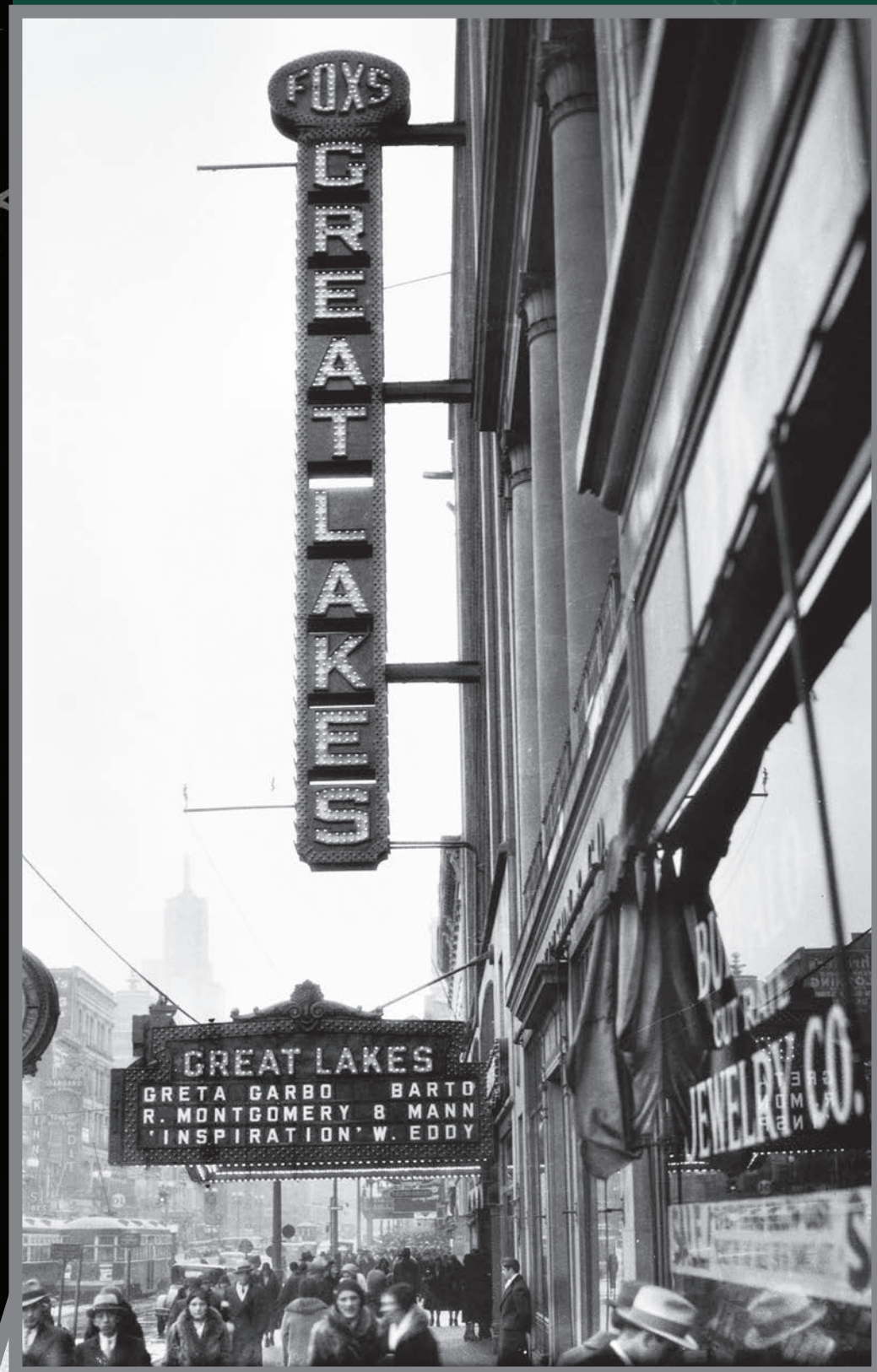


The Show Goes On

Fox Great Lakes Theater, George Mann of Barto & Mann Duo, 1931.
www.thegeorgemannahive.com



The Golden Era of Buffalo Theater: 1880s - 1970s

As 19th century commerce flourished and many local citizens enjoyed increased disposable income, it was natural that live entertainment should blossom. However, the breadth and scope of theater in Buffalo was truly remarkable.

