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Death and the Princess: The Rialto Theater

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probably passed by it once a week for ten years. When I was a little girl in the 1950s, my mother and I shopped in downtown Tampa on Saturday afternoons. From our Seminole Heights home, Mom drove (with the exaggerated care of someone who learned to drive just a few years earlier) downtown via Tampa Street. In those days, downtown was crowded on Saturdays. I can remember my mother clutching my hand and dragging me along sidewalks so jam-packed with humanity that we sometimes got pushed off the curb and into the street. Franklin Street was the locus of the activity. There or thereabouts were located Newberry’s five-and-dime, F. W. Woolworth’s, and Kress Department Store. Shopping at these stores yielded domestic odds and ends: colanders, plastic buckets, shower curtain rings, vegetable brushes, mops and brooms. For clothing and ‘better’ goods, my mother went to O. Falk’s and Maas Brothers, the large and fairly elegant department stores downtown. Maas’ had the first escalator Tampa had ever seen and my mother was terrified of it. Luckily for us, the store also had an elevator with a smiling black man in charge of the brass operating mechanism. At O. Falk’s, we visited the shoe department. It had a Buster Brown Shoes device for measuring children’s feet. It was like a scale, and children hopped onto a little platform, inserted their feet into shoe-shaped depressions, and the machine ‘read’ their foot size and shape. The machine also irradiated their insides, since the machine used x-rays to photograph their feet, but none of us knew that at the time.

O. Falk’s, Maas’, Newberry’s, Kress, F. W. Woolworth’s: these were mercantile landmarks in Tampa, well-established by the 1920s. In the era before shopping malls, they were temples where we worshipped the gods of commerce.

After our shopping, Mom drove back to Seminole Heights. We did not simply reverse our route. We drove north on Franklin Street to Palm Avenue, where we turned east and went to Central Avenue, the street that took us to within two blocks of our house.
Even in the late 1950s, Franklin Street just north of downtown Tampa was what my mother called skid row. It was going seedy and going there fast, with a few warehouses, some struggling retailers, boarded-up storefronts, and bars outside which lounged the kind of people we never saw in our neighborhood. There was one saloon that especially fascinated me; its sign was a neon martini glass, complete with olive and swizzle stick. The swizzle stick rotated, the glass tipped over, and the olive tumbled out. Then the glass righted itself, the olive and swizzle stick popped back in, and the glass did the trick again, over and over, a drinker's dream. That was on the west side of Franklin. On the east side, at Henderson Street, was the building that made the whole tiresome shopping day worthwhile for me. I thought it was a little palace, and even today it looks like one of those pocket palazzi that you see behind high walls and lush gardens in Milan or Florence. It had rectilinear designs in etched colored tile on the front. The Florida sun glittered magnificently on scrolling leaves of ruby, emerald, turquoise, peach, and gold. The brickwork surrounding the tile was warmly yellow, the color of Valencia oranges. There were stone sphinxes perched on each top corner of the roof line and, at the summit of the pediment, some sort of baronial shield in granite. The building had a name, but it was a funny one. HOLTSINGER read the raised letters in a white plaster space near the top, but I could see the shadowy forms of other letters behind them: R ALTO. I thought that must be the name of the people who lived in the building.

And the people themselves? I knew they were in the little palace, somewhere. The front of the R ALTO had windows, after all, little Italianate windows with miniscule balconies that did not so much cantilever outward as suggest themselves. The windows were barred and I could just see a princess behind one of them. She's trapped in there, I used to think, her mean father won't let her marry the man she loves, who is a poor itinerant juggler and not the nobleman for whom her family has their daughter intended. Sad and imprisoned, the princess looks out from the barred windows of her chamber in the R ALTO palace, longing for a deliverance which never comes.

