

## **SU TEATRO CULTURAL AND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER: FROM MOVIE THEATER TO SOCIAL ACTIVISM THROUGH THE PERFORMING ARTS**

**During the 1920s, the architecture of movie theaters was often quite fantastical and high quality.  
Why do you think that is?**

Su Teatro (Your Theater) is housed in the Denver Civic Theatre, which was created by theatre impresario, Henry Lowenstein, at the site of what was originally the Cameron Building, built in 1921 as the Cameron Movie Theater. Located on Santa Fe Drive, in the neighborhood of La Alma/Lincoln Park, the company's home is in the heart of Denver's historic Latino neighborhood.

### **Structure**

During the 1950s and 1960s, the building was used as a meatpacking plant before it became a photography studio and then the Denver Civic Theatre. It was renovated in 2003. In 2009, after years of raising funds to build a new facility in the Westside neighborhood, the City of Denver granted Su Teatro a lease on the Denver Civic Theatre providing them a larger, more permanent location. Su Teatro purchased The Denver Civic Theatre in 2010 from Denver.

The present facility combines three buildings that existed when Lowenstein renovated the space for live theatre. The building houses two theaters. A large proscenium theater, The Martinez Performing Arts Hall, seats 332. A smaller, flexible, black box theater, The Frank Trujillo Salon de Arte, seats 134. An adjacent art gallery and cafe space is ideal for all types of events. In addition to putting on its own shows, Su Teatro rents out the facility to groups.

### **Neighborhood and History**

The neighborhood of La Alma/Lincoln Park has seen many changes over the course of its long history, which dates from the very beginning of Denver itself. Much of the architecture and history of the area has been overwritten multiple times. The area has hosted everything from farms to a military camp to railroads, residents, activists and artists. Its history includes public housing projects and a cultural arts district. The neighborhood owes its earliest beginnings to its closest neighbor, Auraria (La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association).

Santa Fe Drive historically hosted small mom-and-pop shops serving the community's daily needs, anchored by two movie theaters: the Cameron Movie Theater at 7th (built in 1922) and the Santa Fe Movie Theater at 10th (built in 1927). Two movie theaters within three blocks of each other did not constitute a poor business plan back in the 1920s, when television had yet to begin siphoning off the audience. By the late 1950s, however, both theaters were in poor repair and the theater audience was much sparser. Both theaters were vacant for a number of years.

Today La Alma/Lincoln Park is a vibrant, mixed-use, urban community with parks, major health services, an arts district and cultural facilities, grocery store, close proximity to downtown and higher education institutions, the Colorado Ballet and Denver's theater district, museum district and major sports and concert venues. A diverse neighborhood, it is anchored by the Santa Fe Arts District (Denver Public Library Archives).

## **Su Teatro**

Su Teatro is a nonprofit arts organization with an emphasis on Latino culture featuring plays, concerts and film events. The third oldest Chicano theater in the country (only Teatro Campesino and Teatro de la Esperanza are older), Su Teatro features dual-language events—Spanish and English—that espouse social activism. The group predominantly performs pieces written by Latinx (Latino/Latina) playwrights speaking to the life experiences of those in the community.

Originally a student theater group at the University of Colorado Denver in 1971, they grew and began looking for a home. In 1989, Su Teatro, a roving theater troupe, purchased the old Elyria School in Northeast Denver. Having a home allowed the organization to expand its programming to include annual arts festivals and an arts education program in addition to a full theater season. They chose the name El Centro Su Teatro to represent a multidisciplinary cultural arts center. After that, it moved to numerous facilities around Denver, before finally settling in the Denver Civic Center at the heart of the Art District on Santa Fe. This allowed them to expand and become a regional Latino cultural arts center—the only one of its kind in the area.

Born from the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Su Teatro got its start in 1971 performing politically charged agitprop plays and skits to support social activism and bolster civil rights causes. The 1980s saw a shift in the artistic output of Su Teatro, who began to develop full-length plays focused on demystifying the Chicano identity and celebrating the experiences, history, language and cultural heritage of Chicanos, Mexicanos and Latinos throughout the Americas.

Over 40 years, Su Teatro has built a national reputation for productions that speak to the history and experience of Chicanos. Su Teatro has created more than 15 original full-length productions that have toured widely to venues such as New York's Public Theater, The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, San Antonio, TX, and Plaza de la Raza, Los Angeles, CA. The artistic excellence and relevance to the field has been recognized nationally through funding from The Shubert Foundation, Theatre Communications Group, the National Performance Network, The National Endowment for the Arts, the Kresge Foundation and the American Composers Forum (About Us).

## **References**

La Alma/Lincoln Park Neighborhood Association.

Denver Public Library Archives.

Su Teatro. About Us. Retrieved from <http://suteatro.org/about-us/>.