

# CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

## LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** The Playhouse Theatre

**OWNERS:** John and Gertrude Stone

**APPLICANTS:** Same

**LOCATION:** 4816 Main Street

**30-DAY HEARING NOTICE:** N/A

**AGENDA ITEM:** IV

**HPO FILE NO:** 10L228

**DATE ACCEPTED:** Mar-10-2010

**HAHC HEARING:** Apr-8-2010

**PC HEARING:** Apr-15-20109

### SITE INFORMATION

Tracts 3 and 4a, Block 1, South End Villa, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a one-story, concrete block, commercial building.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Playhouse Theatre, located at 4816 Main Street, is considered the first permanent structure in the United States built specifically for professional “theatre-in-the-round.” Constructed in August 1950 with an initial investment of \$100,000, the theater was the brainchild of William Rozan and Joanna Albus, who hoped to establish a professional Equity theater in Houston.

Architect Benjamin F. Greenwood, Jr. designed the concrete block theater building with a central auditorium of 300 seats surrounding a circular stage. Although the theatre was considered small from a seating standpoint, it was actually the largest venue for a building of its kind in the country. Year-round air-conditioning was a plus.

In its early years, the theater featured first-class, distinguished productions, including Broadway hits, classics, and original plays, as well as lectures, musicals and dance events. Many noted Hollywood and stage actors graced the Playhouse stage, and playwright Tennessee Williams directed a play at the Playhouse in May 1953.

Despite good reviews from the critics, high overhead forced the theater to close within two years. The theater reopened in 1954, but went through a series of managers over the next 15 years. By 1971, the theater had been converted to an adult movie house and renamed the “Academy Theater.” Purchased by the current owners in 1991, the theater has since been used again for live theatrical productions and comedy shows, such as the Hip Hop Comedy Stop and Encore Theater. In 2004, the current owners dedicated the theater as the National African American Museum, a facility for historical documents, events, photos, memorabilia, artifacts, historical newspapers, art pieces, and programs.

The Playhouse earned national recognition and sparked growth in arena type-venues and other theatres in Houston, some which still exist today. The Playhouse’s original marquee on the building and its preservation of the theatre-in-the-round concept is a reminder of its unique

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architectural and theatrical legacy in Houston's history. The Playhouse Theatre at 4816 Main Street meets Criteria 1, 4, 5, and 8 for Landmark designation.

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

#### *Brief History of Theatre-in-the-Round Productions*

While living in Houston during the 1930s, young playwright Margo Jones sought to establish permanent resident professional theatres in the United States. She felt the best way to achieve this process was to create "arena theatre" or "theatre-in-the-round" productions. Because building new theatres in desirable locations proved to be extremely expensive if profits could not be realized, her solution was to "stage" or create theatre-in-the-round presentations in existing buildings.<sup>1</sup> Jones accomplished this feat while working in Houston in 1939.<sup>2</sup> She later moved to Dallas in 1945 and while there received critical acclaim and international fame for her theatre-in-the-round productions.<sup>3</sup>

*Theatre-in-the-round can be defined as any space in which the acting area may be raised or at floor level and is completely surrounded by the audience. The shape of the stage can be round, square or rectangle allowing the actors to enter or exit through the audience from different directions or from below the stage. It has been theorized that the informality of this type of staging creates an increased rapport between the audience and the actors.*<sup>4</sup>

The concept of theatre-in-the-round is not new. Also known as central staging, circus-theatre, arena staging and penthouse style,<sup>5</sup> the concept has its roots in rituals such as those performed by the ancient Greeks, which evolved into classical Greek theatre. It was used again in medieval times, especially in England, where it gave way to the open stage of Elizabethan times. During the late 17th century the proscenium stage, which limited audiences to the area directly in front of the stage, came to dominate theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Before the construction of the Playhouse Theatre in 1950, Houston already had its share of theatrical venues devoted to the arena concept but they were non-professional theatres known as 'community' and 'off-Broadway.'<sup>7</sup>

