

# Village Views

Volume IX, Number 2

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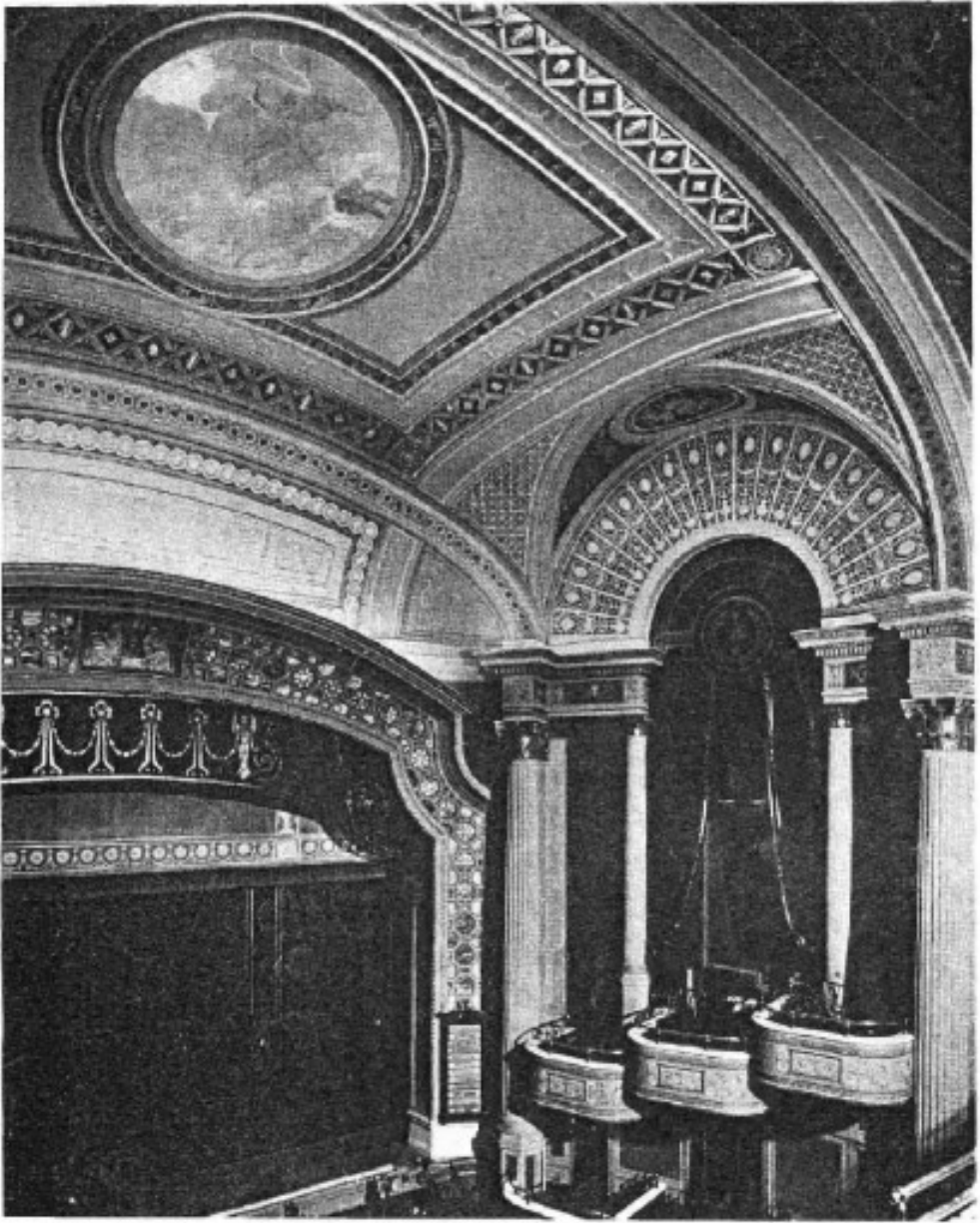
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*On the cover: A rhyton on the skyline of the Victoria Theatre.*

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Village Views is edited by Ronald J. Kopnicki, Matt McGhee, and Christabel Gough, with archival research by Dale L. Neighbors, and is published by the Cityscape Foundation and the Society for the Architecture of the City, 45 Christopher Street, Apt. 2E, New York, New York 10014. Unsigned articles are the work of the editors, and should be so credited. Village Views, © 2005, the Cityscape Foundation, Inc. Village Views ISSN 0893-9543. Village Views has appeared irregularly. Vol. IX, No. 2 is published in February, 2005.



*The Loew's Victoria Theatre, from the magazine, Architecture and Building, January, 1918.*

## NEW DEVELOPMENT PLANS FOR THE VICTORIA THEATRE SITE: A HARLEM SCHOLAR SEES "A KIND OF FIG LEAF" IN THE CONCESSIONS

*Michael Henry Adams is the author of Harlem Lost and Found: An Architectural and Social History, 1765-1915 (New York: Monacelli Press, 2002). As it was built after 1915, the Victoria does not figure in Harlem Lost and Found. We asked Mr. Adams why the Victoria should be saved.*

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First, its important presence on the avenue: it presents a distinctive and distinguished monumental facade on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, superior to the more prosaic buildings around it. But for the interior architecture especially, which is as distinguished as that of any other theatre, including Broadway theatres, that Thomas Lamb designed. He built some 400 theatres, all over the world. Today in Toronto, Melbourne and Bombay you can see restored examples of his work—and so why not similarly a beautifully restored Thomas Lamb theatre in Harlem?

The Loew theatre chain was founded by Marcus Loew, who in 1909 was living in central Harlem on 111<sup>th</sup> Street, and later moved to Riverside Drive. The impresario Adolph Zukor also lived on Riverside Drive near 152<sup>nd</sup> Street, and was part of the phenomenon of ever more successful Jewish migrants moving from the Lower East Side to the new prosperity of Harlem, which was to become the largest and most prosperous Jewish community in the United States. Because of Harlem's status—and it also included numerous German Protestant and Roman Catholic immigrants and people of Irish descent—there was a desire to provide Harlem with theatres second to none and fill them with entertainment second to none. Not only was there a tradition of Harlem as the stepping off point for national tours of Broadway productions, but many of the most popular Broadway artists lived in Harlem, and so if they played in Harlem they were playing their hometown. And this was true of George and Ira Gershwin, and Irving Berlin, and Groucho Marx and his brothers, and Sigmund Romberg.

Once Harlem started to become an African American community, there was a dilemma. Whites still owned and continued to dominate most commercial enterprises and real estate, and blacks made up the largest proportion of the population. Initially this was viewed as an anomaly which should be reversed; *Harlem Home News*, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Herald* spoke of the migration of blacks in terms of war, saying that blacks had “captured” a building, or “invaded” a block. This antagonism extended to commerce and entertainment. If you were black, in most theatres, restaurants and hotels in Harlem, you were discriminated against. In theatres, you were relegated to the balcony: that was the case at the Victoria, and it remained in effect until after the Second World War, when Loew's sold the Victoria. It was a policy of the entire Loew chain, and applied also to the Loew's at Seventh Avenue and 124<sup>th</sup> Street and the Loew's Regent Theatre. This points to the fact that at that time, despite an African American majority population, there were still sufficient whites for these businesses to appeal to, whites whose patronage was important, while African Americans still wanted to see mainstream white products like the Hollywood movies that Loew's showed.



