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**BENE LEGERE**NEWSLETTER OF THE  
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**NEWS FROM THE BANCROFT LIBRARY****PARAMOUNT THEATRE ARCHIVES AT BANCROFT****Peter Hanff, Deputy Director**

Late in 1998 Peter Botto, then-general manager of Oakland's Paramount Theatre of the Arts, Inc., telephoned me to report that he was planning to retire in the spring of 1999. Botto explained that following his management of the restoration of the Paramount in the 1970s, he had saved many documents about the restoration; the business of running the theater; and its eclectic programming. Would Bancroft be interested in having the theater's archives?

The Paramount Theatre in Oakland, the last surviving full-size movie palace in the San Francisco Bay Area and the largest theater auditorium of its kind on the West Coast, closed its doors on September 15, 1970, just shy of its 39th birthday.

A few months earlier a special committee of civic leaders had underwritten an engineering study to determine the feasibility of building a new arts center in Oakland. Their goal was to create a performing arts hall that would support concert, ballet, symphony, opera, and light opera presentations with a seating capacity of 2,700. With the closure of the Paramount, the study expanded to survey the Paramount's facilities. The committee found that the existing building more than met the various criteria defined for the proposed performing arts center. After extended negotiations with the theater's owner, the Oakland Symphony Orchestra Association purchased the building from National General Theatres on June 2, 1972. Thus Oakland became the sixth city in the United States, and the first in the West, to create a major arts center from a retired motion picture house.

The Paramount was planned in 1926 by Paramount-Publix Theatres, the exhibition branch of Paramount Pictures Corporation, and the ground-breaking took place in 1930. During construction, the economic pressures of the Great Depression forced Publix to sell the giant theater to the Fox-West Coast theater chain which opened the Paramount on December 16, 1931. This remarkable theater was created by San Francisco native architect Timothy L. Pflueger, renowned for his designs of buildings in San Francisco: the Pacific Telephone



Paramount Theatre. View of interior.

Building (1925); 450 Sutter Street professional offices (1930); the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange (1930); the Union Square Garage, the first subterranean parking structure of its kind ever built (1942); and the I. Magnin department store (1948).

For the Paramount Theatre, Pfleuger chose the clean and open designs of the modern movement rather than the more eclectic rococo, oriental, Egyptian, or baroque styles of most other movie palaces of the era. Indeed, the moderne style was used only briefly for motion picture houses, with the first theater of note being the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood (1930), and the last being Radio City Music Hall in New York (1932). The Great Depression brought a rapid end to construction of such elaborate theaters.

The decision of the Oakland Symphony Orchestra Association to restore the Paramount led to the first large-scale restoration of its kind in the West. From the outset of the project, Peter Botto combined superior research and organizational skills that assured a restoration that preserved the fine decorative motifs and elements of the original design. Skidmore Owings & Merrill LLP were retained for the new construction, but the timing was fortuitous: Timothy Pfleuger was still available to advise and Anthony Hewinsbergen, the 81-year-old designer of over 750 movie theater interiors, came out of retirement to help coordinate the restoration of the theater's decorative elements. Botto balanced the restoration with adaptation of the Paramount for its new multiple purposes: providing a fully equipped, modern edifice with a seating capacity for 3,000 and virtually all of the original design elements either cleaned, restored, or replaced with authentic recreations of the original materials.

When Botto called me, I told him that I would need to examine the records to be sure they were appropriate for us. So, in December, I visited the Paramount Theatre. I was amazed at the scope, variety, and order of the documents that Botto showed me: close to 70 cartons (more than 85 linear feet) containing restoration files; press release files; sign-in logs; restoration contracts files; blueprints; Organ Pops Concerts files; program/promotion articles; 1973 Paramount Premiere files; accounting records; Paramount Posters (a stack perhaps 15 inches high); and pictorial collections, some dating back to before ground-breaking in 1930.

The Paramount Theatre Archives join strong collections of theater history, California architecture, and cultural history at Bancroft. Nearly anything a theater historian, an urban historian, a California architectural historian, or a student of the evolving culture of Oakland from 1970 might want is represented in the Paramount Theatre archive.

To celebrate the acquisition and Peter Botto's distinguished career as general manager, the Paramount Theatre and Leslee Stewart, the new general manager, hosted a reception at the Theatre for Friends of The Bancroft Library, Library Associates, and the Art Deco Society of California, with a behind-the-scenes tour conducted by Peter Botto. Even more fortunate was that a remarkable Bancroft donor shared our enthusiasm and agreed to underwrite the archival processing of the collection so that Bancroft could make the collection accessible as soon as reasonably possible.

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