

# **The PARAMOUNT Theatre Centre & Ballroom**

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

To serve the public with arts, entertainment, and community events in the most beautiful historic setting in Indiana.

## **ABOUT THE PARAMOUNT**

John Eberson started building this atmospheric theatre in 1928. It opened on August 20, 1929. We can relate to 1929 because our history and memory of 1929 was the Great Depression. Eberson, and the country, ran out of money and down-sizing of plans began.

The theatre was primarily built for vaudeville and movies, to escape the real world. The design was to give the illusion of a Spanish courtyard at night complete with wrought-iron gates, statues, a ceiling painted like a sky with stars that really twinkled, and clouds projected onto the ceiling which slowly moved across the sky. Thousands of tiles in the original design of the lobby floor were set by hand and the terra cotta façade on the building facing was so detailed it merited its own blueprints.

The entire complex was originally designed as a seven-story hotel and theatre with a ballroom on the 7th floor. With down-sizing, there was no hotel and the building stopped with three floors, with the third floor being what is now the Hardacre Ballroom. We think there are 12 John Eberson “atmospheric” theatres left in the USA. Originally, there were 155. John Eberson also sold plans (around 1,500) for others to be built. Indiana has several other (non-atmospheric) theatres in Indiana.

The original owner was Publix Corporation. Local developers had planned to call the theatre The Palace. When Publix entered the picture, it became The Paramount and opened with that name. In 1985, the theatre closed for four years. By 1989, the complex had been owned by eight different groups and was actually facing the wrecking ball to become a parking lot.

Three weeks before the last reading of the ordinance to tear down the Paramount, Leslie Davisson, a young lawyer with offices across the street, saw a documentary on TV about other theatres that had been saved. She called the TV station for the address, wrote to Washington, got a copy of the program, called a group of people together and said, “Let’s save the Paramount!” That was the start. The name of the TV program was “The Movie Palaces” and it was narrated by Gene Kelly.

In July of 1989, the group (now called the Paramount Heritage Foundation, Inc.) entered the theatre and turned on the lights (those that were working). Carrying flashlights, they saw water running down the aisles into the orchestra pit. The dressing rooms were filled with water and other debris. When they turned their flashlights toward the balcony and the ceiling, they saw something cloud-like and thought they had caused a fire. What they were seeing were mold spores floating in the air. In the balcony, plaster with large holes was hanging from the ceiling. Pigeons and bats had made this their home. With over four years of no heat, no cooling, and water damage from a deteriorating roof, the whole complex was in dire straits.

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The Paramount Heritage Foundation, Inc. and, indeed, the people of the city of Anderson, embarked on a renovation program that, quite frankly, is still ongoing today.

In January of 1995, the theatre was closed, all seats removed, and scaffolding brought in – all the way to the top of the theatre, front to back and side to side. A Conrad Schmidt artist used an air brush to paint the ceiling. He had seen a beautiful sunset as he looked to the West from his hotel room, and his goal was to duplicate that view. The clouds were painted in two and one-half days.

The theatre re-opened on August 19, 1995, with Sammy Kaye and the McGuire Sisters performing. The deadline was very close. The last seat was bolted in place at 11:45 AM, rehearsal started at 12:00 noon, and the show started at 7:30 PM to a sold-out audience

### **THEATRE**

Originally, there were 1,700 seats. New, wider seating lowered capacity to 1,445 seats. The detail on the 13 half shells above the stage had the only gold leafing when the theatre opened in 1929.

All the statues along the walls are original:

HEBE' – Goddess of Youth – is holding a cup, and part of the arm was missing. One of the plasterers from Chicago took a cast of his 11-year-old daughter's arm and made the replacement arm for HEBE'.

VENUS – There are only two of this size in the world.

The original print from 1928 was used for the trees and greenery on the lattice work. There is a catwalk above the ceiling to access the night lights. There are 221 lights. The blinking of lights was originally caused by the covers being cone-shaped. At the bottom of each cone, tinsel floated, causing the lights to twinkle.

Birds, peacocks, doves, and pheasants were a favorite for John Eberson. The birds were his trademark. Eberson used these in most of his theatres

The theatre screen is 20' X 40', the second largest (non-IMAX screen in Indiana.

The Grande PAGE Pipe Organ is one of only three such pipe organs remaining in their original theatre installations in the United States. The PAGE, installed in 1930 to accompany films, was used continuously until 1984. It was a three manual, seven rank instrument. In 1997, the PAGE was restored and enlarged to a three manual, 12-rank organ with 966 pipes. The organ is a phenomenal instrument, and it offers an aural experience people talk about long after they have visited. The Paramount has served as host to the annual convention for the American Theatre Organ Society.

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New aisle lights were donated in 2015, along with a new state-of-the-art sound reinforcement system.

In the last few years, with continued donations from the good people of Anderson and Madison County, the Paramount has been able to provide many much-needed restorations and renovations to include:

- New main curtain
- New wooden stage floor
- Lift to accommodate the organ and piano for storage beneath the stage
- Hardacre Ballroom renovation
- Marquee restoration (currently researching digital screens)
- Both pipe organ chambers restored
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor (Ballroom) prep-kitchen upgrade
- Expanded Lobby-to-Courtyard access path
- ASO (Anderson Symphony Orchestra) office relocation

As can be appreciated with a historic building of this unique design and character, there are, and will continue to be, many more projects in our future....

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### **The Paramount Heritage Foundation Inc.**

d/b/a **The PARAMOUNT Theatre Centre & Ballroom**

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