Stories to Tell:  
The Remarkable History  
of 601 Lake Avenue, Lake Worth

By Leon M. Rubin

When The Palm Beach Post announced on July 1, 1939, that a new theater would soon be constructed in downtown Lake Worth, it stated that the owners planned to make the 1,000-seat house "one of the finest in South Florida." The announcement heralded the arrival of a structure that – seven decades later – is once again making news.

From its origins as the Lake Theatre to its newest incarnation as the Robert M. Montgomery, Jr. Building – the exciting new, permanent home of the Palm Beach County Cultural Council – this architecturally significant Streamline Moderne building has featured a storyline with as many twists and turns as the plots of the some of the films that once were shown on its silver screen.

That 1939 front page Post story about the new theater – to be built by Florida Theatres Inc., operator of 110 theaters in the state – projected that the cost of the structure and its equipment would be approximately $75,000.

"The new theater will be of the most modern design...and it has been especially designed to embody the latest features of sound and moving picture projection," the article said. "There will be 800 seats in the orchestra section with an additional 200 seats in a special loge balcony above the theater doors. All seats will be of the newest de luxe spring edge type with deep upholstery."
Architecturally, the theater would reflect the popular influences of the day: "The structure...will have a front of modernistic design trimmed with stone, glass and stucco and will be ornamented with sidewalk marquise of porcelain enamel and stainless steel. The entrance foyer will be heavily carpeted and the walls will be treated in the latest wall design."

It was also noted that "careful study has been given to ventilation...so that the theater will be properly ventilated and cooled to the satisfaction of patrons." The building was designed by well known Florida architect Roy A. Benjamin, who had a number of other theaters in the Southeast to his credit, including the strikingly similar San Marco Theatre in Jacksonville.

Construction was slated to begin in August with completion scheduled in time to "afford the public of Lake Worth the benefit of the new theater before the winter season."

A PROUD OPENING

The new Lake Theatre opened on February 29, 1940; the fact that it was Leap Day likely made it all the more special. Mayor Grady Brandley called it "something for Lake Worth to be proud of." The Lake Worth Herald said it was "hailed as Palm Beach County's most modern movie palace." It was reported that telegrams were read from such Hollywood luminaries as Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy, Tyrone Power, Mickey Rooney, Don Armeche, Fred MacMurray, Bob Hope, Shirley Temple, Bing Crosby, Alice Faye, Clark Gable, Jack Benny and Linda Darnell. The first feature was Little Old New York, starring Faye and MacMurray. "A throng of moviegoers had crowded about the box office and formed a long line along Lake Avenue," The Herald reported.

In its heyday, the Lake was considered the city's predominant theater. It showed first-run films and did its part to support the war effort - hosting benefits for the USO and offering free admission for purchasers of war bonds. The theater had another direct connection to the war, albeit a sad one. Alexander R. "Sandy" Mininger, Jr., a 1941 graduate of West Point and the son of the Lake's second manager, was killed in action in the Philippines during a heroic effort to capture an enemy position. He was posthumously awarded the first Congressional Medal of Honor of World War II.

As time went on, the theater filled numerous entertainment needs for the community. It screened re-releases of Hollywood classics and later offered Summertime Fun Shows for kids that cost just 50 cents - or 10 RC Cola bottle caps with a newspaper coupon.

By the early 1970s, however, as suburban multi-screen theaters with plentiful parking began to proliferate, the Lake Theatre could no longer sustain itself. It finally went dark after a June 16, 1974, showing of Disney's Robin Hood. Employees gave the once-glorious movie palace a rather checkered send-off with an after-hours party where they drank beer and threw crushed ice snowballs at the screen.

TRYING AND FAILING

Several attempts were made to give the theater new life, but each was relatively short-lived.

In November 1975, the Pasta Palace opened in the building with a menu featuring "29 complete dinners priced under $5" and free movie screenings. There was an Italian delicatessen in the lobby where patrons could "buy homemade noodles from our pasta machine." The bar and lounge were located in front of the movie screen and the former loge seats were utilized as "special dining areas for more privacy," The Lake Worth Herald reported. By February 1976, it had closed.

The building's next occupant (from November 1976 until late 1978) was Horsefeathers - a restaurant that continued the practice of showing films while diners ate their meals on the former theater floor or, for larger groups, in the balcony. The decor featured movie stills, posters and memorabilia. After 10 p.m., according to an article in The Herald, "the 'Boogie in the Balcony' discotheque comes to life with lights flashing to the beat of disco music engineered by a professional disc jockey."

