



UPTOWN

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POPCORN PALACES

Make your meetings “marquee” with six cinema classics. **BY EVE DANIELS**

GOING TO THE MOVIES USED TO BE a fantastic show before the lights even dimmed. In the first half of the 20th century, many movie houses featured lavish lobbies, orchestras, stage acts and a dazzling display of amenities unknown to modern cinemagoers. As the late studio head Marcus Loew once observed, “We sell tickets to theaters, not movies.” Today, most of the picture palaces and ’hood haunts of the ’20s and ’30s have been ousted by suburban megaplexes. But the show goes on at these Twin Cities treasures, each with its own larger-than-life history.

DREAM WORLD

“An acre of seats in a garden of dreams.” That’s how film historian Ben Hall once described the movie palaces of the Depression era. While all too many of these dreams have dissolved, the Suburban World Theatre has managed to thrive, dive and ultimately survive bankruptcy and significant renovation, not to mention a few changing of hands and business plans.

After his remarkable success with the acoustics at Temple Israel, still located at 23rd and Hennepin, University of Minnesota grad Jack Liebenberg was commissioned to design the Minneapolis movie theater. Due to its distinctive architectural style, the 1928 building was then named The Granada. One

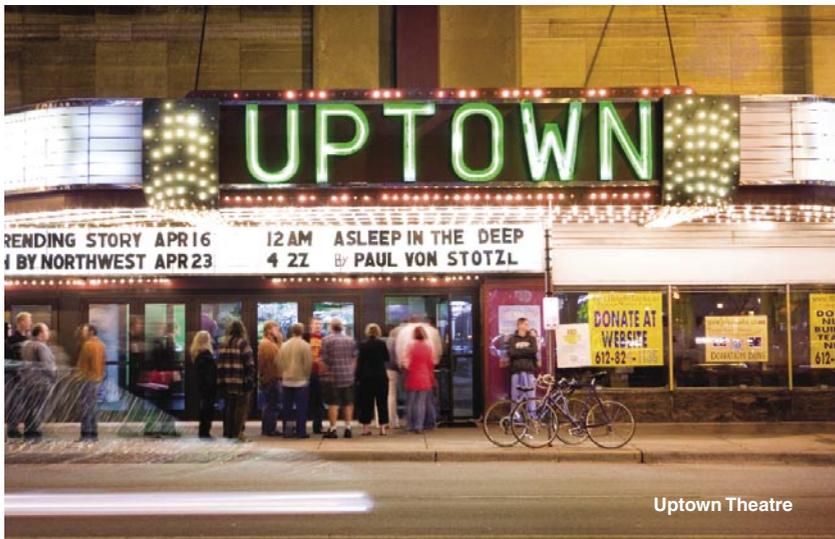
of the last atmospheric theaters left in the Midwest, the auditorium feels like a Spanish courtyard: Plaster balconies and gold-leaf statues flank the stadium seats; constellations and a spotlight moon drift across the ceiling. Producing yet another acoustic masterpiece, Liebenberg caught the attention of Paramount Pictures, which owned numerous theaters across the Midwest. Despite the challenges of being Jewish in mid-century Minneapolis, Liebenberg and his business partner, Seeman Kaplan, had finally “arrived.”

When the late Ted Mann bought the theater in 1954, he chose to brand it with his signature “world” stamp, as seen in St. Paul’s World Theater—renamed The Fitzgerald in 1994—which he then owned along with the Orpheum, the Academy and many other historic gems, both here and gone. “I guess Ted was having a slow day, so he came up with ‘Suburban,’” jokes current owner Don Driggs. Mann, who began his film career in St. Paul, eventually became a Hollywood producer, a philanthropist and, most notably, a theater chain tycoon whose properties included L.A.’s famous Chinese Theatre. At one time, Ted shared the local theater chain biz with his brother Marvin, but the two went their separate ways when Ted moved to California in the 1970s to produce movies.

The theater changed hands again in 1999, and the new owner worked with the city to create a cinema grill, adding a \$500,000 kitchen to the lobby. Unfortunately, the concept didn’t fly and the owner went broke. Driggs bought the theater in 2004 and has made the venue even more adaptable, with additional plans in the works: “The lobby will become The Granada Café, and we’re switching to a full performing arts venue, with film, live theater, music and comedy. And we’re going to bring back the Saturday morning



Suburban World Theatre



Uptown Theatre

breakfast buffets with cartoons.” Driggs says he’s already booking a lot of corporate parties, birthday parties, business meetings, book signings and weddings. A garden of dreams indeed. Here’s hoping this one will flourish.



