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ARTS + CULTURE

On the heels of a $34 million restoration, The Plaza Theatre in Palm Springs readies for its return to the spotlight.

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The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies ran from 1991 to 2014 at The Plaza Theatre.
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“The Last Hurrah!” It was a fitting title for the finale season of *The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies*. A blur of feathers and sequins and silver hair, the vaudeville-style musical revue at The Plaza Theatre featured 55-and-older performers — many of whom had enjoyed glittering careers before landing in the Coachella Valley. High-

kicking to the top of the desert's entertainment scene in 1991, the *Follies* held court for almost a quarter century.

So in 2014, when Teri Bond heard the venue was closing, she purchased two tickets for its final show, on a balmy Sunday evening in May. R&B songstress Darlene Love, known to Bond from the film *20 Feet From Stardom*, shared the billing as special guest.
Bond thrummed with excitement to see the long-legged lovelies that friends had raved about. As she recalls it today, she witnessed a fine performance. But the theater itself left less of an impression. "There wasn't much of an entrance, really," she says. "I remember it being dark and dingy."

What she missed were the ornamental aspects that once made The Plaza Theatre the jewel of downtown Palm Springs. When it opened nearly 90 years ago, the theater embraced the rustic "atmospheric" style popular in grand cinemas of the era; murals depicted an idealized Iberian village, and a starfield ceiling sparkled with innumerable pinpoint rays as house lights dimmed.

But decades of wear and grime made details easy to miss. Geometric stenciling adorned the lobby's original concrete beams. Hand-painted in Talavera style, with eight-petaled cosmos blossoms inside hexagons, the proscenium arch sat shrouded behind an old movie screen.



From 1991 to 2014, The Plaza Theatre was home to *The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies*, a hit revue led by co-founder and master of ceremonies Riff Markowitz (center).

After the *Follies* finale, the audience filtered into the warm night air, and Love lingered to sign autographs out front.

This December, the curtain rises once again. After an ambitious restoration, estimated at $34 million, The Plaza Theatre reemerges with brand-new infrastructure — upgraded sound, a larger stage, improved ADA accessibility — and a star-studded lineup including Lily Tomlin, Billy Porter, John Waters, and Jane Lynch. The return has been years in the making.

A committee formed in 2019 to begin charting the theater's restoration, with preservation advocate and former city council member J.R. Roberts at the helm. That effort grew into the Plaza Theatre Foundation, which secured its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in early 2022 and continues to guide the project today. The group has rallied donors, enlisted organizations such as Modernism Week and the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, and secured a game-changing $5 million pledge from TV producer David C. Lee.

"We're not doing a remodel," Roberts says. "We're doing a nuts-and-bolts restoration."

That work officially began in March 2024. The structure has been reinforced with steel and fiberglass. A new concrete floor hides ductwork for efficient cooling and heating as part of an all-new mechanical plant. Overhead, a grid system and rigging support the trick lighting setup, with Lycian 1280 LED followspots controlled through a GrandMA3 console. L-Acoustics audio promises a second-

to-none aural experience, while a Barco laser projector will deliver crisp, cinematic visuals. At the very top, the starfield ceiling has been rewired with thousands of LEDs to mimic a night sky.

The rustic atmospheric elements have been refreshed, down to the Romeo and Juliet balconies flanking the stage. Passageways will display historic photos and artifacts, including mementos from the *Follies* and all the eras that came before.

Through painstaking restoration, layers have been peeled back to reveal the Plaza's 1936 character. Having architect Harry Williams' original drawings on hand didn't hurt. Those sketches, commissioned by Dayton heiress Julia Carnell, became the blueprint for the region's first true movie palace.

Julia Shaw Patterson Carnell arrived in Palm Springs in the early 1930s with the means and the vision to shape downtown. Twice widowed — first from National Cash Register Company (NCR) co-founder Frank Patterson, then from NCR executive Harry Carnell — she had amassed a personal fortune, balancing business acumen with philanthropy, funding projects from church enhancements to the Dayton Art Institute.

