

THE STRAND / PANTAGES

Location 10209 Jasper Avenue NW



www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



Home to the oldest and largest fringe festival in North America, Edmonton came by its reputation as a theatre town honestly. Early in the last century, the city boasted a wide variety of dedicated performance halls and theatre spaces in the downtown core. One of these historic venues had roots in the Klondike Gold Rush and would later be at the centre of a gay sex scandal that set the city's theatre community ablaze.¹

In 1898, Alexander Pantages, a man small in stature but large in ambition, made his way to Dawson City to find his fortune. Unfortunately, like so many others, he arrived in the aftermath, just in time to see the gold rush fade. But he did manage to find a way to good fortune by making the acquaintance of Kathleen Eloise Rockwell, also known as "Klondike Kate," a burlesque dancer who had headed north seeking her own kind of luck.

On her way to Yukon, Kate was refused entry by the North-West Mounted Police, who attempted to regulate a lawless frontier, control the traffic of liquor, and keep out any undesirable miners or unwanted visitors such as those who would "mine the miners," which often included thieves, gamblers, murderers, and "ladies of ultimate accessibility."² Undeterred by the rules or the famous Yukon rapids, Kate disguised herself as a man and jumped on the men's-only scow's deck and made her way to Dawson City.

Both wandering souls, Kate and Alexander became lovers and business partners who turned out to be a formidable team. Both had a taste for show business and a con. They were noted not only for watering down the champagne but also for cheating miners out of their gold. Together, they bought a struggling theatre and re-christened it as The Orpheum.³ Although small in scale, the theatre raked in an astonishing \$8,000 a day at its peak,⁴ largely from the throngs of miners who came to witness "The Yukon Flame," a provocative burlesque show Kate had created that used hundreds of yards of bright red fabric to excitingly reveal just enough to drive audiences into a wild frenzy. Kate was also known for her kindness and generosity, which led her to receive the title of "Queen of the Klondike."

After amassing and losing an extraordinary fortune, reported to be over \$500,000, Alexander Pantages moved back to the United States and eventually returned home to Seattle, where he built the first Pantages Theatre. While in Seattle, he secretly married Lois Mendenhall, a young and talented musician from California. After disclosing the marriage to Kate via a letter, she sued Pantages for breaking his promise to marry her and settled out of court for



\$25,000, which at the time was an astonishing amount of money.⁵ Kate would eventually make her way back to the U.S. and settle in Oregon, where she became a pioneering homesteader and avid rockhound who never lost her glamour or charm.⁶

Pantages continued his quest for riches and cashed in on his reputation as a purveyor of successful touring houses and began to build theatres, with each becoming more elaborate than the last. To make his vision come to life, he

1 This article has been adapted with permission of Darrin Hagen. See Darrin Hagen, "Pantages and The Strand," Edmonton City as Museum Project, November 15, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2021/11/15/pantages-and-the-strand>.

2 W. R. Morrison, "The North-West Mounted Police and the Klondike Gold Rush," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9 no. 2 (1974): 93-105.

3 Peter Lester, "Alexander Pantages," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, December 16, 2013, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/alexander-pantages>.

4 "Pantages x 2," *Dance Collection Danse*, <https://www.dcd.ca/exhibitions/vancouver/pantagesx2.html>.

5 "The Life of Alexander Pantages," *J. Willard Marriott Library*, <https://pta.lib.utah.edu/alexander-pantages/>.

6 Finn J.D. John, "Vaudeville's Famous 'Klondike Kate' Became a Central Oregon Legend, Offbeat Oregon History, August 14, 2011, <http://www.offbeatoregon.com/01108b-vaudeville-legend-klondike-kate-bends-most-colorful-homesteader.html>.

commissioned a young Scottish-born architect B. Marcus Priteca. Together, they would develop a long-lasting partnership designing 30 theatres, each built ornately to make a grand cultural statement, much like churches. For those struggling to make ends meet, an afternoon at the theatre was a form of fantasy and escapism. Priteca designed his first Pantages Theatre in San Francisco, followed by two more in Seattle. A fourth followed in 1908 in Vancouver. By 1926, Pantages owned or controlled 74 theatres throughout Canada and the United States, making it the most prominent theatre chain in North America. At the height of his success, Pantages was reported to have earned between twenty to thirty million dollars, which is equivalent to hundreds of millions in today's dollars. For someone who grew up poor and illiterate, Pantages typified the American rags-to-riches success story. However, like a good American tragedy, a scandal would soon follow and bring down his empire.⁷



As part of his growing theatre network, Pantages sought to further expand across Canada. After figuring out how to successfully and profitably program live acts that toured up and down the west coast, Pantages wanted to move eastwards. He needed a prairie outpost to bridge the long gap between Vancouver and Winnipeg to connect his growing network. As a result, he set his sights on the wilds of Edmonton.

