

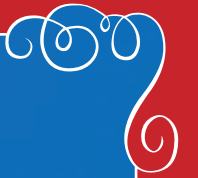
a picture palace

Reborn

The Granada Theatre provides Santa Barbara with a new center for live entertainment

By: David Barbour

*M*any of America's grand old movies palaces have been brought back to life in the last few years, but few of these renovations have been as impressive as the Granada Theatre in Santa Barbara, California. In the parlance of vintage Hollywood, this one is an epic production—years in the making, with a cast of thousands, and color by Deluxe. The restored theatre is a delirious dream of Hollywood grandeur, an exotic monument to the American film industry in its extravagant youth. It's not a small effort to save a building like this—it's even harder to make it better than it was. However, The Granada is a singular demonstration of what can be achieved when a top team of professionals is backed by a community that is motivated—and well-heeled—enough to make magic.



ARCHITECTURE



Located about 95 miles from Hollywood, Santa Barbara has always had a symbiotic relationship with the film colony. During the early silent era, it was home to Flying A Studios—the world's largest film studio—as well as several other moviemaking venues. Over the years, as it grew into a popular seaside resort, it became a leading getaway spot for film stars. It also provided a nearby venue for sneak previews of new films.

These screenings often took place at the Granada, a 1,550-seat venue that opened in 1924. As designed by A. B. Rosenthal, and built by Charles Urton, it was, at eight stories, the tallest building in town. The movie palaces of the period were designed to give audiences an extraordinary experience, transporting them to a world of glamour even before the film began. In this, the Granada did not disappoint, thanks to its enormous lobby, wide staircases, and wealth of Spanish-Moorish detail. The theatre came with numerous amenities, including the requisite Wurlitzer organ; the balcony loges featured love seats. Like most theatres of the day, it featured a program of films combined with live entertainment, and, for performers appearing there, there were 14 well-appointed dressing rooms located on five levels.

However, time passed, the movie industry changed, and the Granada, like other buildings of its type, fell on



Top left: The theatre in the old days. Top right and above: The stage house renovation.

evil days. The theatre held on longer than many others; throughout the '90s, it was home to the Santa Barbara Civic Light Opera Company. Nevertheless, it was carved up into a multiplex, consisting of three auditoriums. (In addition to the main room, the balcony was walled off and split into two.) The interior was marred by neglect and the passage of time. The final screening there was in 2004.

However, a local organization, The Santa Barbara Center for the Performing Arts, led by executive director Peter Frisch, was determined to rescue the building, and a fundraising effort began. Working with an eminent local design firm and a team of leading design consultants,

the \$52-million project was more than a renovation; today, the Granada Theatre is arguably more elaborate and eye-filling than in its heyday. It is now equipped to serve a wide constituency; as we go to press, the schedule of events includes a lecture by the author Robert Bly and performances by Ballet Preljocaj, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Santa Barbara Symphony, and a ten-day engagement of *Forbidden Broadway*. Besides CAMA, the arts-presentation organization, resident companies include Santa Barbara Symphony, Opera Santa Barbara, and State Street Ballet.

The theatre's renovation was spearheaded by the Santa Barbara-

based architectural firm Phillips Metsch Sweeney Moore, now PMSM Architects, which has offices in several California cities, including Santa Barbara. The PMSM team included Roger Phillips, architect/interior designer; Stephen Metsch, principal in charge and construction administrator; and Monisha Adnani, project manager and director of performing arts design. New York-based Sachs Morgan Studio provided theatre consultation, with acoustical consultation by McKay Conant Hoover, which has offices in Westlake Village, California and Scottsdale, Arizona. Working with Roger Phillips, the interior construction was handled by EverGreene Studios, which was recently renamed EverGreene Architectural Arts. Melchiori Construction oversaw the building work; the owner's representative was Tryon Company.

