

Old Mayan Theatre May Retrieve Glory

By GEORGE STEIN, Times Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES—On Aug. 15, 1927, the Mayan Theatre—with scowling Pre-Columbian gods staring down at first nighters—opened with the Broadway production of George Gershwin's "Oh Kay." And the show matched its title, running for three months.

Tonight—after a 61-year run of musicals, Depression-era WPA dramas, comedies, tango singers, Spanish films and X-rated movies—this landmark from an earlier chapter of Los Angeles history will close its doors as a theater. "Passion"—replete with sighs, moans and raw sex—is the last show on the schedule.

Lamenting the end were a couple from Hermosa Beach, who arrived Saturday not knowing they would see one of the last performances.

"It's terrible," said the woman who insisted on anonymity. "We have been coming every couple weeks. We love the atmosphere. There is nothing like this."

But in the fall, after a refurbishing that will retain the original decor, the Mayan will reopen, transformed into the Lost City nightclub.

Preservationists, who have been holding their noses because an architectural jewel was being used to show porn flicks, are applauding the move.

"From our point of view," said Jay Rounds, executive director of the Los Angeles Conservancy, "a lot more people are going to enjoy the architecture as a nightclub than are going to enjoy that as a

porno house. . . . We think it would be a positive step."

The Mayan, better than many an old building, illustrates the changing nature of downtown Los Angeles, from its beginnings with unrealistic promise, through decay and hard times, to the present era of redevelopment and renewed hopes.

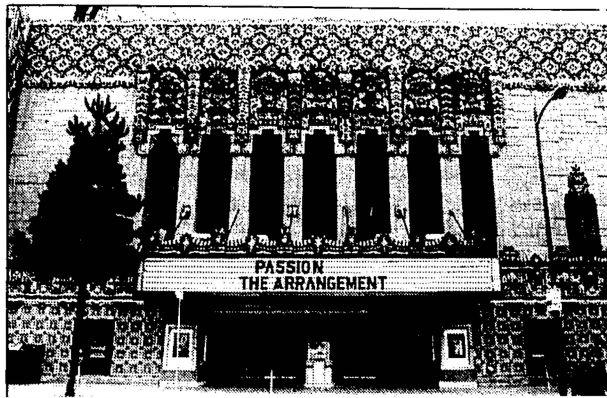
'A lot more people are going to enjoy the architecture as a nightclub than are going to enjoy that as a porno house. . . .'

—Jay Rounds,
L.A. Conservancy official

Built in the 1920s in the 1000 block of Hill Street by oil magnate Edward L. Doheny, the Mayan and its next-door neighbor, the Belasco Theatre, were supposed to become the nucleus of a theater district. Doheny picked the location for his convenience—between downtown and his home near USC, according to John Miller, vice president of the Los Angeles Historic Theatre Foundation.

At the time, the short-lived Mayan Revival style was hot, and Doheny held a competition.

One who entered was Robert Stacy-Judd, architect of the still-standing Aztec Hotel in Monrovia, who was such a proponent of the



JAYNE KAMIN-ONCEA / Los Angeles Times

Marquee of ornately decorated Mayan Theatre advertises final films being shown before building is closed for remodeling.

style that he wore Mayan garb, complete with head feathers, to a cocktail party. "Unfortunately, he wore brass-rimmed spectacles, which detracted from the image," Miller said.

The contest was won by the firm of Morgan, Walls & Clements. The design that was chosen became the best exemplar of a Mayan Revival theater in the country. Assisted by Francisco Cornejo, a Mexican anthropologist and sculptor, the architects used authentic designs from various pre-Columbian cultures.

Symbolic Features

The giant bas-relief figures on the exterior are of the Mayan god Huitsilopochtli seated on the symbolic earth monster. The three-tiered chandelier in the theater—rigged for red, blue and amber—is a replica of the Aztec calendar stone found near Mexico City. The design of tapered pillars was taken directly from the Palace of the Governors at Uxmal, a Mayan ruin on Yucatan Peninsula dating from AD 800. Other column designs came from the ancient Toltec city of Tula.

On July 13, 1969, an advertisement in The Times announced a shift: "Infraxexum," a production of Carlos Tobalina, the new owner of the Mayan.

"Color! Reality!" the ad said. "Hollywood's answer to the new European films. Warning: Restricted to persons over 21 only!"

If new material was being shown inside, the outside was changed too. Tobalina repainted the exterior, abandoning a dull two-tone scheme of tan and orange for its current gaudy design featuring purple, red, brown, turquoise and orange.

"The new colors are more authentic than the original," Miller said. "The Pre-Columbians used a lot of color."

The shift brought a new type of customers. In 1979, the management removed the doors from the restroom stalls, according to manager Fernando Fortes, who lives in the building and who was director of photography for Tobalina's X-rated film productions.

In the women's bathroom, a male customer had tried to rape a theater employee; in the men's room, homosexuals seeking contacts were being robbed, Fortes said.

Used in Movie

But even in decline, the theater still had glamorous moments. It was used in a scene in "Save the Tiger," for which Jack Lemmon won an Oscar. It appeared in a number of videos.

Although the porno customers never fill more than a small fraction of the 1,494 seats, Gloria Nakamura, stepdaughter of Tobalina, said the house still made a profit. But the proceeds were not enough to undertake any major renovation, she admitted.

About a year ago, Sammy Chao and Daniel Sullivan began talking to the Tobalinas about transforming the theater into a nightclub, promising to spend more than \$1 million in the remake.

Chao, 36, is owner of the Savoy restaurant in Chinatown and the Savoy nightclub in Alhambra. Sullivan, 32, describes himself as an entrepreneur who has been associated with the Stock Exchange, Vertigo and Congo nightclubs.

The two also met with preservationists. "I am a true believer in the preservation movement," Sullivan said.

The two got a lease from the Tobalinas and the support of the Los Angeles Conservancy and the Los Angeles Historic Theatre Foundation.

"We recognize that there are more theaters than the market can support," Rounds said. "One of the things that we look for in an adaptive use of a theater is that it be reversible. We feel their approach did meet those criteria."