To achieve his vision, Pantages entered into a partnership with George Brown, a local Edmonton-based developer. However, Pantages shrewdly refused to foot the entire bill for the new theatre, which was initially proposed to include a 10-storey office tower. Brown worked to convince City Council to loan \$50,000 towards the project. Other than the first two storeys, the office tower never materialized, but the elaborate theatre was built in 1913 at the cost of \$125,000.⁸

The building and theatre each had two different architects; Edmonton architect Edward Collis Hopkins created the understated two-storey brick frontage, while B. Marcus Priteca designed the actual theatre.⁹ On the side of

the building, on the wall facing Jasper Avenue, giant painted letters stated, "PANTAGES: Unequaled Vaudeville." This bold announcement heralded the start of a grand theatre experience in Edmonton. Notably, the northeast corner of the building featured what would become another landmark institution: Edmonton's first cafeteria, the American Dairy Lunch, which operated until it became Ciro's in 1955.¹⁰

On May 12, 1913, The Pantages opened to a spectacular debut¹¹. Thousands of Edmontonians rushed through the main entrance, albeit forty-five minutes later than the advertised launch, as final construction was still being completed moments before the doors opened. So many people showed up that the doorman, Charles Wilson, couldn't verify who had tickets and who didn't. It was his first night on the job—a duty he would perform for decades through the building's many different incarnations.

What the opening night audience witnessed was a remarkable sight. Priteca had created a Neo-Greek fantasia, seating 1600 patrons. Lush and ornate, the theatre featured imported Italian and Grecian marble, Chinese silk wall panels, hand-painted murals, and heavy draperies trimmed in elaborate embroidery. The opening performance went on until midnight and was followed by a banquet that continued into the early hours of the morning. The Edmonton Bulletin referred to The Pantages as "the handsomest theatre in Western Canada". The Edmonton Journal described the theatre as "[t]he most Northerly High Class Vaudeville Playhouse in North America."¹² It was a sensation.

Over the next decade, The Pantages hosted the brightest lights of Vaudeville as performers made their way to Edmonton as part of a regular western tour, which included The Marx Brothers, Sophie Tucker, Will Rogers, Buster Keaton, Eddy Foy, Harry Lauder, and Stan Laurel (of Laurel and Hardy fame). Joy Yule brought his newborn son onto the stage, marking the debut of the Hollywood star who would eventually become known as Mickey Rooney.¹³

However, there was already a seismic cultural shift in the making. The new film industry was forcing the Vaudeville circuit to adapt. The time finally arrived when all the old performing theatres and roadhouses inevitably transitioned to movie houses. As well, fortunes were shifting in the show business world. Eventually, The Pantages was the only theatre in Edmonton that was still offering Vaudeville, as the rest of the entertainment houses had installed movie screens and changed their names. For a time, films and live performers shared the same bill. Eventually, the cost of touring live performers to audiences that preferred to be dazzled by this new film medium was too prohibitive, and the touring circuit fell into disrepair and then stopped altogether.

In 1921, there were disagreements between Brown and Pantages. There was no programming at all on the Pantages stage in July of that year. Pantages offered this advice to Brown: "Declare bankruptcy". He pulled his touring circuit, deleting Edmonton as a stop on the national tour, the lifeblood of the entertainment houses across the country. It only took Brown a few months to make the transition permanent, and the mighty Pantages Theatre reopened as a movie house called The Metropolitan.¹⁴

7 Taso G. Lagos, "Forgotten Movie Theatre Pioneer: Alexander Pantages and Immigrant Hollywood," *The Journal of Modern Hellenism* 32 (2016), <https://journals.sfu.ca/jmh/index.php/jmh/article/view/299>.

8 "Pantages Theatre," Edmonton Historical Board, <https://www.edmontonarchitecturalheritage.ca/index.cfm/structures/pantages-theatre/>.