Houstonian Nina Vance, an apprentice of Margo Jones, opened her "arena-like" Alley Theatre in 1947 using amateur actors.<sup>8</sup> Located on Berry Avenue, the venue was an old fan factory

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Margo, *Theatre-in-the-Round* (New York, New York: Rhinehart, 1951), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> "Margo Jones of Theater '55 Passes," *Dallas Morning News*, 25 July 1955, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, "Theatre in the Round." < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre\\_in\\_the\\_round](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_in_the_round) > Accessed July 20, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Dauphin, Sue, *Houston By Stages: A History of Theatre in Houston*, (Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1981), p. 123; Jones, pp. 10 –11.

<sup>8</sup> "Alley Theater to Fold After Current Show." *Dallas Morning News*, 11 November 1950, p. 6. < <http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> > Accessed 23 June 2009.

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converted into a central performance room with 230 seats arranged around an arena.<sup>9</sup> The current Alley Theater was constructed in 1966 in downtown Houston.<sup>10</sup> It is one of the city's premiere institutions with a national and international reputation for artistic achievement.

The first building erected for theatre-in-the-round in the United States was the Glenn Hughes Penthouse Theatre built in 1940 with an elliptical stage. It was housed on the University of Washington campus in Seattle but was not a professional venue.<sup>11</sup> It was completely renovated in 1991 when it was moved from its original south campus location.<sup>12</sup>

### *History of the Playhouse Theatre at 4816 Main Street*

The first permanent structure in the United States built specifically for professional "theatre-in-the-round" was the Playhouse Theatre in Houston. Constructed in August 1950 with an initial investment of \$100,000, it was the brainchild of William Z. Rozan and Joanna Schreiber Albus. The rectangular building featured an auditorium with a circular stage surrounded by 300 seats. Although the theatre was considered small from a seating standpoint, it was actually the largest venue for a building of its kind in the country. Year-round air-conditioning was a plus.<sup>13</sup>

William Rozan's and Joanna Albus' goal in building the Playhouse Theatre was to establish a professional Equity theatre. They would act as producers and managing directors. Rozan gave up his law practice and became a concert manager for Municipal Concerts Inc., a national concerts bureau headquartered in Houston. His interest in the arena theatre concept probably stemmed from his affiliation with the Alley Theatre, where he later served as vice-president. Albus, a native New Yorker, got her start working as an assistant to Margo Jones, a pioneer of professional regional arena theatre in Houston and Dallas. Albus was later affiliated with the Little Theatre (where she worked with Rozan's wife) as well as Municipal Concerts, Inc.

The duo's plan was to operate the theatre year-round with runs tailored to suit public acceptance. There would be six weekly evening performances with Saturday and Sunday matinees.<sup>14</sup> Other

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<sup>9</sup> Holmes, Ann. *The Alley Theatre: Four Decades in Three Acts: A History of One of the Nation's Resident Theaters*. Houston, Tex.: Alley Theatre, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> AlleyTheatre website. "A Home of Our Own."

<[http://www.alleytheatre.org/Alley/A\\_Home\\_of\\_Our\\_Own\\_EN.asp?SnID=1654207688](http://www.alleytheatre.org/Alley/A_Home_of_Our_Own_EN.asp?SnID=1654207688)> Accessed 3 March 2009.

<sup>11</sup> "The Legacy of Drama Professor Glenn Hughes." <<http://www.washington.edu/research/showcase/1919a.html>> Accessed 23 July 2009.

<sup>12</sup> HistoryLink.org "Glen Hughes" <[http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=3694](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=3694)> Accessed 23 July 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Houston 'Circle'\$100,000 Playhouse, Opening Wednesday, Has Many Novel Features, *New York Times*, 18 February 1951, Proquest Historical Newspapers; "Events of Years Ago Lead To Start of New Playhouse," *Houston Chronicle- Today's News Today*, 5 August 1950, npl.

