



CHC Presentation: June 1, 2023

Slide 1 Hello, my name is Honor Dunn and I'm thrilled to be here to present the Coronet Theatre Building's historic cultural monument nomination. I would like to thank the Cultural Heritage Commissioners and the Office of Historic Resources for providing me with the time and space to share parts of its powerful history.

Slide 2: The Coronet Theatre Building meets HCM criterion 1 as it is significant as a venue important to the development of performing arts in Los Angeles and as a venue for art, experimental film, and live performances. Specifically, it has significance in post war entertainment history, women's history and entrepreneurship, and LGBTQ+ safe spaces. The period of significance is 1947 – to the mid 1960s.

Slide 3: It is essential to acknowledge the woman behind its creation—Frieda Berkoff Gellis. **<space bar><space bar>** Joining her in this remarkable lineage are her mother, Betty Berkoff, **<space bar><space bar>** and her daughter, Petrie Gellis Robie, forming three generations of visionary women. These 3 women played a role in shaping not only the Coronet Theatre Building, but their dedication to artistic expression left an enduring impact on the cultural landscape of Los Angeles.

Betty Berkoff, a Jewish Russian Immigrant, assumed the full responsibility of her four children after her husband tragically passed away on stage when Frieda was just a young girl. Undeterred by the challenges she faced, Betty managed the family vaudeville troupe and went on to establish numerous successful businesses in the Beverly-Fairfax area, including multiple movie theaters and the Russian nightclub, Berkoff's Balalaika.

Slide 4: **<hit play button>**From a young age, Frieda Berkoff Gellis dedicated herself to the world of entertainment as a traveling vaudeville performer alongside her family troupe. After retiring from the stage, Frieda commissioned, built, and managed the Coronet Theatre Building for over four decades. In 1969, she was awarded with a resolution from the City of Los Angeles for her contribution to the culture of the city.

Slide 5 Petrie Gellis Robie, Frieda's daughter, continued the family tradition of entrepreneurship with her own unique spirit. A woman of diverse talents, Petrie's dynamic life unfolded as a dancer, actress, sound artist, radio producer, and businesswoman. Working alongside her mother, Petrie played a vital role in the operation of the Coronet Theatre Building and eventually took sole ownership after Frieda's passing.

Slide 6 In 1942, Frieda Berkoff Gellis began the process to build an entertainment complex on the corner of North La Cienega Boulevard and Oakwood Avenue, two blocks north of Beverly Blvd.



Slide 7 She commissioned Lyle Nelson Barcume, experienced theatre architect to build what would eventually be named the Coronet Theatre Building. The Streamline Moderne meets Late Moderne building was completed and opened to the public in 1947.

Slide 8 The smooth stucco building has a rectangular footprint with rounded corners and wrap around windows. It possesses several other architectural defining features that make it distinct including an integrated pylon sign, which not only serves as a marquee at street level, but also displays the Coronet Theatre's signage.

Nestled within the complex and accessed by a walkway entrance from La Cienega is a brick-paved courtyard, serving as the heart of the building. This central space acts as a hub, providing access to various areas within the complex including the theatre and the staircase to upstairs.

Slide 9 Built to house a 272-seat stage theatre and cinema, a smaller performance space, known as the "Little Theatre", multiple storefronts, second-floor offices, and a dance rehearsal studio.

Slide 10 From 1957-1961, the smaller performance space, known as the "Little Theatre" was home to Doug Weston's original Troubadour. Weston is considered responsible for promoting many successful singer songwriters in the early stages of their careers such as Elton John, Van Morrison, Carole King and the Eagles to name a few.

Slide 11 The legacy of the Coronet Theatre Building is associated with innovations in Los Angeles's post-war entertainment history. In this era, the performing arts industry was challenged to set itself apart from television, motion pictures, and radio. The Coronet Theatre and its programming is an exemplification of that innovation in creative offerings for the community. Due to time restraints today, I will only be presenting a few markers in its significant history.

Slide 12 In 1947, actor and producer John Houseman, leased the Coronet Theatre and formed Pelican Productions to bring legitimate theatre to Los Angeles. His second production there was Bertolt's Brecht's English adaptation of *Galileo*, starring Charles Laughton.

Bertolt Brecht was a revolutionary and influential theatre practitioner who challenged the traditional norms of theatre through his unique methods and rejection of mainstream naturalism. His approach, known as epic theatre, had a profound impact on the craft and earned Brecht the reputation as one of the most important figures of 20th-century theatre.

