

## Orpheum Theatre

1921, 1933, 1993

Originally known as the Hennepin Theatre, the Orpheum Theatre opened in Minneapolis in 1921 and seated 2,579. [The original Orpheum Theatre opened in 1904 and was located on S. 7th Street and Hennepin Avenue. In 1921, it became the 7th Street Theatre, and the Hennepin Theatre became the Orpheum.]

Designed by Kirchoff and Rose in the Beaux Arts style, the Orpheum featured a playroom and day care off the mezzanine lobby and had eight floors of dressing rooms backstage. When it opened, vaudeville was king of the national touring entertainment circuit, and to accommodate these large acts, the Orpheum was equipped with an elevator exclusively for large animals. The theater is architecturally significant as an excellent surviving example of ornate theater which was archetypal in the early Twentieth Century. The current seating has not changed from the original architecture of the building.

The opening act in 1921, was the Marx Brothers with more than 70,000 guests attending the show the first week. The Orpheum was heralded as the largest vaudeville house in the country, and it became a major outlet for famous vaudeville performers like Jack Benny, George Burns and Fanny Brice. Vaudeville declined, and the theatre became a movie house in 1927.



*Hennepin Country Library*

**B**LAZING into the night with brilliance and beauty unsurpassed anywhere in the world, the Orpheum Theatre's new \$16,000 all neon facade makes a dazzling debut on Hennepin Avenue tonight.

By far the most gigantic lighting project in this part of the country, it involves equipment of incredible proportions.

One mile, 5,280 feet of glass tubing, comprise the letters and design. A month was required to build the huge vertical sign and marquee. A highly specialized crew was kept busy for two weeks installing the six-ton ensemble.

There are 575 changeable letters of rainbow hue flashing the current amusement message from three sides of the canopy.

Combining Ruby Red, Marine Green, Gold, Sky Blue, Orange and Midnight Blue, its kaleidoscopic effulgence adds a permanent splash of beauty to Minneapolis' rialto.

*Minneapolis Star, December 22, 1933*

In 1933, the Orpheum's façade was remodeled to include a neon structure consisting of 5,280 feet of neon glass tubing with 575 changeable letters of various colors.

*Gone with the Wind* came to the Theater in 1940 and sold out every show for three weeks. In the height of the 1940's big-band era, the Orpheum hosted popular musical entertainers including Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Count Basie.



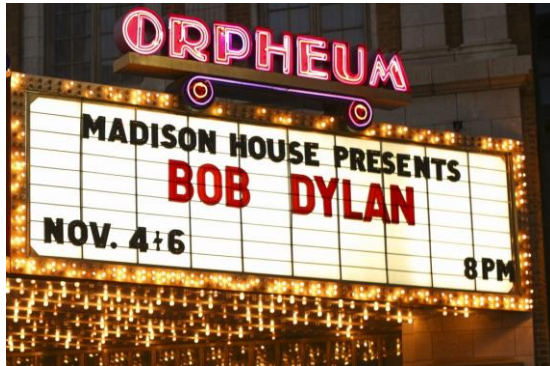
*Star Tribune May 5, 1940*

In 1959, Ted Mann, who at the time owned the nearby Pantages Theater, bought the Orpheum. New ownership helped to bring in new touring productions, including *My Fair Lady* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. As the popularity of live theater began to decline in the 1970s, the Orpheum again responded by hosting several popular film productions of the day. The Orpheum set Minneapolis box office records for *From Here to Eternity* in 1953, *Thunderball* in 1965, and *The Godfather* in 1972. The Orpheum continued as a movie theatre until 1979.



*Star Tribune, May 5, 1940*

Bob Dylan owned the Orpheum from 1979 until 1988. Under Dylan's ownership and his brother David's management, the Orpheum staged *A Chorus Line* in 1979 and subsequently presented other touring musicals.



In 1988, the Minneapolis Community Development Agency bought the Orpheum from Dylan. [Dylan performed at the Orpheum for five nights in 1992.]

Shortly thereafter, in 1993, to accommodate larger productions, renovation began. The new owners rehabilitated the Orpheum as a cost of \$10 million. The renovation extended the Orpheum stage almost twenty feet to accommodate these larger productions, removing the original brick wall of the rear of the building. The Theatre consists of two separate structures: a long, thin lobby that extends back from a narrow front façade on Hennepin Avenue, while the auditorium parallels Hawthorne Avenue.

During restoration, a terra cotta wall was found behind a plain plaster wall in the lobby, 85 percent intact, featuring sculptural reliefs of griffins and urns. The restored lobby now includes six terra cotta bas relief sculptures, while the auditorium is plastered with garlands, swags, and medallions.

The ceiling's dome has 30,000 squares of aluminum leaf. The building seats 1,500 on the main floor and 1,100 on the three balconies. The chandelier in the main auditorium remained the theatre centerpiece; it is fifteen feet high and weighs 2,000 pounds.

After restoration, the Orpheum re-opened in December 1993, with a concert by rock group Heart. Live theater returned to the stage shortly thereafter in January 1994, with *Miss Saigon*.

Not only have world-famous Broadway shows made stops in Minneapolis at the Orpheum, but several have originated there, including the world premiere of Disney's *The Lion King* and *Victor/Victoria*, and Elton John and Tim Rice's touring production of *AIDA*.

The Hennepin Theatre Trust is now the owner and operator of the Theater, as well as the adjacent Pantages and State Theater.