The choice of the architectural firm was felicitous, as Roger Phillips is a lifetime resident of Santa Barbara. "As a boy, I imagined that the Granada was what a palace in Europe looked like," he says. "It got me interested in buildings. When the pieces of this project fell together, I was in a unique position to indulge my passion to design a brand-new 1924 motion picture palace, an opportunity I had missed the first time around." The final product is a kind of synthetic: "The idea was to keep it the way it was, stylistically and in terms of mood—yet every surface and detail is different. Everything was ripped out and reconfigured. It was a rare chance to recreate this kind of eclectic, classical architecture, and blend it with a modern, high-tech capability."

Re-imagining the building

In some ways, the Granada did not seem to be a promising candidate. "When I came in, the balcony was still divided by walls," says Adnani. "The interior was painted black, with baby blue columns. The proscenium was there, as was the mural above the

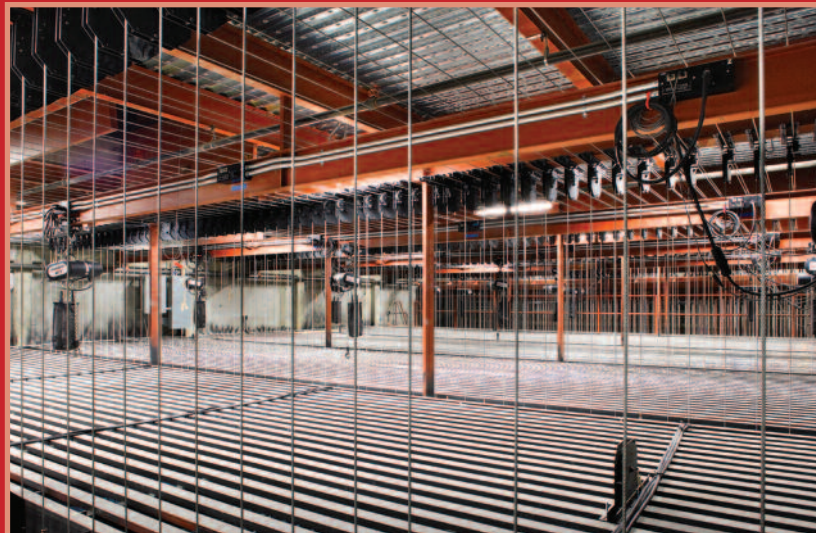
stage house, but the ceiling had been damaged, thanks to a fire sprinkler contractor who poked holes in it. I wouldn't have been surprised if there were rats in the theatre."

Indeed, the most pertinent question seemed to be where to start. "Our biggest goal was to bring the theatre back to its original splendor," says Adnani. "But the splendor of which era? We worked with a historian and decided to restore it to the 1930s. We had beautiful hand drawings that showed detailing, most of which no longer existed. Jeff Greene, of EverGreene Studios, came in and did a historic finish study, exposing the

original modeling and the colors."

It became apparent that it was necessary to rework the Granada's structure within the confines of a limited footprint. "We couldn't drastically expand the square footage of the existing building, because it was right up to the property line, except for a 10' space at the back of the stage and an exterior exit way south of the auditorium," says Adnani. Still, the theatre needed a upgrade if it was going to work as a modern performing arts center.

PMSM Architects reviewed several solutions for the expansion of the stage. "Sometimes," says Roger



Top: One of the dressing rooms. Above: The rigging system.



The view from the mezzanine, showing the mural over the proscenium and the disk chandelier.

Morgan, of Sachs Morgan, “in these projects, people look past the good stuff, if it’s dirty enough. The Granada had wonderful qualities. For example, the balcony had the most comfortable row spacing of any theatre that I’ve been in. But you had a stage in the back, with a basement under it, and an eight-story building in the front. The lobby came through the main building. Under the orchestra, there was just slab on grade, with no basement, and a stack of dressing rooms at stage right. I got the original architectural drawings, took tracing paper, and made a few choices to demonstrate that you could fit into that space what was needed for a legitimate theatre with the kind of programming they wanted.”

He adds, “I said, ‘Let’s tear out the dressing room tower completely. Get rid of it, and it will give us extra room. We’ll go to the middle of the orchestra, make another floor level underneath, and connect it to the basement under the stage.’ That

was my major contribution.”