Dad's dark blue Mercury, with my mother driving slowly and carefully, rolled past
the little palace. I looked up at the RIALTO and saw the princess waving to me from her window. *Goodbye,* she said, *goodbye.*

He: What's the difference between a Jewish newspaper and a radio?
She: Silly, you can’t wrap a herring in a radio.1

1920s vaudeville 'gag'

The Rialto Theatre opened in Tampa, Florida on November 24, 1924. Its debut was preceded by 10 X 6-inch display ads that ran for a week in *The Tampa Tribune* and featured drawings of scantily clad dancing girls, along with the customary hyperbole attending opening nights.

High-class Musical Comedy Successes, Perfectly Presented by a Superlative Cast. Scenic Settings of Splendor – Chic Costumes Novel Lighting Effects of Surpassing Beauty.2

The play selected for the Rialto's opening was George M. Cohan’s *The O'Brien Girl.* Judging by the luscious prose of *The Tampa Tribune’s* entertainment critic, a lot was expected of the play and the theater which housed it.

THE O'BRIEN GIRL.

The Rialto Theatre, Tampa’s new playhouse, will open Monday night, and will be christened with the presentation of "The O'Brien Girl," pronounced one of the greatest musical plays in the history of the American stage.3

Despite his best shoulder-shoving efforts, the critic "E.O.L." from *The Tampa Tribune* was unable to get through the crowds on opening night. He wrote:

I tried to ‘get in’ for the opening of the new Rialto last night, but found street and sidewalk blocked with humanity awaiting a chance to push through the entrance. Realizing that it would be difficult, if not dangerous, to attempt to crash through that crowd, I was forced to defer a visit to Tampa’s newest playhouse and a review of "The O'Brien Girl" to some other evening.4

The reporter had better luck the next night and this review ran in November 26’s *Tribune.*

The Rialto, “Tampa’s new playhouse,” was constructed sometime during the months prior to its November opening and was probably begun in 1923, judging from the date of the sidewalk in front of the building. The Real Property Record on file with the Hillsborough County Tax assessor shows a construction date of 1947, an error that left a clerk in the Property Appraiser’s office unruffled. “Oh,” he shrugged, “we have lots of mistakes.” A building code, now no longer in use, is 192366.000. The architects were F. J. Kennard & Son. Francis Joseph Kennard, who emigrated from England to the U.S. in 1865, was a notable architect in Sanford, Orlando and Tampa, Florida. Alone or in practice with his son Philip, Kennard designed many of Tampa Bay’s most significant buildings, including Maas Brothers Department Store, The Burgert Brothers Studio, the Wolfson Building,
The Floridan Hotel, Henderson Elementary School, the Seville Apartments and several other elegant residences and churches in the Hyde Park neighborhood. The grandest of all Kennard's buildings was the Belleview Hotel at Belleair, built for transportation magnate Henry B. Plant.  

The complete file description for the Rialto Theatre property is: Borquardez Lot 2 AND N 20 _ INS OF LOT 3 BLOCK 1. The street address of the building is now recorded as 1631 North Franklin Street, though it has been variously listed at 1619, 1621 and 1627. In Burgert Brothers photographs taken from 1923 - 1939, the address is always given as 1621. The current owner of the building is Donald William Kenney, who purchased it from Clarence Holtsinger in 1974. When Holtsinger bought the building in 1949, it was intended to house his Ford automobile dealership. Kenney is owner/manager of Bay Armature Company, to which trade the building is given over now. Both owners acquired adjacent buildings which they annexed to the Rialto to accommodate their expanding businesses and allow for office and showroom space, repair facilities and storage.

Whether the three-dimensional letters forming the name RIALTO had by then dropped off or were still in place when Clarence Holtsinger acquired the building in 1949, he replaced them with HOLTSINGER in the white plastered blank in the top center of the façade. Some of HOLTSINGER is now also gone, and the letters in the space read: H LSINGER. The shadowy outline of RIALTO clings like a grudge to the plaster behind the newer name.

