

Just call the Ritz the comeback club

Into its ninth decade, the Tampa institution has seen all sorts of entertainment and many changes.

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TAMPA — If the Ritz Theater could talk, it might describe how it feels to die and come back to life, time after time after time.

Since it opened in 1917 and expanded in the 1930s, the building at 1503 E Seventh Ave. in Ybor City has seen silent films, all-day matinees, live nude shows, plays, rock concerts, foam parties and black-tie affairs. It has answered to the names Rivoli, Ritz, Manchester and Masquerade.

Its marquee has been Ybor's sign of the times and a testament to the staying power of old theater buildings in Tampa.

After an almost two-year hangover, the Ritz is back, with a \$750,000 facelift. The Capitano family, which bought the theater 20 years ago, didn't

want to invite another club into the historic building. Instead, they turned it into a four-room event venue.

The Ritz hosted its first event in March and is now open for weddings, concerts, galas and other parties. Owners have big plans to use it during next year's Super Bowl and say a famous band has booked the stage.

An invitation-only grand opening party is planned for June.

The big, circular, art deco mirrors still greet guests in the grand foyer. The black-and-white tile floors have been deep cleaned. The bathrooms, dressing rooms and 25- by 44-foot stage are all new, as are the high-tech lights.

"It's a blank slate," said executive director Nicole Capitano Nassif. "But it has character."



Lovelynn Jensen, the Ritz Theater's marketing director, looks at the stage and floor of the Ritz's latest incarnation Monday. The theater opened in Ybor City in 1917.

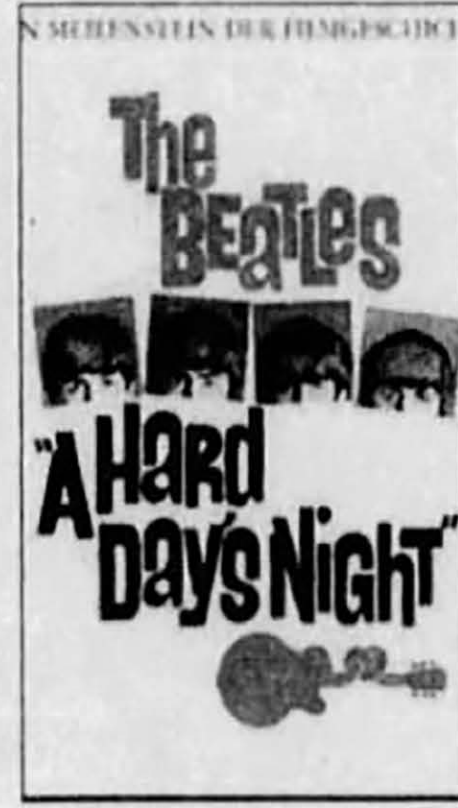
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Glimpses of the Ritz's past



1922
Audiences packed the Rivoli for *Blood and Sand*, which a poster billed as "The love epic of a Spanish Toreador. Imagine Valentino, a dare-devil Toreador, a fiery Spanish lover!" Admission: Children, 15 cents; adults, 35 cents.