After Horsefeathers closed, another disco - Kaleidoscope - took up residence. Opening on June 1, 1979, it was geared to 12- to 18-year-olds, who could "dance the night away with destiny" on South Florida's largest dance floor with the "greatest super disco sound and light system in Florida." Drinks were non-alcoholic, proper dress was required and parents were welcome. Despite initial success, however, The Lake Worth Herald reported that, "Kaleidoscope quietly closed its doors in January 1980, leaving behind a long line of unpaid bills."
LANNAN ERA BEGINS

Later in 1980, J. Patrick Lannan, Sr., a well-known financier, entrepreneur and part-time Palm Beach resident, would take steps to breathe new life into the former theater – although with a radically different purpose. He purchased the building to house his extensive and acclaimed collection of contemporary and modern American and European art. “Architect Mark Hampton of Miami spent about a year and a half, under Lannan’s direction, renovating the building for the collection,” The Lake Worth Herald reported. “Multilevel floors, nearly hidden alcoves and the old theater balcony all add to the building’s new character.”

The former Lake Theatre appealed to Lannan on several levels. “Mr. Lannan really liked this community and the feel of the area,” said Nancy Mato, who was then curator of the museum, in The Herald. “The area is quiet and it is not overdeveloped and this particular building has phenomenal space for this sort of art because of the ceiling height.”

Furthermore, she added, Lannan was “saving a marvelously constructed building.” (Nancy Mato is now executive vice president and curator of the Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach.)

The February 7, 1983, edition of the Palm Beach Daily News noted that, “The official celebration of the opening of the Lannan Foundation Museum in Lake Worth, which will benefit the Palm Beach Festival (a multidisciplinary arts festival of the day), will take place at 7 p.m. March 6.” Tickets for the “world premiere” cost $125. The event was slated to begin with tours of the collection, champagne and seafood cocktails. “A formal dinner will follow and chairman of the event, Mrs. Robert Dodge, Mrs. J. Bradford Greer, Mrs. Lee Olsen and Mrs. Jim Lyons are planning a gourmet repast.”

The Lannan Foundation Museum hosted the gala opening. “This is the greatest place in the world for contemporary art,” said Richard Madigan, director of the Norton Gallery of Art, as quoted in the Daily News. “He is such a brilliant and creative man.”

Donald Miller, in a 1983 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article, wrote, “When Lannan’s collection was shown to the public in his home, it was written about in magazines. One of the collection’s most unusual aspects was the display of large abstract paintings flat on ceilings.” According to the Lannan Foundation, “Included in his collection were important early works by emerging artists who went on to develop international reputations.”

Miller went on to say, “The new installation...takes advantage of the existing building elements with a series of carpeted levels, half-walls and mezzanines. Two paintings are affixed to the ceiling.”

It was noted that 400 works, “which are one-tenth of the art (Lannan) owns,” were on view. “Lannan has an eye for both delicacy, as seen in fine drawings, glass and ceramics, and strongly challenging idioms, such as bizarre sculptures and heavily colored canvases. The works are provocative and frequently surprising.”

While its primary focus was to exhibit Lannan’s remarkable collection, the Lannan Museum also became a venue for a wide array of cultural pursuits. Earlier in 1983, in fact, the Daily News reported that dancer Pamela DeFina was teaching the Isadora Duncan style of dance at the museum. In April, the Daily News noted that Gordon Getty’s song cycle The White Election, based on the poems of Emily Dickinson, had been performed there as part of the Palm Beach Festival. In October, pianist Shigeru Asano was scheduled to perform a concert at the museum to benefit the Palm Beach County Chapter of the American Red Cross.

On September 25, 1983, Lannan died unexpectedly of heart failure in New York at age 78. In 1986, the Lannan Foundation received a substantial endowment from his estate. It continued to expand the collection, but eventually the board chose to relocate the foundation’s headquarters from Lake Worth to Los Angeles.

According to the August 12, 1988, edition of the Miami Herald, “The Lannan Museum in Lake Worth, home of one of the most important modern art collections in America today, will cease to exist.” The next chapter in the old Lake Theatre’s history was about to begin.

PBCC TAKES THE REINS

According to the Lannan Foundation’s website, “The Lannan Museum in Lake Worth was donated to Palm Beach Community College (PBCC). In addition, the foundation donated a collection of more than 1,000 American craft objects, approximately 20
works of kinetic art dating from the 1960s and 1970s and a Tom Otterness frieze, Battle of the Sexes, which had been commissioned especially for the building."

