

In 1972, a group of workers was looking for a place to hold a meeting in Cleveland, Ohio. By turning a rusty key, they

OUT OF THE WOODS - THE

If Stephen Sondheim is still looking for a theme for his next musical, he could well turn his talents away from stories of heroes and towards the story of heroic theatres.

The tale of the Playhouse Square district in Cleveland has all the elements of a modern-day blockbuster musical - ambition, enthusiasm, success, compromise, hope, desolation and abandonment. The protagonists enjoy all the triumph, and suffer all the ignominy the twentieth century entertainment world has to offer.

But just as the curtain was about to fall and the bulldozers move in, a new generation discovers the tarnished splendours, and with fresh ambition and plenty of enthusiasm creates an outstanding artistic and social success.

Cleveland developed in true American style. Meteoric expansion based on business and commerce took the population from 57 in 1810 to over 40,000 busy people in 1860, all looking to make more money and for ways of spending it. Entertainment was on the agenda, and theatre blossomed, with one of the country's first drama schools opening in Cleveland in 1853.

As the century turned, the appetite for drama, musical theatre, comedy, musical spectacular (typified by the *Zeigfeld Follies*), and silent movies, was insatiable. To compete and adapt to these demands, 'palaces' were commissioned as lavish showcases, and the audiences flocked in.

Cleveland was growing, and real estate developer Joseph Laronge marked out an area for a collection of beautiful theatres. Within 5 years of the opening of the 1800-seat Stillman Theatre in 1916, the district called "Playhouse Square" was established, and the building boom had begun.

The three theatres at the center of this story are the State, Ohio and Palace. The State and Ohio opened within a week of each other in February 1921, with the Palace following in 1922. The State offered its 3400-seat audience a program of orchestra-accompanied silent movies in an elegant setting of Roman, Greek



The auditorium at the State Theatre.

and European Baroque. The 320 foot (100m) lobby, adorned with a Venetian ceiling, marble and mahogany, is one of the longest in the world. The Ohio, originally intended for the legitimate theatre, had 1400 seats, and a similar Baroque lobby.

The vast Palace Theatre was a \$7m monument to vaudeville entrepreneur B.F. Keith, and was

billed as the 'showplace of the world'. The beautiful 'Grand Hall' was adorned with treasures from around the world, and hung with a valuable art collection. With its 3,680-seat French Imperial style auditorium, it was the 'swankiest' vaudeville theatre in the country, and drew the biggest names. All three theatres were connected with a network of tunnels.

But the exuberant atmosphere of the 1920's was not to last, and the changing trends of the 30's drifted towards inexpensive entertainment, such as the radio, and a 25¢ weekly trip for 85 million movie-goers.

The Palace was modified for cinema in 1926. In 1935, the Ohio was briefly converted into a nightclub with a new Art Deco

Photo by David M. Thum