Ann Sachs, of Sachs Morgan, says that, early on, the demolition of the theatre was considered. Once a viable renovation plan was proposed, she adds, “We’ve never seen a board act that quickly. They were so focused about moving forward.”

“PMSM’s role was to configure the interior layout of the basement and integrate it with the existing basement levels,” says Adnani. Every square foot of support space, including dressing rooms, offices, and storage and machine rooms, are below the orchestra and stage footprint, so the backstage space planning had to be carefully programmed and designed. Special attention was paid to egress, accessibility, and the circulation patterns of cast, crew, and materials. The final plan encouraged efficient use of the support space, and resulted in lower costs for productions, ease of use for visiting companies, and fully equipped dressing rooms.

Indeed, says Steve Rust, also of

Sachs Morgan, “The only place for us to go was down. The stage house was torn down, the proscenium was widened, and they excavated down about 20’ to the back wall of the orchestra, so we could put the dressing rooms beneath.”

Essentially, the building was essentially torn open and reshaped. The result is an entirely new stage house. “We widened the proscenium to 50’,” says Rust. “We designed a hybrid rigging system; it has 58 standard counterweight sets and, between each of the loft block beams, is a separate set of trolley beams that hold chain hoists. They’re placed underneath the rigging lines and can exist simultaneously, so there’s an automated chain hoist system for headliners and Broadway shows. The rigging system is by J.R. Clancy. The 24 chain hoists are controlled by a Skjonberg system.” Also new are two 1-ton drum winches for the front-of-house eyebrow, two 1-ton line shaft winches under the

crossover gallery for shell eyebrow storage, and two 1.5-ton drum winches for front-of-house line arrays.

The orchestra shell was supplied by Wenger; Rust says it was designed to fit in with the theatre's interior.

"EverGreene came up with a design, based on an idea by Roger Phillips, and wallpapered the shell. It's a Moorish courtyard scene. We also made sure that the orchestra shell's ceiling pieces could be kept to a weight that would fit on any lineset." A curtain was designed by Phillips and built by Stage Decoration and Supply.

The new basement level contains ten dressing rooms: one star room, five for principals, two for chorus, and one for a conductor; all are easily accessible by stairs or elevator. An additional "diva" dressing room is placed on the stage level. There's a wardrobe room in the basement, as well as a visiting company manager's office, rehearsal room, orchestra pit access, musician staging area, and carpentry/props room.

The orchestra pit was expanded, and a Gala Spiralift was added to provide an extension to the stage. "The pit lift offers a way of getting materials and equipment down there to the wardrobe and dressing rooms," says Rust. "Also, because so much equipment is stored in the basement, there's a freight elevator in the upstage right position. If the pit lift is in place, you can still get to the basement." Among the items stored downstairs is an American Harlequin floor for dance presentations.

Other amenities include a gallery built about 30' above the upstage area, "so crew members can cross over from stage right to stage left and have access to the dimmer room," says Rust.

Reviving the interior

In discussing the auditorium's interior, Roger Phillips, notes that "in a way, it's more elaborate" than the original. Indeed, from the beautifully painted

coffered ceiling, with its disk-shaped chandelier, to the mural of Spanish galleons over the proscenium, the Moorish screens and stage boxes at left and right, and balcony that wraps around the room, the Granada is an unusually luxurious auditorium.

Ironically, the room now has old-fashioned amenities it never had before, beginning with the box seats. "On each side, behind the organ screens, there were exits with little balconies," says Phillips. "Beyond that, there were no other boxes. By adding eight new boxes, we were able to add about 50 seats." Other existing design details were restored. "The original perforated screens on the sides of the proscenium were damaged in the 1925 earthquake," the architect adds. "The screens that we put in are about 85% like the original." The original mural over the

Steven Handelman Studios.) "In each of the ceiling coffers is a dropped panel with a cast decorative grille; we put high-intensity recess beam lights in each panels, and, around them, a strip of color-mixing LEDs. Not only does air come out of the panels, but also light, in any color you want. We've used LEDs around the organ screen and elsewhere. In the '20s, the theatres had a lot of indirect lighting behind the fascias; we have the same thing, but with a more sophisticated range of colors." The architectural lighting was designed by Norman Russell, of Norman Russell Design; the LEDs are by Phillips Color Kinetics.