*Loew's Victoria Theatre, 233-35 West 125th Street and 228 West 126th Street (Block 1931, Lot 17) was built under New Building Permit 143 of 1916, commenced September 21, 1916 and officially completed January 3, 1918, although it opened earlier. According to the Historic American Building Survey (HABS), it is "a major surviving example of the work of Thomas White Lamb." It has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Photo from the magazine, Architecture and Building, January, 1918.*

This policy of Loew's was in distinction to that of other white business owners who discovered by trial and error how to get a financial return by embracing black entertainment: for instance, the Schiffman brothers, who owned the Lafayette, the Apollo, and various other properties. Performers at the Apollo have recalled the exploitative conditions under which they worked. Marvin Smith, the photographer, rented space from the Schiffmans beginning in the 1930s, and he recalled that they refused to rent street level space to him in a building they owned east of the Apollo, saying that he "couldn't afford the rents", which was not the case, since Marvin Smith and his brother were running one of the most successful photographic studios in Harlem. It was a manifestation of residual racism. African American artists struggled against this kind of bias throughout the 1920s, and 30s, and 40s, and 50s, and the irony is that even today property owned by African Americans on 125<sup>th</sup> Street is the exception rather than the rule. And if you look at 125<sup>th</sup> Street, more often the commercial spaces there provide what is profitable for the owner rather than providing for the most pressing needs of the community. I would argue that this reality is reflected in the formulation of these various proposals for the development of the Victoria Theatre site. The ESDC—the Empire State Development Corporation—requires that each scheme utilize a kind of fig leaf, some concession to the African American community in the form of some black cultural component: but none of these black cultural elements, to me at least, would be equal to the loss of the fine quality represented by this building—the Victoria—as an expression of the varied cultural history of Harlem's evolution. The story of the Victoria, and its decline, is a focus of Harlem's cultural direction: it was a birthplace for the Dance Theater of Harlem as well as a venue for Cassius Clay before he became Muhammad Ali. In the 1990s, it reflected the diminution of Harlem as a self-contained African American cultural capital sufficient unto itself, into a place where it was no longer possible to find a place to dine or shop or find a single operating movie theatre.

Then a retired police officer, Warren Blake, with a partner, decided to take the Victoria and convert it into a multiplex and provide the kind of service no one was providing—rather as is being done by Magic Johnson today in a different setting. It was at that time that the Victoria was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, and so the alterations to the auditorium were made to be reversible. The lobby, the staircases, the oval anteroom with its saucer dome and plaster reliefs were stabilized and made sound because Mr. Blake appreciated architectural detail. He is the owner of the famous mansion built by James Anthony Bailey and so understood that it was important to preserve these irreplaceable architectural elements. So now it is a disservice not only to the whole Harlem community but to Mr. Blake and his efforts, to sweep away all of this history. I am reminded of what Councilmember Bill Perkins recently said, that there are so many people who expect that not only should Harlem not be overly concerned about the destruction of its historic architecture, but that Harlem should actually be grateful that there is any economic development, at any cost. They think it is positive to tear down historic buildings and put up new ones. And that is the simple approach; it is the easiest thing to do—but is it in fact the best or most intelligent thing to do for Harlem? Now, as we see the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Malcolm X, and the tenth anniversary of the destruction of the Thomas Lamb theatre at the Audubon Ballroom, which was never landmarked, despite its great importance, we must ask, when will we see meaningful protection of the African American heritage in upper Manhattan?



*The Victoria Theatre in 2005.*

## NOTES TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE VICTORIA THEATRE

*Based on a Request for Evaluation which the Society for the Architecture of the City submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 2002, in the hope that the Victoria could be protected by local landmark designation, which can provide stronger protection than the determination of eligibility for the National Register that already exists.*

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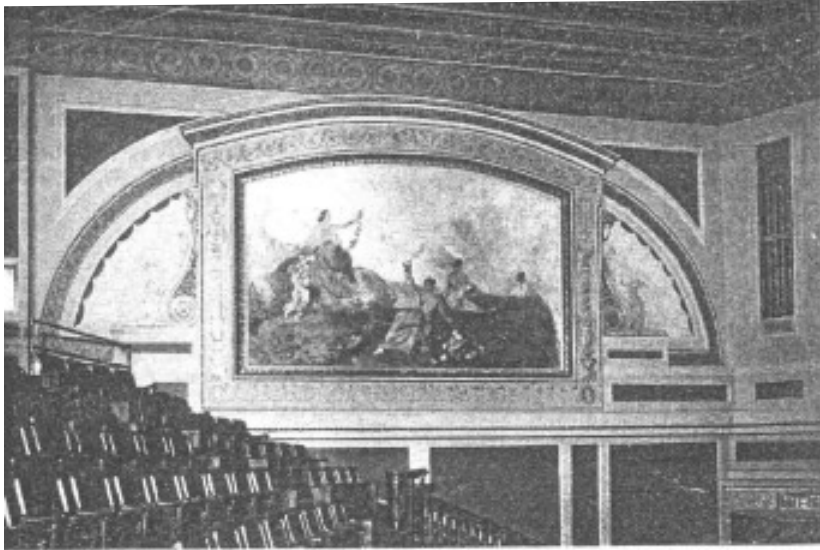
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The Victoria was part of a cluster of uptown playhouses that first served a population of Irish and German origins, but then evolved into the world renowned center of the black entertainment world. The Apollo, the Lafayette, the Alhambra, the Lincoln, the Harlem Opera House, the Victoria (and other lesser venues) provided a home for music, vaudeville, drama, and later, films, by black artists for a black audience. This theatre world, which first flourished in an age of segregation, produced astonishing artistic achievements, and its very existence was a major event in the evolution of civil rights in America.

The Apollo is a New York City Landmark, but from the standpoint of historic preservation, landmarking the Apollo alone fails to tell the real story of theatre in Harlem. Harlem once supported not just one theatre but a whole neighborhood of thriving stages. The Victoria originally mustered less star power than the Apollo, but later played an important role in the community, not least because its extraordinarily elegant interior halls and lounges and its striking auditorium became a place of fantasy, pride, and sanctuary from everyday life. Designed by the distinguished architect Thomas Lamb before the First World War, these interiors were very recently substantially intact, and since the building was found eligible for the National Register of Historic Places before the auditorium was subdivided, the partitioning was designed to be reversible. Apart from the Apollo, the Victoria is by far the best preserved of the famous Harlem theatres, since in terms of historic architectural fabric, the Lafayette and the Alhambra have been seriously damaged in renovation.

This year, when Ossie Davis died, someone took an old wooden ladder and climbed up to put his name on the marquee of the Victoria one last time, though the theatre was now empty and closed. The heart of Harlem still beats in its old buildings: they stand for memories that should not be lost.

The economic renewal of 125<sup>th</sup> Street could be a cultural renewal also, preserving the Victoria as part of Harlem's Broadway—an old theatre district from the turn of the century that went on to make a more modern history, providing an infrastructure for the Negro Theatre movement of the 1920s and a home for the musical revolution that was celebrated on the stage of the Apollo from the 1930s on. It would be tragic if the Victoria were destroyed or gutted in the course of the proposed redevelopment on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, just as the resources become available that could bring it back to life. Harlem's history as a path-breaking center for music, dance and theatre is a great asset that should not be wasted. The Victoria can speak of that history, to the community and to visitors from all over the world.



*The balcony and lobby of the Victoria, from Architecture and Building, January, 1918*

## BUILDING THE VICTORIA

Marcus Loew was a Harlem resident (living at 200 West 111<sup>th</sup> Street in 1909, according to Trow's Directory) and as a successful self-made businessman, he was a member of the Harlem Board of Commerce. The Board's publication, *Harlem Magazine*, carried enthusiastic theatrical advertising—"All the latest Broadway successes in Vaudeville & First Run Photoplays: the Acme of Perfection"—and promoted its local theatre district editorially. At this time, Times Square was seen as distant, and when plays produced downtown by the Shuberts toured, they opened to new audiences in Harlem. In July, 1915, *Harlem Magazine* called 125<sup>th</sup> Street "Harlem's Broadway," and in a February, 1916, article, "A New Theatre for Harlem?" the magazine noted:

Harlem being in a pronounced degree a theatrical district of New York, the question has been raised whether it would not be desirable to encourage the erection of another theatre.

Then in May, *Harlem Magazine* announced "Harlem To Have Another Theatre: Reputation Which This Section Enjoys For Splendid Playhouses To Be Added To By Loew's Victoria":

The promise of the architects and builders is, that the new theatre will be not only the largest in Harlem but the most attractive in Greater New York, which means something. It will be devoted to high class vaudeville and the best of motion pictures. The theatre building is to be three stories high. The first story will be devoted to a double store with large display windows, some of which are to open on the theatre lobby, in the fashion of an arcade. The two upper floors will be given over to lofts and a number of lodge and meeting rooms. Below the auditorium of the theatre will be an immense hall, with 20,000 square feet of floor space and on top of the building will be either a roof garden or a moving picture studio. A novel feature of the building will be a club room, with an expensive organ built into it, where theatre parties may meet before or after the show. Some of the most expensive hangings ever used in any theatre in the United States have already been ordered. The theatre itself will embody all the newest improvements in both the auditorium and the stage. Every convenience will be provided for the patrons, and the same principle will be applied behind the footlights. The stage equipment and lighting will make possible spectacles which can be staged in only a few theatres.

