

When the Cockettes Played the Palace

Second of two parts

In Part 1, Flashbacks explored the history of the Powell/Columbus site of the "old theater building" that has fallen on hard times, to the distress of many.

The August Flashbacks went back to about 1895 when the important location on Washington Square was occupied by the elegant Russian Orthodox Cathedral, which was destroyed in 1906.

FLASHBACKS

By June A. Osterberg

When the Washington Square Theatre was built in 1909 it was the first of several theaters to brighten the west side of the already historic park.

The theater was established for live performances. It was followed by the Milano Theatre, which showed

American motion pictures. The Milano was replaced by the Palace Theatre just before World War II, which fulfilled its role as North Beach's popular movie house for decades.

A Chinese movie theater opened on the spot in 1967, and that was the beginning of a new era. The marquee had borne the name Palace for so long that when the new owners wanted to rename the place they chose another six-letter name to fit

the sign. The name Pagoda went up.

However, there was so much continuing affection for the traditional Palace that the name eventually morphed into the Pagoda Palace. The theater showed Chinese films and occasionally live Chinese opera.

Not long after the old theater

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NORTH BEACH BEAT



PHOTO BY BLAIR PALTRIDGE 1970 COURTESY OF RUMI MISSABU, COCKETTES STAR AND ARCHIVIST

The old Palace Theatre was ablaze in neon back in the '50s and '60s.

► *Chinese cinema and bawdy shows* — From Page 1

had taken on its new character, a remarkable dual personality took shape. Starting in 1969 the Cockettes, a talented and uninhibited troupe of performers in drag, created a sensation with their original, outrageous "midnite shows."

When moviegoers who had come to see the Chinese films would file out of the last show about midnight, there would be a crowd of people on the sidewalk outside, waiting to enter the theater for Nocturnal Dream Shows. They would start about 12:30 and go until 2:30, except on Halloween, when the show lasted until after 4 a.m.

The shows had names like "Pearls Over Shanghai," "Circus of Life" (subtitled "The Rudest Show on Earth"), and "Smacky and Our Gang."

On the screen there would be films such as Laurel and Hardy in "The Chimp," "You'll Never Get Rich" and "Night of the Living Dead."

Both straight and gay people filled the theater every night that the Cockettes were playing. Tickets were \$2 or \$2.50. The hilarity went on into 1972.

The Pagoda Palace continued to show Chinese movies and occasional live Chinese opera until late in 1985.

The Renaissance-Rialto theater chain took over in 1986, refurbished the old building, took back the name Palace and opened the theater as a repertory movie house.

The first movies featured were two filmed in San Francisco: "The Maltese Falcon" and "Dark Passage." They were shown at a \$10-a-person fundraiser to save the Grace Marchant Garden on Telegraph Hill.

The repertory operation was short-lived on account of poor attendance, and the name Pagoda Palace reappeared.

Sometime in the mid-'90s the theater building was acquired by a reputed Hong Kong billionaire. Not long after, the building was gutted, and nothing of the old Art Deco objects and furnishings remained. Not the ticket booth, not the curving stairs, not the valuable dance floor upstairs.

This was done in an attempt to convert the building to retail use. In late 1995 a mini-mall was proposed for the space, to general consternation. The unpopular prospect was opposed by the community and did not materialize.

Commenting on the "insensitive alteration," the Foundation for San Francisco Heritage Newsletter stated in its March/April 1998 issue: "... Only the pylon that bore the colorful neon blade sign and a canopy barely suggestive of the marquee (which had been previously modified) remain to suggest its original character..."

After the mini-mall was thwarted the Rite-Aid drugstore chain sought to open a jumbo outlet in the old building. Neighborhood residents rallied successfully against that, too, believing that a large late-hour drugstore selling liquor was inappropriate for the prominent location on Washington Square.

The community welcomed the effort by Doug Ahlers of New Orleans that followed. His ambitious plan was to rename the building Muriel's Theatre and show live theater. The audience would have been able to dine while watching a performance.

But the dot-com collapse and the economic nosedive doomed that scheme

despite the huge investment that had been made to return theater to the old theater building.

So now the earthquake-retrofitted building stands there, looming over Columbus Avenue with its empty vertical sign, its new roof gleaming in the sun, awaiting its next incarnation.

A group of investors has been meeting this year, and many high hopes ride on the possibilities. The old theater building is still a tantalizing opportunity for people with imagination, courage and deep pockets. ♦