The central chandelier disk is one of the room's most attention-getting features. "It was set up for indirect lighting," says Phillips, adding that the disk largely consisted of a transparent



The lobby has been restored with mirrors and period-style chandeliers.

proscenium was destroyed in the 1925, and replaced by another painting; the latter was restored by EverGreene.

The room's architectural lighting is up-to-date, Phillips notes. (About 95% of the decorative light fixtures are handmade wrought iron fixtures design and constructed in Santa Barbara by Steven Handelman, of

grille. "It was damaged when they split the balcony into two theatres," he says. "We wanted to re-establish its indirect lighting, using [Phillips CK] color-changing LEDs, which was easy; we also put in a system of recessed lighting units, all of which can be aimed at different areas of the mezzanine. It was something of a job to get the fixtures in there and to



A side view of the auditorium shows the wall's decorative acoustical tiles.

make them fall within the ornate design of the disk.”

In order to improve the room's acoustics, Phillips says, “We moved the back wall of the theatre about 20' to make the mezzanine's overhang more shallow. We also added a series of reflective elements on the side walls—the problem was doing it without destroying the room's period style.” Dave Conant, the acoustician, adds, “The original side walls were plain-jane flat, with occasional pilasters. We came up with a curious tessellated pattern from the Spanish-Moorish tradition; now the sound hits the side walls, which turn it back across the audience. It helps the overall diffusion of the sound for the symphony and improves one's sense of being immersed in the sound field. That's because the sound is now being redirected across the audience, getting to their ears from the sides, rather than blowing past their heads.”

In terms of the seating, “the theatre's capacity was the driving force,” says Rust, who adds that “live music drove the programming.” Both CAMA and The Santa Barbara Symphony moved into the Granada from the larger Arlington, so there was considerable pressure to not sacrifice any audience seating. The new auditorium has a center aisle, and the balcony retains its wide, comfortable spacing. Rust notes that the first loge area in the mezzanine functions as a VIP seating area. Assigned Seating Manufacturing was the supplier. In addition, says Morgan, “Wheelchair access is tough to get in an existing building like that. We incorporated a cross aisle about ten rows back in the orchestra, and also created a wheelchair-accessible ramp on the outside of the building.”

Roger Phillips designed an 8'-deep mirrored hallway/gallery addition to the side of the building in order to

provide access ramps to both orchestra and balcony seating areas. The new building can accommodate accessible seats throughout the auditorium, and provides equal access to all the public spaces. PMSM Architects also came up with a creative way to accommodate a new lobby elevator within the existing stairwell shaft. It now provides access to all the levels of seating.

The decision to retain the large disk chandelier also meant the Sachs Morgan team were restricted in other ways. “It was difficult to figure out a front-of-house lighting position that wasn't too intrusive,” Rust says. “While demolition of the old stage house was in progress. Rick Girard, of Melchiori Construction, cut some holes in the ceiling and tested positions with ETC Source Fours. That's how we got two front-of-house lighting coves built into the coffers—and they're really successful. They're accessible

through the building's attic. Also, because the side boxes are all new, we were allowed to take the third boxes at the top of each stack and make box-boom positions."

The theatre's lighting package includes approximately 300 ETC Source Fours, nine High End Systems Studio Spot CMYs, 40 Altman PAR 64s, 48 Apollo Design Technology Smart Scrollers, 12 Selecon Aurora cyc lights, 24 Selecon Aurora ground rows, and two Strong Entertainment Lighting Super Troupers. In addition to the Strand Lightpalette Live 3000, there are 467 Strand Lighting C21 dimmers. Also used is Strand's VisionNet architectural lighting control system.

As Morgan notes, "The theatre didn't have a crew yet, because it wasn't operating, so Steve and I stood in for the stagehands who would someday arrive. We tried to come up with ideas that related to their jobs. For example, the tracks above the grid with dedicated winches—when a show's contract rider says they want electrical battens, they can send in a crew guy on straight time, and he can get it done."