As fundraising to support the transition began, the college clearly stated its intentions for the building. "We’re going to keep the standards set by the Lannan,” said Reuben Hale, chairman of the PBCC Humanities Division, in a Palm Beach Post story by Gary Schwan. “It’s going to be a showplace for pertinent, important art.”

In February 1991, Skip Sheffield wrote in the Boca Raton News, "The building is still the same: a striking ‘art moderne’ structure that opened as the Lake Theatre, but the landmark edifice at 601 Lake Ave., Lake Worth, is now known as the Palm Beach Community College Museum of Art.” It had been closed for a year and a half to allow for the transition, he continued. Museum Director Kip Eagen, who had come from the University of Cincinnati, “has hired a receptionist who greets one and all. He has also created a permanent education center, where visitors can learn more about the artists through written materials and video tapes.”

The new museum’s first exhibition featured paintings by five emerging or mid-career artists – Charles Clough, Judy Ledgerwood, Dennis Ashbaugh, David Mann and Peter Hopkins, The Palm Beach Post reported. Said Eagen, “We want a dynamic museum, not a didactic one that bangs people over the head. I view this museum as a laboratory. The college has a chemistry lab and a biology lab. This museum will be the visual arts lab – a place where now ideas in the visual arts are experimented with.”

In 1999, the building would change hands once again. The Palm Beach Community College Foundation board recently voted to sell its Museum of Contemporary Art in Lake Worth, Fla., to local philanthropists and museum trustees Robert and Mary Montgomery for $500,000,” Art in America reported in its June edition. “The Montogmerys will receive both the building and the entire contents of the museum, which includes some 1,200 glass, ceramic and kinetic sculptures by artists such as Dale Chihuly, Len Lye, Peter Voulkos, Beatrice Wood and Viola Frey.” Bob Montgomery had been the chair of the PBCC Foundation board when it acquired the building and recognized its promise.

After purchasing the building and the art it housed, Robert and Mary Montgomery moved forward with the creation of a new entity, the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art. According to its website, “The PBICA was founded on the premise that contemporary art is a vital means of understanding ourselves and our culture. Artists have often been called the prophets of our time and we believe it is the artist’s voice that can speak most eloquently to our minds and our hearts. PBICA is intended as a place of pleasure and significance, a place where large questions are posed and investigated. It is a venue for major national and international art in all media and a meeting ground for the diverse populations who live in and visit the Palm Beach region.”

PBICA was fresh, popular and exciting. In 2002, readers of New Times named it the “Best Museum in Palm Beach.” The publication wrote, “PBICA has quickly established itself as an institution willing to take enormous risks. Among the highlights: a New Media Lounge and two inaugural shows in 2000 – a landmark examination of film and video as art and a provocative exhibition that wrenched design elements from their context and repositioned them as art; and last year’s large group show of artists from Brooklyn.”

Writing in New Times, Michael Mills said that PBICA promised to showcase the sort of cutting-edge art not typically found north of the Miami-Dade County line.” He said Robert and Mary Montgomery had “sponsored a facelift on a scale that’s dramatic even by Palm Beach standards.” Visiting Curator Amy Cappellazzo, who assembled the inaugural exhibition – “Making Time: Considering Time as a Material in Contemporary Video & Film” – praised their commitment to media that challenge traditional assumptions about art, New Times reported. “Video art is now more than 30 years old, and people are still arguing about whether it is really art,” she said.

Despite such critical acclaim, it appeared that there was not enough local demand to support a full-time museum of contemporary art. In March 2005, Art in America wrote, “After a five-year run, the privately funded Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art will close its doors.”

Longtime Palm Beach Post art critic Gary Schwan lamented the closing. “Openings were crowded, and respectable numbers would turn out for lectures and such,” Schwan wrote. “Former PBICA Director Michael Rush brought some intriguing artists here. He also made a special effort to introduce the latest in video and computer art. The irony is that PBICA had a larger reputation in, say, New York than it did in its back yard.”

Sidney Brien, acting director of PBICA and a longtime adviser to Robert Montgomery, had the job of “closing the building in an elegant way,” Schwan wrote. “The future use of the building

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is still up in the air, although Brien said some groups have expressed interest in using it for temporary art exhibitions. Montgomery said he’s taking a wait-and-see attitude,” Schwan continued, quoting Montgomery as saying, “I’m not going to let somebody throw just anything in there. I’d want to see something commensurate with cultural use.

