

## What's in a name? | Wells Theatre, Norfolk

The curtain rose for the first time at the Wells Theatre in August 1913.

Newspaper previews heralded the opening of the grand Beaux-Arts style theater and production of "The Merry Countess."

Special trains and boats carried patrons to the downtown area for the event. Lavish flower arrangements adorned the lobby, and dozens of congratulatory telegrams poured in for owners Jake Wells and his half-brother, Otto.

The show was a flop, but the theater - called the New Wells Theatre - was a hit. And like many dramas staged there, the venue's fortunes would follow an arc of success, decline and revival over the next 100 years.

The Wells, like other old vaudeville houses, switched to burlesque. "Then it became bad burlesque, then striptease, front-line movies, then 'B' movies," said Keith Stava, Virginia Stage Company managing director. "And then it became an X-rated movie house and then it was boarded up."

At one point, a cinder block wall was erected on the stage with a gin mill behind it, according to a newspaper story.

In earlier years, the theater featured acts that included Fred Astaire, Douglas Fairbanks, John Philip Sousa and Dorothy Gish. There were teams of horses on treadmills for the staging of "Ben-Hur," and Maude Adams flew through the air in "Peter Pan," according to the stage company's website.

Jake Wells had been a catcher, first baseman and manager for the Richmond Colts before he got into the theater business. He decided to expand into Norfolk and in 1901, Otto opened the Granby Theatre.

The Wells was the flagship of their 42-theater chain in nine states, according to the site. The largest theater circuit outside New York was run from Norfolk and included the Academy, Colonial, Norva, Strand and the American Theatre. The brothers sold their Norfolk and Richmond theatrical holdings to their partners Wilmer and Vincent in 1926, according to the site.

The Wells is recognized today for its longevity. The steel-reinforced concrete structure was poured in place a century ago and an architect recently declared the building in "amazingly good condition," Stava said. It also is a National Historic Landmark.

Adding to its charm are what's described as resident ghosts, including a lady in white, a man in a tuxedo and an African American child, that are said to haunt an area that used to be the segregated balcony.

Then there is the story of Ned the stage hand, who was high above the stage many years ago when he fell to his death trying to look down the blouse of a girl.

"To this day, there will be times the sandbags just swing on their own," Stava said.

The Virginia Stage Company acquired the balance of a 100-year lease for the theater in 1980, cleaned up the venue and began performances with "Relatively Speaking," by Alan Ayckbourn, Stava said. In the 1990s, the lease was turned over to the city, which remains the landlord.

The theater was closed in 1986 for a \$3.5 million renovation and reopened in 1987 with Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

Later this year, the company plans to celebrate the theater's 100th anniversary and a story that continues to play on.

*Cindy Clayton, 757-446-2377, [cindy.clayton@pilotonline.com](mailto:cindy.clayton@pilotonline.com) [1]*

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 06/17/2013 - 13:51):** <http://hamptonroads.com/2013/06/whats-name-wells-theatre-norfolk>

**Links:**

[1] mailto:cindy.clayton@pilotonline.com