SUBURBAN WORLD

Auditorium seating capacity:

About 600

Rental hours: Anytime

Rental fee: Negotiable

Parking: One lot behind the building and two down the street; ramp at Calhoun Square; meters can be bagged; valet optional

Contact: Don Driggs at 612-822-9000, www.suburbanworldtheater.com

beloved movie theater came along. In a book on the neighborhood’s history, authors Thatcher and Cedar Imboden include a quote from an April 1929 edition of *The Minneapolis Journal*: “Effective next Thursday, Finkelstein and Ruben’s Lagoon Theatre will be known as the Uptown Theatre. [The name was changed] to conform with a movement now in progress to establish the Lake and Hennepin community as ‘The Uptown District of Minneapolis.’”

When a fire destroyed the Uptown’s predecessor in the 1930s, Liebenberg and Kaplan responded with a bigger and

better design. Operated by Landmark since 1978, the art deco theater boasts exclusive showings and the area’s only balcony seating, not to mention one of the most polite viewing audiences in the Twin Cities. An increasingly popular spot for indie film screenings and private events, the venue offers catering options, a lively location and, most importantly, an extraordinary story—one that attendees will tell until the next Golden age.

UPTOWN THEATRE



Auditorium seating capacity: 900, including balcony

Rental hours: Weekdays, prior to 1:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday mornings; hours negotiable in rare cases

Rental fee: Negotiable

Parking: On-street parking; lot behind the theater; validated parking at the Lagoon Cinema; ramp at Calhoun Square

Contact: www.landmarktheatres.com, click on “Theatre Rentals”

LONGFELLOW LANDMARK

As hot as Minneapolis’ Longfellow community has become lately, many locals still need a marker to find their way there. “You know, near the Riverview Theater?” Got it.

If you’ve lived in the Twin Cities for a spell, hopefully you’ve taken in at least one of the Riverview’s two-buck

“EVERYBODY’S GOING UPTOWN”

North Beach has Coit Tower, Times Square has the NASDAQ sign and Uptown, aptly enough, has the Uptown. While that 50-foot tower with its luminous letters may not be as grand as its big-city counterparts, it does the job all the same. The Minneapolis Arena, Rainbow Café and Hove’s grocery store are just a flicker in grandma’s eye, but the Uptown Theatre still lingers like a ghost of Minneapolis Past.

Once known more for its lakes than entertainment scene, Uptown wasn’t actually called “Uptown” until the



Riverview Theater

(LOCATIONLOCATION)

matinees, indie film fests or late-night kung fu flicks.

The vintage vestige by (you guessed it) Liebenberg and Kaplan is one of those conversation pieces that makes a neighborhood a homebuyer's favorite. Though its surroundings have changed to reflect the era—in six decades, the theater has shared its intersection with a soda-fountain drug store, toy store, salon, bakery, church and diner; and now a clinic, garden center, antique shop, café and wine bar—the Riverview



Riverview Lobby

has stayed virtually the same since opening with *June Bride*, starring Bette Davis and Robert Montgomery, in December 1948.

Almost 60 years later, Longfellow is as diverse as it is trendy, but the Riverview continues to evoke that monochrome, John Wayne world of the 1950s (save the midnight *Rocky Horror* screenings and digital surround sound). While the auditorium's 30-foot-wide screen, backlit proscenium, roomy stadium seating and high-tech trappings amount to the ideal meeting venue, attendees will treasure the lobby most: a funky den in Day-Glo hues of tangerine, lemon and lime, decked with a classic TV set, dated sofas and a copper drinking fountain. Many groups rent the concession stand as part of the package, treating themselves to what's widely held as the tastiest popcorn in town.

Be it a class reunion, an all-staff meeting or a holiday soiree, the Riverview

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The Heights Theatre

makes every shindig swell. “I suspect people will recall the event five years later,” says longtime manager Loren Williams. “Oh yeah, that’s the time we had it at the Riverview.”



