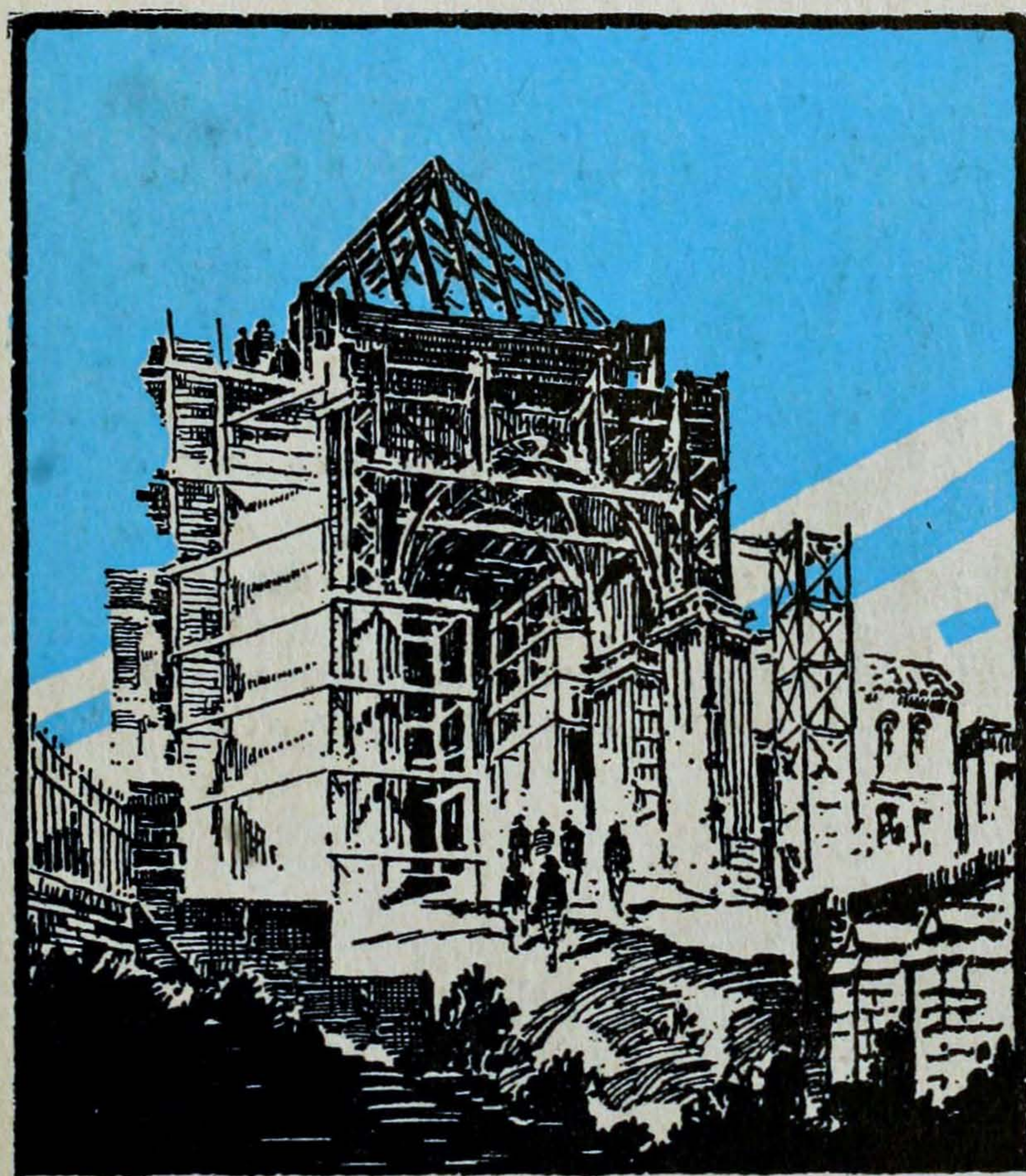


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THE ROMANCE of the PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE

By Elmer Grey, F.A.I.A

WE admire romantic deeds of the past that are imbued with idealism and fraught with difficulties, but I wonder if those who participated in such ventures always realized the romantic nature of their hazards. At any rate the difficulties and discomforts that accompany some of our best endeavors nowadays often tend to obscure their ideal character.

