

# Historic Stages

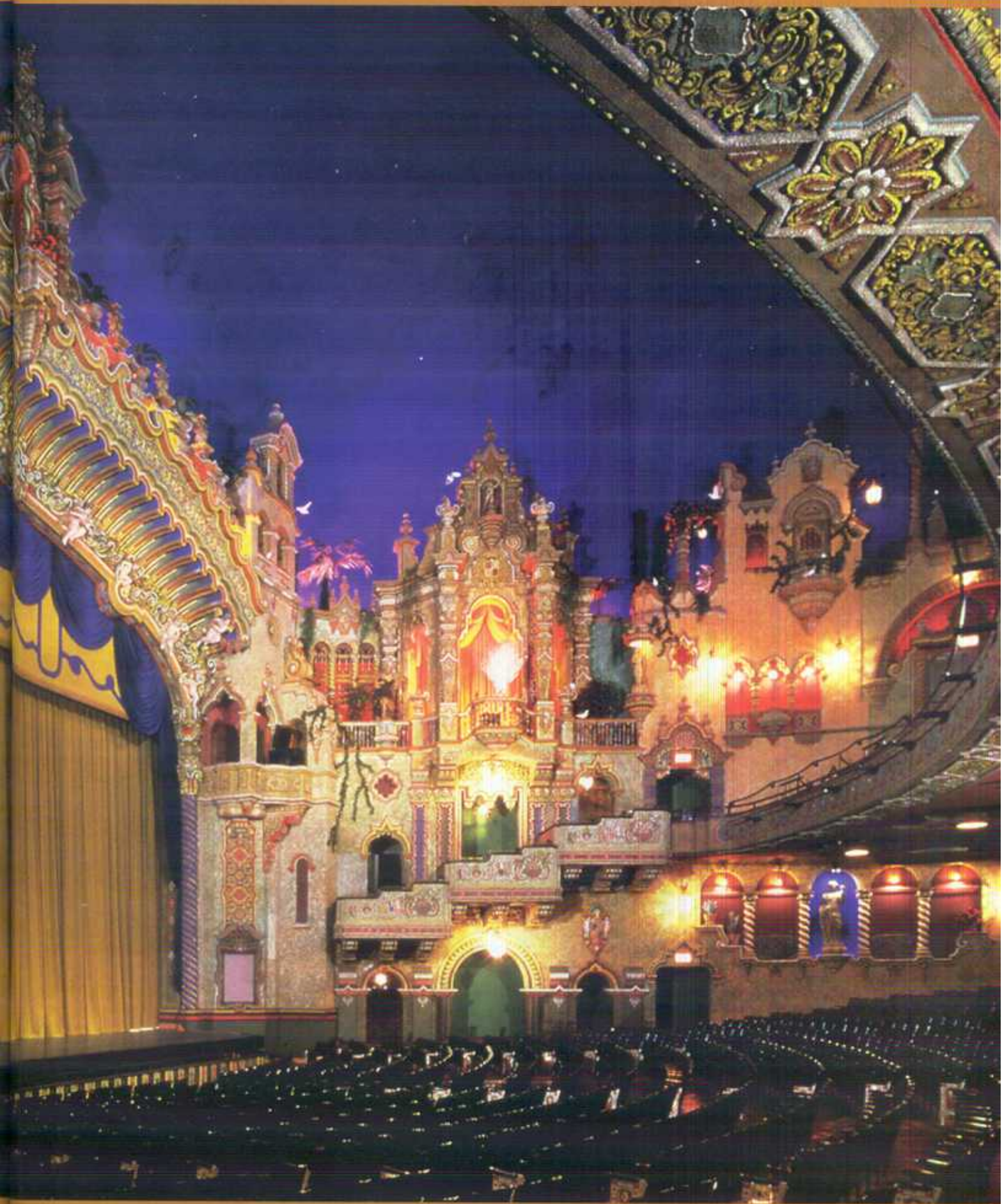
EACH IS UNIQUE, BEAUTIFUL, AND FILLED WITH LOVELY MEMORIES OF PAST PERFORMANCES. BEST OF ALL, EACH IS STILL IN PRIME WORKING CONDITION. BY MANYA KACZKOWSKI

## THE MAJESTIC THEATRE

Look up, and you see an ethereal sky, complete with floating clouds, twinkling stars, and a regal white peacock perched atop a balcony railing. To the left and right, there's an abundance of gilded wall decorations and elaborate statuary. And directly in front, flanking the 40-foot deep stage, you see a Mediterranean village from long ago, with ornate railings and picturesque balconies.