RIVERVIEW THEATER

Auditorium seating capacity: 700

Rental hours: Weekdays until 5 p.m.; additional times negotiable

Rental fee: Negotiable, but typically runs \$100 to \$200 per hour

Parking: Free on-street

Contact: Loren Williams at 612-729-7360, www.riverviewtheater.com

OH, WHAT HEIGHTS YOU’LL HIT

Take a seat in the hushed auditorium of The Heights Theatre and you can almost see the strongmen and fire-eaters, the jugglers and magicians, the singing sisters and dancing brothers of those early Vaudeville acts. Over the eerie echoes of banjos, accordions and the heckling of a crowd, you can almost hear brew-

ery heir (and the theater’s original owner) Arthur Gluek plotting his way through Prohibition.

It’s easy to revisit the heyday of this Beaux Arts jewel now that Tom Letness is running the show. When he bought the theater in 1998, both its interior and exterior sported the drab, aquamarine paint job of a second-run theater, unchanged since the 1960s. Armed with original blueprints and true-blue grit, the owner and several volunteers went to work restoring the art house to its 1926 glamour.

Along with major cosmetic changes—upgrades include motorized drape curtains, antique chandeliers with hand-painted bulbs, a new marquee, seats and carpeting, a refurbished orchestra pit, a removable thrust stage and more—the renovation crew added a new screen, lamps and lenses in all three film formats, new projectors and wireless mikes, plus handicap access and a state-of-the-art

sound system. Of course, as most patrons will quickly confirm, The Heights’ most stunning feature is its mighty Wurlitzer, manned with an organist before week-end film showings.

Thanks to the theater’s extreme makeover, it now serves as both a film-focused art house and a community gathering place. In less than a decade, The Heights has evolved into a space capable of hosting everything from a wedding to a beauty pageant to a company talent show (such as Medtronic’s *American Idol*-themed fundraiser in fall 2005). After suffering three fires, a tornado, a bombing and decades of neglect, the theater looks better than ever. At this rate, the best is yet to come.



THE HEIGHTS THEATRE

Auditorium seating capacity: 400; 360 with thrust stage

Rental hours: Anytime, with peak hours priced accordingly

Rental fee: See Web site for specific

(LOCATIONLOCATION)

rates and added fees

Parking: Two free lots and a free ramp next to the theater

Contact: Tom Letness at 763-789-4992, www.heightstheatre.com

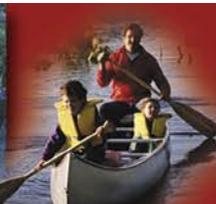
TWO THUMBS UP

If you're St. Paul born-and-raised, odds are, your best childhood memories include double features at the corner movie house—Jujubes and real-but-ter popcorn included. The multiplex invasion of the late 20th century meant curtains for the Randolph, St. Clair, Midtown and many other retro relics, but two have managed to survive through the thick and thin of it: the Grandview, located just four blocks from Macalester College, and the Highland, at home in upscale Highland Park.

Omaha Railroad worker Myrtus A. Wright, who moonlighted as an architect, designed both the Grandview and the Highland in an opulent, art deco style that wows filmgoers yet today. When they opened in the mid- to late-1930s, each one featured balcony seating and an auditorium with a single screen. Mann Theatres—the Minnesota chain that currently operates more than a dozen theaters across the greater metro—purchased the Grandview and the Highland in the early 1970s. Not long after, the owners converted the theaters to twin screens.

Over the years, the state capital mainstays have delivered many a swish event setting. "A lot of times, groups will use the auditorium for meeting purposes and then use the lobby for wine and cheese or concessions," says Stephen Mann (son of Marvin Mann and nephew of Ted Mann, who now owns the chain with his brother Benjie). "Some use the space strictly for meetings and then a little social gathering, some use it for entertainment and some incorporate all three."

