

# Pavilioned in Splendour

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The temperature is 103°, the humidity 101% and four buses are speeding north to beyond where any white man dares to go. The mission is to locate and inspect Loew's Picture House on 175th Street deep in Upper Manhattan. The crew is a motley collection of theatre and movie palace buffs — bare knees, nikons at the ready, bermuda shorts and even tape recorders as it is rumoured that the Wurlitzer may be in working order. Led by physicist and part time member of the N.Y.C. Landmark Commission, Dr. Joe Rosenberg, these are determined men and women, as fanatical as those mystically motivated clerics in Britain whose talk is of Bradshaw and whose visions are of steam trains. They've already inspected twenty seven theatres in the hottest summer New York has known for a decade but still they would kill for plasterwork.

The air conditioning has broken down. The windows are opaque mug-proof plastic begrimed in Jersey City. But we intrepid explorers already have our memories, our pleasures and our sorrows. First there was the Casa Italiana, formerly the Stanley, a single tier Spanish 'atmospheric' with dance floor spread over the rear seats for Mafiosa weddings pizza style — even the motto 'God Bless America' is in Italian. Then a pair of early theatres by Thomas Lamb, also in downtown Newark, both with high S.F.I. — Sticky Floor Index — by which we learn to rate live theatres now at the bottom of the movie league of soft porn and martial art. Next door and now dark were the Proctors, a pair of 2,000 seat vaudeville houses piggy-back style — are they missionary or soixante-neuf, we ask as we peer for telltale smoke vents at the top of the thrusting fly towers?

On Staten Island we've visited Sailor's Snug Harbour, an 80 acre garden site of Greek Revival, Empire and Beaux Arts buildings overlooking Manhattan, which boasts an 1892 theatre complete with stalls and horseshoe gallery of archaic form. Here, incredibly, is a solid plaster ceiling, apparently original, covering half of the fly

Down the road our first taste of Eugene de Rosa, the St. George which is, or was, a 3,000 seat Moorish-Spanish vaudeville house opened by Eddie Cantor probably pursued by the Riff. Our 120 members watched it broken up before our eyes; many camera bags soon becoming as heavy as our hearts on leaving.



*The magnificently restored facade of the Lyric in 41st. (photo Iain Mackintosh)*

tower in area and pitched two-thirds up the tower — holes neatly drilled for the still working hemp lines. (Were those omnipotent American acousticians filling the stage with their gear even before the turn of the century? If so, form squares and remember Bunker Hill.)

In Manhattan itself we had discovered two theatre quarters now largely given over to marauders. First there was the 14th Street area with two flagships still afloat: the Academy of Music of 1854 rebuilt in 1926, three levels, 3,650 seats by Thomas Lamb in Paris Opera mood and anxious to outpoint Garnier. It is now retitled the Palladium and given over to the loudest, brightest rock imaginable. Second the Jefferson, a 1913 Adam style Lamb house now, after fifteen years of closure, being painted white all over by the Disco boys led by the Studio 42 man who wasn't in jail for tax evasion, and who, in his description of the project managed to insert 'state of the art technology' into every sentence. Uptown we toured the theatres of 42nd Street, before the First World War New York's Shaftesbury Avenue and now dangerously involved in drug trade and other fortunately less distasteful pursuits. Here we saw the theatres of the Brandt chain, owners who although understandably commercial have kept threatened theatres in existence and even restored one, the Apollo, in an 8-week orgy of steam cleaning. High S.F.I. but they are, in the words of the Sondheim lyric, 'still here'. The Liberty, a rare 3-tier house, retains its original painted 'asbestos' (safety curtain) from 1904 and some of its elegant, stepped boxes. The Lyric, formerly



*The Winter Gardens, New York, opened 1912. (photo Iain Mackintosh)*