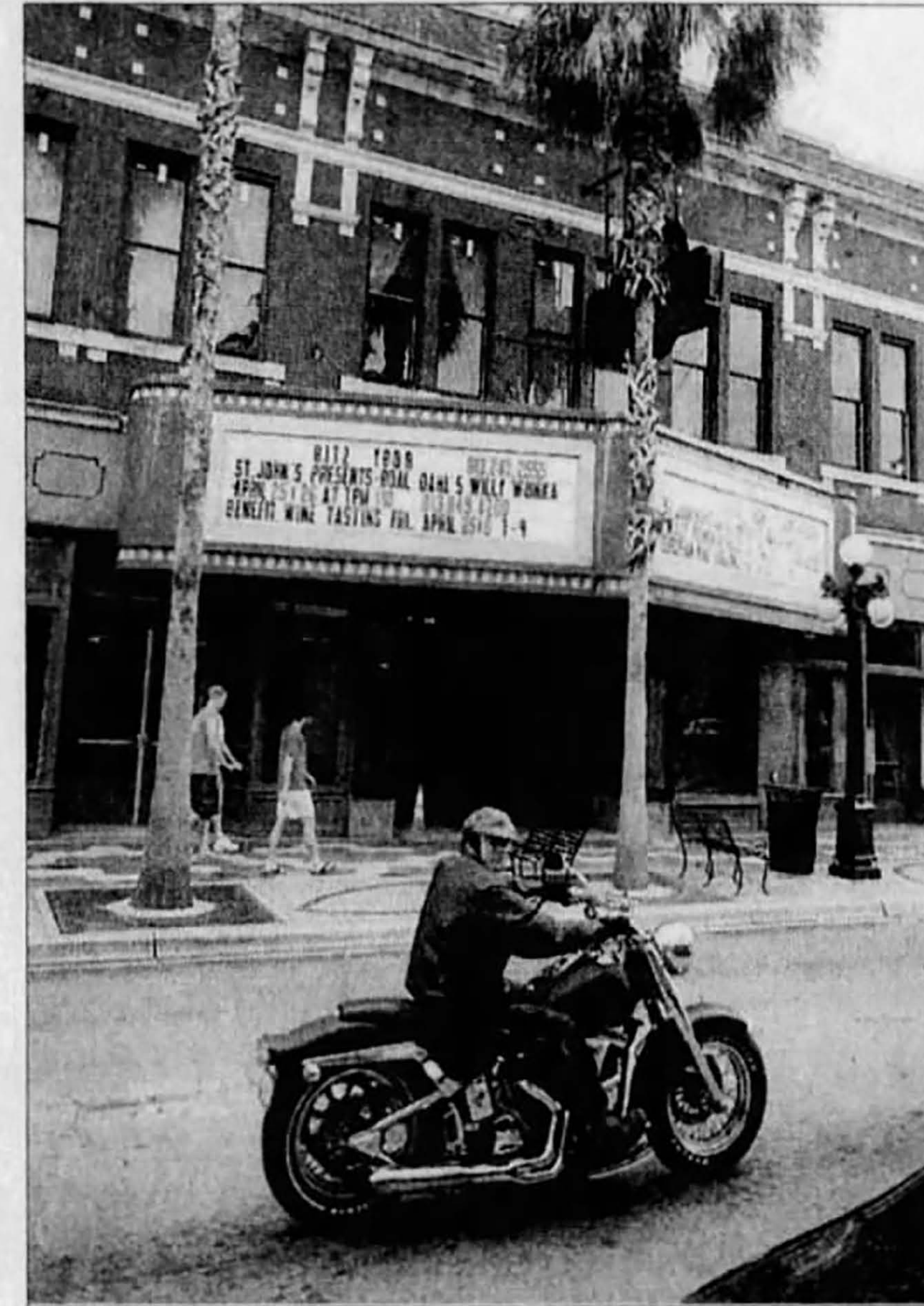
1964
Nick DiMaggio, a regular in the '60s, said, "When *A Hard Day's Night* ran one Saturday afternoon, the theater was sold out to the walls. There were people standing against the side walls and along the back of the theater. The manager, evidently fearing a possible riot, turned the house lights up, walked on stage just before the film began, and gave the audience a stern warning that everyone would be given a refund, and the theater would be shut down, if there was any screaming or rowdiness or excessive noise. They ran the entire feature with the house lights turned up."



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1949
By this date, the theater was called the Ritz.

1987
About a dozen people living in dilapidated apartments above the former Ritz Theater protested their eviction by Freedom Savings and Loan Association. One resident complained that tenants weren't told they had to leave until the day Freedom Savings officials began changing door locks.



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2008
The Ritz reopens as a four-room event venue.



1917
The Rivoli Theatre opens.

1943
Angie Tripolino Zambito, 82, of North Tampa says the theater is where her boyfriend, Rosario Puleo Zambito, asked her to marry him. "Right there at the theater, gee. You know, we would sit as far back as we could so nobody could see us. He would actually be kissing me on the cheek. That's how he proposed." They were married for 40 years when he died in 1984.

'60s and '70s

"There was a consistent tone, during the sexual revolutions of the '60s and '70s, to any news story about the Ritz: all negative," according to a 1984 article in the *Tampa Tribune*. "Undercover cops continually arrested burlesque dancers like '48-24-36 Queen of the College Campus' Anne Howe and 'Minnie the Mermaid' for flashing more flesh than local law allowed in public. Judges frequently viewed the theater's blue movies, like *Man and Wife* and *Animal Lovers* and declared them 'lewd.'"



Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails

1992
"The Ritz presents mostly alternative rock acts, from Nine Inch Nails to Fishbone to Deicide," a *St. Petersburg Times* story says. "The bands that take to the club's generously sized stage usually set their knobs to ear-splitting volumes, so it's difficult to assess the room's acoustics. The Ritz is an especially good spot for people-watching — outrageous clothes, hairdos and chalky pallors are everywhere."