9 "Strand Theatre," Cinema Treasures, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/14090>.

10 Judy Schultz, "Spicy Tidbits of Dining," *Edmonton Journal*, October 4, 1979, 129.

11 "Pantages Theatre Opened by Mayor Short in Presence of Huge Crowd," *Edmonton Journal*, May 13, 1913, 7.

12 "Pantages Theatre Sign," City of Edmonton, https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/edmonton_archives/pantages-theatre-sign.aspx.

13 "Old Strand Theatre Saved from Wreckers," *Edmonton Journal*, February 7, 1976, 11.

14 "Strand Theatre," Cinema Treasures, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/14090>.

The stock market crash of 1929-30, and the onset of the Great Depression, hastened the demise of the Vaudeville roadshows. When the touring ended, "The Western Road" closed permanently. However, there was a bright side, as community theatre started to gain renewed interest and attention. The Edmonton Little Theatre launched in 1929 with a mandate to nurture local theatrical talent. Thus, Edmonton's second life as a theatre town began.¹⁵

At the beginning of the depression, The Metropolitan closed completely. However, in 1931, it was purchased by Alex Entwistle and updated for sound movies and renamed "The Strand Cinema," which became part of a national chain of movie houses.¹⁶ The theatre was also utilized in other ways, often providing a prominent and stately gathering space. In addition, the stage was frequently shared by arts organizations like Edmonton Little Theatre, Empire Opera Company, and Civic Opera Company, becoming essential to the downtown performing arts community.

The offices in the corner building were filled with local businesses, including lawyers and dentists. Notably, the building also contained rehearsal spaces where theatre could be created and acting classes were taught. Also, one small apartment housed the small family of the doorman, Charles Wilson.

In 1931, Edmonton Little Theatre held its first drama class, with its first production opening on the old Pantages stage. *Liliom* by Ferenc Molnar was directed by a woman who would leave an indelible impression on Edmonton's theatre history: Elizabeth Sterling Haynes. Haynes would also go on to cofound the Banff School of Fine Arts. A decade later, Haynes would become an unwitting bystander in one of the biggest scandals to rock Edmonton's theatre community.

In 1935, when William "Bible Bill" Aberhart was elected as Premier, the province headed into a new era that would define Alberta. Aberhart attempted to steer the province into a sort of prairie theocracy. From 1936-1940, Bible Bill tore up the airwaves in full-throttle fire and brimstone with prophecies broadcast province-wide and beyond. From the centre stage of *The Strand*, he would rail against the evils of modern society in front of a live audience. Topics frequently included the war, Jews, declining morality, and Alberta's role in Confederation.¹⁷

In 1942, a scandal shocked Edmonton's arts community and became the talk of the city for an entire summer and beyond. Harvey Kagna, the former President of the Edmonton Little Theatre company and a playwright and makeup artist, was charged with over a dozen accounts of "gross indecency," a charge which could mean almost anything the prosecutor wanted. In this case, it was used to refer to Kagna's sexual relationships with other men, many of them in the arts community. Kagna was also a close friend and confidant of Elizabeth Sterling Haynes and her husband, Nelson.

Also swept into the dragnet was actor/playwright Jimmy Richardson and Atha Andrewe, a virtuoso conducting prodigy who served as the artistic director of the Empire Opera Company. Wilfred Collier, a former employee at the Department of



Education in the provincial government, was also among those arrested, in what one judge referred to salaciously as a "ring of bestiality."¹⁸

Charges were brought against at least ten men, nine of whom were convicted, with several imprisoned ranging in sentences from one and a half to three years, in what was reported as one of the most extensive dragnet operations targeting gay men in Western Canada.¹⁹ The police interrogated the men and pressured them to turn against each other and name their partners. Anyone identified as homosexual was by definition a criminal and an immediate object of police attention and potential prosecution.

The ensuing media frenzy and judicial overreach resulted in dozens of charges of gross indecency²⁰. Kagna, age 37, was initially charged with twelve criminal offences and sentenced to three years in the penitentiary. Andrewe fled the country but was later extradited from Mexico and sentenced to two years in prison. By the time the dust settled, several men had their lives and reputations destroyed. A quote from Kagna demonstrates how deeply these charges affected the men involved. "I have nothing further to live for," Kagna was alleged to have told police at the time of his arrest. "I have disgraced my family and I don't care what happens to me. The only thing left for me to do is to do away with myself, and jump off the high level bridge."²¹ Media coverage of the arrests and subsequent trials published the names of the accused and even their home addresses.²² Before sentencing Kagna, Justice Ives addressed the accused, stating, "I do not know how many other young men there are in the city who have been debauched by you and your confederates, the older men. I have no doubt there are a number."²³ It would take decades for the theatre community to recover, and even to this day, many are reluctant to talk about the scandal.

