

January 1960

THIS MONTH IN LA THEATRE HISTORY



On **January 11, 1960**, the founder of the Pasadena Playhouse, George Gilmore Brown, professionally known as Gilmore Brown, collapsed and died while visiting a friend in Palm Springs.



Brown was born about 1886 near New Salem,

North Dakota. After high school, he studied theatre in Chicago, toured with various theatre troupes and brought some of those Midwestern actors to Pasadena as the Gilbert Brown Players, rented what was then called the Savoy Theatre (a burlesque house) and in September 1916 produced *Man of the Hour* (a melodrama by George Broadhurst that ran on Broadway from 1906 - 1908).

This troupe would form the nucleus of what would become the Pasadena Community Playhouse, and Brown would become a leader in the "Little Theatre Movement" / Community Theatre movement in the early 20th century.



*The former burlesque stage Savoy Theatre on Fair Oaks Blvd. Pasadena about 1920 showing Brown's production of **Boy Dreams***

Brown initially was the manager, director, lead actor, and occasional writer for the company, but clearly Brown's greatest talent was as a fundraiser and community organizer as 1,000 people donated to the construction of the beautiful Pasadena Playhouse (main stage 686 seats), which was completed in 1924.

During this "Golden Period" while Brown was alive, 4 smaller stages were also utilized, including a converted living room in a private home called the Playbox where theatre-in-the-round staging was first used in California.



Our Town at the Pasadena Playhouse, 1939

Over 1600 plays, including 175 - 277 world premieres (conflicting citations of the exact number), were produced by Brown. While frankly most of these 1600 plays are forgotten today, some very significant California premieres were Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

It was also the first American theatre to do all of Shakespeare's plays and produced the one and only production of Eugene O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed* with a cast of 136.

By 1927-28, Brown had opened up a theatre school that became a state accredited college in 1937. Many well-known Hollywood names such as Raymond Burr, Randolph Scott, Robert Preston, Dustin Hoffman (below in 1957 production of *Danton's Death*) and Gene Hackman trained at this school.



The above facts are just some of Brown's accomplishments, but he also

had his idiosyncrasies that wouldn't rate well with Actors Equity today, as he would keep actors late into the A.M. hours till he was satisfied with a scene. Furthermore, he would, according to a story in the LA Times, take his cat to the theatre. If the cat turned its head, Brown would take it as a sign that the scene needed to be changed! Supposedly, his ghost continues to beneficently haunt the Playhouse to this day.

Below: Pasadena Playhouse (designed by Elmer Grey) exterior 1934 and interior 1930.