There were other changes as well. The entrance from the mezzanine to the upstairs lobby was reworked to make its less steep. "We also opened up the archways in the entrance to let light in, along with some wall sconces on the side and, on the outside, we put floor-to-ceiling mirrors," says Phillips. These elements, he notes, help to create a feeling of spaciousness. The ground-level lobby was also enlarged, by moving the front wall "almost to the street, about 5' from the sidewalk," the architect says.

The lobby, he adds, "is broken up into three pieces. You walk in the door and there are three arched window-like effects, with plaques honoring major donors. You see pilasters and a dropped beam. Then you move through an archway into the next section, where the walls are

mirrored and the ceiling has coffers, also with mirrors. There's a repeat of the pilaster-and-beam effect, and you enter the main part of the lobby." It makes for a dramatic entrance into a dramatic auditorium.

Creating a live acoustic sound

Just as Morgan notes that "the whole site was the challenge," the acoustician Dave Conant had to deal with a room that held both promise and peril. "The acoustics were miserable for the intended function," he recalls. "Actually, 'miserable' would be a gracious characterization." However, he adds, "I crawled through the bowels of the space and through the sorry little theatres in the balcony. I pounded on walls and sniffed around—and I learned that the bones of the room were excellent for its intended uses." He mentions that the Arlington Theatre, the previous home of the local symphony, "has a vaulted ceiling that can glow like a night sky—it's beautiful but very bad for serious music. The Granada was more of a shoebox space, and we could capitalize on that for the symphony."

One tool proved especially valuable, he adds: "We built a CATT-Acoustic computer model of the room in order to listen—binaurally, via headphones—to a 'virtual orchestra' performing on stage in order to assess the acoustical value of the proposed side wall articulation as well as the acoustical eyebrow. This software permitted us to make judgments about various aspects of the room's sound as they were influenced by room size, shaping, and finishes."

Of course, a key aspect of the room's acoustical makeover had to do with the decorative acoustic tiles mentioned earlier. The side walls have patterns of heavy (220 lb) glass, fiber-reinforced gypsum acoustic modules about 15" tall by 3'-6" long, each divided into three sculpted facets angled differently facing the auditorium,

rigidly attached to the concrete. "This becomes a structure to retain the sound's bass energy," says Conant. "The rear walls have the same kind of material, which is rotated to shoot the sound upward. That way, the sound that approaches the rear wall from the orchestra hits it in such a way that it is kicked upward to the vaulted ceiling under the balcony. That sprays the sound back down to the audience from over their heads."

Conant mentions another distinctive feature, the eyebrow, a reflector located above the proscenium arch, which is used principally for orchestral and choral performances. Also, the Wenger orchestra shell, he says, "has a curious characteristic in a series of openings that appear to be balcony windows. The windows are partially open to the backstage, through an acoustically transparent medium; when sound enters a window, some of it is reflected back to the orchestra, enabling antiphonal sounds. It's really useful in pieces where there is an offstage musician, as in some of Mahler's works. In such cases, the musicians can stand out of view and be heard beautifully through the orchestra shell."

In addition, there is a system of variable acoustic draperies that can drop down from slots in the ceilings and cover the side walls on both the orchestra and mezzanine levels. These were supplied by Tiffin Scenic Studios, of Tiffin, Ohio.

In order to acoustically isolate the auditorium from the life of the street, sound-absorbing plasters were installed on the walls of the lobby and side vestibules. Conant adds that the multiple-lobby setup, described by Roger Phillips above, also helps to isolate the venue from street noise. Additional isolation material was added to the ceiling, to keep out the noise of helicopters flying overhead. The HVAC system was reconstituted, with a return air plenum being installed in the floors on both levels of the theatre.

The sound system

Kyle Ridenour, also of McKay Conant Hoover, who worked with the theatre to specify the sound systems, says, "A lot of effort went into implementing technologies in a way that wasn't detrimental to the interior design." He notes that the client hoped for a sound system that could handle the theatre's multi-faceted program. "But the reality is, there will be times when the act coming in will insist on using the system in the truck." Therefore, the focus was on getting additional loading points, clean power, and the ability to hold additional weight loads.