On opening night in 1936, the world premiere of *Camille* drew many stars, including Greta Garbo herself.

After acquiring the site of the town's original First Community Church for $40,000, Carnell enlisted contractor W.O. Warner and a crew of 86 men for what the press described as a "huge building project." She coaxed Williams out of semi-retirement in Dayton, Ohio, to design the mixed-use Carnell Building in Palm Springs.

Carnell already knew Williams' work in Ohio, where his firm Schenck & Williams designed facilities for NCR and stately homes for the company's executives. Her commission introduced him to the desert, where he soon opened an office and, eventually, brought his sons Roger and E. Stewart into the practice. Together and independently, the Williams family created many historically significant structures in the Coachella Valley.

The Carnell Building, done in Spanish Colonial Revival style, opened in 1935, laying the foundation for La Plaza the next year. Conceived with cars in mind and spread over 3.5 acres, La Plaza was among the first shopping centers of its kind in California. Carnell envisioned a theater as the showpiece, a place for Hollywood premieres and high-society soirées.

To prepare, Harry and Roger set off on a scouting mission. "Mrs. Carnell hired a plane for us, and we flew to Santa Barbara," Roger recalled 50 years later in a video interview. "Lovely, old, quaint Spanish design with the wrought-iron grilles … was all new to us. We wandered around, saw the atmosphere, and then came back and tried to do likewise for the Plaza."

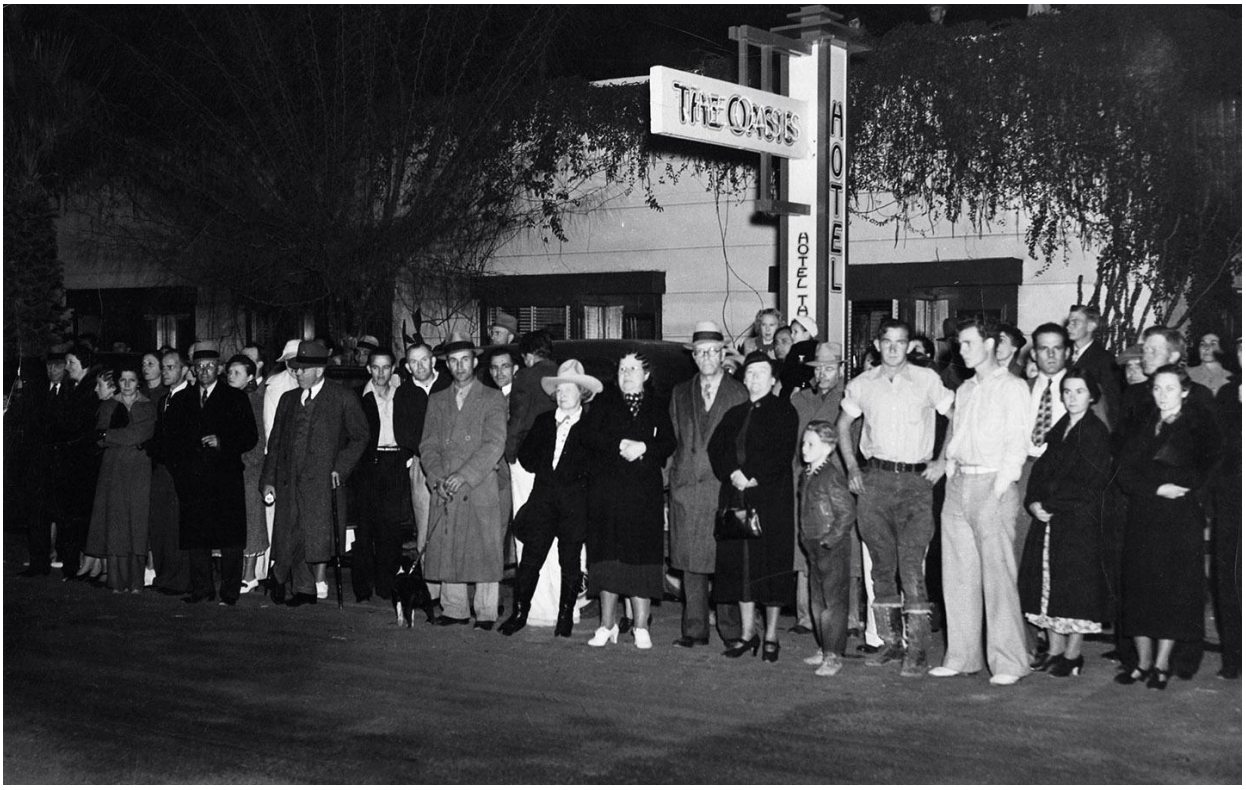
By February 1936, a local report noted, “Mr. Williams is here now in charge of the work and has his office on the property.” For the ambitious Plaza project, Warner brought on a crew of 100 men, working toward a September deadline.

