

Theater on the Square

First of two parts

In the long golden years when North Beach was an American outpost of Italy, Washington Square was the little village's piazza.

Italian immigrants called the park "il Giardino" and made it the heart of their adopted community.

The park, which turned 150 years old in 2000 and was designated a San Francisco landmark, remains the center of North Beach. What happens in and around the Square continues to

FLASHBACKS

By June A. Osterberg

be important to a great many residents.

For that reason, the fact that one of the major structures opposite Washington Square -- the old theater building -- has been allowed to become a sad sight is disturbing to many people.

Fortunately there are others who see the imposing building

as salvageable and ripe with possibilities for renewed life and a bright future.

For now, Flashbacks wants to focus on the glorious past of this conspicuous site at Columbus Avenue and Powell Street.

Where the neglected theater building stands today, there once stood an impressive Russian Cathedral.

Please note the photo that accompanies this little bit of North Beach history.

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The Russian Cathedral occupied this spot in the last years of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th -- until the great earthquake and fire of April 1906. The raging fire consumed the cathedral as well as almost everything else in North Beach.

The church was established in the bishop's house on Powell Street in 1881, was consecrated to Saint Nicholas in 1888, and took the name of the Holy Trinity in 1897.

The bishop at the turn of the century was the Rt. Rev. I. Tikhon. He also served as bishop of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands.

By 1900, he was bishop of the Orthodox Church in North America. And the Russian Cathedral's formal name at the time of the fatal fire was Trinity Cathedral of the Holy Orthodox Church.

Let us not leave this grand but ill-fated edifice without acknowledging other churches not far from the park in 1895, including three familiar, well-loved sanctuaries still standing.

St. Francis of Assisi Church was and is at the corner of Vallejo Street and Montgomery Avenue (later Columbus) and was a survivor of the conflagration. Since 1998 it has been a national shrine to the gentle saint.

Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, organized for the Spanish and Portuguese residents, was and still is at 910 Broadway. It is now the St. Mary Chinese Day School, however.

Sts. Pietro e Paolo Church was not today's extraordinary presence in the center of the block of Filbert Street on the northern edge of Washington Square.

It was then a simple wooden church at the northeast corner of Filbert and Dupont (now Grant Avenue). The cathedral-like church of today was dedicated in March 1924.

As for the Russian Cathedral, a new church was built at Green Street and Van Ness Avenue in 1909. It remains at that corner.

In the aftermath of the fire, the ground on which the Russian Cathedral stood was not one of the first places to get a new building in the amazing rebuilding boom that followed the fiery destruction of 1906.

When it happened, it was because of a woman named Antonietta Pisanelli, a singer who had made her theatrical debut in New York in 1895. She came to California in 1904.

Italian Americans loved the theater. Signora Pisanelli had the will and pizzazz to create a theater for the homesick newcomers.

She converted the Bersaglieri Hall at Union and Stockton streets to a theater-restaurant that became a gathering place. She called it Circolo Famigliare Pisanelli.

Her voice and her enterprise -- and her timing -- were such that she was able to sell her place for \$20,000 just three days before the fateful April 18, 1906.

In establishing the Washington Square Theatre on the site of the Russian

Orthodox Church, she had the backing of the notorious land speculator and political boss, Abe Ruef. It was April 1909.

(It is worth mentioning here that Ruef also owned the property on Filbert Street where Saints Peter and Paul Church wanted to build their magnificent church in the 1920s. The building committee had to deal with him.)

Impresario Pisanelli's new place, constructed of stuccoed brick, had a seating capacity of about 1,000. Tickets were a nickel, with the best seats going for a dime.

The Washington Square Theatre opened with the Compagnia Drammatica Italiana and later presented plays of Shakespeare and Dumas and other non-Italians. For these important presentations ticket prices went up to as much as 75 cents.

Italian variety theater -- live theater, including opera -- continued through the First World War and the 1920s. Even the famous Italian tenor, Tito Schipa, played at the Washington Square Theatre.

At the end of the decade the theater was sold, renamed the Milano, and began showing American motion pictures. The Milano was THE place to go to the movies for all of North Beach for at least eight years.

Antonietta Pisanelli, who had provided theatrical entertainment to the Italian Quarter for decades, retired in 1931.

In 1938 or 1939 the Milano became the Palace Theatre.

Many people born and raised in North Beach remember going to the Palace all through the 1940s and '50s. In those years a matinee ticket costing 5 or 10 cents would include a newsreel, a cartoon, a serial episode (e.g., Buck Rogers) and both an "A" picture and a "B" picture.

More than one native North Beacher has spoken affectionately of a malt shop in the building called Bozo's that had "great milk shakes" and hot dogs for a nickel.

The traditional movie palace closed in 1966, and in 1967 a Chinese movie theater opened. It was the beginning of a new era.

End of part one. ♦

*This striking
Russian
church
was destroyed
in the
1906 fire.*



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