In 1826, the first building designed to house live performances, known simply as "The Buffalo," was constructed at Main and Court Streets. During the following 150 years of Buffalo's commercial and industrial heyday, "The Buffalo" would be replaced by many other palaces of entertainment such as the Saengerhalle, Teck, Star, Majestic, Erlanger, Lafayette, Century, Great Lakes, Cinema, Center, North Park, Allendale, Tivoli, Garden, Court Street, Buffalo, Paramount, Palace, and Studio Arena.

A booming city means large audiences that increase demand for all forms of entertainment. Downtown Buffalo as the destination for work, shopping, celebrations, and leisure entertainment for a growing city meant numerous theaters were built and concerts, theater, vaudeville and other live performance thrived. Impresario Michael Shea built a nationally known theater empire and his flagship, Shea's Buffalo, adorned Main Street starting in 1926. Even the street itself offered entertainment, hosting celebratory parades of marching veterans, fire and police officers, and decorated floats as the vitality of

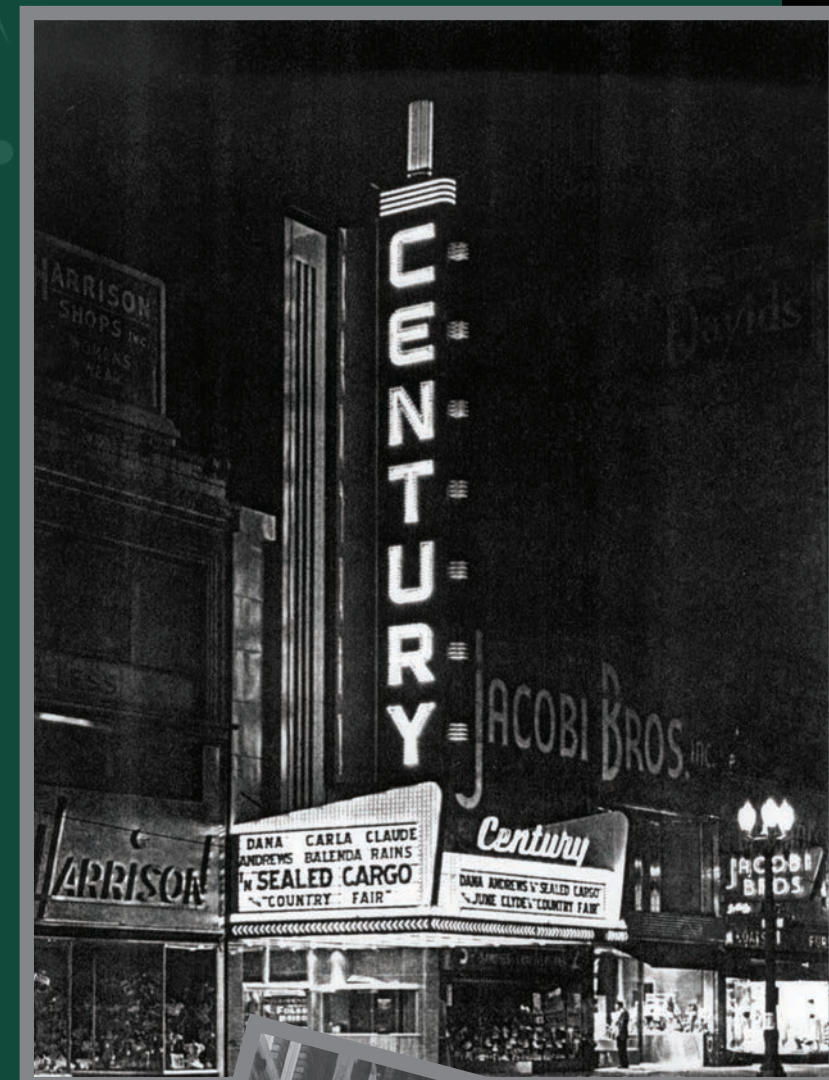
the entertainment industry fed back to promote retailers and restaurateurs. Today, Shea's Buffalo (now Shea's Performing Arts Center) has been restored and is a thriving presenter of Broadway touring shows. Most of the other theaters and movie houses are long gone. However, they have been replaced by a new theater movement that began in the mid to late 1970s. Since then, the general affordability of Buffalo and the size and quality of a remarkable pool of local talent has encouraged theater entrepreneurs, producers and directors to found more than twenty small, prospering legitimate theaters in the Buffalo region. This new movement has its heart, and many of its companies, here in the historic Theatre District. Its most exciting expression comes each September with "Curtain Up!," the celebration of the Theatre District and the opening of Buffalo's professional theater season.