However you splice it, the Grandview's glossy black-and-white marquee and the Highland's Streamline Moderne façade will take your guests back to a



discover

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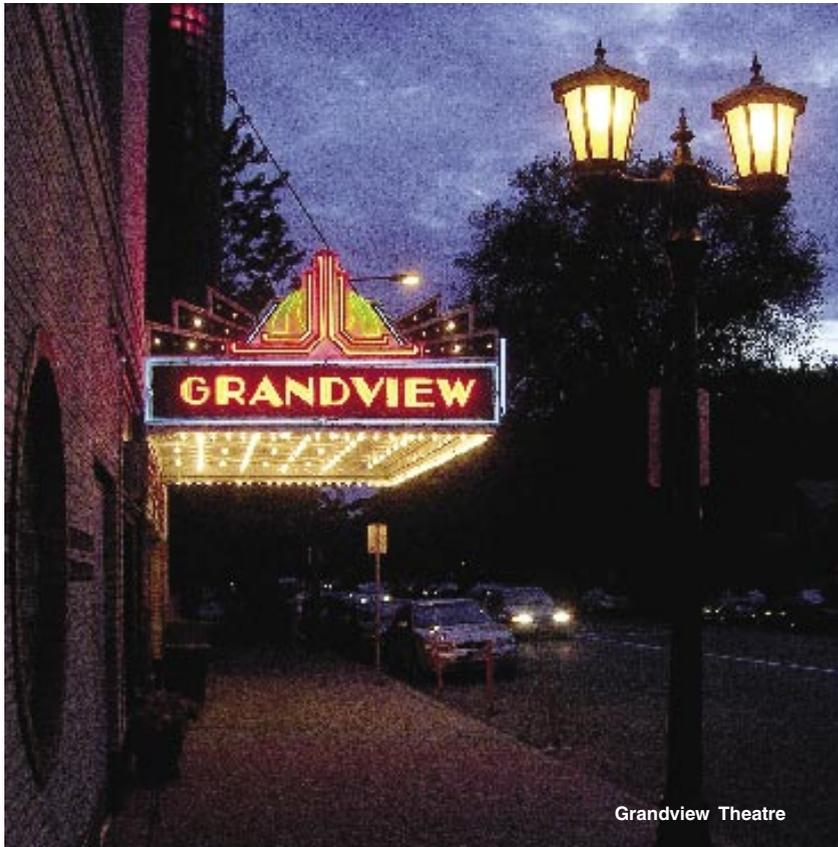


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Grandview Theatre

time when movie stardom was sacred, tickets were less than a quarter and meetings were reserved for tree houses and secret forts.



GRANDVIEW & HIGHLAND

Auditorium seating capacity:

Grandview, 495 on the main floor and 197 upstairs; Highland, about 450 on the main floor and about 400 upstairs

Rental hours: Anytime, with peak hours priced accordingly

Rental fee: Meetings, \$250 for three hours; entertainment/events, \$5.50 per person

Parking: Free on-street, plus free lots by the Highland

Contact: Stephen Mann at 952-767-0102, www.manntheatresmn.com

Editor's note: Most of the theaters featured here include a podium and public address system, video projection capabilities and minimal staffing as part of the rental fee. In many cases, planners can bring their own A/V equipment and can patch into the house sound system. All venues recommend reserving the space at least two weeks prior to the event. 

Prefer high-tech to historic?

Check out these box-office bests:

AMC ARBOR LAKES 16, AMC SOUTHDALE 16 AND AMC EDEN PRAIRIE MALL 18

» **Auditorium seating capacity:** 120 to 486

Screen size: Varies

SPFX: Love-seat style stadium seating, digital projection capabilities, DTS and digital surround sound, VIP suites

On-site caterer: No, but groups can access the concessions

Rental hours: Anytime

Rental fee: Negotiable

Parking: Free lot

Contact: Arbor Lakes, 763-494-0379; Southdale, 952-920-9400; Eden Prairie, 952-656-0010, www.amctheatres.com

CROWN THEATRES BLOCK E

» **Auditorium seating capacity:** Varies

Screen size: Varies

SPFX: Stadium seating, digital surround sound, THX-certified screens

On-site caterer: Yes, plus access to the concessions

Rental hours: Anytime

Rental fee: Negotiable

Parking: Validated ramp

Contact: 800-932-2054, ext. 149, www.crowntheatres.com

GREAT CLIPS IMAX THEATRE, MINNESOTA ZOO

» **Auditorium seating capacity:** 575

Screen size:

63-by-86 feet

SPFX: Stadium seating, equipped for digital projection and Internet access, large format film, Proportional Point Source loudspeaker system, 3-D technology

On-site caterer: Yes, Lancer

Rental hours: Anytime

Rental fee: Negotiable

Parking: \$5 per car or van; \$10 per bus; free when zoo is closed

Contact: 952-997-9701, koconnell@imax.com, www.imax.com/minnesota