The promotion and erection of the Pasadena Community Playhouse is a case in point. It was an enterprise filled with idealism of a very high order, but it was also accompanied by much strain and discomfort on the part of those who struggled with its difficulties. These latter should not however be allowed to becloud its high ideal character.

Pasadena had long been in great need of a suitable and permanent structure to house the operations of its Community Playhouse Association, an organization devoted to the presentation of clean plays by non-professional actors, and the general uplift of the community by means of the dramatic art. For years it had been holding its performances in an old, uncomfortable and poorly ventilated building totally inadequate for the purpose. A structure

was needed that would be not only comfortable and attractive for the audience, but safe for the young people taking part therein, one that would have a green-room and dressing rooms accessible to their parents and friends. Successive attempts over a period of years to get such a building started had failed. Finally into this field entered a promoter. He said that he felt that he could put across a new building for the Pasadena Community Playhouse Association if he could combine with a reputable architect, and he asked me whether I would join him in such a venture. After considering the matter I consented, but had I known the nature of the difficulties before me I might well have faltered.

Promotion, when it is done right, is a decidedly legitimate line of endeavor. All new countries grow by it, and the right kind of promotion often requires a high

type of financial and executive ability. When applied to public or semi-public undertakings it requires a keen understanding of public spirit. And the man I had to deal with knew his game.

By various means the ways of which only such a man knows, he managed to raise sufficient funds to cover the cost of plans. They rep-



PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE
Curtain Painted by Alson Clarke

resented of course the very minimum for which such a building could be built; for the public and the Association were in no mood at that time to pay more. In fact it then seemed doubtful indeed whether the sum required to erect a building such as was then contemplated, namely \$175,000.00 could ever actually be procured. A campaign for subscriptions was

very little of what was going on behind the scenes. The Association had placed the control of its building operations in the hands of a committee of bankers, which, in its turn, had agreed upon one man to represent them and the Association and to act as a sort of overseer during the building operations. The building was no sooner started than there were those who, repre-



PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA
Elmer Grey, Architect

launched however and finally by dint of much hard work enough was pledged to warrant, in combination with a mortgage, the starting of the building.

Then the real drama began! It was fully as tense at times in its conflict of emotions and suspense as any that had ever been enacted on their stage. This time however the actors were those engaged in the building operations, and they were experiencing very real emotions—while the audience, which was the general public, knew

sented by this overseer, awoke to the fact that a structure of minimum cost such as was then contemplated was not suitable to the high position which the future Playhouse was to occupy in the community. The Association had a large membership with strong public sentiment back of it, and its building enterprise was being watched by similar bodies in many parts of the country. Pasadena was also about to have a new Civic Center with a fine new City Hall, a Library and an Auditorium, and the en-

thusiasm aroused in connection with these enterprises also doubtless lent a contributory hand. The slogan of the Association soon became, "There is nothing too good for Pasadena!" So, even though the building had been started, the overseer, backed by others, ordered innumerable and vital changes in the plans looking toward its betterment. Many of these ideas did not

Green Room also was to be decidedly different. A multitude of ideas for housing these requirements were showered upon the architect as the building continued to progress. At a very late day a large portion of the structure was altered from inflammable to fireproof construction! What that and countless other vital changes meant in the way of disrupting months of



PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA
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crop up until the structure was well along. This was largely due to the fact that there was no adequate precedent for such a building as they wanted. It was not to be a theater in the ordinary sense of the term, but was to contain a recital hall, business offices, director's rooms, a possible future art center of uncertain requirements, and revenue producing shops. Nor could the auditorium and stage follow conventional theater plans, on account of the modified form of theatricals that were to be given. The

work on the part of the architect in co-ordinating various parts of the plans only other architects can know! Each change meant a careful search through the plans to see what other parts it would affect. The blueprints became so covered with modification stickers that it required several days to attach them to a set of plans—and the original plans became entirely obsolete! It was a nerve-wracking experience and I dare say had much to do with putting the architect on the shelf for three years time.