Dauphin, pp. 123-124.

<sup>14</sup> Dauphin, p. 125.

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options for the theatre included lectures, musicals and dance events on free evenings.<sup>15</sup> “Their eventual goal was a chain of similar theatres.”<sup>16</sup>

The Felix A. Davison Construction Company was hired to construct the theatre, which would be air-conditioned year round. Architect Benjamin F. Greenwood, Jr., was hired to draw up the plans.<sup>17</sup> Greenwood was a former stage technician and actor who previously worked with Albus at the Little Theatre.<sup>18</sup> His design for the Playhouse was for a rectangular shaped sixty-five by seventy-five foot building. The interior featured an auditorium, fifty-four feet in diameter with 300 seats, surrounding a twenty-two foot “true” circular stage with a revolving mechanism.

During the construction, local newspapers printed headlines that read: “Houston Theater Has Unique Plan,”<sup>19</sup> “Now Arena Style for Houston,”<sup>20</sup> “Playhouse to Be Ready for Feb. 21 First Night”<sup>21</sup> and “Houston to Get Arena Theater.”<sup>22</sup>

The new theatre opened as scheduled on February 21, 1951, premiering the comedy, “Candlelight.” Many prominent Houstonians dressed in black and white attire attended the opening as well as the ribbon-cutting ceremony. “They oohed and aahed”<sup>23</sup> over interior designer Edward Perrault’s choice of gray paint for the walls and mauve for the carpet. The lobby and promenade walls were painted in terra cotta. The theatre featured an autograph wall for performing actors and directors, which would later include E.G. Marshall, Arthur Treacher, Mildred Dunnock, and playwrights Tennessee Williams and William Inge.<sup>24</sup>

In the theatre’s bill, Albus and Rozan stated, “Our aim is to produce legitimate plays continuously the year ‘round featuring the appearances in person, of established and well-known actors, supported by all-professional casts, in the good Broadway hits, the classics and new plays. ...The Playhouse was established for you ... your enjoyment, pleasure and comfort.”<sup>25</sup>

The next day local newspapers hailed the theatre as “A crowning event that is very apt to change the theatre-going habits of Houstonians,”<sup>26</sup> “Arena Drama in New Dimension: Playhouse Off

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<sup>15</sup> “New Houston Arena Theater Seeks Ferrer,” *Dallas Morning News*, 30 August 1950.

<<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org>> Accessed 23 June 2009.

<sup>16</sup> “Houston ‘Circle.’ ”

<sup>17</sup> Dauphin, p. 124.

<sup>18</sup> “Events.”

<sup>19</sup> “Houston Theater Has Unique Plan,” *Dallas Morning News*, 18 February 1951, p. 3.

<<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org>> Accessed June 23, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> “Now Arena Style for Houston,” *New York Times*, 18 January 1951, p. 30, Proquest Historical Newspapers. Accessed June 23, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Untitled Newspaper, courtesy of the HMRC. 7 February 2009.

<sup>22</sup> “Houston to Get Arena Theater,” *Dallas Morning News*, 18 August 1950, p. 6.

<<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org>> Accessed 23 June 2009.

<sup>23</sup> “Glittering New Playhouse Delights First-Night Crowd,” *The Houston Chronicle*, 21 February 1951, p. 23A.

<sup>24</sup> Dauphin, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> Gala Opening of the Playhouse Program courtesy of Woodson Library files.

<sup>26</sup> “Curtain Goes Up: New Playhouse Opens in Houston,” *Dallas Morning News*, 22 February 1951.

