies improved and became big business, grand and sumptuous theaters were erected to showcase the new god in cities across America. The first of the "movie palaces" opened in 1913, with the bulk being built in the heady decade we know now as the Roaring Twenties. The goldleaf-encrusted movie palaces with their statuary, art collections, massive chandeliers, and palatial, often flamboyant, architecture were easily the most splendid structures most patrons had ever seen. Their "unabashed grandeur," observes movie historian David Naylor, "played well among young city dwellers who lived modestly but thought expansively." "No kings or emperors have wandered through more luxurious surroundings," wrote Harold W. Rambusch in *American Theatres of Today* (1929).

Moviegoers were able to escape from everyday cares as they were transported to another world - be it a French Baroque palace, a Moorish banquet hall, or a Chinese temple. To many (perhaps most) these wildly extravagant theaters were just as important, if not more important, than the films (silent until 1927) being shown. Movie theater mogul Marcus Loew is famous for saying, "We sell tickets to theatres, not movies." The largest and arguably the most extravagant of the movie palaces was the roughly 6,000 seat Roxy in New York City (demolished in 1961). A 1929 cartoon in *The New Yorker* must have had the Roxy in mind. A little boy asks, "Mama, does God live here?" In addition to their "over the top" auditoriums, theaters as large and palatial as the Roxy also had lavish lounges for men and women, a grand rotunda for a lobby, a staff outfitted in fine livery, and sometimes nursery facilities. The Roxy even had a small hospital on the premises.

Atmospheric Movie Palaces

The most imaginative movie palaces were known as "atmospheric" theaters, termed by theater historian Ben Hall "an acre of seats in a garden of dreams." Here the designer created the illusion of being outdoors. The creator and chief architect of the type was John Eberson, who provided fantasy-seeking American moviegoers endless delights. In an Eberson atmospheric, the auditorium, to quote him, was "a magnificent ampitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky . . . an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio,

or a mystic Egyptian temple-yard . . . where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds drifted." Eberson's first fully developed atmospheric was the Majestic in Houston (1923) (demolished). Eberson designed roughly a hundred atmospheric theaters, and local architects throughout the country copied his formula. (The exact number of atmospherics built will never be known. But given the 100 designed by Eberson and the numerous architects around the country who imitated the style, one suspects there must have been 200 to 300.)

Eberson and others achieved the illusion with building facades along the walls and a blue plaster "sky" with projected clouds and low-wattage stars. A small machine called the Brenograph Junior projected the clouds and other images. In the very best of the atmospherics, the building facades along the side walls are strongly three-dimensional. Sometimes, as at the Saenger, the proscenium also bears elements of a building exterior. The most commonly used outdoor settings were Italian (or more generally Mediterranean) courtyards and Spanish villages or plazas.

Eberson's most exotic atmospheric was the Avalon in Chicago (which survives with good integrity). The exterior has bulbous Middle Eastern towers in the manner of a mosque. The auditorium is a fanciful Persian palace. Eberson designed the women's lounge as a harem parlor, the men's as a caliph's den. Ushers wore French Foreign Legion uniforms with plumed hats and white gloves.

The best-done atmospherics tend to be large and grand enough to be called movie palaces. At the other end of the scale are small town atmospheric theatres with low budgets. Here building facades and other outdoor elements (vegetation) are painted on the walls. Obviously the effect is not nearly as convincing.

Atmospheric Theater Survey:

To be able to place the Saenger in a national context, the National Register Coordinator in the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation sought to determine the number of atmospheric theaters that had survived and to assess their overall quality. She began with a working list from the Cinema Treasures website of about 100 (of various sizes and in varying degrees of integrity and some listed as closed). The executive director of the Theater Historical Society of America (Richard J. Sklenar) felt that this number was about correct. The list was adjusted and cross-checked via communication with National Register coordinators and others. The next step was to track down information on the survivors, which was done via communication with Register coordinators and other preservation professionals, books and the Internet. The latter was relied on heavily, but only to obtain images of theater auditoriums. Among preservation professionals, Craig Morrison, author of the just released *Theaters*, was most helpful in providing information on the quality and condition of certain theaters.

The list of roughly 100 survivors was winnowed down to about 25-30 first-rate atmospheric movie palaces – the very best of the genre. Factors taken into consideration were size and extravagance (the sheer impressiveness of the space), the quality of the illusion (strongly three dimensional buildings along the side walls rather than pasted on stage sets), and where possible, the integrity of the auditorium. The latter could not be determined for many of the theaters. Many had been abandoned for years and had deteriorated before being reclaimed. How much of what appeared in an image was historic? How much was replicated? Did the theater still retain its sky ceiling, stars, and cloud-producing machines? These were some of the unanswerable integrity issues.

Many of the 25 to 30 first-rate atmospheric movie palaces have roughly comparable auditoriums. The smallest seat a modest (for movie palaces) 1,200 or so. Building facades on the side walls in these smaller movie palaces are sometimes one story. What these lack in scale they make up for in the quality of the illusion - most notably, side walls that go beyond one dimensional stage-set looking ("fake") building facades. While it is difficult to rank the 25 to 30, the Saenger would be in the top half of the group. Perhaps the most extravagant is the newly restored Paradise in the Bronx. Others in the first tier include the Fox in Atlanta (NHL); Loew's Akron (Akron, Ohio); the Tampa (Tampa, Florida); and the Majestic in San Antonio, Texas (NHL). Theater historian David Naylor considers Atlanta's Fabulous Fox to be "the most overpowering atmospheric."