Holtsinger gutted the interior of the Rialto to suit its auto showroom role. He also poured a concrete slab which raised the floor of the building by around six inches, grading a ramp from the floor to the side alley and installing a wide and high roll-up door (where the stage door was formerly.) The original interior partitions forming the box office, dressing rooms, administrative office, and auditorium, as well as all the fixtures and furnishings (the theater seats, stage, orchestra pit, wings, rigging, and so on) were also removed and liquidated at an unknown date. When Kenney bought the building, a small vestige remained of the "indirect lighting system" installed by Monroe Electric Company in 1924. The system employed "varicolored lights to harmonize with music and scenes." By 1974, all that was left of the lighting system was a row of different-colored lights arrayed in a line around the perimeter of the auditorium, each fixture about twelve or fifteen feet from its neighbor. Kenney removed the fixtures and has no recollection of their disposal. A row of holes now marches around the room about twenty-five feet from the floor.

Two enormous fans – a 1920s version of air conditioning – are still in place in a cavity above the auditorium ceiling. Large square apertures crisscrossed by wooden latticework show where they are mounted. They remain wired and theoretically workable, but Kenney doubts they have been switched on since the Rialto closed as a theater.

Wooden rigging is still installed above what was once the stage. An access ladder is fixed to the upstage wall, ascending into the gloom where once brightly colored flats and drapes were flown, but Kenney cut off the bottom ten feet of the wooden ladder to prevent horse-playing employees from climbing on the rotting structure.

The auditorium is full of large dynamos – armatures – along with neatly stacked shelves of parts, coils of wire, and hundreds of tools. There is a tall 'come along' at one end of the space, and a well-lighted repair bay at the other. It is pleasantly dim and cool under the lofty ceiling, even without the fans which haven't turned since 1939.

At the stage end of the room springs a proscenium arch that is almost painfully pretty, curved and white and gently flaring toward what would have been the audience. Its edges are fluted, and a perfectly carved border of stylized grapevines runs all around it. In this greatly altered space it looks like a lily blooming on a slag heap.

Sam: Am I happy! I've got a wife in the country.
Arnold: Who wouldn't be happy with their wife in the country.

1920s vaudeville 'gag'

When the Rialto opened in 1924, it opened as a repertory theater. It had a resident company of theatrical artists – dancers, actors, musicians, directors – and
even a resident technical crew. The house company was sometimes referred to as The Rialto Players or The Rialto Musical Comedy Players. A recent fortuitous estate purchase in Tampa of a trunk of old photographs, costume parts, and letters has yielded dozens of photos of the Rialto's artistic corps. (The trunk was abandoned in the attic of a house on Highland Street in Tampa, at which address resided some of the Rialto's players.) The photos show a young and lively group of performers, about half women and half men, most of them mugging, posing, balancing en pointe and even back-bending in costumes which display the range of the Rialto's wardrobe. Indians, fairies, circus artistes, black face characters, Spanish señoritas, WWI doughboys, cowboys, Colonial dames: judging from the costumes, the Rialto's repertory appears to have embraced the sublime, the ridiculous and all theatrical conditions in between. This deduction is consistent with The Tampa Tribune's November 26, 1924 description of the venue and its artistic mission.

Tampa has every reason to be proud of the theatre, which is one of the most attractive, well arranged and artistically decorated that one could find in a long journey. It has been designed with an eye to comfort of the patrons and also to please them in an artistic sense—and it is to be unique among theatres of these times in that it will not show pictures. Musical comedy and burlesque is to be its policy.