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with Candlelight”<sup>27</sup> and “Glittering New Playhouse Delights First Night Crowd.”<sup>28</sup> Other reviews ran from intense interest to antagonism.<sup>29</sup>

For the next three years, the theatre would hold up to its promise of using professional actors in legitimate productions. Distinguished American stage director and playwright Tennessee Williams directed the “Airless Air” in 1953.<sup>30</sup>

Despite good reviews from the critics, two years of high overhead began to eat up box office profits forcing Rozan and Albus to close the theatre. Before doing so, they even made public appeals for donations while struggling to stay afloat but to no avail.<sup>31</sup> In October 1954, Tamblyn Spiva, a 22-year-old native of Minden, Louisiana, stepped in and paid the theatre’s back taxes.<sup>32</sup> Spiva, a former drama student, took over the lease and attempted to put on productions equivalent to his predecessors but with a smaller audience. The high costs to maintain the theatre and declining interest of the public resulted in the theatre’s second closure in 1955.<sup>33</sup>

For the next 15 years the theatre had several managers, starting with “flamboyant showman” Austrian-born Herbert Kramer (1955-1958), who usually gave himself lead roles in each production.<sup>34</sup> One theater critic wrote, “business varied between fair and horrible.”<sup>35</sup>

When Mitzi Wayne (Hurwitz) and Jim Mendenhall assumed management of the theatre (1958-1961), they fixed it up and painted its interior “hoping to recapture some of the festive atmosphere it had in the early 50s, along with the respect and status of Joanna Albus and William Rozan.” For the next three years, the pair experienced success with their production of popular plays until Wayne had to move to the East Coast to care for her son in 1960. A few

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<sup>27</sup> “Arena Drama in New Dimension: Playhouse Off with Candlelight” *Houston Post*, 22 February 1951, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> “Glittering.”

<sup>29</sup> Dauphin, p. 125.

<sup>30</sup> “Williams Adding Direction to Fame as Playwright.” *Dallas Morning News*, 30 April 1954, p. 9.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Last accessed 20 July 2009.

“Houston Paper Calls One-Man Visit ‘Pilgrimage of Celebrities’ for Drama.” *Dallas Morning News*, 16 May 1953.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Last accessed 20 July 2009.

“Campaign Opened to Keep Houston Playhouse Alive.” *Dallas Morning News*, p. 7.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Last accessed 20 July 2009.

<sup>31</sup> “All Hands to Rally ‘Round.’ ” *Dallas Morning News*, 10 June 1954, p. 8.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org>

“Playhouse Arena to Close Saturday” *Dallas Morning News*, 9 June 1954, p. 4.

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“Campaign Opened to Keep Playhouse Alive.” *Dallas Morning News*, 14 June 1954, p. 8.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Accessed 20 June 2009.

Dauphin, p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> “‘Angel’ Solves Fund Riddle for Theater,” *Dallas Morning News*, 7 October 1954, p. 22.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Accessed 20 June 2009.

<sup>33</sup> “Chatterbox” *Dallas Morning News*, 1 March 1955, pg. 9. Last accessed 2 August 2009. Dauphin, pp. 127-128.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org>

<sup>34</sup> “‘Hamlet’ Opening in Houston Theater,” *Dallas Morning News*, 7 November 1955, p. 18.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Accessed 2 August 2009.

Dauphin, pp. 128-132.

<sup>35</sup> “Houston Theatricals Taking on Pattern,” *Dallas Morning News*, 14 April 1956, p. 5.

<http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.houstonlibrary.org> Last accessed, 6 October 2009.

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months later she sold her share of the business to Mendenhall. He changed the name of the theatre to the Houston Theatre Center with plans to enlarge it. During his three year tenure, he didn't experience the commercial successes he'd hoped for and had to close the theatre.<sup>36</sup>

Marietta Marich, the theatre's next artistic director and producer (1963-1968), managed it longer than any of her predecessors. The theatre had a successful run for awhile and so did the Alley Theatre and Theatre Inc, located a few blocks away. For a time, the three venues formed an unofficial theatre community for its actors.<sup>37</sup> About 1971, the theatre was converted to an adult movie house and renamed the "Academy Theater."<sup>38</sup> In 1975, Marich and her husband formed a partnership with two local actors and opened a dinner theatre at Dunfey's Royal Coach Inn in another part of town.<sup>39</sup>

During its existence, the Playhouse Theatre earned national and international recognition and sparked an evolution of arena-type venues and other theatres in Houston, some of which still exist today.