The photographs of the Victoria published in the magazine, *Architecture and Building*—reproduced here—bear out the contention that the Victoria was regarded as an unusually excellent house at the time it was built. They are part of a portfolio intended to inform professional architects about new theatres recently built in the United States. The other Manhattan theatres that are illustrated and survive are landmarks—the Plymouth and the Broadhurst. The Morosco (whose destruction fueled the 1980s Broadway theatre designation movement) was also shown.



*The Pulitzer fountain, as it looked when Lamb was designing the Victoria Theatre.*

Loew's theatres—and also those of some of his rivals—were noted for bringing an ambiance of luxury and elegance to neighborhoods where such things were in some degree a novelty. As Michael Henry Adams has noted, it is interesting that Lamb's 1916 design provided 125<sup>th</sup> Street with rhytons just shortly after Carrère and Hastings had created the Pulitzer Fountain, standing beside what was then a particularly opulent stretch of Fifth Avenue, in front of the Vanderbilt House. For this fountain, Carrère had commissioned colossal rhytons from Orazio Piccirilli, and these examples of a pared-down classicism had been recognized as notable contemporary sculpture in the 1915 yearbook of the Architectural League. Paul Manship's early work appeared beside them.

Just as many bankers then created an appearance of stability and power for their branch offices by using images of classicism in their design, so the new art of film created its temples of commerce, announcing that the penny-arcade days were over, as actors like Sarah Bernhardt gave stature to the "photoplays" of a new age. This was early 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural classicism in the service of populism: the clients of the savings banks and film palaces, sharing a new wealth, enjoyed the symbols of a new prosperity and a new security. Even those whose economic position was marginal shared in the access to these public places.

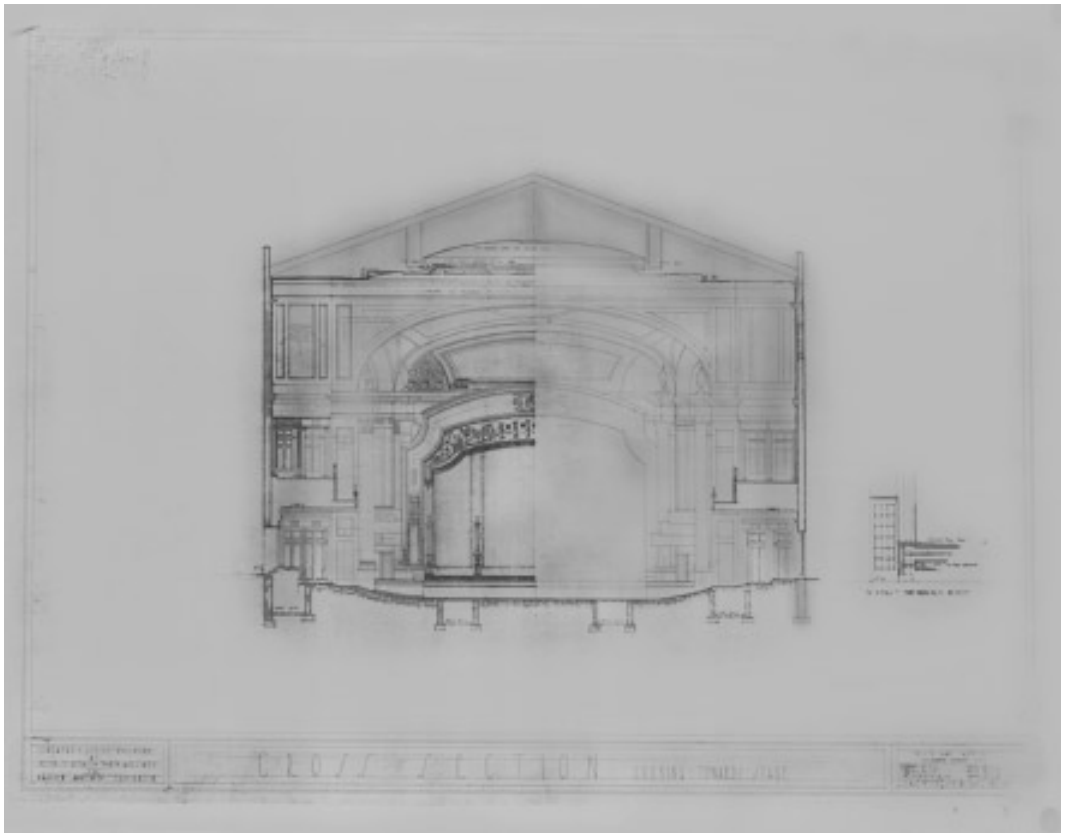


*A rhyton from the Pulitzer fountain, as it appears today.*

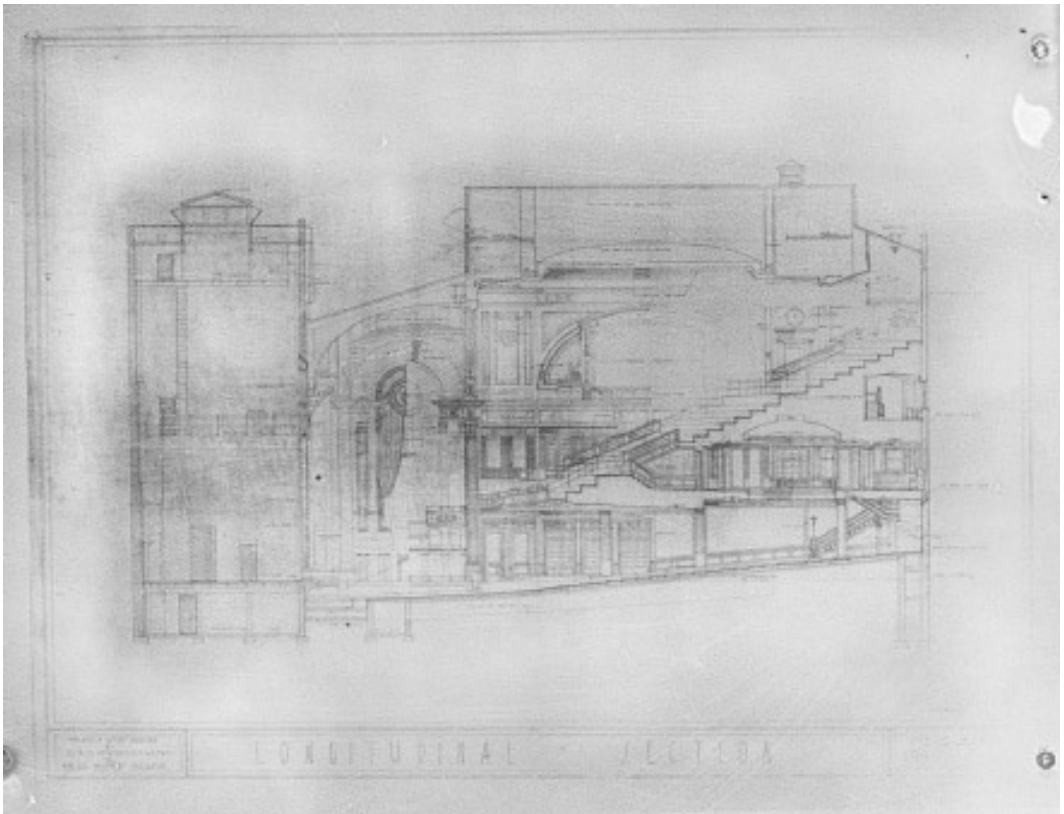
Today, when television has done so much to substitute for entertainment in public settings, the theatres built by Marcus Loew have been more than decimated: of the hundreds he commissioned, few are left. We should not hasten to abandon these. Especially in large cities, uses can still be found for these wonderful public spaces, where communities used to come together for shared pleasures, and even just to meet. Claudia Hart, in her 1983 thesis “The New York Theatres of Thomas Lamb”, quotes an interesting passage from the magazine, *Good Furniture* (February, 1927):

There is so much to see at the Paramount that a great portion of the audience does not go into the auditorium at all, but wanders around looking at the paintings, the statuary, the wonderful bronze work, the tremendous chandeliers, marveling at the great distances, experiencing the rich color harmonies, and in fact, absorbing a great impression of opulence.