In 1945, the Edmonton Little Theatre sought to further distance itself from the Kagna scandal and renamed and branded itself as the Edmonton Community Theatre. By the 1950s, Edmonton's theatre community was burgeoning, thanks partly to the post-war boom and people with new ideas who started to arrive in Edmonton. Most importantly, these new people had no connections to the strife and scandals of the past.

15 To learn more about the Edmonton Little Theatre and the Growth of Theatre in Edmonton, see: Mary Ross Glenfield, "The Growth of Theatre in Edmonton: From the Early 1920s to 1965" (Master's Thesis, University of Alberta, 2001), <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp04/M060377.pdf>.

16 "Pantages Theatre Sign."

17 "Pantages Theatre Sign."

18 "Kagna Given Three Years on Indecent Assault Count," *Edmonton Journal*, September 25, 1942, 1.

19 Lyle Dick, "The 1942 Same-Sex Trials in Edmonton: On the State's Repression of Sexual Minorities, Archives, and Human Rights," *Archivaria* 68 (2009): 1-35.

20 Between 1942 and the trials in 1944, the *Edmonton Bulletin* and *Edmonton Journal* are reported to have published 48 news stories about the cases, including on the front page.

21 "Pair Remanded on Morals Counts," *Edmonton Journal*, July 15, 1942, 9.

22 "8th Man is Held on Morals Count," *Edmonton Journal*, June 27, 1942, 13.

23 "Kagna is Given Three Year Term," *Edmonton Journal*, September 25, 1942, 2.

Likewise, The Strand underwent its own resurgence when it was renovated in 1953, purchased by the Famous Players chain in 1956, and then bought out by First Northern Building Corporation in 1959.²⁴ Theatre pioneer Margaret Mooney remembers studying acting from Edmonton theatre legend Elizabeth Sterling Haynes in The Strand's second-floor offices from 1949 to 1955. She also recalls being consigned to construct and gather props for the first Walterdale Melodrama, *Tempted, Tried & True*, presented on The Strand stage in 1965.

It's impossible to say when The Strand became known as a place for gay men to connect, but in the pre-gay-bar years when downtown was the place for LGBTQ2 people to meet, one of the locations where gay and bisexual men could find each other was in the flickering half-light of second-run movies that showed at the old theatre. Even as late as 1971, The Strand had a well-known reputation in the gay community as a place to cruise and connect, specifically in the notorious back row. It was common enough knowledge within the gay community that it even merited inclusion in the infamous underground "Guide for the Naive Homosexual."²⁵ The Strand was listed with a short and frank description: "A lively back row, but is definitely not recommended except for the most brazen and desperate of people."²⁶

In 1976, the fading theatre was declared a Provincial Historic Resource. On December 30, 1978, the final showing of Elliot Gould in *The Silent Partner* was the last performance on the 56-year-old stage.²⁷ Despite receiving a distinction as a landmark of historical significance, it was demolished to make way for the IPL tower, now named Enbridge.²⁸

A replica of the marquee from the original Pantages Theatre still shines brightly on display as part of the Neon Sign Museum on 104 Street. If objects could talk, it would tell one hell of a story.



24 "Pantages Theatre Sign."

25 The Guide for the Naive Homosexual was a never-published, but much-shared underground volume describing gay life in Canada written by early Vancouver GATE founder Roedy Green that discretely made the rounds in the late 1960's and early 1970s.

26 Roedy Green, "Guide for the Naive Homosexual," 40.

27 "Strand Theatre."

28 Parts of the majestic Pantages Theatre live on. Upon demolition, plaster figurines were removed and molds were taken of the inside of the theatre with the hope it might one day be reconstructed into its former glory as an exhibition in Fort Edmonton Park.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Paula Simons: <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/edmonton/alberta/simons-witch-hunt-at-the-strand-lifts-curtain-on-an-ugly-chapter-of-edmonton-history>.