



The Alliance of
Los Angeles Playwrights

NEWSFLASH

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THIS MONTH IN LA THEATRE HISTORY

If one peruses through the entertainment section of Los Angeles newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s, one will quickly realize that legitimate stage shows were quite rare: generally relegated to the Pasadena Playhouse, touring shows and brief runs at venues like the Hollywood Bowl. Instead, musical revues dominated the live entertainment scene. Probably the dominant figure in LA was Earl Carroll - a Ziegfeld-like impresario who after an initially successful Broadway career moved West in the early 1930s to re-make himself.

Then on **December 26, 1938**, the Earl Carroll Theatre, a 1,000 seat supper club with a 70 foot revolving stage, located at 6230 Sunset Blvd. opened to the public with the revue *Broadway to Hollywood*.



The revolving stage under construction, Carroll is in the center.

Twelve more of these extravaganzas with titles that included *World of Pleasure* and *The World's Fairest* ran at the theatre. These revues featured comedy, dance and song with a gamut of themes: western, Parisian, the South Seas and so on.



From the photos, these shows were clearly very much of their time period and thus were quite **unenlightened** in comparison to our (still rather imperfect) modern worldview, but the Earl Carroll Vanities did embody the glamour that Hollywood wanted to present to the world. And thus the

more expensive tables nearer the stage were filled with the movie world elites.



1939 photo by Maynard Parker / Huntington Library collection

The exterior of the building was transformed at night by a multitude of neon tubes, dominated by the face of Beryl Wallace, a showgirl and Carroll's girlfriend. Also, in neon (and in newspaper ads, matchbook covers and multiple other media) was the not modest motto of the place: "Thru these portals pass the most beautiful girls in the world."



Lobby, Goddess of Neon, photo by Maynard Parker, Huntington Library

But that all ended when Carroll and Wallace died in the crash of United Airline Flight 624 on June 17, 1948.





Above, various production photos in the Los Angeles Public Library collection, Carroll is in the center of the photo at the bottom right. Gene Lester photographer, Herald Examiner

Subsequently the theatre was sold and became the Moulin Rouge nightclub, then the 1960s rock clubs Hullabaloo and Kaleidoscope, before becoming in the late 1968 for the first time, a legitimate theatre known as the Aquarius.

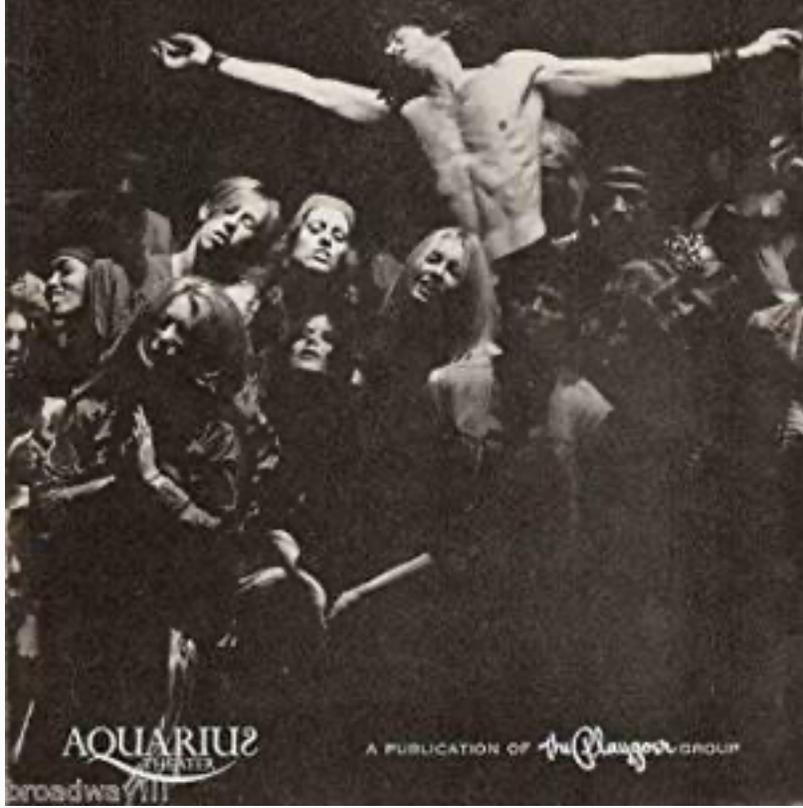


Mural painted by THE FOOL art collective, photo by Richard Wojcik

Actual theatre seats were installed and a new lobby created and the musical *Hair* began an almost two year run. Multiple touring productions had sprouted from the Broadway show, but the LA run initially included the book writers and lyricists / lead actors, James Rado and Gerome Ragni.

HAIR

The American Tribal Love Rock Musical



AQUARIUS
THEATRE

A PUBLICATION OF *the Playgroup* GROUP

broadway



"Hair" at the Aquarius Theatre, photo: J. Thompson, Los Angeles Times

Following *Hair*, a number of commercial productions like *Purlie* and *Lenny* played at the venue. Then the theatre was bought by the Center Theatre Group to house the extended run for the seminal production of *Zoot Suit*. (In a future newsletter, I will focus exclusively on this show.)

Photos: below left: Marco Rodriguez as El Pachuco, Aquarius 1979 (courtesy Mark Taper Forum). Below right: Zoot Suit - 1979 Aquarius Theater - Pachucas Alma Martinez, Rachael Levario, Anne Betancourt, Becky Gonzalez, Laura Owens, Bel Hernandez, Evelina Fernandez, Susie Inyoue, Dyana Ortelli (Courtesy Mark Taper Forum)





Film version of "Zoot Suit" partially shot in the Aquarius

After *Zoot Suit* closed, the theatre changed hands multiple times, initially continuing as a live theatre before becoming a television facility most notably as Nickelodeon on Sunset from 1997 to 2016. A coalition of preservation groups including the L.A. Conservancy plan to re-open the theatre as a mixed-use facility.