The Majestic Theatre, an architectural masterpiece built in 1929, remains one of the most striking and elaborately detailed venues in the United States. Built originally as a movie theatre, it was the most modern and ornate building in the South for its time, hosting *Fox Movietone Follies of 1929* at its grand opening. In its original heyday, the Majestic also hosted vaudeville stars Mickey Rooney, Jack Benny and George Burns. A \$4.5 million restoration occurred in 1989, bringing the building back to its original splendor, and it is now a National Historic Landmark and hosts large concerts and Broadway shows more than 300 nights each year.







TOP LEFT:  
THE MAJESTIC  
THEATRE; TOP  
RIGHT: CHURCH  
BISTRO & THEATRE;  
BOTTOM RIGHT:  
THE ARNESON  
RIVER THEATRE.

### ARNESON RIVER THEATRE

On a hot summer night in La Villita, San Antonio's oldest neighborhood, Mexican folk dancers in colorful costumes liven up the city on a simple outdoor stage at the Arneson River Theatre. This historic theatre is actually across the river from 800 grassy seats, making the experience most unusual, especially when you add in spectators ... who float by in boats.

Built by the Works Project Administration in 1939, the Arneson River Theatre was created as a unique open-air venue. Here, you can get a better understanding for the culture of the city through the traditional dances of the Fiesta Noche del Río. This talented performance troupe presents the music and dances of Mexico, Spain, Argentina and Texas. They are recognized as the longest regularly playing outdoor musical production in the U.S.

"Back in the early '70s," says Jesse Moreno, special activities coordinator for the City of San Antonio, "I performed on that stage." Moreno remembers the most famous Arneson performer, Rosita. She was such an audience favorite that the footbridge connecting the stage with the seating was named in her honor. "She would come out and sing Mexican ballads, and then cross the bridge and go into the audience," says Moreno.

The beloved Rosita may no longer be gracing the stage, but performances are still held almost every night from May through September. Other times of the year, performances are on weekends. Whether you're in the mood for traditional folklore, mariachi or Bedouin troupes, this classic San Antonio theatre is sure to thrill and entertain.

### CHURCH BISTRO & THEATRE

You comment softly to the person seated next to you during the play, when suddenly, the hairs rise on the back of your neck. An unseen someone whispers "Shhhhh," into your ear, and you catch a faint whiff of old-fashioned perfume. A delicious little shiver runs up your spine—you've just met Miss Margaret.

Church Bistro & Theatre often plays host to these unscheduled performances; in addition to the usual musicals, comedies and dramas presented each fall, ghostly apparitions frequently drop in to be part of the action.

"The first time I came here," says general manager Victoria Sotollo, "I actually felt Miss Margaret's spirit, and I smelled a scent—an older lady's scent—rose-water, maybe. Later, I saw a photograph at her house (open occasionally for tours), and she had buttons all the way down her back. That's when I thought, "It was her. I saw those buttons on her dress." Miss Margaret, a former actress, sometimes watches performances from the balcony.

And there's more: Eddie, a child afflicted with polio in the early '50s, shuts off the ovens during dinner and plays with the lights. "We've had performances where all of the lights in the building turn off; then a few minutes later, they all come back on," says Sotollo. Then there's Henrietta, who meddles with costumes, and Alvin, an actor who died at home shortly before a performance. Plus, there are unexplained footsteps, cool spots, levitating furniture and props that move on their own.