Charles Laughton, at the time, was considered one of the world's most admired stage and screen actors. He was not only casted as the male lead, but he was also Bertolt Brecht's



collaborator in the translation and adaptation. For over 18 months, Brecht and Laughton worked together in a relentless process of translating the original script from German to an English modern adaptation.

Slide 13 On July 30, 1947, a sold-out crowd including Charlie Chaplin, Ingrid Bergman, and Frank Lloyd Wright filled the theatre for the debut performance of *Galileo*. *Galileo* is considered one of Brecht's most significant plays as it explored controversial topics such as the social responsibility of scientists, progress vs. tradition, and freedom of thought and speech.

Slide 14 Fast forward to 1964, when Ray Bradbury, famed and influential science fiction and fantastical writer and author of *Fahrenheit 451*, leased the Coronet Theatre for his newly created repertory company devoted exclusively to science fiction theatre.

Slide 15 Bradbury hired John Whitney, sound technician and the "father" of computer animation and Saul Bass, a renowned graphic designer as consultants to create new and experimental electronic effects. They used the preexisting movie projection system to create floating images on parts of the stage to support the dramatic scenes. Whitney also developed electronic simulations of human voices, animal cries and a "gender-neutral" electronic voice to enhance the futurist storytelling.

Slide 16 The Coronet Theatre also had a strong presence in the city as an art house cinema.

Slide 17 When the theatre first opened in 1947, it hosted a midnight screening of Kenneth Anger's groundbreaking debut homoerotic film, *Fireworks*. *Fireworks* was created when Anger was only 17 and is considered one of the earliest portrayals of homoeroticism on film. The screening was organized by Creative Film Associates, a film society formed by Anger and Curtis Harrington.

Slide 18 Also in 1947, the Coronet Theatre became home of Paul Ballard's influential venture, The Hollywood Film Society. Ballard was recognized as a key figure in curating Los Angeles' post-war avant-garde scene, and dedicated himself to presenting film as a form of art.

In 1950, Raymond Rohauer, Curator of the Society of Cinema Arts took over the theatre from Ballard and branded it the Coronet Louvre. Rohauer's programming encompassed daily screenings of classics, experimental works, foreign films, and art cinema.

Slide 19 On October 11, 1957, the Coronet Theater Building was raided and Rohauer was arrested by the Los Angeles Police Department's vice squad on obscenity charges for screening John E. Schmitz's film, *Voices*, and Kenneth Anger's film, *Fireworks*. While the arrest seemingly was due to a fleeting glimpse of female nudity in *Voices*, it was *Fireworks* homoeroticism that drew the most outrage.



The ensuing trial revealed that the Los Angeles Police Department's motivations extended beyond the content of *Fireworks* and were intertwined with the Coronet Theatre's standing as a safe space for the gay community with the prosecutor focusing much of his case on the theatre and its gay patrons.

Slide 20 By the time Rohauer faced arrest for screening Anger's film *Fireworks*, the Coronet Theatre was known as a long-time center of gay entertainment that served as a vital space for connection, shared experience, and cultural expression during a time when such opportunities were limited and scarce.

In February 1958, Rohauer was found guilty, however civil rights attorney Stanley Fleishman appealed the decision to the California Supreme Court which ruled in favor of Rohauer. The court affirmed that homosexuality was a legitimate subject of artistic expression, firmly establishing that explicit references to it could not be deemed obscene. This ruling became a landmark decision for freedom of speech in the US.

Slide 21 Today, the Coronet Theatre Building stands with its integrity intact. It remains a place where people come together, fostering community and shared experiences.

Slide 22 The Largo at The Coronet, the current tenants, has kept the spirit of the venue alive by hosting live music and comedy shows, providing a platform for artists and entertainers to showcase and explore their talents.

Slide 23 The Coronet Theatre Building holds significant meaning in the present day as a physical representation of Los Angeles's art and cultural history. It stands as a testament to the woman who built it, and the people who worked and performed within its walls, carrying their stories.

By designating the Coronet Theatre, we ensure that these stories endure, inspiring future generations and continuing to shape the performing arts landscape. By honoring its historical value, we pay homage to the creative pioneers, their bold artistic expressions, and its progressive history.

Slide 24: From 1947-2008 the Coronet Theatre Building was owned and managed by woman, and although we didn't have time to explore events under Petrie Gellis Robie, Deborah Del Prete and Gigi Pritzker' leadership, I would like to acknowledge their contribution to the development of performing arts in Los Angeles by prioritizing creative exploration and expression. Women's roles in shaping communities have often been overlooked and undervalued, but it is vital to recognize and honor their legacies within history.