Hart connects Lamb’s new emphasis on promenades, lounges and lobbies, as described above—and Lamb’s ubiquitous grand staircases—to the influence of Charles Garnier’s Paris Opera, where seeing and being seen became part of the experience of going to the Opera. She quotes Robert Irving (*Inland Architect*, February 1977), who sees the early 20<sup>th</sup> century cinemas as meeting places that should be compared to the public forums and baths established in the provinces by imperial Rome: “...those numberless ‘Grands’, ‘Majestics’ and ‘Palaces’ in every American city displayed community importance and were designed to express community aspirations.” Community residents who remember going to Loew’s Victoria in better days speak of exploring the wonderful rooms around the auditorium, which were especially mysterious and exciting to children.



*One of Thomas Lamb's drawings for the Victoria Theatre, a section through the auditorium showing the stage and proscenium, as submitted to the New York City Department of Buildings.*



*The longitudinal section. Lamb's drawings remind us of the beauty and complexity of the structure, and the intricate geometry of the spaces which are in danger of being destroyed.*

Edwin Heathcote, in his recent book, *Cinema Builders* (Wiley-Academy: Chichester, 2001) notes “Thomas Lamb, a Scottish architect, designed the Regent in Harlem, New York in 1913, and in the next four years he built a group of influential cinemas around Times Square: the Strand, the Rialto and the Rivoli—all in conjunction with the legendary impresario Samuel “Roxy” Rothapfel. Together, Lamb and Rothapfel defined the architecture of the luxury cinema, and created the notion of the picture palace as a place of escape and sheer fantasy in which the building played as large a part the evening out as the film itself.” Heathcote notes that this concept soon evolved into the exotic or atmospheric theatres with Chinese, Moorish and Egyptian themes: places outlandish and glorious, with special effects and lighting on an amazing scale. A 1939 “atmospheric” theatre by John Ebersson, Loew’s Paradise on the Grand Concourse, is a New York City Landmark, as is the Loew’s Valencia in Queens. The public rooms of the RKO Keith in Flushing are also on the roster. By comparison, the earlier picture palaces like the Victoria were models of restraint in their architectural detailing, but this chapter in the architectural history of the cinema is not represented among local landmark designations, despite the Victoria’s eligibility for National Register of Historic Places.

Preservation of early cinemas and especially of their interiors is problematic in New York. Some have become houses of worship whose interiors are of course exempt from regulation under the Landmarks Law. Lamb’s Regent Theatre, mentioned above as the earliest and most influential, is now the First Corinthian Baptist Church. Without such re-use, the building might not exist at all today, so in that sense, the church deserves the gratitude of cinemaphiles. Unfortunately, the Landmarks Commission failed to act to protect the Lafayette Theatre facade before it was modernized by another house of worship. Thomas Lamb’s Hamilton Theatre in Hamilton Heights has been landmarked, but only the exterior, and the theatre interior is now threatened with demolition. Landmarking only the exterior of a theatre is a paradoxical action. On West 43rd Street near Times Square, the landmarked exterior of the Henry Miller Theatre is now reduced to a single wall which stands, meticulously braced and alone, beside a huge excavation for a new skyscraper. It is a troubling example of what was presumably regarded as the letter of the law in historic preservation.

As Michael Henry Adams observes above, other cities are reclaiming their early Lamb theatres. For instance, the Hippodrome in Baltimore has just re-opened as part of the France-Merrick Performing Arts Center after a major restoration which extends to several other historic buildings and is expected to hasten the renewal of West Baltimore. Not just the facade, but the auditorium is used again.

In designing Loew’s Victoria, Thomas Lamb showed himself to be an ingenious and immensely prolific architect who kept his finger on the pulse of America. He enclosed a new technology in a shell of fantasy, drawing on architectural models remote in time and space to create a world apart for the nation’s entertainment. His achievements, like Marcus Loew’s, were historic, and deserve to be remembered.

## "ANOTHER OPENING, ANOTHER SHOW": EARLY PERFORMANCES

The *New York Telegraph* announced the opening of the Victoria on September 30, 1917:

### LOEW'S VICTORIA OPENS TOMORROW Host of Notables in Theatrical World to be Present at First Performance FINEST HOUSE IN CIRCUIT

Not only Harlem but the entire theatrical world in New York is talking about the coming opening of Loew's Victoria, to be tomorrow night. Loew has had wonderful openings in the past, but nothing compared to the one planned for Monday night. Not only is the Victoria the most beautiful and costly theatre Loew ever built, but he will have the greatest collection of celebrities there at the opening that ever graced a Loew theatre.

Elsie Ferguson, whose regal yet winsome beauty has graced the stage, and who is now such a remarkable overnight success as a screen star, will be present as the guest of honor, with her picture, "Barbary Sheep" selected as the picture feature for the opening. Miss Ferguson has never made a speech in her life, but she's going to break her rule Monday night.

Fatty Arbuckle, a famous screen comedian, will also be present. He postponed a trip to the Pacific coast just to be on hand when his friend, Marcus Loew, opens his greatest theatre. Fatty, they say, is funnier on the stage than on the screen, and is sure to offer something original in the line of comedy.

Irving Berlin, veteran of Loew openings, Mr. Loew's great friend who never misses the first night of a Loew theatre, whether it is New York, Toronto or San Francisco, will also be there, together with a number of stage and screen celebrities in boxes and orchestra.

The reserved seat tickets for opening night were placed on sale but a few days ago, yet they have been nearly all sold.

Raymond & Coverly, "the wizards of joy", in their new act "The Submariners" will head the opening vaudeville program. Another headliner will be the Hirschhoff Troupe in "A Russian Wedding", a spectacle with twelve people. Many other acts will be presented.

Elsie Ferguson was starring

...in the role of an Englishwoman who, tired of her life at home, goes to Algiers with her husband. While he is in the mountains hunting Barbary sheep, she stops in a village on the edge of the Sahara. The great desert weaves a spell around her, and this tropical lure comes to her in the person of Benchaalal, an Arab...

He is a jewel thief and a murderer, but just as he is throwing himself upon her, help arrives: the fiancé of an earlier victim, seeking revenge, bursts in, and rescues Miss Ferguson. After this debut, Loew's Victoria continued showing such programs of film and vaudeville as were available to the

thirty-odd theatres making up the Loew's circuit in New York city. When *Harlem Magazine* began noticing the programs in local theatres, it gave this description of the attractions for March, 1921:

*Loew's Victoria Theatre* will present a high class bill, all headliners having been secured, among whom will be Odiva and Seals. Odiva is one of the most delightfully and perfectly formed women, and an expert swimmer and diver. She performs all sorts of feats under water, and at times with from five to six seals in the tank with her. The act is beautifully set, and put on by Captain Arams, famous in this line for years. The last part of the week, Cecil B. De Mille's romance "Forbidden Fruits" that established a record during its run on Broadway, with Agnes Ayres, Theodore Roberts, Kathlyn Williams and a star supporting cast, will be an added feature. On the program with Odiva and Seals will be Zelaya, the son of the ex-President of Nicaragua, celebrated concert pianist, offering music and philosophy; Pealson and Wallace, in a skit "Some Life"; Ward and Gorey in their jazzy revue on the violin and banjos and Noel Lester.

The Victoria was not one of the New York vaudeville houses that *Variety* reviewed on a regular basis; however, the names of its vaudeville acts show up in the listings section. Checking a sample of these against *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* by Anthony Slide, we found that almost none had achieved immortality. Julian Rose, the only one with an entry, was "a Philadelphia accountant who perfected a stereotypical Jewish monologue titled 'Levinsky's Wedding'. In 1933 he starred in the Royal Variety performance at the London Palladium." A sample of his monologue: "He asked me to come out and see him next night. I told him I can't. I was going to see Hamlet. He says, 'Bring him along, what's the difference?'" As for animal acts, Marcelle and Sea Lion, "an English importation" was listed in the *Encyclopedia*, but "The only other prominent sea lion act in vaudeville was Hughling's Seals." Why did Loew's Victoria, despite its somewhat lavish interior, begin by featuring less-than-stellar performing seals? The answer is probably to be found in the demographics of an audience in 1917 that was comfortable with average entertainment, perhaps comparable to network television today, and the internecine politics of the entertainment industry, that is, the booking wars among the vaudeville circuits, as Keith-Albee and Loew's fought to monopolize the available talent and maximize profitability.