For much more information, scan the QR Code to the right or go to www.buffaloplace.com/history/theatre#show

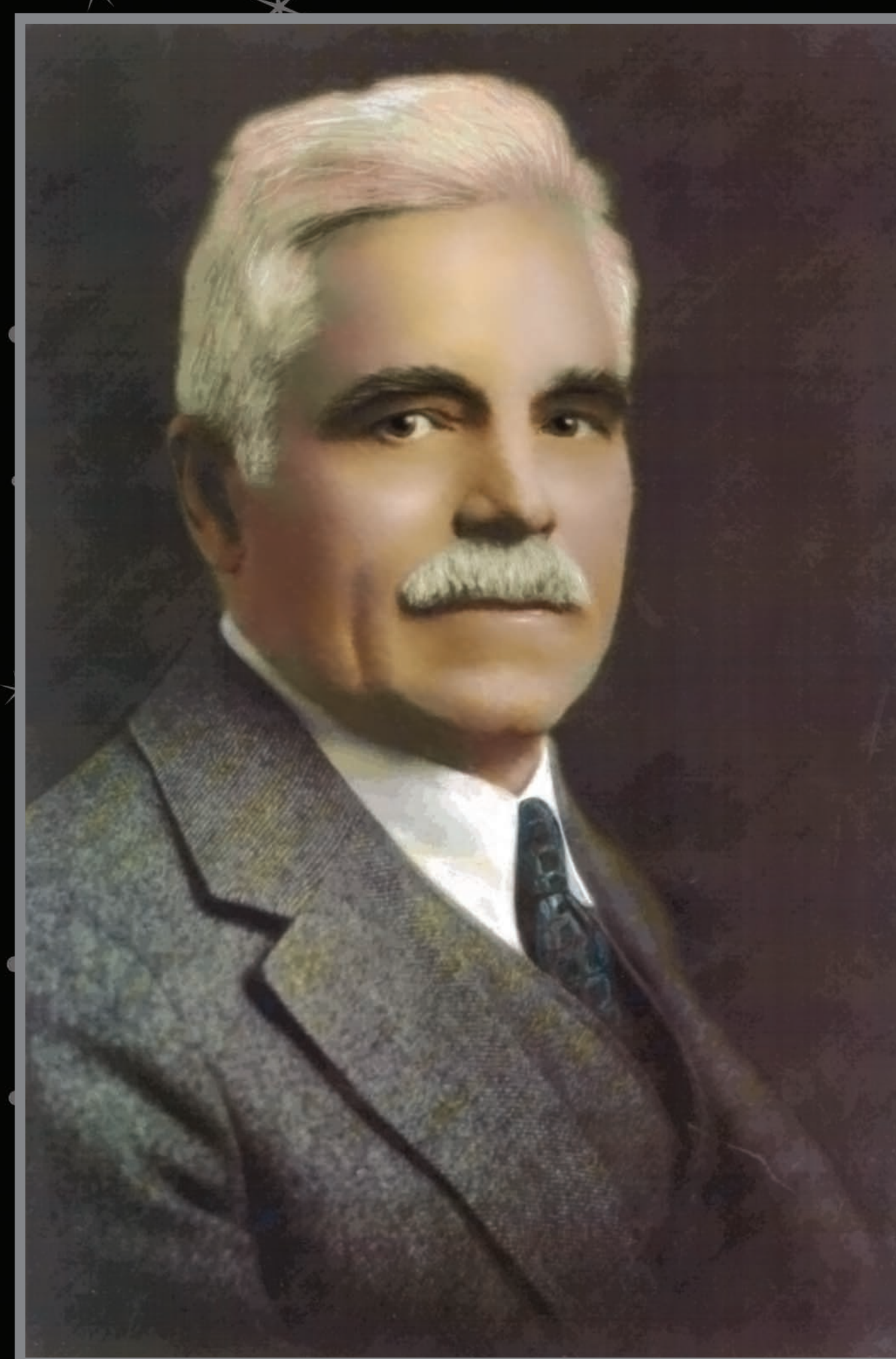
Check the QR Site for more details!



Century Theater, 1949.



SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection



Courtesy of Shea's Performing Arts Center

The Dean of American Showmen

In an era when Buffalo was dominated by intrepid self-made men rising from rags to riches, Michael Shea stood out as the nationally prominent impresario whose name was synonymous with theater and entertainment. No one did more than he in establishing Buffalo's reputation as a required stop on the national theatrical touring circuit and as a mecca of popular entertainment.

Shortly after he was born in 1859 in St. Catharines, Ontario, his family moved to Buffalo's working-class First Ward. While working on a lake freighter in 1882, he was inspired to enter the entertainment business, to provide escape to tired workers and businessmen.