The Rialto's promise to "not show [moving] pictures" points to the transitional character of popular entertainment in Tampa and across the nation during the early to mid-1920s. Vaudeville, the long-lived entertainment genre that blended ethnic theater, black face minstrelsy, and European music hall traditions, then laced the resulting mixture with American grassroots humor, no longer stood unchallenged in its bid for audiences' patronage and affection. While vaudeville acts continued to play successfully in many towns (especially mid- to small size towns and cities), the art form was taking smaller and smaller bites of the American entertainment dollar. At the time the Rialto opened, The Tampa Tribune ran ads in its "Amusements" section for several all or mostly vaudeville theaters, including The Strand and The Victory (as well as a handful of ballrooms, such as The Sunset Beach and Roseland, dedicated primarily to dance orchestras and social dancing.) Altered popular tastes were effecting changes, few of them salutary, in the fortunes of theaters like the Rialto that attempted to replace traditional vaudeville with its presumed successor: musical comedy. The trouble seemed to be two-sided: vaudeville wasn't getting off the stage fast enough for the likes of those who preferred musical comedy, while musical comedy was not attracting the mass acclaim its supporters predicted. To be sure, vaudeville, enjoying the longest dying scene ever mounted on the American stage, had gathered critics around its supposed deathbed as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. Variety remarked in 1905: "A good variety show is one of the finest tonics in the world, but vaudeville when for the most part it consists of fallen stars in mediocre wishy washy one-act plays is one of the finest producers of mental dyspepsia that I know of." The critics were still hissing in 1911 when Louis Reeves Harrison said: "Don't you think we have had enough of the cheapest and poorest form of entertainment ever slung over the apron of the stage into the face of a self-respecting and unoffending audience?"

The refusal of vaudeville to pass away either as quickly or as finally as many critics predicted had something to do, no doubt, with its having nearly as many fans as detractors. In fact, fervent praise of the art form that had been such a democratizer of America's diverse populations was often printed cheek-by-jowl with its critical opposite. Many of the pro-vaudeville writers leaned hard on vaudeville's cross-cultural appeal in constructing hymns to what Mary Cass Canfield in 1922 called, "art of the people, for the people, by the people:" Canfield went on, in The New Republic, to rhapsodize:

Perfection is the aim and sign of great art. Mr. Ziegfield's Follies, or the Winter Garden, or an afternoon of vaudeville at the Palace are perfect of their kind... Vaudeville leads us breathless but interested, from acrobats to sentimental songs, from pony ballets to well-played one-act tragedy. The revolving stage has a soul, it bounds forward to its task with a swagger, it prides itself on never making a mistake. It is American.
The “Amusements” section of the Tampa Tribune, Sunday, November 23, 1924, displaying the pre-opening advertisement for the Rialto Theater. (University of South Florida Libraries.)

More recent analysts have described vaudeville’s class-unconscious appeal this way: “High-society women in pearls sat side by side with humble Polish tailors and sentimental Italian bakers. It [vaudeville] was a cauldron in which to spice up the boiling stew of American cultural identity.”

Eventually, however, and notwithstanding the praise of its supporters (and for reasons only partially identified by its detractors), vaudeville, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, began to fade. By 1929, even its most steadfast promoters were reading the genre’s Last Will and Testament:

There are still incomparable artists on the vaudeville stage, such as Sophie Tucker, Belle Baker, Bill Robinson, Owen McGivney, Toto, Brothers Arnault, and a few others. But many of the best performers in vaudeville have gone to the musical comedy stage — George Cohan, Fred Stone, Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Fannie Brice, Joe Cook, Will Rogers, W.C. Fields, Fred and Adele Astaire, to mention a few. As a result, the average program even in the better class of vaudeville houses is often excruciatingly dull and talentless.

All this being taken together, it would seem, on the surface, that the decision of theaters like the Rialto to produce musical comedies like The Gingham Girl, Irene, Naughty Bride and Oh, Boy! (all of which ran at the Rialto in its early years) rather than vaudeville was a good one, in step with the trends of the time. However, the form to which many vaudeville stars were defecting...
could not and never did effectively replace vaudeville in the popular tastes. Some have blamed the repeal of Prohibition and the rise of nightclubs for the public's diminished interest in staged shows generally, since imbibing was the headline attraction of nightclubs while entertainment became a sort of living wallpaper. Other critics have suggested that musical comedy failed to engage audiences, that it was, compared to vaudeville in its glory days, a boring, overly-verbal experience. The Nation supplied an arch contrast between “the youthful sprightliness, concentration, and marvelous precision of perfect vaudeville,” and musical comedy, which it likened to “a lady far past her prime, inordinately made up, and garrulous to an extreme.”17 The Nation's was an opinion shared, apparently, by Tampa audiences who, despite their initial enthusiasm for the Rialto's musical comedy bill of fare, did not support the theater in the long run. By equipping itself with an expensive resident repertory theater team, then announcing its decision to present musical comedies in all their expensive splendor, Tampa's Rialto committed itself to an aesthetic which the entertainment-seekers of the city would not sustain in sufficiently large numbers to underwrite its cost.

