

# A Theatre Lives



The Story of the  
Historic Palace Theatre  
Cape Charles, Virginia

# A Theatre Lives

*The story of the Palace Theatre is very much the story of Cape Charles. At the Palace's opening in 1942, its impressive size and luxurious décor symbolized the confidence and aspirations of this thriving transportation hub. As Cape Charles slid into decline during the '60s, so too did the Palace, its audience waning, its Art Deco glory fading. Today, both town and theatre have been reborn, and the restored Palace Theatre, with its live stage shows and other art programs, has resumed its role as the cultural heart of the community.*

## A Palace Fit for a King

In the 1940s, Cape Charles was booming. More than two million travelers moved through the town each year aboard the trains and ferries linking Norfolk with points north. At any one time, several thousand people might be on the town docks, and it was difficult even to walk down the sidewalk on a Saturday afternoon because of the crowds.

Amid this whirl of prosperity and activity, local entrepreneur William Carroll Parsons announced his intention to

build "one of the biggest and best moving-picture theatres between Norfolk and Philadelphia." The purchase of the land for the theatre in July, 1941, was trumpeted by *The Northampton Times* as "the biggest real estate deal ever made on the Eastern Shore of Virginia."

Alfred Lublin, a German architect based in Norfolk, was hired to design the theatre; and 30 firms, some from as far away as Salisbury, Baltimore, and New York, were involved in its construction. For a final price tag of \$75,000,

the theatre boasted air-conditioning; walnut paneling; top-of-the-line projection equipment; and one of Virginia's largest screens, said to "reduce eyestrain when viewing the picture." Its concrete and steel roof was reputed to be able to withstand the heat of an incendiary bomb, a precaution that may have seemed overzealous until just two weeks after the grand opening, when a three-inch naval shell crashed through a home on Peach Street during gunnery practice.



# PALACE THEATRE... Come to the Movies

When the Palace Theatre opened for the first time, on March 18, 1942, more than 1,000 people lined up to watch two showings of *Rage in Heaven*, starring Ingrid Bergman and Robert Montgomery.

Four days later, the nationally known Barney Rapp and his New Englanders orchestra kicked off a three-day engagement. The Palace Theatre, in all its Art Deco splendor, was proof that Cape Charles had truly arrived.

As was typical of the time, though, the audience was restricted to whites only. The town's black population could attend only the cinder-block Carver Movie House, built two years earlier on Jefferson Avenue.

Less than a decade after the Palace opened, Cape Charles suffered the first of several economic blows. On May 1,

1950, the ferries moved to a new terminal at Kiptopeke, eight miles south of town. The stream of travelers that had coursed through the arteries of Cape Charles began to dry up, but the town—and the Palace Theatre—did “not go gentle into that good night.”

For two years, in 1952 and 1953, the Palace staged the Miss Virginia contest, a prestigious event that captivated the



whole state. The 1952 competition was kicked off by a grand parade. Each of the 14 finalists was carried through town in her own convertible, escorted by the Langley Air Force Base Band, a Navy and Marine Color Guard, fire equipment, and a host of dignitaries.

With the opening of the Chesapeake Bay-Bridge Tunnel in 1964, however, Cape Charles was abandoned to its fate. Robbed of its *raison d'être*, the town withered. The Palace Theatre, which had shown movies daily for more than three decades, shifted to a weekend schedule in the 1970s. When the Palace showed its last movie, in 1997, Cape Charles' population had dropped to half that of its wartime level. To the town's remaining residents,

the prosperity of 1942 must have seemed like a dream.

As one dream faded, though, another took shape. On July 7, 1998, Arts Enter Cape Charles purchased the old Palace Theatre and embarked on the arduous task of restoring it to its former glory. The dream was not simply to resume where the old Palace had left off, but to make the restored theatre the heart of a cultural renaissance in Cape Charles.

Beyond its desire to see live entertainment back on the stage, Arts Enter wanted a venue where students could learn the arts. Today, Arts Enter Cape Charles and the Palace Theatre touch the entire community with their arts programs. In Cape Charles, a theatre—and the arts—lives.



# An Art Deco Treasure



The Palace Theatre is an excellent example of Art Deco, a popular design movement that hit its stride after a 1925 Paris art exposition. With its fascination for machinery, speed, and the modern age, Art Deco was the perfect style for a town that owed its very existence to the train. Its flamboyance, emphasized by geometric shapes and patterns, also suited a town at the height of its prosperity.