## HARLEM'S BROADWAY

In 1918, the Victoria Theatre joined a district that was already a "real entertainment hub" according to *Uptown: The Story of Harlem's Apollo Theatre* by Jack Schiffman, the son of Frank Schiffman, who later operated the Apollo through the partnership of Schiffman & Brecher. On 125<sup>th</sup> Street:

Crammed into a couple of blocks along it were the West End Theatre, which featured legitimate shows, Hurtig & Seaman's Burlesques, which occupied the present Apollo building, Keith's Alhambra around the corner, which featured vaudeville, and at the opposite end of the Apollo block, the Harlem Opera House, presenting variety shows downstairs and legitimate productions in its upstairs annex. There were live musicals too,

at Loew's Seventh Avenue. Even in those days, Harlem swung. In 1922 Leo Brecher and his associates acquired the Harlem Opera House, then being operated by Keith as a segment of its vaudeville circuit. For a time "legit" plays produced by the Shuberts were rotated from Broadway to Harlem. Later it was converted into a motion picture theatre. In 1925 the Lafayette Theatre on 132<sup>nd</sup> Street and Seventh Avenue was taken over by Dad and Brecher, refurbished, and in May was opened with a show featuring a line of black chorus girls, a small orchestra, and a variety show.

This re-opening of the Lafayette marked the beginning of African American use of Seventh Avenue theatres. Among the artists who performed there were Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong, Eubie Blake, Cab Calloway and the Mills Brothers. It was home to the celebrated repertory company, the Lafayette Players. Subsequently, Schiffman & Brecher moved their operation to the Apollo, the Lafayette was leased by the Federal Theatre Project of the WPA. In 1936, it housed the renowned production of *Macbeth*. Known as the "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, it was set in Haiti, with an all black cast which did include actual voodoo practitioners and African drummers. Orson Welles, then only 21 years old, was the director, and used a free hand to incorporate Haitian themes into Shakespeare's text. A page of Welles' original typescript with stage directions, now in the Library of Congress, is reproduced on the following page.

Some of the accounts quoted above describe the Harlem theatre district from the standpoint of the investors who owned and managed the theatres, and the entertainment industry chains whose attractions kept theatres going, year in and year out. However, there is another story here, best told by James Weldon Johnson in *Black Manhattan*. The existence of a theatre district in Harlem—at a time when Harlem was becoming the center of black America—was a catalyst in creating a whole new role for black artists, not only at home, but on the national and international stage. Johnson writes:

The relation of Harlem to the latest phase of the development of the Negro in the theatre cannot be overlooked. New York is the centre from which all the main forces and activities of the American theatre radiate. And Harlem, with its cosmopolitan Negro population, its literary and artistic groups, its theatres, its cabarets and night-clubs, its theatric clubs and its little-theatre movement, with all of its elements that fire ambition, its opportunities for the nurture and development of talent, is within the radius of that centre. Here, then, was the field, and here were those best fitted to occupy it. There is no other city in the country where the same thing could have happened; and it could not have happened in New York had there been no Harlem at hand.

The past seventy-five years have seen vast changes in the position of the Negro in the theatre. Beginning as a mere butt of laughter, he has worked on up through minstrelsy and the musical-comedy shows to become a creator of laughter; to become a maker of songs and dances for the people. This alone is an achievement not to be despised. The past twenty years have seen the Negro actor, after a set-back, emerge from the Negro theatre of Harlem and finally make for himself a definite place on the legitimate stage of New York, the theatrical capital of the world.



*An important page in the history of Harlem as a theatre district was the WPA Negro Theatre Project. It attracted national attention in 1936 with its third production at the Lafayette Theatre, the “Voodoo” Macbeth, which had an all black, all professional cast directed by Orson Welles.*

*In his autobiography, Unfinished Business, John Houseman wrote, “Three days before the opening, Harlem woke up to find MACBETH stenciled in luminous paint on every street corner...The Tree of Hope, a gnarled relic that survived with difficulty on Seventh Avenue in front of the Lafayette Theater, and which was credited with magic properties, was festooned with garlands and bright-coloured ribbons for luck. By April 10, every seat in the theater (except those reserved for U.S. Government officials and the press) had been sold, sometimes twice over, as ticket scalpers became active in Harlem’s fancier bars. From the WPA press department came word that every first-string critic in town would attend. On opening night, just before dusk, the massed bands of the Monarch Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, in uniforms of light blue, scarlet and gold, began to march in two detachments through the streets of Harlem behind two huge, crimson banners that read: MACBETH BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. By 6:30 they had converged before the theater where they continued to play around the Tree of Hope, while 10,000 people milled around them and dozens of police, including some on horses, tried in vain to keep a way clear into the Lafayette. As reported in the New York Times: ‘All northbound automobile traffic was stopped for more than an hour, while from trucks in the street, floodlights flared a circle of light into the lobby and cameramen took photographs of the arrival of celebrities.’ ...The reviews next morning were a joy to read...Roi Otley, a militant Negro journalist, [wrote]: ‘The negro has become weary of carrying the White Man’s blackface burden in the theater. In Macbeth, he has been given the opportunity to discard the bandana and burnt-cork casting to play a universal character...’ Macbeth played for ten weeks at the Lafayette with never an empty seat, then moved downtown to Broadway where it remained through a long, hot New York summer before being sent on a triumphal national tour.”*

MACBETH

I think not of them.  
 Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve  
 We would spend it on some words upon that business,  
 If you would grant the time.

BANQUO

(Starting uneasy.)  
 At your kind'st leisure.

WARNING  
FOR FLICKER

MACBETH

If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,  
 It shall make honour for you.

BANQUO

(Stopping a little coldly - pointedly.)  
 So I lose none  
 Seeking to suggest it.

MACBETH

Good repose, the while!

BANQUO

Thanks air! the like to you!

(BANQUO and FLEANCE exit into the palace.  
 MACBETH stands alone in the courtyard.  
 Very faintly over the air comes the throb  
 and wall of the voodoo. "EFFECT".  
 MACBETH starts back.)

FLICKER CUE

MACBETH

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
 The handle toward my hand?  
 Come, let me clutch thee  
 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
 Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
 To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but  
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation  
 Proceeding from the heat-oppresed brain?  
 (Effect - change - music higher.)  
 I see thee still.  
 And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
 Which was not before.  
 (The music and chanting go up, then  
 MACBETH kills it with the about.)  
 There's no such thing!  
 (Effect out. Silence.)  
 It is the bloody business which informs  
 Thus to mine eyes.  
 (Pause - silence.)  
 Now O'er the one half - world  
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
 The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates  
 Dark Hecate's off'ings.

SCENE I  
MACBETH STARTS  
UPWARD

(LADY MACBETH appears above in the door  
 of the tower room. SHE leaves the  
 door open and comes down the battlements  
 to MACBETH.)

*A page from Orson Welles' typescript of Macbeth with stage directions for the voodoo drums.*

Writing in 1930, Johnson cites plays (*The Emperor Jones*, *Green Pastures*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Porgy*, *In Abraham's Bosom*), productions of Shakespeare by all-black companies, influences on Broadway musicals with mixed casts like *Showboat* and the *Ziegfeld Follies*, revues like *Blackbirds* or *Shuffle Along* that originated in Harlem and migrated to London and Paris. This is of course was only the beginning of a much larger movement that has been a huge influence on music and other arts in America.

The theatre district in Harlem in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was an astonishing incubator for the arts. While many of the buildings that originally made up this historic group of theatres have been demolished or altered to house churches or government offices, the Apollo has been preserved, and its neighbor, the Victoria, remains largely intact. Any project to create a new entertainment center where so much entertainment history was made could benefit from including a restored Victoria Theatre. While the Victoria was not involved in the artistic and musical ferment of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920's, it does testify to the existence of a lost theatrical hub, a hub that provided the original setting for the jewel of its most famous stage, the landmarked Apollo Theatre. And in later years, it became an accepted entertainment spot, which was also used for other community events such as the Police Athletic League Christmas Show in 1950 when Jackie Robinson awarded medals to "outstanding youngsters", and a 1958 closed circuit telecast of boxing, Patterson vs. Harris (*Amsterdam News*, August 2, 1958). Another significant event was the "Harlem Homecoming" of 1972, about which the *Amsterdam News* wrote:

On Monday night November 13, Arthur Mitchell and his Dance Theatre of Harlem were honored. Harlem was also honored. The occasion was a gala star studded benefit performance at Loew's Victoria Theatre on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. It was a homecoming. It brought back memories of the community as it was in the 20s and 30s, and it sent out the call to expatriates to come back home. A capacity crowd of more than 2,000 persons, representing a broad spectrum of New York's varied population, sat charmed, then exuberant, as a galaxy of stars, young and old, paraded across the stage...the incomparable Leontyne Price and the gracious and stunning Lena Horne served as hostesses. The very suave Brock Peters was master of ceremonies....Standing ovations, thunderous applause, and crescendos of bravos shook the house as the audience expressed its appreciation for the headliners onstage...Joe Williams with Count Basie and his orchestra, Pigmeat Markham with George Wiltshire and Mantan Moreland, Cab Calloway, Peter Duchin and his orchestra, the Nicholas Brothers...