The Rialto was forced to raise its prices, which it did by the end of 1925, going up more than 50% for general admission, from $0.50 to $0.77 and $0.99.18 At the fairly stiff price of nearly a dollar, the Rialto was in a poor position to fend off an assault on its livelihood from yet another and more lethal source: moving pictures.

A Scotland Yard Mystery – Crime – Murder – Suspicion. A SPARKLING MYSTERY DRAMA BUBBLING WITH ROMANCE AND REPLETE WITH THRILLS!19

This description accompanied The Franklin's ad for its latest film feature, starting November 26, 1924. At twenty-five cents for adults (ten cents for children) and including comedy (cartoons or short comic films), newsreels, a feature film, and an orchestra, and sometimes also displaying live stage performers (dancers, singers, acrobats, animal acts, comedic teams), the movie theater package was a hard act to follow. Among the many reasons for the demise of vaudeville and the failure of musical comedy to replace it in popular tastes, tight money was undoubtedly one of the most powerful. Had hard times not fallen with a bang in 1929, things might have taken a different turn but, as it was, the old vaudeville gag about the buffalo on the nickel being stretched so far it was screaming just wasn't funny any more. Along with its ads for the Strand, the Victory, and the Rialto – all theaters presenting musical comedies, vaudeville, or both – the 1924 Tampa Tribune started running larger and more prominent ads for The Franklin and other houses that were showing films. (This pro-
cess of conversion from legitimate houses to cinemas was accelerated by aggressive chains of movie theaters. In the South, the Sparks chain ended up owning most of the film houses in small to mid-size towns and cities. By 1925, the Rialto’s ads were much smaller than before; those of the Strand and the Victory, now both running films in addition to or in place of stage shows, were much bigger. Only the Rialto clung to its “live theatre only – resident company of players” stance, but a change of management in early 1927 meant a change in that policy as well. The Rialto began producing “package shows” rather than maintaining a resident company. One imagines the dismay on Highland Street, where those ebullient and attractive young actors, dancers and singers were put into the street a year and a half before the Crash. In November of 1927 the Rialto abandoned the no movies promise of its premiere and began running films on its dark nights. During “the week of February 26, 1928, the theatre presented the last of its regular live commercial performances.”

With the demise of the Rialto as a venue for legitimate professional theater, only foreign language, semi-professional, club-based ethnic theater (based in Ybor City and patronized almost exclusively by ethnic audiences) remained in Tampa, supplemented by an active amateur and community theater environment. This was the mise en scene until 1936, when The Federal Theatre Project came to town.

The Federal Theatre Project’s plan for Tampa-based production units falls into the category of things that seem like a good idea at the time. The good idea, of course, was based on the FTP’s Florida-wide plan to provide repertory theater, festival productions, vaudeville and variety shows, marionette troupes, and youth teaching programs in theater technique. In this, Florida conformed to the national four-part model of the WPA Arts Projects (Theater, Music, Art, and Writers.) The FTP was essentially and optimistically regional theater. National Director Hallie Flanagan hoped not only to forge “a balance of power between the local and the national aspect of Federal Theatre” but also to create regional and local production units that would grow out of and remain embedded in the tastes and needs of each area. Local theater was of no value, Flanagan insisted, unless “our audience sees something which has some vital con-
connection with their own lives and their own immediate problems."23

