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**Historic “California Theatre”
Opens in Downtown San José**
*Restoration and expansion of classic 1920s movie palace
anchors San José Arts District*

San José ---- Shuttered for over 30 years, the historic California Theatre in downtown San José reopened today as a major modern performing arts facility designed both for live stage performances, including opera, and for motion pictures.

The \$75 million restoration was the result of a six-year joint undertaking of the San Jose Redevelopment Agency and the Packard Humanities Institute, which financed over one-third of the project costs.

“This beautifully restored theater connects us with the brilliance of San Jose’s past, and it represents our vision for a bright future,” said San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales at the “ticket-tearing” ceremony today. “The California Theatre is a work of art that many hands have helped to create and enrich the cultural life of our downtown.”

Opera San Jose will begin its season in the new hall on Saturday, September 18, with a production of “The Marriage of Figaro.” The inaugural season at the California will continue with “Tosca,” “Carmen,” and “The Flying Dutchman.”

Other local and touring performing groups will share the California with Opera San Jose, including Symphony Silicon Valley and screenings of classic films.

This beautifully restored and expanded historic theater is envisioned as the centerpiece of San José’s South First Street Theater, Arts and Entertainment District.

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Originally built in 1927 and designed by the noted architectural firm of Weeks and Day (architects of the Sainte Claire Hotel, Oakland's Fox Theatre and San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel), the California Theatre is one of the best-preserved examples of late 1920s motion picture houses in the country. Over the years, the theater housed vaudeville shows and featured 3D and Cinemascope.

In the 1960s and 1970s the building went through several owners until it closed in 1973. In 1985, the property was purchased by the San José Redevelopment Agency to preserve San José's largest remaining vintage downtown movie palace. Plans to return the theater to use were stymied by technical and budget constraints, including the inadequacy of the original stagehouse for modern production requirements for live performance.

In 1998 the Packard Humanities Institute offered to fund a feasibility study to identify options for the theater's conversion into a performing arts hall suitable for the largest productions of Opera San José and other performing groups.

The Redevelopment Agency hired ELS Architecture and Urban Design for the study and later for the design for theater renovation and expansion, joined by theater consultants Auerbach-Pollock-Friedlander and Auerbach-Glasow lighting design. Charles M. Salter Associates was retained to provide acoustical consulting services.

The conversion of the theater into a top-tier modern performance facility required a larger and wider stagehouse. The tight site and an existing service alley for the neighboring Sainte Claire Hotel left no room to expand.

"With the much-appreciated cooperation of the Sainte Claire, we relocated the service alley from Market Street to First Street to give us just enough room so we could build an entirely new stagehouse next to the hotel," said Bob Ruff, Redevelopment Agency project manager.

"The new stagehouse can accommodate major opera performances and let us use a wide range of sets, including set exchanges among companies and for visiting shows."

Restoration of the historic building to its original 1927 grandeur was a major goal of the Packard Humanities Institute, the San José Redevelopment Agency, and ELS Architects. The First Street entry façade was returned to its former elegance, including the re-creation of the original marquee and "California" vertical blade sign.

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Tony Heinsbergen, son of A.B. Heinsbergen who was the original decorative designer of the California Theatre, was retained to guide the restoration of the historic interiors.

Unfortunately, Heinsbergen died in February 2004, before the final phase of decorative painting could be completed.

James Goodman was then engaged to design and supervise all decorative painting in the historic areas of the theater. The decorative painting was done by EverGreene Painting Studios of New York. For many weeks, as many as fifteen skilled decorative painters were working simultaneously on scaffolding inside the theater.

“The transformation of the California has been extensive and the result is exciting,” said Ruff. “The auditorium and three foyers have been painstakingly refurbished by taking our cues from historic photographs, and we have installed custom broadloom carpeting, infill terra cotta tile, marble veneer, and restored historic light fixtures to enhance a unique atmosphere.”

One of two refurbished Wurlitzer organs is positioned in the entry foyer, and the second pipe organ is located in the main auditorium. Both were carefully assembled and installed by Edward Millington Stout III. The organs will be owned and maintained by the Stanford Theatre Foundation, a local organization dedicated to the preservation of historic theaters.

Within the auditorium are extensively restored decorative painting and historic light fixtures; theatrical lighting upgrades imbedded in dropped ceiling beams and in Juliet balconies to minimize technical intrusions; and 1,160 new mohair upholstered seats.

To accommodate Opera San Jose and other live productions, the rear orchestra seating level and balcony were slightly re-raked for better sightlines, while keeping a traditional movie palace ambiance. A sound-dampening roof structure was added to reduce outside noise penetration.

New structural framing and seismic bracing throughout the project were carefully placed to accommodate restored historic features. The stage rigging and curtains, the orchestra pit elevator, and theatrical lighting and sound systems are new. The projection booth was extensively renovated.

A new Market Street building addition was designed by ELS to provide a second main entrance from the convention center district. Limestone facades were designed to complement the neighboring Sainte Claire Hotel.

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The building addition provides additional program space for the opera company and other performing groups. In addition to the two-story lobby expansion, amenities include basement-level dressing rooms and back-of-house support; mezzanine-level star dressing rooms; and second-level conference room, green room, and large rehearsal hall.

The new building facing First Street holds expanded restrooms, mechanical and support rooms, and a new outdoor courtyard accessible at performance intermissions.

Swinerton Builders was the general contractor, with Rudolph and Sletten providing construction management services. Team San José, a local consortium that also operates and markets other San Jose performance and convention venues, will operate the new theater.

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