On the proscenium is a left-right system consisting of W8LC line array elements with W8LCD downfills and W8LS subwoofer units from Martin Audio. "We were going to put in a more traditional left-center-right set up arrays, but we didn't want to obscure that gorgeous mural on the proscenium. The Martin Audio boxes appear as one long seamless column," and, therefore, minimize the distraction from the intricate architectural detailing. Also used are EAW JFX88 underbalcony fill speakers, and EAW MK8126 units for balcony fill.

In addition, says, Ridenour, "Because of the auditorium's deep under-balcony area, and the acoustically semi-isolated area in the rear of the balcony, an electronic acoustic enhancement system came to be a compelling need for all patrons to have a similar listening experience." The enhancement method used is described as a "legacy VRAS" system, based on the foundational technology that has evolved into a product from Meyer Sound. It involves a matrix of 12 mics placed in the ceiling, supplemented by additional mics over the stage when in use for orchestral performances, and an matrix of loudspeakers integrated into the auditorium. "We made sure the mic cable was located in the middle of an architectural detail, and we spent time figuring out how to hide

the speakers behind custom architectural elements," he adds.

"The heart of the performance audio system is the Yamaha PM1D," adds Ridenour. "It provides all the audio routing and is located at the rear of the main floor under the balcony. We chose it for a couple of reasons. First, this project was in design for seven years. The PM1D is a robust digital console and has been installed in many venues. It is a known entity and is capable of being more than a performance audio console. Once you've gotten the engine located and all the analog wire running to it, you can move the control surface easily, with only a couple of pieces of fiber."

Finding a place for the PM1D was an issue. "We looked at several different locations, some of which made sense, some of which didn't," he says. The position chosen was preferred by the client, because it didn't involve losing any of the most expensive seats. However, it affords the board operator an obstructed view of the stage and main loudspeakers in certain situations. Therefore, a second position was identified in the orchestra and provided with full technical infrastructure, although it does involve removing a few seats.

Overall, says Ridenour, "We had a number of challenges in terms of putting that much technology into a building that wasn't originally designed for it. The primary challenge, especially for the acoustical enhancement, was making the technology disappear. I view the Granada as having two separate audio systems. There is the performance audio system, and there is the acoustical enhancement system, which I view as more of an acoustical, rather than an AV, technology. It's OK to see and be aware of the performance system. The enhancement system should be transparent to the listener; it should be very hard to detect as an active piece of electronics."

Getting to completion

Other personnel involved in the project were Rick Gerard and Steve Pivato of Melchiori Construction, David Johnson (production manager), James Griffin (head carpenter), and Scott Garey (master electrician). Virtually everyone interviewed for this article singled out the vision of Peter Frisch for helping to steer the project through many complications to a successful opening.

Indeed, the project was long a-borning. "We started with asbestos abatement and partial demolition in 2005," says Adnani. The opening was scheduled for October 2006, then postponed to early 2007, then put off for another year. The first delay, she says, was triggered "because the building's tower is placed above the lobby, and, because the patrons exit through the lobby, we had to bring the building up to earthquake code. We met with Rob Rossi, who owns the building; the conversion to code meant that he had to convert two floors of the building from offices to residential space."

Nevertheless, the building opened in March 2008, with an event hosted by the opera diva Denyce Graves. A reviewer for the *Montecito Journal* wrote, "I'm not sure I want to hear music in any other hall in Santa Barbara again." Adnani adds, "At the open house [held a day or two after the opening], there were thousands of people line up; the theatre was open all day. It was thrilling to see how this town appreciates this project."

"My day was made when, after the recent L.A. Philharmonic concert, Esa-Pekka Salonen told us 'It is a joy to play in a hall where pianissimos can be played truly pianissimo,'" says Frisch. "The Granada will provide Santa Barbara with an exciting, beautiful space, a cultural and entertainment landmark, and a theatre of surprises that will light up State Street for the next hundred years." 📶