The Saenger:

When the Saenger opened in February 1927, it was among the nation's very largest movie palaces. With seating for 4,000, "this unmatched palace of amusement" (New Orleans *Times-Picayune*) cost $2,500,000. (The Roxy opened in the same year at a cost of six million.) The architect was Emile Weil of New Orleans. (Weil designed several theaters for the Saenger chain across the Gulf South.) The auditorium design, according to the *Picayune*, was that of "Florentine Renaissance Architecture." Mixing historical epochs, the paper's front page story had as its subtitle, "Audience Sits Beneath Stars in Medieval Air." The piece began, "The sensation of being lifted from a workaday world into a land of mediaeval [sic] romance . . . under a summer sky of twinkling stars and moving clouds was conveyed to four thousand Orleanians at the opening of the Saenger theater last night. They sat beyond the outer walls of a Florentine palace . . . ." Of the "sky" the reporter wrote: "Everyone agreed that it was a remarkable sky, giving the illusion of illimitable space."

From another article in the *Picayune*:

> It [the Saenger] doesn't look like a theater until the stage commands one's interest. The structure is architecturally after the best of the Florentine Renaissance. Seated in the center sections one sees on the left a wall of what probably was a ducal palace and on the right a wall of what no doubt was a princely residence. Richly striped awnings [no longer extant] shade a barred window here and there . . . . Between the ends of these walls as one looks, is the proscenium, with a stage as though it had been erected out of doors in a Florentine garden for overhead a perfect Italian sky holds a veracious portion of the celestial bodies . . . . Descriptions often tone the edges off an imitation; in the case of the new Saenger theater, there are no edges to soften. The illusion is not imitation; it is versimilitude [sic]."

The auditorium at the Saenger is indeed a most splendid space. Firstly, there is the sheer scale of the place. The building facades on the side walls, of plaster chiseled and painted to resemble stone, rise to three stories, and at one point four. (One is reminded of David Naylor's description of the Fox in Atlanta: "Its seemingly impregnable walls keep the real world from disrupting the escapist pleasures offered within.") More importantly, Emile Weil produced a strongly three-dimensional design. But contrary to the opinion of the above reporter, it is definitely not "the best of the Florentine Renaissance." As was typical of movie

palace architects, Weil borrowed freely from various periods (in this case Italian) – what one theater historian called a "mix and match" approach. On the whole, the inspiration was the Italian Renaissance, with a good dose of the Italian Baroque.

In contrast to the pasted-on stage set designs of lesser atmospherics, the theater patron can actually walk into the "buildings" on either side of the seating. Unlike a palazzo from the "best of the Florentine Renaissance," each side wall is far from uniform in design. And each side wall is different from the other.

On the right hand side, as you face the stage, the rear bays are articulated as a colonnade at ground level, a Renaissance-inspired loggia with a groin-vaulted ceiling at the second level, and at the third level, a balustrade topped by life-size statues. (The loggia leads to a fire safety door and provides access to balcony seats.) Theater historian David Naylor wrote that the Saenger statues "appear to view the proceedings in the manner of those above the piazza of St. Peter's in Rome." Several feet behind the statues, on another plane, is a roof-looking feature (originally covered with synthetic vegetation, per an early photo). The white marble statues rise above the "roof" to contrast with the blue "sky." The other roughly half of the right side wall is articulated as a largely symmetrical three-story pavilion crowned by a hipped tile roof at the center with a huge urn to each side. Windows on the second level of the pavilion are lit from within (to suggest a room beyond). At the center of the first floor is a large niche with a fountain (operable when the theatre opened).

The left side wall (as you face the stage) features, for most of its length, an open arcade at ground level, an enclosed hallway with windows at the second level, and a crowning balustrade with life size statues at the third. Near the stage is the auditorium's most flamboyant architectural gesture – a Italian Baroque-looking confection that rises four stories. At the ground floor center is a large two-story niche framed by a great round arch. Inside is a statue and above a dome. Shallow niches with life-size sculptures flank the great round arch at the second story. Crowning the entire composition is a curvaceous Baroque design with inset larger-than-life sculptures flanked by huge urns.

The Saenger's proscenium is articulated in the manner of a building exterior as well. It is suggestive of a Renaissance palazzo's roofline, complete with a heavy tile roof overhang. The overhang is accented by an inset blind arcade. What might be called the frieze of the proscenium is very richly detailed, including roundels filled with bas relief sculpture.

Above the Saenger's courtyard is a sky formed originally of plaster painted blue (changed in the 1930s or '40s to a horsehair ceiling painted blue). One hundred and twenty stars twinkle, as they did on opening night, and clouds drift by courtesy of the theater's two original "cloud machines." Adding to the overall high state of integrity is a rare surviving Robert Morton organ built specifically for the theater.

Note: The Saenger received some damage from Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005), but nothing serious enough to threaten its architectural integrity. The theater is presently closed.

Part 9 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Form Prepared By:

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