Others present were Gordon Parks, Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Diahann Carroll, Loften Mitchell (who wrote the script), Willi Smith, Stephen Burrows, and Scott Barrie (who designed the costumes), Mrs. Betty Shabazz, Lord Snowdon, Mrs. Oscar Hammerstein 2nd (who noted that her husband had been born in Harlem), Mayor Lindsay, and Mayor Wagner. The event was also featured in the *New York Times*, Charlotte Curtis's headline was "In Ermine, Pearls and Jeans, They Came to Dance Theatre of Harlem's Gala."

The *Amsterdam News*, September 9, 1995, lists additional artists who are reported to have appeared at the Victoria, in “the early seventies”: Marian Anderson, Tony Bennett, Roscoe Lee Browne, Dizzy Gillespie, Peter Duchin and his Orchestra, James Brown, Edwin Hawkins, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Lena Horne, Cab Calloway, Carmen McRae, Nicholas Brothers, Joe Williams, Leontyne Price, Gloria Foster, James Earl Jones, Cicely Tyson, and Count Basie and his orchestra. Evidently while many of these stars appeared at the Dance Theatre of Harlem benefit, others whose presence would surely have been reported, such as Marian Anderson and Dizzy Gillespie, did not. The *New York Observer*, November 15, 1999, reports that the Victoria was the scene of Josephine Baker’s last concerts. The events noted above were found through a sampling rather than a full review of available periodicals; further research into this phase of the Victoria’s history would be interesting.

## THE LONG WAIT FOR EQUAL ACCOMMODATION ON 125<sup>TH</sup> STREET

Jervis Anderson, in *This Was Harlem* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982) describes the evolution of 125<sup>th</sup> Street:

Until about 1914, the theatres of Seventh Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street were off limits to blacks. *Their* theatres were the Lincoln and the Crescent on 135<sup>th</sup> Street between Lenox and Fifth Avenues. This was Harlem’s “Off Broadway.” Harlem’s “Broadway” was Seventh Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street, and, in its own fashion, it was a great white way. Only persons of that color were admitted to the Lafayette and the Alhambra, and to such places as the Harlem Opera House, Hurtig and Seamon’s Music Hall, and Proctor’s....But as the black belt spread west to Seventh Avenue and south toward 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the major theatres found it increasingly difficult to maintain their all-white policy. In place of exclusion, they instituted segregation. Blacks were now welcome, but only to the balcony....The Lafayette at Seventh Avenue and 132<sup>nd</sup> Street was the first of the major theatres to desegregate, probably because it fell sooner than the others within the widening perimeter of the black community.

For his 1983 book, *Showtime at the Apollo* Ted Fox interviewed Francis “Doll” Thomas, who was the film projectionist at the Apollo, but was working with the impresario Leo Brecher from 1914 on. Thomas recalled those early years:

There were no blacks on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. That was all Irish. It was in the twenties that the switch really started to colored. Even when I was in the Alhambra back in 1927, all of this neighborhood was strictly white...[To go to] the Alhambra or the theatre that’s now the Apollo, you entered from 126<sup>th</sup> Street up the back stairs.

Thomas also noted that as late as the 1920s, none of the restaurants on 125<sup>th</sup> Street would serve people of color. It was not until 1934 that Hurtig & Seamon’s became the Apollo, and 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the “Black Broadway.”

When Marcus Loew set out to build the Victoria in 1916, it was part of his regular business plan,

another neighborhood theatre featuring minor attractions at popular prices, but in a building that held an aura of luxury and romance. The Victoria was run along conventional lines for decades. Clearly Loew, who died in 1927, did not foresee the Harlem Renaissance, nor did he embrace it. However, he may have had little opportunity to do so. By all accounts Schiffman & Brecher did their best to monopolize the best of the new black talent, and as the first New York impresarios to present black entertainers to black audiences, originally at the Lafayette and later, of course, at the Apollo, Schiffman & Brecher had a huge advantage. At the same time, black performers had been a staple of the vaudeville stage from the beginning, and some of them were certainly appearing on the Loew circuit. Only there was no successful attempt to recruit the best and brightest or recognize new trends. It was not until the 1970s that the black entertainment community rallied at the Victoria, and stars like Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Lena Horne, and Leontyne Price stepped onto its boards.

Loew's operated two theatres in the neighborhood, the Victoria, and the earlier Loew's Seventh Avenue, a theatre with Gothic décor, standing on the east side of Seventh Avenue at 124<sup>th</sup> Street. During the 1920s, neither of these theatres received any publicity for their offerings in the *Amsterdam News*, nor did they advertise there until Christmas, 1934.

However, on September 23, 1925, the *Amsterdam News* published a front page report on a lawsuit against the management of Loew's Victoria:

HARLEM THEATRE SUED: SUES LOEW'S VICTORIA CHARGING JIM CROW: Arthur F. Hargrave Secured Tickets But Was Denied Admission to Orchestra Section of Harlem Theatre. Because he was refused admission into the orchestra section of Loew's Victoria Theatre, 125<sup>th</sup> Street, near Seventh Avenue, Arthur F. Hargrave, who is associated with the A. H. Leach Investment Company, has brought a suit for \$500 against the Marlowe (sic) Amusement Company, which is in charge of the premises. Hargrave said that he went to the theatre about 6 o'clock in the evening and was informed that all of the orchestra seats had been sold out. He said that he did not believe it, and called on a friend who is of very fair complexion to secure tickets for him. The friend got the tickets, but Hargrave and his companion, Miss Marie Harrison of 73 West 130<sup>th</sup> Street were stopped at the door. The management of the theatre offered the couple seats in the balcony, and, when he refused, offered to refund the money paid for them. Hargrave is being represented by the Speiser & Speiser law firm.

The admissions policy was not changed, and African-Americans were still being seated in the balcony in 1933, according to the photographer Marvin Smith who lived nearby when he first moved to Harlem (personal communication to Michael Henry Adams, January, 2001).

Another cause championed by the *Amsterdam News* in 1926 was the rights of film projectionists. For instance, on September 15, 1926 the *News* reported:

Harlem was treated to a sensation Monday night at nine o'clock when Negro motion picture operators appeared on Seventh avenue in the vicinity of the Lafayette Theatre, picketing the

house. A fight is being waged between the management of the Lafayette and the Operators' Union, the latter insisting that the Negro operators be given the same scale of wages as the white operators in union houses....It is said that the better known theatres, which include the Franklin, Lincoln, Renaissance, Roosevelt, Douglas and Odeon Theatres, are all member of the union and on record as being willing to give Negro operators a chance to work at their trade. Negro operators are at present employed in the Renaissance, Roosevelt, Douglas and Odeon theatres, and colored operators are being placed in the other theatres as fast as they qualify.

The Loew theatres were not mentioned in connection with this controversy.

## THE VICTORIA: RECENT HISTORY AND ITS CONDITION NOW

The more recent history of the Victoria is documented in clipping files in the Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library (Theatres: U.S.: N.Y.: Victoria 5 West 125<sup>th</sup> Street). In 1972, Loew's Victoria was refurbished, and began to show first run films—for instance, "Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street" starring Yaphet Kotto and Anthony Quinn premiered there in December, 1972. However, the revival was short-lived, and in 1977 Loew's decided that the Victoria could no longer be operated profitably, discontinuing their lease. The building was put up for sale, leaving Harlem without an active movie theatre, according to the *Amsterdam News*, October 1, 1977, "The Death of Loew's Victoria." *Variety* noted that before closing, the theatre had been playing "exploitation product" (July 31, 1985, "Loew's Victoria, Harlem To Reopen"). In retrospect, some might find cultural significance in genre films of this period: films *Variety* would have characterized as "exploitation" probably included "Shaft" and "Superfly."