Each change also meant an increase in cost, and the directors of the Association began to ask where the money was to come from. For awhile no one seemed to know. The fact that a wonderfully fine Playhouse should be built, and that Pasadena was wealthy, was answer enough for some. They felt that when it became a question

ences in France such a situation was of course of small moment. Tactfully, patiently and wisely he handled it. Practically all the expenditures required to make the building a very fine one had already been authorized. So, he urged, what was the use of a squabble. With the assistance of the committee of bankers a very



AUDITORIUM, PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA
Elmer Grey, Architect; Dwight Gibbs, Associate Architect of the Interior

of ruin or more funds there were those in Pasadena who would go down deeper in their pockets! The situation became critical. Finally a committee was appointed to put a check upon further expenditures. The overseer, in open meeting, refused to recognize it! The ship of the Association's progress became wobbly! The presiding officer was a man who had received much acclaim and many honors as a hero of Verdun—and compared with his experi-

large additional cost, one nearly double that of the original estimate was successfully financed and the building completed practically in harmony with the high hopes of those who had pictured it at its best.

Through all the stress of such proceedings there ran a strong current of idealism. To a large extent it was a co-operative achievement. Artists, architects, contractors and capitalists rubbed elbows and gave of their time or material either in part or

whole. The drop curtains were donated. Also the painting of the main curtain. In completing the latter one man of leisure whose particular hobby was the painter's art was on the scaffold following directions with his brush as hard as any hired assistant—but without pay and in golfing knickerbockers!

Public sentiment, already strong, was made stronger by the helpful attitude of the newspapers. Finally the building was completed and it came time for the opening. The affair was a social event of first importance. Names that had received international honors for achievements in science, art and war were on the reception list. The entire house had been sold out to subscribers to the building fund before the box office opened. The newspapers devoted columns to describing the occasion. Here is an extract from one:—

“What a brave picture was presented! The night was almost tropically fine and to be under the stars was in itself an inspiration. The stately palms before the courtyard seemed to stand in greater dignity than usual now that the building barriers which had ingloriously surrounded them were finally withdrawn. Up and down the old-fashioned outer stairway a passing pageant of beauty was proceeding and in and around the beautiful, flag-stoned compound a changing series of lovely groups was presented as the neighborly clusters of playgoers assembled for the occasion.

“On every hand was friendliness and the sense of a satisfied accomplishment. The great theater, rising in simple lines of grace and substantiality, seemed to loom above the gathering throng as the silent token of a great endeavor. Picturesque Spanish groups paraded the courtyard and balconies, adding that tinge of color which enlivened the quiet-hued structure; the sound of guitars and singing lingered in the patio; and in and around the lesser halls of the theater aggregations of distinguished people, noted around the world, were commingling with the humbler folks of the city, finding in the occasion and the event a common bond of community good-will.”

A Community Playhouse such as this indicates that a great number of people of a substantial character are no longer satisfied with moving pictures and professional drama alone for histrionic amusement, but also want to get into the game themselves; and they want this so seriously that they are willing to pay for a costly structure as a home for such an in-door sport. The building expresses its unusual function of presenting plays enacted by actors chosen from talent among the people in many ways. Here the actors do not confine their operations to the stage. The plan is such that parts of the auditorium as well become their settings. Balconies similar to those which we are wont to associate with Romeo as he whispered love to Juliet occur on each side and are accessible from the stage. The floor of the latter extends out over the orchestra pit and reaches down by means of steps to the very feet of the first row of chairs, the music being carried through the steps by means of sound conveying material. The old-fashioned Green Room of Drury Lane days is revived in the form of a spacious and beautifully decorated room located immediately beneath the stage and connected with the auditorium directly by two flights of steps. At the conclusion of performances the audience is invited down into it to meet the actors in truly Drury Lane fashion. Needless to say this arrangement greatly enhances the pleasure of the evening entertainments.

