

The El Capitan Theatre: A Hollywood Legend

by Mary Kraemer, *PassPorter Guest Contributor*

Hollywood. Movies. The two words are practically synonymous. Glamorized by the huge studios such as MGM and sweeping cinematic epics such as *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*, Hollywood possesses magic that dazzles people. And yes, its sidewalks are covered with stars that honor the people who have been part of that magic.

Transformed from an agricultural area to the center of cinema, in time, Hollywood tarnished somewhat and became seedy, and is now undergoing a revitalization to become a vibrant place again. Although some of the area boasts impressive new buildings, such as the Hollywood and Highland Center, which features the Kodak Theater--home to the Oscars--there are also lovely original buildings from Hollywood's heyday.

One of the finest examples of Hollywood's past, present, and future glory is the fabulous El Capitan Theatre. Opened in 1926 as a theater for live performances, the El Capitan is mostly known as one of Hollywood's grand movie palaces. One of its notable premieres was *Citizen Kane*, in 1941. What's a movie palace, you ask? If you have never had the pleasure of this experience, I will be delighted to share it with you. It's a vastly different--wonderful--experience than going to a movie at the local multiplex!

The first impression of the theater comes from its exterior, with a marquee filled with thousands of lights promoting the movie that's currently playing. That's right - THE movie, not 16 or 20 movies! The El Capitan boasts an ornate Spanish Colonial exterior. After purchasing your tickets at the lovely ticket booth that is in the center of the front entryway, you'll be greeted pleasantly, and admitted into the elaborate lobby area.

One of the special pleasures of a movie palace is the choice between seats in the orchestra level, easily accessed through the lobby, or climbing the thickly carpeted stairs to the balcony seating (I highly recommend this area simply because you can't sit in a balcony at your local multiplex). If you decide to sit in the orchestra section, you owe it to yourself to take a walk upstairs to see the photo collection in the upstairs hallway, which shows many memorable moments and notable guests from the El Capitan's distinguished history.

Once inside the theater, find your very comfortable seat and take in your sumptuous surroundings. In the 1920s, the El Capitan Theatre's interior cost \$1.2 million dollars, and its elaborate East Indian theme is simply gorgeous. In 1989, the Walt Disney Company began a museum-quality restoration of the El Capitan Theatre and did an amazing job of bringing the theater back to its original splendor. It is ornate and beautiful; you can spend quite a bit of time simply admiring the interior.

But Disney did more than merely restore the theater to its original lavish beauty. The stage was improved for performances, dressing rooms were remodeled, and the theater boasts superb projection and sound equipment, as well as the ability to provide some surprise special effects. Seeing a film at the El Capitan assures you of a top-quality viewing experience.

Unlike a local multiplex, where the pre-show time is filled with a loop of annoying ads on the screen, the El Capitan has something special for its guests, a 1920s Mighty Wurlitzer organ! This top-of-the-line instrument was built to provide movie palace guests with the best musical experience available. On each side of the theater, there are two chambers that house the 2,500 pipes that let the sound from this wonderful organ truly impress its audiences with its amazing capabilities. House organist Rob Richards entertains guests with wonderful renditions of favorite tunes, often related to the movie that is about to appear on the screen.

When it is show time, the organ descends through the stage floor, the house lights dim, and then, as if to introduce the movie in a grand style, multiple curtains swirl open to reveal the screen so the show can begin.

Because the Walt Disney Company owns the El Capitan Theatre, first-run Disney movies are shown. Often, the theater is the site of a movie's premiere, and there could be no more perfect place. On occasion, the El Capitan will add special events to the film, making it an even more special experience. For example, when *Pirates of the Caribbean* was showing at the El Capitan, the entire theater was 'dressed up' in a pirate theme. From the fort over the marquee that included palm trees and cannons, to the display of props from the film that were available to view throughout the theater and as a walkthrough display in the basement, to the juggling pirates out on the front sidewalk, guests were treated to an extraordinary experience.

Once in a while, the El Capitan Theatre shows a classic Disney movie, and it is such a treat to see those lovely films on the big screen. Other times, the El Capitan takes a playful approach to a popular movie, such

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as Mary Poppins, and offers 'sing-along' showings, which are a lot of fun (and might also have some unexpected surprises during the show!) Depending on the film, Disney might have a pre-movie show, where live characters will take to the stage and perform. But even if the El Capitan does not add any extras, going to the spectacular theater and seeing a movie with the state-of-the-art projection and sound system is special.

One of my favorite features of the El Capitan Theatre is the ability to purchase tickets online for a future performance. Now, yes, the local multiplex has this capability, but the El Capitan goes one step farther. Although there are general admission tickets available, you can also purchase a specific seat for a particular showing. So, for example, if you are like me, and you adore the first few rows of the balcony toward the center, you can buy those seats in advance. Reserved seats have a higher price than general admission, but there is no stress about sitting in just the right seat without much wait in line (which can be a blessing given the unpredictability of Los Angeles traffic). And reserved seat ticket prices often include a large bucket of popcorn and a soda. (For you Disney collectors out there, the buckets are often themed to the movie that's showing.)

Can this experience get any better? Of course! This is Disney, after all, and adjacent to the El Capitan Theatre is the one and only Disney Soda Fountain and Studio Store. This (new) old-fashioned ice cream parlor serves divine sundaes, cones, shakes, floats, phosphates, and lunch counter-style food in an intimate space that is shared with the Studio Store. (My kids love to browse after we order our ice cream treats, which is, no doubt, part of the design plan!) The soda fountain has table seating, counter space, and even a walk-up cone window for sightseers on the go. Often, the Studio Store offers exclusive merchandise related to the film appearing in the theater.

Convenient, well-lit parking is available in the Hollywood and Highland Center, directly across Highland Avenue from the theater and soda shop. The soda shop offers partial parking validation, subject to availability.

About The Author: Mary and Char are agents with www.CruisingCo.com and www.MouseEarVacations.com, in business since 1987. Char is currently on a whirlwind tour of Europe, and Mary is looking forward to her first Oasis of the Seas cruise in January!

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