

The Colonial Theatre of Lancaster: 1912-1965

By James Henke, Ph.D.

Howard E. Doan had come to Lancaster in 1906, to manage the Electric Theatre, an early motion picture house on West King Street. After establishing a strong following of audience members, H.E. Doan built another motion picture house, the Hippodrome Theatre, which also found favor with Lancaster audiences. With these two solid successes behind him, Doan embarked on a considerably larger venture, the construction of a theatre "on the stage on which the largest attractions on the road could be presented and the auditorium of which would seat enough people to justify the bringing of such attractions to Lancaster." (*Daily New Era* of January 26, 1912)

Designed by Albert E. Westover of Philadelphia, a prominent theatrical architect of the day, construction was begun on what was to be Lancaster's most opulent theatre, on May 1, 1911. The grand opening of the Colonial Theatre at North Queen and Chestnut Streets took place on January 29, 1912.

The *Daily New Era* of January 26, 1912 reports the interior features in great detail (all following descriptions of the decor are from this article):

The main entrance to The Colonial will be through a thirteen-foot-wide lobby and foyer in the Trout building, the front of which is guarded by a heavy bronze ornamental canopy. The lobby is in natural marble, with tiled floor, and the foyer is furnished in marble and foreign tile, the same as used in the State Capitol at Harrisburg. The sides and ceiling at night will be one blaze of electric lights in frosted globes. The doors and box office, which is situated on the right of the foyer, are of heavy cherry wood of dark finish.

The foyer enters without steps to the auditorium, promenade and floor. The auditorium is sixty-eight feet wide and seventy-seven feet deep, and the slope to the stage is particularly easy. On the auditorium floor are 700 chairs of the latest theatre design, upholstered in green leather. These chairs are separated into divisions by four-foot-wide aisles, in order to comply with the most dramatic rulings of the State. The chairs, too, add to the safety of the audience. When an auditor arises, the chair seat and arms lift and fold automatically, practically making the space between every row of chairs an aisle in itself. In addition to the front exit there are two emergency exits by way of the stage, and three immense exits to West Chestnut Street, without steps. These are fastened with the new "panic bolts" that the smallest child can operate by the mere pressure of a finger, throwing the exits wide open . . . Convenient retiring rooms and cloak rooms for both ladies and gentlemen are situated in the rear of the auditorium. These are in marble and tile, with hot and cold water and substantial furnishings.

Carpets and draperies were green in the auditorium and balcony areas. The auditorium walls were wainscoted to a height of three feet six inches with the top walls and ceiling done in ornamental plasterwork. Over the stage were a series of paintings, with life-size figures, depicting scenes from "Apollo's Court." These paintings were "the work of artists from the Rambuscly Decorating Studio, of New York, whose handicraft can be seen all over the world." Large columns stretched from the floor to the roof alongside the boxes.

There were four boxes, two on each side, that almost reached the stage floor, and there was room in each "for ten of the latest improved theatre box chairs."

By a stairway audience members could reach the balcony area. Since the balcony was suspended, no pillars existed to block the view of audience members in the auditorium. The arrangement of seating was similar to that in the auditorium:

Here are found 422 chairs of the same pattern as those on the auditorium floor. There is a wide promenade in the rear, which leads off to large retiring rooms for both ladies and gentlemen. The seats are divided into two sections by three four-foot-wide aisles, and there are three wide emergency exits to the fire escape on West Chestnut Street, which is regarded by architectural experts as the safest and most substantial of its kind to be found. Here, too, no posts are in evidence to obscure seats, the stage being in full view from every quarter.

The second balcony was reached by a stairway accessed from West Chestnut Street. A wide stairway with "but one turn" it was carpeted in heavy rubber "both noiseless and sanitary." This balcony contained 500 seats "of the Cathedral pattern" and all seats had an unobstructed view of the stage. The decoration followed that of the two lower levels.

In the second balcony was the fireproof booth for motion picture projectors and "stage lighting effects." The stage area was equal in size and grandeur to the audience area:



The Colonial Theater lobby was entered from North Queen Street (left). On the right is the auditorium sidewall with its covered fire escapes leading onto West Chestnut Street. The first door right of the Imperial Bar was the entrance to the "Gallery" or "peanut heaven." (1953 photo)

The stage is 40 feet wide, 31 feet deep, and 58 feet to the roof. The proscenium arch opening is 29 feet wide, with a huge sway of "apron." The stage has all modern equipment, and Mr. Doan starts with a full carload of scenery, product of the W.W. Feters Studio, Philadelphia. The curtain, which is handsomely painted, is of heavy asbestos, and, as a matter of course, absolutely fireproof. Beneath the stage are eleven dressing rooms, 10 by 10 feet in size, all plastered and with hot and cold water and toilet accessories. The orchestra room occupies the space of two dressing rooms. These rooms, as well as the entire house, will be cleaned by a McCrun-Howe vacuum cleaning system apparatus operated by a five-horsepower motor.

The management of the Colonial was obviously quite proud of the precautions that had been taken for fire safety. In addition to the folding seats and improved door releases mentioned earlier, the newspaper article points out that "Every wire that enters the house is in conduits, and there is not an inch of exposure anywhere."

The primary source of lighting in the auditorium area was "an immense chandelier bearing thirty-five frosted globes." This chandelier was supported by "smaller chandeliers, and light clusters located at convenient points." Un-

fortunately, no description of the stage lighting equipment exists, although it must surely have been electric and controlled by resistance dimmers.

The new theatre was heated by steam "and all radiators are recessed in the walls and covered with artistic screening." Cooling of the theatre was accomplished through the use of an air shaft "which conducts outside air to the basement, where it will be cooled when necessary." Exhaust air flowed out through three ventilators on the roof, "one of which is the largest in the city."

In addition to the Colonial's resident orchestra, for the grand opening of his theatre, H.E. Doan had gathered a "galaxy of stellar talent from the Keith, Orpheum and William Circuits." These acts included: "Mme. Besson & Company, in *The Woman Who Knew*; Neff and Starr, *The Musician and the Telephone Girl*; the Five Sullys, in *The Information Bureau*; Spissel Bros. & Company comedy acrobats; the Gene Muller Trio, hoop rollers; John Geiger, the master violinist."

The entertainment at the grand opening was typical of the amusements presented at the Colonial during its golden days when it provided the first really serious competition for the Fulton Opera House.

Eventually, the Colonial fell victim to the same strong competition experienced by other legitimate theatres, the motion picture. The first motion picture houses opened in the early twentieth century. The Theatorium opened in the year 1902, and closed within a year. This early "nickelodeon" was soon followed by the Dreamland and the Gem in 1906, the Electric Vaudeville Theatre and the Bijou about 1908, and the Hippodrome opened by H.E. Doan (who sold the motion picture house to open the Colonial), in 1910. The Family Theatre had turned to motion pictures exclusively by 1910, and finally went out of business in 1916. The final two motion picture houses of this period were the Grand, opened in 1913, and Wonder's Theatre, in existence from approximately 1913 to 1915.

H.E. Doan had had the foresight to include a motion picture projector in his new theatre, and after 1930 the Colonial also turned exclusively to the presentation of motion pictures. At some later point, the Colonial was renamed the Boyd Theatre, and, following three decades as a motion picture house, fell victim to urban renewal in 1965.

Dr. James Henke was born and reared in Michigan near Detroit. He earned his B.S. in Communication and Theatre from Western Michigan University, his Master of Fine Arts degree from Florida State University, and his Ph.D. in Theatre from the University of Michigan. He serves presently as Chairman of the Department of Communication and Theatre at Millersville University where he has been teaching technical theatre and theatre history since 1976.