By May of 1981, Donald Cogsville, then president of the Harlem Urban Development Corporation, was campaigning for the renovation of Loew's Victoria, publishing in a letter to the *New York Post*, titled "Save the Apollo—the Victoria, too". According to *Variety*, December 10, 1986, Mr. Cogsville had contacted Motion Picture Association President Jack Valenti for help in 1983, and Mr. Valenti had put him in touch with the major studios, who were willing to operate, but not to rebuild, the Victoria. Mr. Cogsville then turned to Leonard Clark, a New York theatre operator, who acquired the lease of the old house, and re-opened it as Moviecenter Five on December 10, 1986, after a "\$3,000,000" renovation which was partially funded by the State. A more complete account of the funding of what was then described as a \$2,600,000 project is found in the *New York Times*, July 28, 1985; it involved a contribution from HUDC, a federal urban development action grant, a loan from Chemical Bank to Mr. Clark's company Cine 42, Inc. and additional private capital. *Amsterdam News*, December 13, 1988, noted that the NYC Public Development Corporation was also involved.

However, despite all these efforts, Mr. Clark appears to have gone out of business. On November 27, 1992, the *New York Post* reported that the Victoria had re-opened after another "face-lift" as the Victoria 5, under the management of Warren Blake, a retired New York police force detective, and well-known Harlemite. A sign in the lobby described it as the nation's only movie theatre owned and operated by African Americans. The *Amsterdam News*, June 4, 1994 reported:

Despite being shut out of the mainstream film distribution market, Victoria 5 Cineplex is not only surviving, but thriving. Since their notice last year, Victoria 5 has hosted film premiers of Black independents, lectures, concerts and now a monthlong drama. Their presence has become a major positive addition to our cultural scene.

And on September 9, 1995, the *News* wrote:

Harlem's Roger Furman Theatre, one of the oldest Black not-for-profit theatres in New York City (founded in 1964 by Roger Furman as the New Heritage Repertory Theatre), and the Victoria 5 Theatre...have formed a strategic partnership. The Victoria Theatre will house the Roger Furman Theatre....Blake redesigned the theatre in 1994 in an attempt to keep Black theatre alive in Harlem as well as to accommodate the multitude of small Black theatrical productions in need of performance space.

*New York Newsday* described this new life at the Victoria in a feature article, August 9, 1994, which portrayed the theatre as an important new home for independent black film makers. It describes a showing of "Alma's Rainbow" and discussions in the lobby afterward:

More than five years in the making, this coming of age tale by New York-based director and producer Ayoka Chenzira follows the twists and turns of a girl growing up in a West Indian middle-class community in Brooklyn. Staying through the credits, three black women in the audience obviously have more than a passing interest in the film. The last to leave is Karen Perry, a native of Harlem who now lives in the Bronx and works as a costume designer. (She worked on the recent film, "Above the Rim" which included a scene shot at the Victoria.) "I grew up in this theatre. My God, I saw 'Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song' here!" says Perry, scanning the ceiling, which retains original ornate details. "It's so important to have this theatre back" she says. "We have to go into white communities and sit in little rooms to see our films..."

Today, the Victoria is once more closed, and large scale projects which could lead to demolition or radical alteration have been under discussion since 1999. On February 6, 2002, Community Board 10 Manhattan passed a resolution asking the Landmarks Preservation Commission for an "emergency" evaluation of the Victoria and nine other buildings; there was no result. However, the action shows that the Victoria has come to be regarded as an important part of the history of the Harlem community.

Before the 1986 conversion into Moviecenter Five, the Victoria was determined eligible for the State Register of Historic Places, so that although the Victoria is now divided into multiple stages, the conversion was designed to be reversible. Subsequent changes appear to be to within the already converted areas. The interior is documented under HABS standards. Ms. Kathleen Howe of the State Office is familiar with the interior, which we have also been able to see. Substantial portions are intact, including the lobby ceiling, the grand staircase, and the second floor oval lounge and anterooms.

The decoration here is quite different from Lamb's later, more flamboyant interiors: the paneled anterooms are designed to recall late 18<sup>th</sup> century British classical decoration; they have been described as Adamesque, and might remind us that Lamb was born and bred in Scotland: he was 13 years old when he first came to New York. The oval room features a central mural of blue skies and cherubs on the wing; the cherubs are dark skinned. As noted in our letter of 7/12/02 to Mary Beth Betts, Landmarks Preservation Commission, this mural was executed after 1985 by an unknown hand, in the light of the Historic American Buildings Survey photo documentation prepared prior to the conversion. It is an interesting historic feature of the theatre. Where the new multiplex partitions have been broken through, the plasterwork of the original auditorium appears to be in good condition, although repainted. The columns framing the boxes are still in place.

On the exterior, the façade is also in quite good condition. It is decorated with engaged Ionic columns, anthemion cresting, and two rhytons in the form of winged rams. The ground floor storefronts have been altered; however, historic photos show that other Loew's theatres by Thomas Lamb had quite simple and undecorated retail stores flanking entrances (for instance, Loew's Avenue B and Loew's Strand Palace, illustrated in *Marquee*, Vol. 21, No. 1), so the loss is probably not too significant. The theatre was built with office space above, and the New York Telephone Manhattan Address Directories show that in the 1930s and 40s the space was used by the theatre and by related companies such as the Loew's Seventh Avenue Corporation and the Marloew Amusement Co. At that time the retail spaces were filled by Finkel Confectionery and Kirshblum's luncheonette. Unfortunately, the both the original marquee and electric sign (as shown in *Architecture and Building*, January, 1918) and the historic ones (as shown in photograph NYPL 0648-C6, and *Marquee*, Vol. 13, No. 3 ) are now replaced.

On December 13, 1986, the *Amsterdam News* welcomed a restoration of the Victoria:

The Victoria, before urban blight and apparent city planner's indifference set in, was a glamorous movie house that had many memorable events. Old-timers recall seeing premieres like "The Well," a drama featuring Maidie Norman as one of the stars. With all of the fanfare of a Hollywood opening, with giant searchlights piercing the night with brilliance, Miss Norman and others were flown in from California and spot-lighted with various actors, socialites and well-known personages, as photographers scrambled to catch their entrance. Dress designer-artist Raven Chanticleer was among those adding to the excitement of the evening by arriving for "The Well" premiere in a sparkling horse-drawn carriage....But this development of 125<sup>th</sup> Street, which is a vital artery of the city...is just beginning.

Now we know that this was only one of a series of new beginnings. Changing times have led again and again to the reinvention of the Victoria as a center for the Harlem community. Re-using and not destroying the building is a paramount concern. It is not enough to retain just the facade: we can only hope that the theatre itself, with its mirrored lobbies and its elegant oval room will still be standing for its centenary in 2017 as part of a flourishing 125<sup>th</sup> Street that has recaptured its role as Harlem's Broadway.



*In 1909, Marcus Loew and his family were living in Harlem, at 200 West 111th Street, an apartment building dating from the 1890s. The building, shown above, is still there. A Jewish community of more than 100,000 people lived in Harlem at this time, according to Jeffrey S. Gurlock's study, *When Harlem Was Jewish: 1870-1930* (Columbia University Press, 1979), and the area where Loew lived was particularly prosperous. "Three generations of Jews lived uptown and constituted in their heyday not only Harlem's single largest ethnic group but also America's second largest new immigrant Jewish community. Harlem was surpassed only by the Lower East Side as a center attracting those originally from Eastern Europe." Gurlock describes the religious and political controversies that animated Harlem in those days, "uncovering a forgotten community's history."*

## TRIBUTES TO MARCUS LOEW

The essential thing was the sagacity...

(*New York Times*, Obituary, September 27, 1927)

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The Victoria is an excellent example of one aspect of the work of Thomas Lamb—the design of theatres intended for film and vaudeville in a neighborhood setting. This type of house was the staple of Marcus Loew’s earlier business ventures as a theatre owner and vaudeville impresario—which gives the Victoria a role in the evolution of the American entertainment industry. Designating this theatre would memorialize the beginnings of the career of Marcus Loew, a New Yorker who eventually became head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and the international Loew chain of theatres, emphasizing the huge role New Yorkers played in originating an industry we generally associate with Hollywood.