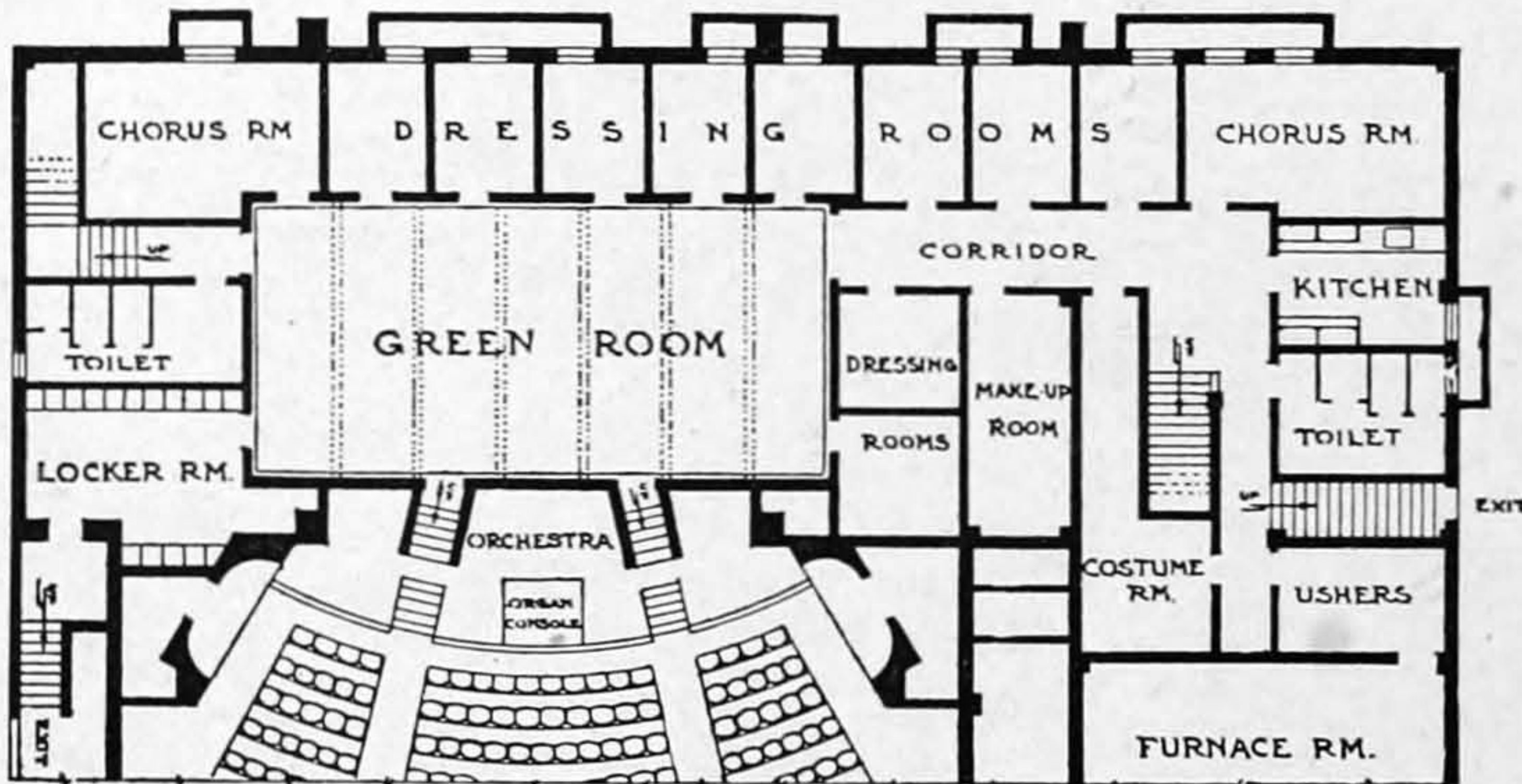
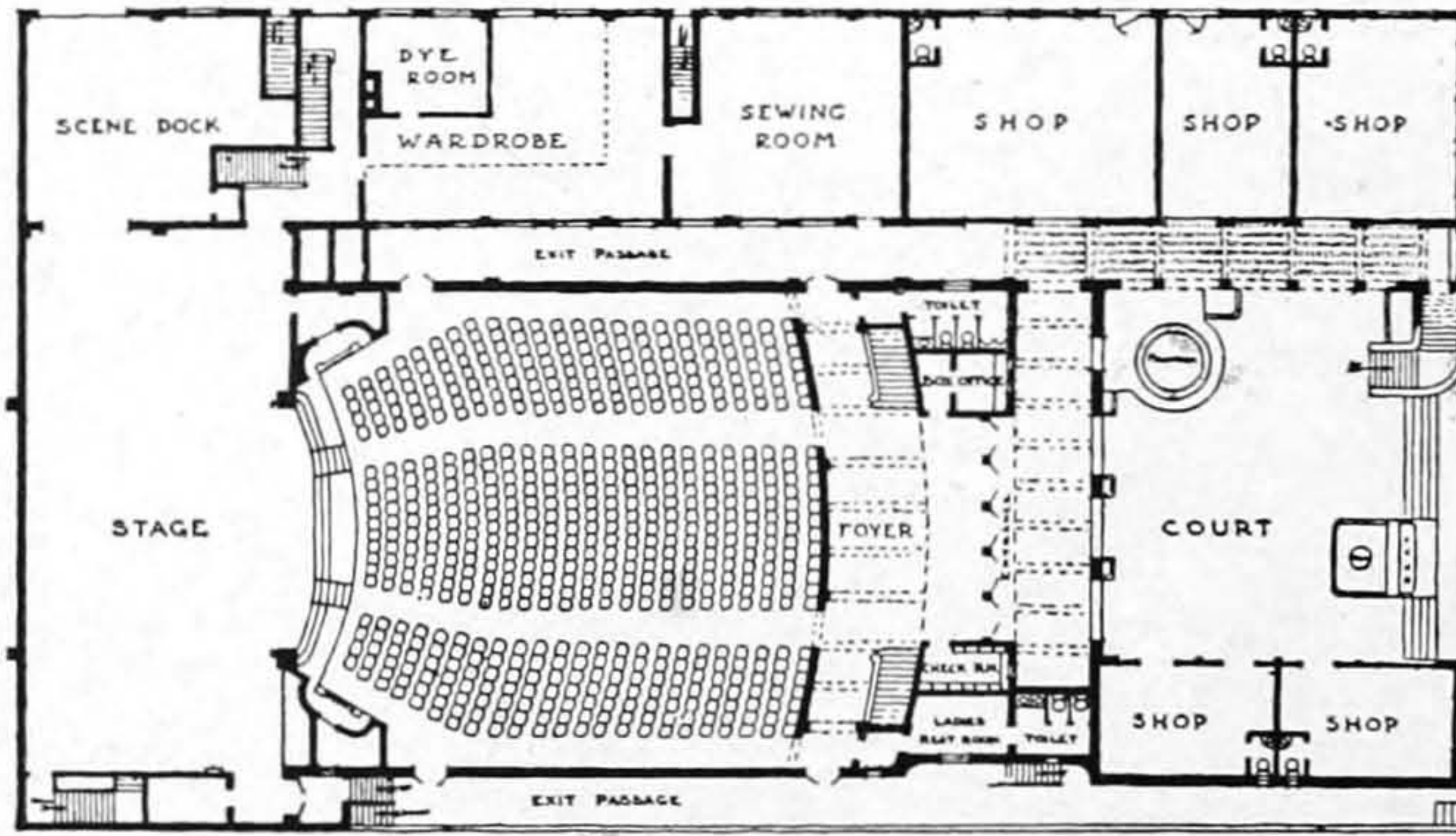
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It is one thing to raise \$300,000.00 for charity or for a commercial enterprise, and quite another to raise that amount for a building whose purpose is a little understood form of idealism. The public had first to be educated up to the Community Playhouse idea and to believe in it. To have successfully put over such an undertaking was a most remarkable achievement. It marked a milestone in the history of recreational events in Southern California. It was a fine illustration of modern romance.



