

# SUNDAYPLUS



## Sarasota’s ‘Purple Cow’

Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall cemented city’s cultural status



**Jeff LaHurd** Columnist | Sarasota Herald-Tribune | USA TODAY NETWORK

When the curtain rose for the first time at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, on Jan. 5, 1970, for the production of “Fiddler on the Roof,” Sarasota added to its claim of being the cultural hub of the Gulf Coast of Florida. ● Ground was broken for the hall on April 25, 1968, with a newspaper photo showing Commissioner David Cohen, Mayor Jack Betz, City Manager Ken Thompson, auditorium advisory committee chairman Adolph “Chick” Frankel and Paul Stannard, who had helped obtain a grant from the Van Wezel Foundation. Each was armed with a shovel to push into the turf. ● The idea for a city-owned hall was put forward by Allied Arts Council President Rita Kip, who interested Mayor David Cohen, a noted local musician and concertmaster of the Florida West Coast Symphony in the project. ● In 1964, a \$1.35 million bond issue was voter approved for the hall’s construction. However, more money was needed which was provided by the Lewis and Eugenia Van Wezel Foundation who agreed to donate if the hall was named in honor on the Van Wezels.

At the opening Betz credited David Cohen “As the man who conceived the building,” and went on, “This is a great day for Sarasota and citizens of the county and other surrounding areas. This building exemplifies the character of the citizens and of the community perhaps more than any other structure.” To Cohen, a child prodigy violinist, Sarasota’s need for a modern performing hall was acute, and he along with Thompson spearheaded the effort to build the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. Indeed, the structure was a giant step forward for the cultural life of the community. Previously, live entertainment was served up in the Mira Mar Auditorium, the Mediterranean Revival designed hall downtown on McAnsh Square that had been built in 1924, its opening called “The Event of the Season.” It was not the venue to entice top-flight talent. Jazz dance bands pass-

ing through town played there, as did soprano Josephine Lucchese, an understudy to Helen Morgan. Noted opera singer and baritone Robert Ringling – Charles Ringling’s son – put on a concert. Frieda Hempel, “The Jenny Lind of Today,” also performed. Lowell Thomas lectured to a full house, “With Lawrence in Arabia and Allenby in Palestine.” It was also used for numerous community events from flower shows to fashion shows. But by 1955 its best years were behind it, and it was demolished. The other major entertainment venue, the cavernous Works Progress Administration funded Municipal Auditorium, hosted, and continues to host various events. It was built without regard to acoustics; an unrefined workhorse of a building that was opened in time for the annual Sara de Sota Pageant on February 24, 1938, and still serves a multitude of civic functions: proms, dances, beauty pageants, home shows, flea markets, flower shows and various performances.

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Ken Thompson juggling at Van Wezel before the hall opened, joked that he was the hall's first performer.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD



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Construction is underway on the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall in 1969. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD

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Neither lent themselves to the high caliber of entertainment that modern Sarasota sought, but the Lewis and Eugenia Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall would bring world-class productions and an eclectic array of topnotch talent. As the unusual looking but beautiful building on Sarasota Bay took shape, it was derided by some as the “Purple People Seater” or “Purple Cow.”

The structure was designed by the renowned William Wesley Peters, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright and later president of the architect’s namesake foundation. Its color scheme, floor coverings and fabrics were selected by Mrs. Frank Lloyd Wright, and the project director, Vernon D. Swaback predicted that over time, “People will understand it and with more exposure be as enthusiastic as we are.” He assured “The purple color may have a harsh appearance now, but it will fade to smoother lavender with a little time.”

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With the controversial color swirling, Swaback sent a letter to William C. Coleman, chairman of the Van Wezel Hall’s operating committee: “In summary, we can only ask for a reasonable amount of faith in our professional judgment and the record it has produced.” The Hall reportedly cost \$2,475,000 and Peters, discussing the building some years later with Sarasota Herald writer Charlie Huisking, said: “The design was suggested by a serrated, lavender colored seashell that had come into my possession. It was designed to reflect its waterfront location and the entire West Coast of Florida environment.” He told Huisking, “I had shown the shell to Mrs. Frank Lloyd Wright, and she said, ‘Why not paint it the same color as the shell?’” Thompson shrugged off the controversy, remarking, “If a building doesn’t provoke some kind of discussion, then it probably isn’t a successful piece of architecture.” The St. Petersburg Times’ art and architecture writer, Charles Benbow, assured skeptics that Sarasota could be proud of it. As it was designed by “one of the world’s most famous architectural groups. That alone will guarantee wide



A car show at the cavernous Municipal Auditorium. Not constructed with acoustics in mind.



The Mira Mar Auditorium, built in the Roaring ’20s, served as Sarasota’s top entertainment venue into the 1950s.

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recognition for the hall ... and draw sightseers off Highway U.S. 41 for many years.”

At that hall’s completion, County Commissioner William Carey congratulated the city on its achievement. “It’s magnificent, really magnificent,” he said. “It’s the most outstanding civic accomplishment to date. It will do much to improve and stabilize the cultural image of Sarasota.”

Opening night was a fittingly grand affair and it was given high marks by attendees. This was a symbol of modern Sarasota – beautiful, refined, and cultured.

Mayor Overton, who replaced Betz, addressed the audience for a few minutes before curtain: “I know all of you will join me in saluting the latest gem in the Bayfront Tiara of the city of Sarasota. We all must surely admit that our new gem is an amethyst.”

He read a congratulatory telegram from Gov. Claude R. Kirk: “It is another outstanding example of why Florida living is the very finest,” he enthused.

Audience reaction on that opening night was favorable. Dick Bloom of the Herald wrote: “Comments made by first-nighters as they entered the richly endowed grand foyer of the theatre included the repeated use of such equally splendid adjectives as ‘magnificent,’ ‘tremendous,’ ‘awesome,’ and more to exhaust the most complete of dictionaries.” For effect, Peters arrived dressed in a purple tuxedo.

No one had followed the progress of the construction more closely than Thompson. When Peters was in town he often stayed at the Thompson residence, and when the floor to the hall stage was put in, Vernon Swaback, one of the architects, and Thompson and his wife, Barbara, went over to have a celebratory glass of champagne. Thompson did a juggling act, kidding that he was the first to perform at the hall.

When Cohen died in 1999, the hall’s managing director, Dr. Curtis Haug, said the structure would “always be a monument to his total commitment to all areas of Sarasota’s cultural life.”

Between April 1999 and October



The two men most responsible for the construction of the Van Wezel: Mayor David Cohen and City Manager Ken Thompson. PHOTO PROVIDED BY JEFF LAHURD

2001, the 1,736-seat Van Wezel underwent a reported \$20 million renovation, which added 25,000 square feet, plus upgrades throughout the hall.

David Sollenberger, the city manager who replaced Ken Thompson after 38 years of service, oversaw the renovation work. Sollenberger, an affable gentleman who managed to keep the five city commissioners happy for 14 years (not an easy task), called the performing arts hall his Titanic. Myriad problems asso-

ciated with the renovation helped bring an end to his tenure.

The future of the controversial hall has not been determined. Hopefully what was once an iconic beacon of modern Sarasota, will be spared the fate of many of Sarasota’s signature buildings and not be reduced to purple rubble.

Jeff LaHurd was raised in Sarasota and is an award-winning author/historian.

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