In Tampa, the search for immediacy, relevance and regionalism led Federal Theatre Project directors to Ybor City, where a lively and well-supported theater tradition, dating back to the earliest years of the neighborhood and supported nearly 100% by Ybor's resident ethnic populations (Sicilian, Cuban, Spanish, Jewish), was already in place. Much of the theatrical activity – the revistas (revues), zarzuelas (Spanish light operas), and bufas (a sort of Cuban commedia dell'arte) – as well as other events (banquets, raffles, dances, verbenas, youth programs, meetings, and pageants) took place in El Centro Asturiano, the capacious Spanish social club building at Palm and Nebraska Avenues in Ybor City. Built in 1914, the Centro was a locus for artistic and social activity, and was a logical choice to house what became designated in 1936 the Tampa Latin Unit of the Federal Theatre Project. Other units devoted to Italian opera, repertory theater, and vaudeville, were also housed in El Centro.

The set-up of the Tampa Latin unit was problematic from the outset, though FTP directors seemed initially not to notice. First among its problems was the nature of the existing theatrical menu in Tampa's Latin community, a menu that included nowhere the "good plays on as wide a variety of subjects as possible,"24 envisioned by Hallie Flanagan. The stock-in-trade spectacles of Tampa's Latin performers gained little notice from Tampa's non-Latin audiences, despite assurances by La Gaceta (Tampa's longtime tri-lingual newspaper published, in the 1930's, only in Spanish) that there were "numerosos Americanos simpaticos" in every crowd.25 Language was, of course, an insurmountable barrier for English-speaking theater-goers, but the stock characters of the Cuban bufá, the complexities of Italian opera, and the multiple nuances of the zarzuela, Spain's nineteenth century operetta form, were also incomprehensible to most Tampans except those whose aesthetic homeland had been Havana, Naples, or Madrid.

When Florida Federal Theatre Project director Dorothea Lynch and local supervisor Gene Brandon attempted to revise the Latin unit's play offerings to include more mainstream and socially relevant pieces like It Can't Happen Here (adapted by John Moffitt and Sinclair Lewis from Lewis' novel of the same name), the exercise quickly took on absurdist qualities. No Spanish translations of the play existed, and when one called Esto lo no pasara aqui finally did arrive it was almost entirely and woodenly literal, which did little to impress audiences used to the literary conventions and high-flown poetical devices of Spanish traditional drama.26

Other aspects of the Latin theater expe-
experience - set designs, acting styles, costumes, direction - proved as untranslatable as Lewis' stage play. When *Esto lo no pasara aqui* finally opened on October 27, 1936, the production was predictably disappointing from both sides of the footlights.

Project directors were comforted during this fiasco by the fact that El Centro Asturiano was accessible for other FTP production companies. The Tampa Italian opera unit, as well as vaudeville and repertory theater units (these last two made up of predominantly non-Latin performers), had been installed in 1936 and had a promising outlook. The repertory unit produced such plays at El Centro as *As Husbands Go*, *The Perfect Alibi*, *The Drunkard*, *Seven Keys to Baldpate*, *Merton of the Movies*, and *Seventh Heaven*, while posters held in the Federal Theatre Project Collection suggest that other pieces, including *Pandora's Box*, *If Ye Break Faith*, *Follow the Parade* and *The Little Old Lady* were also staged at El Centro, along with a number of children's plays.27 However, the arduous and time-consuming rehearsals for *Esto lo no pasara aqui* forced the non-Latin players, especially the repertory unit members, to look for alternative venues or postpone productions since they could not, for weeks at a time, gain space in El Centro or were needed to help coach the Latin unit's players as they struggled with the Lewis play. (During this time the Italian Opera company was 'absorbed' by the Federal Music Project.)

The lack of suitable alternative rehearsal/performance space took on graver qualities in 1937, when two developments shook the Tampa FTP units and brought on major changes in their organization and locales. First, Congressional restrictions forbade the employment of aliens in WPA projects from 1937 onwards. A number of key personnel in the Tampa Latin unit were not U.S. citizens and found themselves disqualified overnight for production funds. Second was the passage, in 1936, of legislation requiring the Florida project to take ninety percent of its workers from the state's relief rolls. For the most part, the Latin unit's performers were (and had always been), part-time performers and full-time cigar industry workers. As one of the few industries to remain relatively strong throughout the Depression, the cigar industry continued to pay good wages; actors, singers, directors and technical staff could not hope to achieve WPA relief certification from the State Board of Social Welfare if they were drawing regular wages from a cigar factory, as many were. In January, 1937, many Latin specialty artists were forced out of the Tampa Federal Theatre due to their loss of eligibility.

