



CENTENNIAL THEATRE

THE CABOT IN BEVERLY CELEBRATES 100 YEARS
OF BRINGING ENTERTAINMENT TO THE REGION.

BY ROBERT G. PUSHKAR



The Cabot Theatre has a long history of entertaining North Shore residents.



IN

1976, the Cabot Cinema in Beverly was fading fast under the ownership of the movie chain, E. M. Loews.

The 56-year-old building at 286 Cabot Street was in disrepair after a storied history that began when it opened on December 8, 1920, as the Ware Theatre. Then, throngs lined up to view live vaudeville acts and an assortment of movies—silent, of course—to the accompaniment of rousing music from the huge Austin pipe organ. It was one of perhaps 20,000 theatres in America that provided the novel thrill of moving images to awestruck audiences in lush, ornate palaces of their day. Talkies wouldn't arrive until 1927 with *The Jazz Singer*.

A few blocks away, the Larcom had been in the entertainment business since 1912, offering a fare of vaudeville amusements as well as shorts and feature films. Founders Harris and Glover Ware of Marblehead launched their second venue as the craze for movie going was changing the social landscape. Most cities and towns of a certain size had their own cinemas, but the two in Beverly still exist today due to a succession of vigilant community groups determined to preserve them.

If, as Emerson opined, “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man,” then the Cabot's most successful rebirth and preservation surely must be credited to a Cuban immigrant Cesareo Pelaez, who believed in magic. His childhood dreams were fueled by the magic shows he attended in Havana's grand theatres. He learned from the masters like Fu Manchu, and as a teenager he joined friends in producing shows. He once told a reporter, “I have never been able to stop dreaming since childhood.” But a revolution forced him into exile, and his magic would have to be put on hold.

He sought asylum in Colombia and taught there for one year before coming to the United States. At Brandeis University he was a devoted follower of Abraham Maslow, founder of humanistic psychology. He taught there under his mentor, and then moved on as a professor of psychology at Salem State College (now University).

Meanwhile, the charismatic Pelaez revealed to friends and colleagues his dream



of mounting a magic show in the Cuban and European traditions. David Bull briefly met Pelaez over Easter dinner at the family home. He was impressed by the professor's knowledge of psychology, his own field of study at Boston University.

After graduation Bull reconnected with Pelaez, and self-taught himself to perform magic-making from reading books, hoping to impress him. He helped found the company of 17 members merging as White Horse Productions, which pooled \$110,000 to buy

The theatre. Bull says, “Cesareo had a very specific vision of what he wanted to put on stage. He was very insistent that stage magic could be presented on the level of great opera and ballet.”

But first they needed a revenue stream. After a “48-hour intensive scrub-down,” the theatre began showing movies.

Pelaez's deferred dream gained momentum and plans for a magic show ramped up. Others joined in, preparing the stage, building props, and honing theatrical skills. On February

SV Design made much needed upgrades and renovations to the old theatre.

Built in 1920, The Cabot Theatre was once called the Ware. Below, Patti Austin recently performed at The Cabot to raise awareness for the nonprofit mentoring program called Over My Shoulder. Austin was joined for two numbers by North Shore native 17-year-old Amanda Mena.



20, 1977, Marco the Magi's Production of *Le Grand David and His Own Spectacular Magic Company* premiered, unlike anything ever seen in modern times on the North Shore.

The shows were exuberant spectacles with levitations, transmogrifications, and sleight-of-hand feats punctuated by blaring trumpets, flashing spotlights, waving banners, and unfurling exotic fans. Razzamatazz vaudeville staples—a 12-member barbershop quartet, lovely dancers, jugglers, puppeteers, clowns, even a tap-dancing cow—lent astonishment to the show. Performers were costumed in dazzling outfits hand-sewn in-house and showcased among exquisite sets built by the crew. Their ranks included volunteers who held ordinary jobs—teachers, engineers, housewives, bankers et al.—who on Sunday afternoons morphed to performance artists at the direction of Pelaez, aka Marco the Magi.

Pelaez, whose signature green eyes were always shining and focused, chose an Oriental motif for his show. He once explained this was because “it offered the greatest possibilities for beauty and coherence in the design and



costumes.”

Later the name was shortened to just *Le Grand David and His Own Spectacular Magic Company*. The ensemble numbered 72 and over its lifetime delivered more than 2,600 performances, including seven shows at the

White House. During its 36-year run, it was the longest consecutively running stage magic show in the world according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

Riding the wave of the popularity of live entertainment, the Cabot resident company

The Cabot's
executive director
Casey Soward



spread its magic and purchased the Larcom Theatre less than a half-mile away located on Wallis Street. Again, they engaged in a top-to-bottom restoration project, which took just over a year. On October 16, 1985 (Pelaez's birthday), a second show premiered, with new tricks and choreography. Now, Beverly had the distinction of two magic shows running concurrently, which surely must be a record since the vaudeville era.