THE NEWEST CHAPTER

And so the former theater, museum, educational facility and performance venue once again stood shuttered. Still, hope remained that this storied facility would once again occupy a place of prominence in Palm Beach County’s cultural landscape.

Enter the Palm Beach County Cultural Council.

More than five years ago, the Cultural Council’s strategic plan articulated the importance of securing a new physical location for the organization to house its programs, which touch more than one million people annually through services to cultural organizations, artists, citizens and tourists. It was strongly felt that the Cultural Council should own, rather than rent, its building – and that it should be centrally located within the county.

In 2010, the pieces that would make this vision a reality fell into place. The city of Lake Worth – recognizing the power of the creative industries to inject energy and economic vitality into communities – had embarked on a Cultural Renaissance Program that focused on attracting artists, cultural centers and institutions. Its goal is no less than making Lake Worth the hub of Palm Beach County’s cultural scene. As part of this effort, the Lake Worth Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) committed a substantial amount of money to the Cultural Council to help it renovate a building in downtown Lake Worth to serve as its headquarters.

Then, in a truly magnificent gesture, Mary Montgomery and the family of the late Robert M. Montgomery, Jr. donated the building at 601 Lake Ave. to the Cultural Council.

And so the remarkable story of this venerable landmark – which has played such diverse roles as movie theater, cutting-edge museum, Italian restaurant and even disco – continues to be written.

The Cultural Council has remade the building once again under the watchful eye of consulting architect Gene Lawrence, upon whose vision and artistic sense the Montgomerys relied when they transformed it into the PBICA. His primary contribution, among many others, is the glass entrance that so warmly welcomes everyone to the building. Equally important to the process is Rick Gonzalez of REG Architects, who has overseen the extensive interior renovations in preparation for the Cultural Council’s move.

Still, as befits a building with such a rich history, there are echoes of the past: The Battle of the Sexes continues to be waged in the Tom Otterness frieze that J. Patrick Lannan, Sr. commissioned for the lobby three decades ago.

As the Palm Beach County Cultural Council takes up residence, an exciting new chapter begins – one that will assuredly preserve and honor the legacy of the old Lake Theatre for many years to come. 🎭

Writers (and former Lake Theatre patrons) Don Vaughan and Bill McGoun contributed to this article.
A Peek Inside the Lake Theatre
from Two Who Were There

For kids growing up in Lake Worth during the years it was open, the old Lake Theatre was a familiar fixture.

"As a child I saw numerous movies at the Lake, though I would be hard-pressed now to recite specific titles," writes Don Vaughan, a former reporter for The Lake Worth Herald and occasional contributor to art&culture.

"What I recall more vividly are the sights and smells of the movie-going experience. For example, I was entranced by the neon-illuminated Weeki Wachee Springs clock in the lobby and the ancient vending machine that dispensed iced soft drinks in paper cups.

The Lake Theatre was part of Wometco Enterprises (which also owned the Miami Seaquarium, in addition to several movie houses) so practically everything in it had some kind of Florida theme. The kiddie drinks, for instance, came in large plastic oranges with green lids and white plastic straws. Inevitably, the empty containers would get loosed from their owners and roll like miniature cannonballs beneath the rows of seats until they came to rest at the very front of the theater.

"When I turned 15, I went from customer to employee, accepting a part-time job at the Lake as an usher for $1 an hour and all the popcorn and RC Cola I could consume. The job required that I wear a tie, which I wasn't keen on, but working in an air conditioned theater beat the heck out of mowing lawns in the brutal Florida heat. And as an employee, I also got to come in any time on my days off and watch movies for free, high up in the then-blocked off balcony. A lot of these movies contained nudity and adult themes that were a real eye-opener for this shy, yet-to-be-kissed 15-year-old, a bonus that helped compensate for the lousy pay."

Another long-time patron was Bill McGoun, a retired Palm Beach Post columnist and historian. "During the years immediately following World War II, I spent many an evening in the Lake Theatre with my parents," McGoun writes. "It was my introduction to the silver screen.

I remember Captain from Castile, A Night in Casablanca and my all-time favorite, The Three Caballeros. My father finally dragged me out of the theater after I had watched it for the fourth time in two days.

"Films ran continuously in those days, which is how I got to watch The Three Caballeros more than once for the 14 cents it cost a child (up from 10 cents in 1940). People would come in and go out in the middle of features. One story was told of a child, leaving Snow White at the point where he had come in, turning toward the screen and saying, 'If she eats that apple again, she's really stupid.'

"I can still sing the title song from The Three Caballeros, more or less, if anyone asks. So far, no one has."