These moves ended up closing El Centro's doors to non-Latin FTP units as well as well as the Latin one. It can be argued that the doors had been closing for quite some time beforehand. As early as "the end of November, 1936," said Dorothea Lynch, "it be-
came evident that the American population of Tampa did not want to support an American repertory company—or at least come to Ybor City to do so."

In 1937, Tampa's Latin unit was closed. Its members who were American citizens and were eligible for relief under WPA standards were incorporated into the Tampa vaudeville unit, which then became the only functioning FTP unit in the city, though it had no regular theater venue and presented shows in such prosaic locations as the Rotary and Lions' Clubs, the Bay Pines Veterans Hospital and a recreation hall of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad. Only one performance, in July of 1937, was in a legitimate theater, the Victory; this was, in fact, the first WPA show to be presented to Tampans in a legitimate theater outside Ybor City. The repertory theater unit had nothing to do and was eventually closed. After it had been dislodged from the Centro Asturiano during rehearsals for *Esta lo no pasara aqui*, it had never recovered either a legitimate theatrical venue or a cast large enough to produce full-scale productions.

For six months, between September, 1937 and March, 1938, the FTP in Tampa gave no performances, but it was far from idle. It was then that the production unit moved to the Rialto Theater. It takes twenty years to become an overnight success.

Eddie Cantor

As a legitimate theater, the Rialto had been dark for some time, since 1928, in fact, when it gave the last of its live staged performances. How long afterwards it continued as a movie house is unclear, but in 1937 the building was managed by a real estate firm that leased it to an evangelical religious sect for services. Just what prompted FTP officials and artistic directors to choose the Rialto, so long removed from its role as a venue for live theater, as a home for its languishing vaudeville unit is not at all clear, but the delicate beauty of Kennard's architecture, as well as the theater's short but brilliant history as a legitimate house in the early 1920's, had to have encouraged the decision. Under the guidance of Martin 'Syl' Sylvester Zinns, the gifted designer-technical director who served the Tampa FTP from its outset until its demise, the Rialto was leased and completely refurbished for theatrical use. With somewhat startling efficiency, the labor for the make-over was provided by the out-of-work artists from the vaudeville unit, and the renovation (which took the six months from September '37 to March '38) was so successful that Hallie Flanagan described the Rialto as one of the Federal Theatre Project's most beautiful houses.

So it was that the little theater at Franklin and Henderson Streets enjoyed its second career as a legitimate house, a career quite a bit shorter and not nearly so brilliant as its first. Between March, 1938 and June, 1939, when the whole Federal Theatre Project was shut down by government edict, the Rialto was home to Tampa's FTP vaudeville unit and to good reviews and fair audiences for shows which included *Ready! Aim! Fire!*, *Seventeen Hits and Highlights*, *Invitation to the Dance*, and *Television*. Plans were underway for a statewide festival and a children's show unit. It is ironic that the vaudeville unit's final program was entitled *Television*, for by 1939 American audiences were most definitely moving indoors, toward the small screen, and to different pastimes that made, over the years, both vaudeville and the Rialto obsolete.