Photo by Hiller

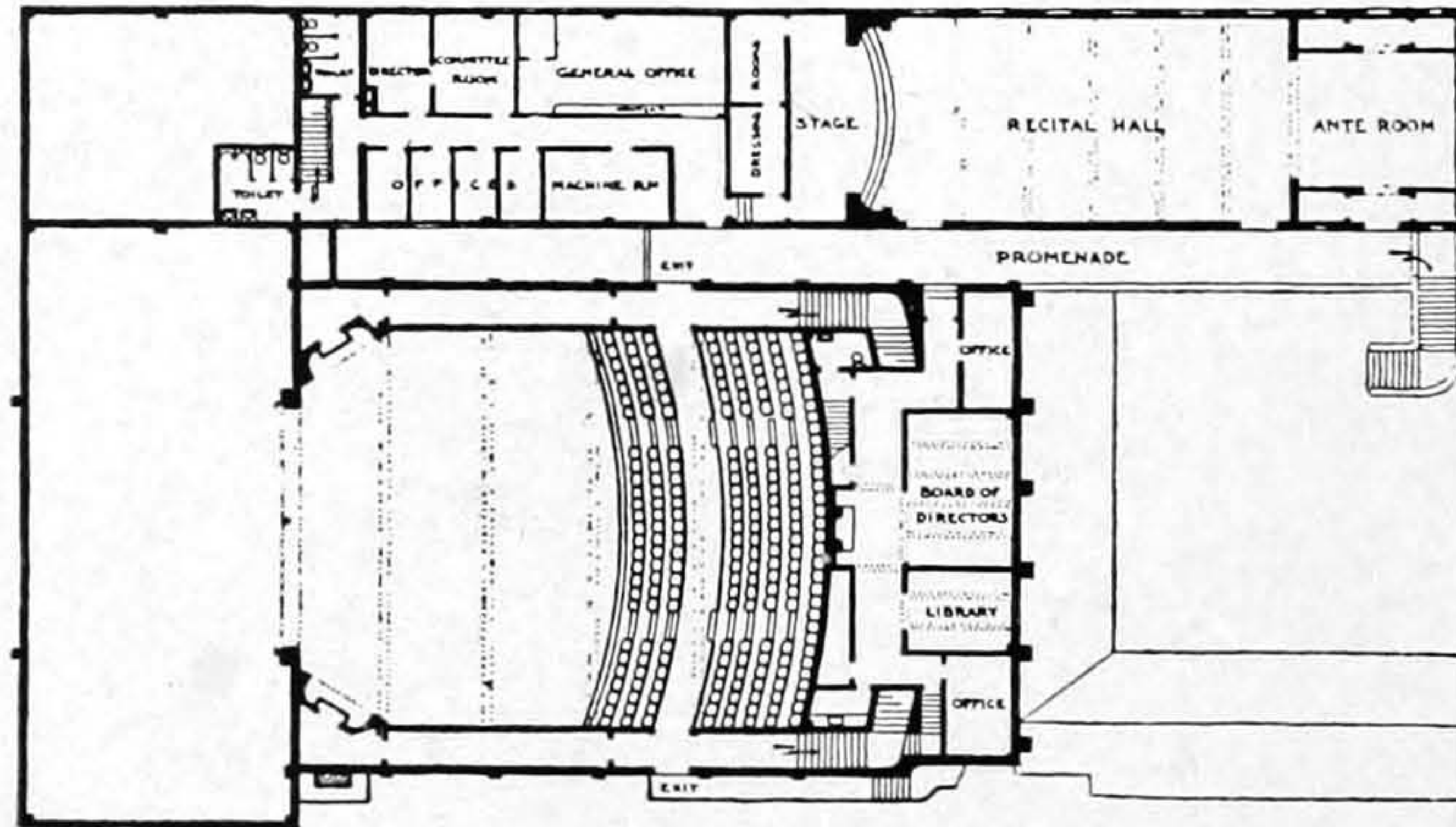
PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA
ELMER GREY, ARCHITECT