In May 2012, the final curtain descended on the magic show, after the death of Pelaez earlier that year. The company stopped performances, and The Cabot faced a doubtful future. The theatre was put up for sale. Developers and other business owners came to check out the property. Rich Marino remembers that he worried about the loss of this historic treasure to development. His Chianti Jazz Club is across the street, and he watched with binoculars as real estate agents gathered prospective buyers for tours. "It was

for a quick evaluation. He was happy to give an hour or two of his time. And that was all it took for nostalgia to work its own magic. Siemasko has been pivotal in the restoration, donating his time pro bono for over five years. He is now vice chairman of the Board of Directors.

As the building needed a lot of work to get it up to code, Siemasko devised an incremental approach using multiple phases over several years. The primary concerns were health and safety, which required the installation of fire alarm and sprinkler systems, electrical services, and a reinforced roof. Next was patron comfort, which entailed the installation of 850 brand-new seats, a new heating and air-conditioning system, hand rails, and handicapped accessibility. Also on the list were improved functionality and aesthetics. Box seats in the balcony were reopened, and a multipurpose platform was installed in the rear main floor.

Since 2015, executive director Casey Soward has managed The Cabot, ever mindful of the trust placed in him while it is under his watch. He sees their mission as twofold: to preserve and restore a beautiful building and to support the arts in the community. "We're growing a brand-new arts organization," he says, "that presents everything from films to children's programming to classical music to a variety of visual content, and comedy and popular artists. It's the confluence of those two things that is our mission at The Cabot."

The theatre is an entertainment destination in the downtown's newly established Beverly Arts District. Already, \$4 million has been invested in the restoration, with \$750,000 earmarked to upgrade the lobby. Special events help in growing funds and unifying the community in a common interest. A full-time digital marketing manager uses social media to keep the buzz going among various demographics. Soward said his marriage vows

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a gift for the city and left to us, and I felt it was our job to be stewards and pass it on to another generation," he nostalgically told me. And this, from someone who went on his first date with his wife at the Cabot.

A group of citizens, hastily brought together by city councilor Scott Houseman, emerged as the "Founders" with the tasks of preservation foremost on their minds—for once this place was indeed a palace. In 2014 entrepreneur/philanthropist Henry Bertolon stepped up and purchased the Cabot for \$1.2 million. But he soon discovered that the theatre first had to add value to downtown.

At this point, the theatre was repurposed as a nonprofit and renamed the Cabot Performing Arts Center. The plan was to show movies and offer live entertainment on stage. But that was a reach, as the aging building required a state-of-the-art sound system and other upgrades.

The task of restoration was formidable. The Founders approached Beverly architect Thaddeus Siemasko, a partner of SV Design,

Installation of new lighting and a \$90,000 digital projection system followed. And the renovations continue, made possible by creative fundraising, a Cabot Club for memberships, and generous donations.

For years, speculation circulated about what was above the faux drop ceiling in the lobby. Recently, that mystery of at least 60 years was solved. Tiles have been peeled back revealing a once-grand entrance, complete with a Palladian window, Beaux Arts cornices, and the original chandelier. At some point during a past renovation an effort was made to preserve small poster boxes notched into the walls. On being opened, posters from a bygone era were revealed.

"We just want the doors to be swinging open and closed and being used in all ways that can be imagined," Siemasko says. "If those doors are swinging and the hinges get worn out, our vision is that we'd like to replace the hinges because we know the place is being used by the community."

and had his wedding reception here, and he foresees another venue for the theatre.

Everywhere the effect of the arts on local economies has been an underleveraged asset. But The Cabot story is supported by facts. Soward consulted studies from the group Americans for the Arts. "We estimate our economic impact on the region and on Beverly to be about \$7 million in 2019," he says.

Chairman of the Board of Directors Stephen Immerman, a former president of the Montserrat College of Art, concurs. "The bulk of the money for admission for the live performances goes directly to the artist. So we're also supporting the artists and the artist's work."

When asked once what was his magic show's secret, Cesareo Pelaez offered one word: togetherness. "I think he was creating not only a theatrical ensemble," Bull says, "but creating a family." That too is a form of magic, which today, still permeates the vibe at the beloved Cabot. ♦ thecabot.org