How Carnell financed the construction is a subject of speculation. Published estimates range from $500,000 to $700,000. Her great-granddaughter Isabel Swift repeats a favored family tale: “Granny,” as they call her, won a $1 million jackpot at the Dunes Club, an illegal casino in Cathedral City operated by associates of Detroit’s Purple Gang. Not daring to return to Dayton with such a windfall, Carnell sprinkled dollars around the desert. “I just doubt the $500,000 for La Plaza came out of any Dayton account,” Swift says.

It’s a colorful story — but unlikely. Carnell, once a banking commissioner in Ohio and noted for her Presbyterian rectitude, hardly fits the profile of a high-stakes gambler. Did the generous philanthropist really roll the dice at an illicit casino? Did the casino even have $1 million to pay out? How did Carnell store a pile of cash of that size at the Desert Inn? More plausibly, she drew from her well-established fortune and track record of successful projects.
Williams embraced the shift to Spanish Colonial style, designing an innovative shopping center capped by a show-stopping atmospheric theater. Earle Strebe, already running two other movie houses in town, took the lease.



An early photo shows the theater's original sign, replaced in 1939 with the iconic art deco Plaza Theatre sign that still stands today.



Crowds gather across the street, outside The Oasis Hotel, on Dec. 12, 1936, to watch celebrities arrive for the Plaza's grand opening and the premiere of Camille.

On opening night, Dec. 12, 1936, the world premiere of *Camille* drew many stars, including Greta Garbo herself, said to have stolen in at the last moment to see her performance. Dozens of film premieres and live radio broadcasts by the likes of Jack Benny and Bob Hope cemented the Plaza's position as a cultural hub.

In the decades that followed, The Plaza Theatre endured changes in ownership and purpose, even a twin-screen retro-fit that dulled its grandeur. City acquisition under Mayor Sonny Bono and the 1991 arrival of Riff Markowitz's *Follies* revived the venue, named a Class 1 Historic Site that same year.

But time and neglect took their toll.

The restoration, led by the Plaza Theatre Foundation, restores the luster of a city landmark. Roberts and his team enlisted Woodcliff Construction of Los Angeles to oversee the work and tapped Oak View Group — operators of Acrisure Arena — to manage programming, with executive John Bolton named to run the theater. National touring acts will take the stage alongside local troubadours, with groups like the Palm Springs Gay Men's Chorus already secured as artists in residence.

For Palm Springs, the payoff extends beyond entertainment. The theater is projected to deliver an annual economic impact of $40 million, while restoring a historic downtown landmark.

And for people like Teri Bond, who once filled its seats and lamented its closure, The Plaza Theatre's return feels especially meaningful. Now retired and dabbling in open-mic nights, she dreams of her own *Follies*-style turn under the lights. "If I can tap some friends from my music-making community, sure, I'll perform there," she says with a wink. "I better start planning."

Who knows what might happen when you wish upon a starfield ceiling?