Looking at the Rialto now, with her battered face still pretty and her shopworn dignity still held bravely before the world, one gets the feeling that the old girl never really got her chance. She is like an ingenue grown old in the wings, waiting, waiting, for that one big break. Or the chorus girl whose...
The Rialto Theater annexed to Bay Armature, looking south on Franklin Street. (Photograph courtesy of the author.)

knees have gone but who still has that nice figure, that saucy smile; if the lights are soft and the audience isn’t too near why she can pass for twenty-five nearly any day, don’t you think? Certainly it is not the Rialto’s fault that it was, in a manner of speaking, an idea behind its time. One hates to think that F.J. Kennard, the Rialto’s architect, so celebrated for his elegant and topical taste, designed a perfect dove of a theater and then stood by and watched while it was dropped into a nest of movie-mad philistines, but the Rialto, silent and dark and

The Rialto Theater, interior view, displaying ornamented plaster proscenium surround. (Photograph courtesy of the author.)

mutely reproachful, gives the impression that it is so.

And yet, in a way curiously consistent with the Rialto’s stop-and-go past, the theater might come to life again. Del Acosta of the City of Tampa’s Historic Preservation Board has suggested starting the process of achieving Federal recognition and registration for the theater. “We don’t have architectural historians working here,” he says, “We have to rely on scholars to give us the background on these buildings.”

Now, Mr. Acosta has his reasons for wishing to save the Rialto and I have mine. Tampans today have only some fragments of material culture associated with the theater and its era to give us the real smell and touch and contour of the city’s past: a purple velvet hat found in the Highland Street trunk, some faded FTP posters, and the Rialto itself. It is one thing to read what someone said about a time and place. It is quite another to hold it in your hand, see it with your own eyes, lean against it with your own shoulder.

Saving the Rialto. It is almost too good to

Facade of the Rialto Theater, displaying both damaged “Holtsinger” name and “Rialto” ghost sign. (Photograph courtesy of the author.)

The Rialto Theater, detail of tile work on facade. (Photograph courtesy of the author.)
be true. I couldn’t resist going to Franklin and Henderson Streets to share the dream with the little palace of my childhood. I stood by the rusty iron utility pole (the same one in the 1924 Burgert Brothers photo of the theater) at the building’s southwest corner and looked up at the little barred windows in its façade. I hadn’t seen the princess behind the windows for some time but I fancied I saw her then. I waved, and she waved back. Hello, she said, hello.

Author’s Note: Since this article was composed and submitted for publication, the building formerly housing the Rialto went on the real estate market and has been sold. Without historic designation, its future is uncertain. MJP

ENDNOTES
3. Ibid.
9. Photographic Collection, The Tampa Bay History Center, Tampa, Florida.
23. Flanagan in Mardis, 50.
24. Flanagan in Mardis, 49.
25. La Gaceta, July 9, 1936, in Mardis, 178.
27. The Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, numerous sections and pages pertaining to Production Records, including Photographic Prints, Posters, and Titles, 1934 – 1943; not paginated.
31. Mardis, 237.

APPENDIX
List of plays staged at the Rialto Theater during the Federal Theater Project, 1939
(Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives,
George Mason University Library, Fairfax, VA)
Bacchanale. (Dance Theater.)
April 10, 1939.
Careless Household. (Children's Theater.)
October 8, 1938.
Dragon’s Wishbone. (Children’s Theater.)
February 1939.
Follow the Parade. (Musical Theater.)
May 23, 1938.
From the Earth Spring. (Dance Theater.)
April 10, 1939.
Halloween Program. (Children’s Theater.)
October 29, 1938.
Hans Buloa’s Last Puppet. (Children’s Theater.)
August 30, 1938.
Hazard of Infections. (Children’s Theater.)
October 1, 1938.
International Revue. (Vaudeville.)
November 5, 1937.
Invitation to the Dance. (Dance Theater.)
April 10, 1939.
Kansas of Hearts. (Theater.)
August 30, 1938.
Krazy Kat. (Dance Theater.)
April 10, 1939.
On Dixon’s Back Porch. (Children’s Theater.)
August 30, 1938.
Pandora’s Box. (Children’s Theater.)
October 1, 1938.
Ready! Aim! Fire! (Musical Theater.)
March 16, 1938.
Revue Internationale. (Vaudeville.)
July 6 10, 1936.
Reward. (Children’s Theater.)
March 25, 1939.
Tales from the Vienna Woods. (Dance Theater.)
April 10, 1939.