

# No. 64: Sarasota Opera House

61 N. Pineapple Ave.  
Roy Benjamin, architect

Thousands of Sarasotans have many fine memories of the Sarasota Opera House.

It is a place for culture, hosting performances of opera and ballet. It is a place for ceremony, hosting many graduation events over the years.

I remember it as a movie theater in the early 1960s.

On summer Wednesday mornings, the children of Sarasota would gather in front of what was then known as the Florida Theatre and drop six RC Cola bottle caps into a barrel. This would allow them to enter the theater to watch a movie.

Children who did not have six caps could toss in three at the same time another child was tossing in six. I can attest that this bit of deception often was effective.

Once inside, the movies tended to be adventure flicks, such as "Journey to the Center of the Earth" — the 1959 version.

The cultural thermometer has increased significantly since the Asolo Opera Guild bought the building, vacant since 1973, and restored it in 1982 (and again following the 2007 season), with 1,119 seats. Out with screaming kids. In with "Manon Lescaut" and the other operas on this winter's schedule.

The building was constructed in 1926 as the Edwards Theatre, named for two-term mayor A.B. Edwards. A native Floridian, Edwards knew the region as a lawless frontier in his youth, but promoted Sarasota as a resort destination in the 1910s and '20s. His professions in real estate and insurance sales positioned him for such a mission.

The building, with the Mediterranean revival architecture that was popular in the 1920s boom, was multi-use, with shops on the first floor, offices on the second and 12 apartments on the third. The theater and balcony seated 1,500 — segregated until the 1960s.

Framed with steel posts and beams and clad in clay-tile block, it was used for silent films, concerts and plays. The roster of performers included Elvis Presley during his famous tour in 1956, Will Rogers and The Ziegfeld Follies. "The Great-



The exterior of the Sarasota Opera House as it looks today. The opera company bought the former A. B. Edwards Theatre in 1979 for \$173,000. PROVIDED BY SARASOTA OPERA



The Florida Theatre, now the Sarasota Opera House, was decorated to look like a circus tent, for the 1952 Florida premiere of "The Greatest Show on Earth." PHOTO PROVIDED BY SARASOTA COUNTY HISTORIC RESOURCES



Column accents are on some of the lobby columns in the lobby of the Sarasota Opera House. HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF FILE PHOTO

est Show on Earth," Cecil B. DeMille's epic circus film, had its world premiere there in 1952. A partial circus tent was built over the entrance for the building to provide a dramatic portal for stars Dorothy Lamour and Charlton Heston.

Jacksonville-based architect Roy Benjamin (1888-1963) specialized in theater design; he was associate architect of the Florida Theatre and also de-

signed many fine houses and apartment buildings in his home city.

Benjamin did not have the notoriety in Sarasota of his contemporaries, Dwight James Baum and Thomas Reed Martin, but he created a landmark that has had an enormous impact on Sarasota's cultural scene.

"Florida Buildings I Love" is Harold Bubil's homage to the Sunshine State's built environment. This article originally ran on March 3, 2018.