Shea's first venture, Shea's Music Hall, located at Lafayette Square, was modeled after German beer halls. Though it was destroyed by fire in 1893, he was undeterred and soon opened the Shea's Tivoli Theater where he booked some of the era's most popular singers, actors, acrobats, jugglers, magicians, trained animals, and novelty acts in what was clearly anticipating vaudeville. In 1898, Shea committed fully to vaudeville with the opening of Shea's Garden Theater on Pearl Street, formerly a roller rink. He helped form one of the nation's first vaudeville circuits and expanded his young empire

with the Park Theater (renamed Shea's Court Street) in 1905 that featured the top vaudeville acts including George M. Cohan, Douglas Fairbanks, W. C. Fields, Buster Keaton, and others.

Throughout the early 1900s, Michael Shea's collection of downtown theaters continued to grow with the Majestic and the city's first major movie theater, Shea's Hippodrome. In 1920, Shea purchased his first neighborhood theater, the North Park on Hertel Avenue, and would eventually establish and operate other theaters across the city. During this era, the national trend of building large, plush motion picture palaces was taking root, and Shea envisioned a showplace such as Buffalo had never seen. Ground was broken in 1925; one year and \$2 million later, Shea's Buffalo opened to great fanfare.

With his crown jewel in place, Shea accumulated additional theaters including the former Loew's State Theater (renamed Century Theater), the Fox Great Lakes Theater (renamed the Paramount), and the Riviera Theater in North Tonawanda. However, with the onset of the Depression in 1929, Shea faced serious financial reverses. The strain of the difficulties of his entertainment empire proved too much for the aging impresario and he died in 1934 at age seventy-five.

For a time, the Shea's theater chain stayed afloat, but the theaters were subsequently sold off to other operators or shut down and demolished. The North Park Theater on Hertel Avenue and Shea's Buffalo Theatre, both proudly restored, serve as illustrations of Buffalo's golden era of entertainment and Michael Shea's great entertainment empire.

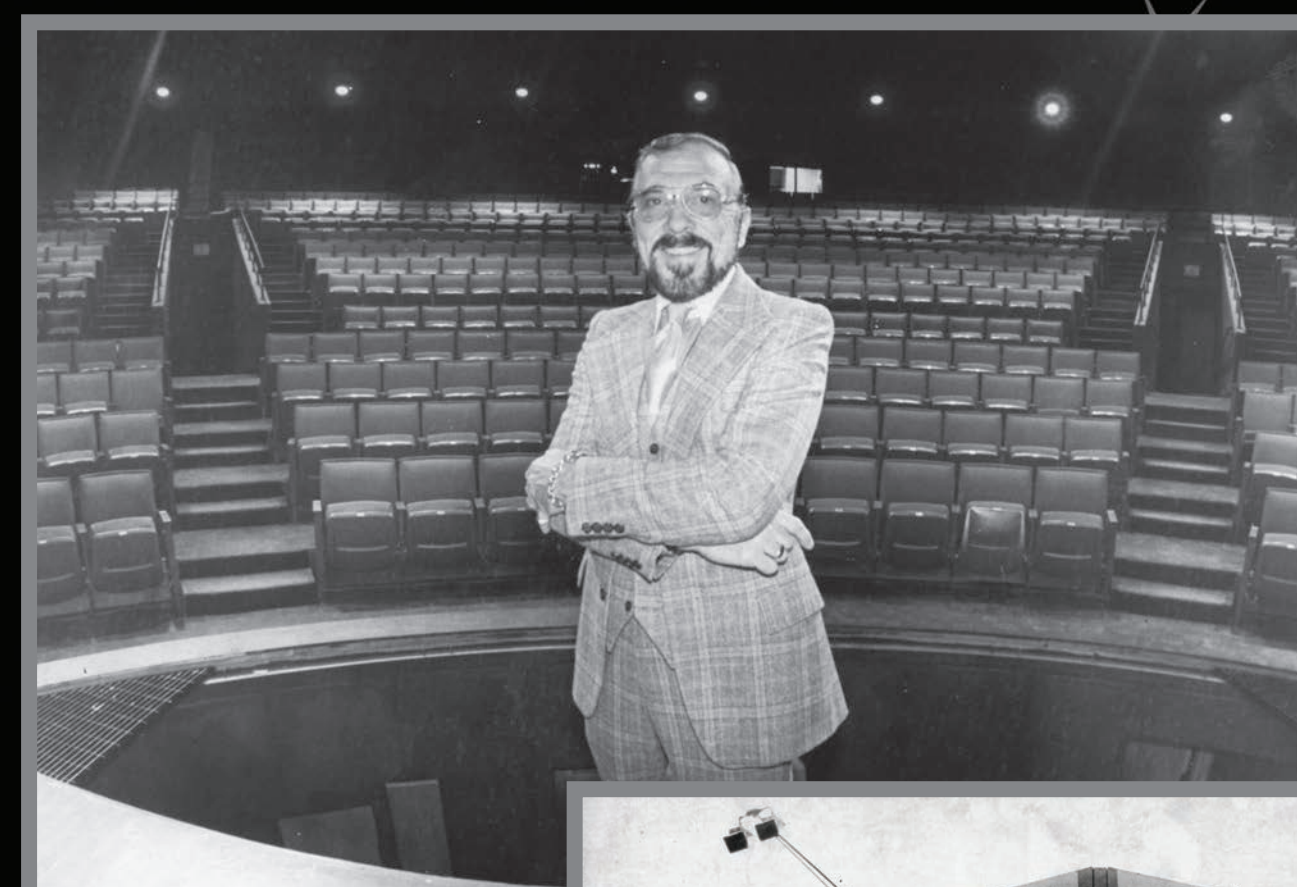
Advertisement, January 14, 1926. SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection



Studio Arena Theatre

Studio Arena Theatre evolved from the Buffalo Players, a community theater founded in 1920, to become one of the country's premier regional theaters. In 1927, the group became Studio Theatre School where young hopefuls like Amanda Blake, Nancy Marchand, and Michael Bennett began brilliant careers. Under Neil Du Brock's leadership in 1965, Studio Theatre became a fully professional company and as Studio Arena Theatre moved into the former Town Casino at 681 Main. The debut performance was Jose Quintero's landmark production of Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten* starring Colleen Dewhurst and James Daly. In 1978, Studio Arena moved again, into the 600 seat former Palace Burlesque at 710 Main. The next thirty years saw premieres of plays by Edward Albee, A. R. Gurney and Lanford Wilson, and emerging performers such as Christopher Walken, Kelsey Grammer, Paxton Whitehead, Glenn Close, and Julianne Moore. However, bankruptcy closed the company in 2008. The building re-opened for the 2012-13 season under the management of Shea's Performing Arts Center as 710 Main Theatre.

Neil Du Brock, opening day of Studio Arena at 710 Main. SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection



Studio Arena Theatre at 681 Main, 1978. SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection

The Palace Burlesque

The Palace Burlesque, last operating at 710 Main Street, was owned by Dewey Michaels from the late 1920s until it closed on September 29, 1977. Like Shea, Michaels was able to make his mark in show business from modest beginnings, learning the business from his father who ran movie theaters. He established the first Palace Burlesque on Main Street near St. Paul's Cathedral in the late 1920s, the heyday of burlesque. Michaels was a showman, driving a charreuse Cadillac, promoting prize fights, and auditioning strippers personally. In the 1970s, Michaels gambled on the future of burlesque as popular entertainment in building a new Palace Burlesque at 710 Main Street, but it turned out to be a bad bet as burlesque was fading, and the new Palace quickly closed. His beautiful new theater later became the second home of Studio Arena Theatre, and is now the 710 Main Theatre.



Andre Cortis publicity image by Management Three, LTD. SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection

The Paramount Theater

During the heyday of downtown movie palaces, the big Hollywood studios invested in theater construction in major markets throughout the nation. Fox and Loews ran the 3,300 seat movie palace at 612 Main which opened in 1927. It operated first as Fox's Theatre and then as Fox's Great Lakes. In 1931 Michael Shea, with Paramount as his partner, acquired the property giving Shea an interest in virtually every major downtown theater. The theater became The Paramount in 1949. Shortly thereafter, the era of the automobile and the rise of the suburbs was in full swing and downtown ceased to be a destination for movie-goers. The cavernous Paramount screened its final film for about 50 people in 1965. The interior was demolished for a retail furniture business and warehouse before the building was converted into the City Centre condominium complex in 1992.



The Teck Theatre was a home for legitimate plays and musicals starting in 1908. As an unnamed writer for the Courier-Express said in 1939: "If the Teck has ghosts, no other theater in the country could have more glamorous ones. The greatest names in the English and American theater appeared on its billboards, and no history of the American musical comedy could be written without mementoes of the Teck."

Night view of Main Street, 1950s. Courtesy of Western New York Heritage Press