The Loew’s Paradise, a landmark designated in 1997, was built after Loew’s death by his partner Nicholas Schenck, and represents a more expansive building type predominantly built later, the “atmospheric” theatre, as is detailed in the designation report. The Victoria is a surviving example of the smaller type of neighborhood theatre that was the backbone of the original expansion of Loew’s before (and during) the First World War, when the company brought “small time” vaudeville and new motion pictures—at bargain prices, but in theatres of impressive design—to neighborhoods all over New York, and ultimately, all over America. It was to ensure the supply of new films for this growing chain of theatres that Marcus Loew created Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

The story of Marcus Loew’s gradual acquisition entertainment properties and his creation of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is outlined in Bosley Crowther’s *The Lion’s Share*, a history of MGM. Crowther evinces a rather raw dislike for Marcus Loew, referring to him as “the cheerful little showman who had come up from the slums.” Apparently, Crowther felt that Loew was unappreciative of the artistic side of films he produced and distributed: “...he thought of them as bulk merchandise, like manufactured jewelry or plums.” Alexander Woollcott, however, writing in *Variety*, October 19, 1927, saw a different picture. He says that entrepreneurs like Loew were “...men who inevitably fell heir to enterprises which the show folks themselves, being vagrant, light-hearted, irresponsible people for the most part, soon proved unable to control.”

In his book, Crowther industriously traces a staggering number of acquisitions and mergers which Loew and his partners executed during and after the First World War. In 1924, these culminated in the purchase of Metro Pictures—followed by the acquisition of Goldwyn Pictures in a stock swap which gave Loew’s, Inc. control of all the voting stock of the company—and the hiring of Louis B. Mayer, whose name was then attached to the enterprise. Loew’s company not only assembled and controlled Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but acted as distributor of MGM’s output, and Loew’s activities, then and earlier, were so extensive that they attracted the attention of government anti-trust prosecutors. However, the press tended towards enthusiasm. On April 18, 1924, the *New York Times* reported:

\$65,000,000 MOVIE MERGER COMPLETED: Metro, Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer Companies Become “Metro-Goldwyn Corp.”: HEADED BY MARCUS LOEW: All His Theatres and Many Others, Including Capitol, in One Organization....The amalgamation brings to the support of the Metro-Goldwyn Company the immense Loew chain of theatres and the large number of houses which Goldwyn at present controls throughout the country, the most important being the Capitol, New York....Mr. Loew, in commenting on the amalgamation...said, “The motion picture business is going through a stabilizing process and is working itself out on sane economic principles....The merger will accomplish mutual savings that will react to the benefit of the exhibitor, and through the exhibitor to the public, which is what we wish to bring about.”

It should be noted that the Capitol, now demolished, was a masterwork of Thomas Lamb. Opened in 1919, it was designed just after the Victoria, and shared some of the decorative approaches that Lamb used in the Victoria, especially in its grand staircase and the Adamesque ceilings of the promenade. The Capitol, however, was on the corner of Broadway and 51<sup>st</sup> Street, and seated 5,300—as the *American Architect* reported (November 19, 1919), it was larger than the Metropolitan Opera or Carnegie Hall, and affirmed the pre-eminence of films in America. Calling this new New York theatre “one of the most remarkable structures that has ever been erected”, the *Architect* noted its innovative structural engineering, but also praised “the richness of its decoration and the perfection of its detail”, which was “carefully studied” and “artistically refined.” “The commercial value of good architecture is today more generally conceded than ever before....” Though Loew did not build the Capitol, he acquired it, and his long collaboration with Lamb may have helped lay the groundwork for it. Lamb was working as a plans examiner in the NYC Department of Buildings when he met Marcus Loew, who was also just beginning his career, and they worked together extensively (“An Architect’s Progress” by Hilary Russell, *Marquee*, Vol. 21, No. 1).

Marcus Loew was loved and celebrated in his time. When he died, 3000 New Yorkers flocked to his interment. His death was not only front page news but became the subject of a perceptive editorial in the *New York Times* (September 7, 1927):

Most of the tributes to the late Marcus Loew properly dwell upon the fact that by industry and ability he raised himself from the humblest beginnings to wealth and power. His case is cited as another instance of the opportunities still open to the “poor boy” in the United States. There is more in it than that. The essential thing was the sagacity which foresaw the immense development of a new industry, the possibilities of which were perceived by only a few. If Mr. Loew had not had the business genius to see more than an amusing scientific invention in moving pictures, he could not have made himself the great figure which he became in the film world. His example and success are not unlike those of Henry Ford in the automobile industry. Novelties are all the time presenting themselves to the business man and the manufacturer. But it is only the penetrating and soundly judging mind that knows which of them can be turned into a source of great public utility, and so into riches. What other openings for special talent are now lying, unseen by most, in front of ambitious and capable young men? Some think that the airplane industry is one of them...

*Variety* devoted an entire issue to a memorial to Loew (October 19, 1927), including a long, biographical essay by Alexander Woollcott, which had originally been commissioned by Loew's friend, William Randolph Hearst. The essay was (unexpectedly, for *Variety*) illustrated by a drawing which is an architectural *capriccio*, showing a city entirely composed of Loew theatres. It is a telling image, which speaks of the immense proliferation of the chain, and bears an inscription framed by a laurel wreath:

MARCUS LOEW  
of the people, He  
worked and lived for the  
People, may his memory be  
Held sacred by the people  
And let these theatres that  
He built and dedicated to  
The people be his Monuments.

All of the obituary comments mention Loew's honesty, integrity and kindness and his concern for the welfare of others. Reading *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture* by Robert W. Snyder, it becomes clear that the subtext here is the reportedly more hard-hearted and hard-headed behavior of the managers of the rival chain, the Keith-Albee interests, who booked attractions regarded as superior and charged accordingly. Although they represented "the big time," when Loew was regarded as "small time," Loew, with customary flair, managed to book for his less pretentious venues some legendary performers, such as Mae West and Sophie Tucker, before they became stars. On the other hand, the Keith-Albee theatres competed for the best African-American talent; for instance, Florence Mills in "Blackbirds of 1926" appeared at the Keith-Albee managed Alhambra on Seventh Avenue and 126<sup>th</sup> Street.

Also, although Loew left school at the age of nine, and spent most of the next twenty years working in the fur industry, he was alert to the potential of moving pictures—which more conventional thinkers then regarded as cheap curiosities. According to Woollcott, Loew's film ventures began in a penny arcade he operated on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, which "may or may not" have been New York's first cinema:

Loew's first movie was a Pathé half-reel comedy called "Hot Chestnuts." It took about two minutes and a half to run off. The admission charge was one nickel. At the end of the first day, they counted up the receipts. These amounted to \$493.75. I think it was just about then that Marcus Loew lost his interest in slot machines....Of late years, the activities of the house of Loew have been extended to include the making as well as the exhibiting of pictures. Such extension is inevitable. If you should ever find yourself master of several hundred theatres you would discover the emotions of one who keeps a ravenous dragon outside his cave which he must feed each morning. You grow gray with fear lest rival houses coax all the better films and plays away from you. In the ensuing panic you immediately begin turning out plays and pictures in an effort to be self-sustaining. In this



*The Capriccio.*

way, Loew has acquired one studio after another, all consolidated under the Metro-Goldwyn name, and to this he has recently added the Cosmopolitan Pictures, which revolve around the art and the beauty of Marion Davies. Thus such celebrated pictures as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," "Ben Hur" and "The Big Parade" belonged to Marcus Loew by the time they were ready to be seen.

Woolcott thinks that Loew's heart was more in his work as a builder than as a producer.

But chiefly, I think, he regards himself as a builder of theatres, and in all the chain from Chicago to Cairo, none gives him so much satisfaction as the shiny playhouse he reared some years ago on Avenue B. It took the place of two dingy tenements which had stood at 79 and 81. Into a flat in one of these, more than half a century ago, a waiter from Vienna and a German girl whom he had met in this country moved shortly after their marriage, and there, in a windowless room, Marcus Loew was born.

Although at the time of Loew's death there were more than 30 of his theatres in New York, part of the one time vaudeville "subway circuit," many have now been demolished. Equally, in the old entertainment hub around the Apollo, except for the Victoria, theatres have been substantially altered for other uses or demolished. Gone also is the former MGM studio at 126<sup>th</sup> Street and First Avenue. We believe that designation for the Victoria would preserve a fine theatre by Thomas Lamb which is significant as an example of his early work in a neo-classic style. It would also serve as a monument to the achievements of Marcus Loew, and to the lively theatrical history of "Harlem's Broadway."