2005
A tragic melee ensued during a heavy metal concert by the band Corrosion of Conformity. Two women knocked over a man in the mosh pit, which led to a brawl. The man stabbed four people, killing one, before running out of the club brandishing a knife.

2006
The club closes after the property's developers, Capitano & Garcia LLC, filed a lawsuit alleging the Masquerade nightclub owed more than \$90,000 in rent and other costs.

A sampling of old theater buildings still standing



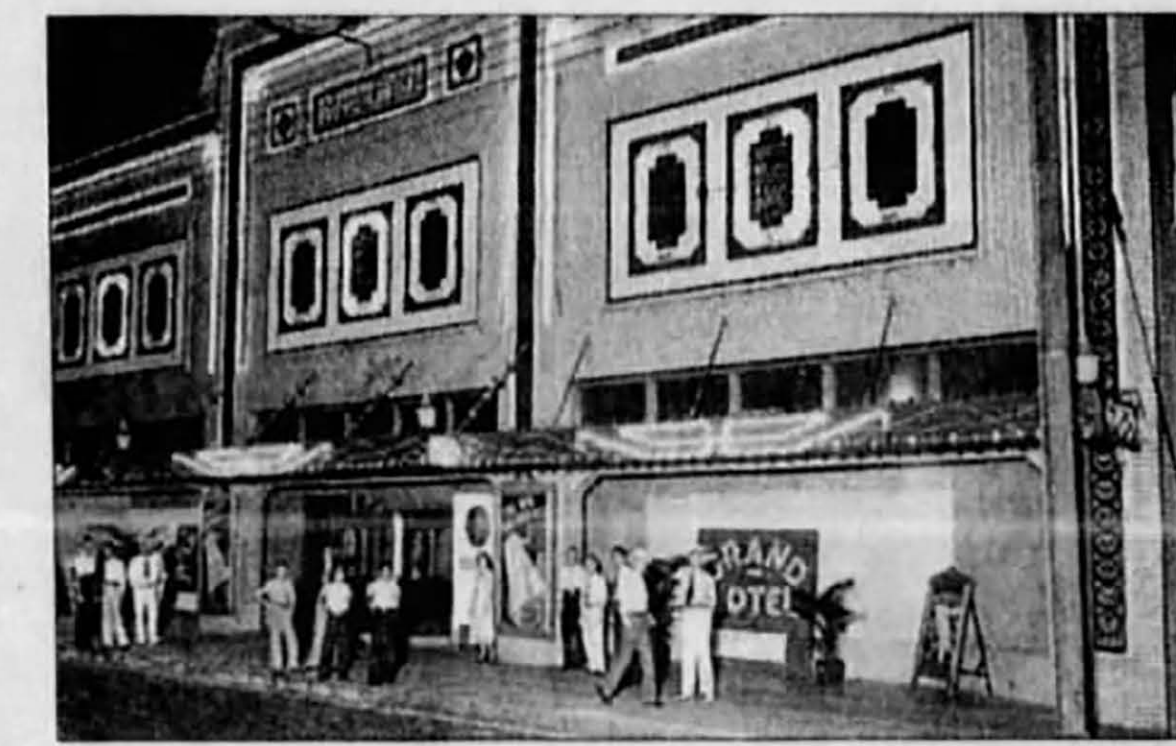
Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System
Crowds wait to see *The Squaw Man* starring Warner Baxter at Tampa Theatre.

The Tampa Theatre

(Built in 1926) The theater is a local treasure and still hosts performances and screens first-run films as well as classics. 711 N Franklin St.

The David Falk Theatre

(1928) It showcases student productions at the University of Tampa. 428 W Kennedy Blvd.



The Rialto theater, date unknown.

The Rialto

(1925) It was the site of some plans presented to the City Council last year to develop a private club called Print. 1621 N Franklin St.

The Seminole

(1923) It is now home to Praise Cathedral, 5103 N Florida Ave.

Some theater buildings are long gone. The Alcazar Theatre (1911) stopped showing movies in 1921 and was eventually absorbed into the Maas Brothers Department Store in downtown Tampa. So was the Strand Theatre (1915). That entire block was demolished in 2006 to make way for condos that still haven't been built. The Palace Theater (1920) was billed at its opening as the most modern theater constructed of the finest materials. It was renovated in 1962 to accommodate the three-projector process Cinerama and later packed sold-out, first-run shows. In 1976 it closed and was demolished in 1979. The Skypoint condos now replace it.

Sources: A Historic Guide to Tampa, librarian Nick DiMaggio and Times archives

1920s
The Rivoli Theatre in Ybor City.

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