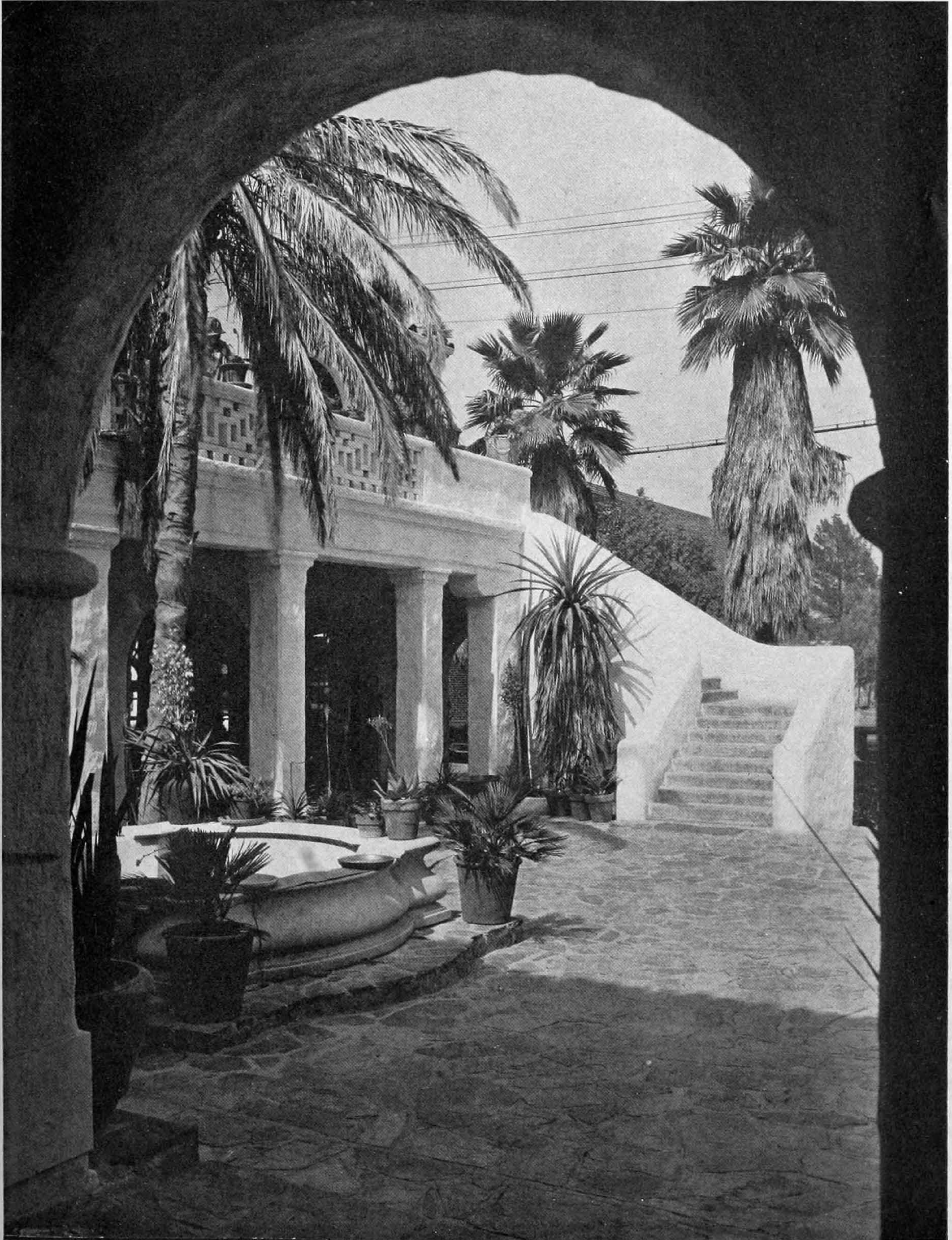
PLANS, PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA
ELMER GREY, ARCHITECT



CORNER OF PATIO, PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA, CALIFORNIA
ELMER GREY, ARCHITECT



PLAN, PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA
ELMER GREY, ARCHITECT



FOUNTAIN AND STAIRWAY, PASADENA COMMUNITY PLAYHOUSE, PASADENA
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