Houstonians Dr. and Mrs. John S. Stone acquired the Playhouse Theatre in 1991.<sup>40</sup> Its subsequent use has included live theatrical productions, comedic entertainment, and dinner parties. From 1994-1995, Houstonian Rushion McDonald used the theatre (then known as the Hip Hop Comedy Stop) as a venue for his comedy routine before heading to Los Angeles.<sup>41</sup>

On June 30, 1997, Encore Theatre moved into the Playhouse Theatre building. Under the direction of Encore Theatre's artistic director and founder, the theatre entered into yet another era. The seating configuration was re-designed as a modified thrust with a pseudo proscenium arch resulting in a seating capacity of 210 seats. The lobby was re-decorated in maroon and gold, with white marble floors and a gold metallic ceiling. Encore Theatre closed its operation at 4816 Main about 2005 when they moved to their new location farther north on Main Street.<sup>42</sup>

On November 4, 2004, the Stones held an opening and renamed the building the National African American Museum. The site is dedicated as a facility for historical documents, events, photos, memorabilia, artifacts, historical newspapers, art pieces, and programs.

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<sup>36</sup> Dauphin, pp. 132- 136.

<sup>37</sup> "Marietta to Head Playhouse," *Houston Chronicle*, 3 October 1963; Dauphin," pp. 137-138.

<sup>38</sup> David Welling. *Cinema Houston: From Nickelodeon to Megaplex*, (Austin, Texas: UT Press) First Edition, 2007, p. 243; 1969 and 1971 Houston City Directories.

<sup>39</sup> "Acting is Family Tradition for COM's Marietta Marich." *Galveston Daily News*, 27 July 1981, p. 1.

<[www.newspaperarchives.com](http://www.newspaperarchives.com)> Accessed 6 October 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Gertrude Holliday Stone, interview by author, February 12, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> "A Comic Farewell." *Houston Chronicle*, 10 June 1994: Houston Section, 2 Star Edition p. 5.

McDaniel, Mike. [http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=1994\\_120739](http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?id=1994_120739), Last accessed 6 October 2009

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<sup>42</sup> James Ford, interview by author, August 28, 2009. E-mail.

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## **Architectural Description and Restoration History**

The Playhouse Theatre was constructed in August 1950 with an initial investment of \$100,000. Architect Benjamin F. Greenwood, Jr. designed the rectangular shaped sixty-five by seventy-five foot building. The interior featured an auditorium, fifty-four feet in diameter with 300 seats, surrounding a twenty-two foot “true” circular stage with a revolving mechanism.

In 1997, Encore Theatre moved into the Playhouse Theatre building. The seating configuration was re-designed as a modified thrust with a pseudo proscenium arch resulting in a seating capacity of 210 seats. The lobby was re-decorated in maroon and gold, with white marble floors and a gold metallic ceiling.

Most of the original features of the building remain, including exterior and interior tickets windows with their original glass, a refreshment area off the lobby, and the exterior marquee sign for the theater.

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Courtney Spillane and Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*



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Gertrude Holliday Stone, interview by author, February 12, 2009.

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James Ford, interview by author, August 28, 2009. E-mail.

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## **APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

### **Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.**

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

<b>S</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>S - satisfies</b>	<b>D - does not satisfy</b>	<b>NA - not applicable</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
	<input type="checkbox"/>			
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			

### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Playhouse Theatre at 4816 Main Street.

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## EXHIBIT A

Playhouse Theatre  
4816 Main Street



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Archaeological & Historical Commission  
Department

Planning and Development

## EXHIBIT B SITE LOCATION MAP

Playhouse Theatre  
4816 Main Street

NOT TO SCALE