That flamboyance was best exemplified by the theatre's High Deco façade on Mason Avenue and an exuberant, vertical "blade" sign over the marquee emblazoned with the Palace's name. While these elements are long gone, many original Art Deco elements remain. Take note of the front doors with their porthole glass panes; the white structural-glass façade; and the curved-glass ticket-booth window. The interior, too, carries numerous reminders of the theatre's Art Deco origins: Notice the upholstered walls; bucket lights; and the stepped plaster ceiling with its indirect neon lighting. Most striking of all, of course, are the exceptional hand-painted murals.

The Art Deco murals that stretch 30 feet along both sides of the auditorium possess a dreamlike quality, conjuring up an exotic, even idyllic image of an Eastern Shore landscape.

The flora hangs down in the style of the Gardens of Babylon, the water ripples into stylized trees and draped fabric, while herons, swans, and ibises pose theatrically. A female figure, dressed in the flowing style of the '30s, anchors each image. The figure on the right gazes toward the painted horizon. On the left, a woman fiddles with her hair and looks into the audience, a coquettish smile playing on her red lips. Interestingly, she sits on what appears to be a pile of fish, symbolic perhaps of the Eastern Shore's great prosperity.



*From Cape Charles' Northampton Times, March 12, 1942*

In truth, the murals are not murals at all. Rather than being painted directly on the theatre walls, the images were produced like a stage set. The fabric pieces were dyed and painted, then stretched on supports, framed, and attached to the walls. The two seven-foot-tall pieces were created and installed in 1942 by Novelty Scenic Studios of New York City, a company that remains in business to this day.



# The Theatre Now

Arts Enter Cape Charles! In these four emphatic words a small, grass-roots organization found both its name and its mission. Founded in 1997 when Cape Charles was in economic free fall, Arts Enter Cape Charles committed itself to bringing the arts back into the lives of the community.

Starting in a single classroom in the old high school, Arts Enter enrolled 50 students in its dance program in the first year. *Magia*, starring a cast primarily of children, was the group's first production. Unable to stage the show at the school, Arts Enter leased the Palace Theatre for a week instead.

The Palace, which had fittingly shown *Titanic* as its last movie, was in a terrible state of disrepair. The seats were ripped, the lobby ceiling was falling down, and none of the lights worked. Yet the show must go on, and the cast of *Magia* brought the arts back to the Palace in style. They were rewarded with a standing ovation from the audience of 400. A year later, Arts Enter bought the old theatre, and volunteers began the painstaking task of restoring the Palace.

In the decade since, Arts Enter's impact in

the community has grown in leaps and bounds. Hundreds of students enroll in the center's programs each year, and thousands of visitors attend performances by such artists as the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, the Virginia Opera, and Ghana's Kusun Ensemble.

While state and local government provides some financial support, it does not cover all the costs of this non-profit group. Securing funding for the theatre—and Arts Enter's cultural programs—takes tremendous dedication on the part of its volunteers.



# The Theatre



# Tomorrow

Arts Enter remains dedicated to its original mission of nurturing students in their understanding and appreciation of the arts. Its staff teaches classes covering everything from drama and dance to painting and pottery. With the 2007 opening of the new Stage Door Gallery, Arts Enter realized its dream of housing all the arts under one roof.

As Arts Enter embarks on a second decade, its goals remain very much the same. As part of the restoration, the theatre's façade will be restored to its original magnificence. At the same time, Arts Enter hopes to lay the foundation of its own financial security,

which would allow the hiring of a salaried staff. Most importantly, Arts Enter intends to extend its outreach even further into the community, with plans to launch a summer-retreat program for college students, where they can experiment, work, and create without academic pressure.

In 1997, the arts entered Cape Charles, and they have remained. When you consider the impact that Arts Enter Cape Charles has had on the lives of residents throughout the Eastern Shore, only its name may not have been ambitious enough.



**Arts Enter Cape Charles is a non-profit, grass-roots organization, founded in 1997 by Clelia Sheppard, Sheila Cardano, David Feeney, Mary Ann Clarke, Virginia Savage, Arthur Tross, Liz Goffigon, and Carol Chappell.**

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