

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

## 1. Name of Property

Historic name: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

Other names/site number: San Gabriel Civic Auditorium

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

**DRAFT**

## 2. Location

Street & number: 320 S. Mission Drive

City or town: San Gabriel State: California County: Los Angeles

Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this x nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property x meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

\_\_\_ national   x   statewide \_\_\_ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

  x   A \_\_\_ B   x   C \_\_\_ D

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<b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b>	<b>Date</b>
<hr/>	
<b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b>	
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In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.	
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<b>Signature of commenting official:</b>	<b>Date</b>
<hr/>	
<b>Title :</b>	<b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b>

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**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register

determined eligible for the National Register

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain:) Note that the property was determined eligible for listing on the National Register in 1985 per a local review performed by the Los Angeles County Community Development Agency

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:

Public – Local

Public – State

Public – Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)

District

Site

Structure

Object



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## Summary Paragraph

The San Gabriel Mission Playhouse is located at 320 S. Mission Drive in the city of San Gabriel. It is a prominent feature of the locally designated historic district, along with the San Gabriel Mission and Grapevine Park. The rectangular plan auditorium building is located within a triangular area bordered by Broadway to the north, Mission Drive to the west, and Santa Anita to the east. The Playhouse is modeled after the Mission San Antonio de Padua and is an example of Spanish-Colonial-Revival architecture. The frontage of the Playhouse is approximately 400 feet with a depth of approximately 600 feet. The façade of the building is marked by an arcade, a red tile roof, and a two-story high parapet with flanking belfries. Alterations to the interior of the Playhouse have been minimal and in keeping with the needs of its theatrical use, including the removal of seats in the main house to accommodate a new sound board, replacement of carpeting in the main house and balcony, and updates to venue amenities. Exterior modifications as well have been minor, with removal and replacement of a non-original, detached neon sign. Restoration to the façade following the Whittier Narrows earthquake followed preservation protocol.

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## Narrative Description

The San Gabriel Mission Playhouse consists of a two-story rectangular plan auditorium building. Designed to resemble the Mission San Antonio de Padua (NR, b. 1771) near present-day Jolon, California. The Playhouse, begun in 1921, was designed by Arthur B. Benton (1858-1927), a major Southern California architect of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Because of Benton's ill-health, the Playhouse was completed in 1927 according to Benton's plans by the Los Angeles architectural firm of Dodd and Richards.

The main (south elevation) façade of the building is marked by an arcade, a red tile roof, and a two-story high parapet with flanking belfries. Four iron lamps and a polychrome terra cotta heraldic crest grace the arcade. Molded plasterwork and decorative finials also adorn the arcade. Inside the arcade a vaulted ceiling embellished with polychrome designs leads the eye to molded plaster archways at the east end of the arcade. Heavy carved wood entry doors decorated with polychrome designs encased in modified quatrefoils depicting astronomical and heraldic symbols lead to the auditorium. Above the doors, arched fixed pane transoms are embellished with heavy, interlocking wood tracery.

To the rear of the main elevation, the building stretches north in a two-story form capped by a pitched red tile roof. The stage section of the building rises three stories, and each buttressed corner is capped by a heavy finial. Arched wood frame casement windows punctuate the plain stucco façade on the west and east elevation.

A grass-covered courtyard located along the west elevation is enclosed by a rectangular one-story, red-tiled roofed reliquary, housing a collection of miniature replicas of all of California's Missions. Asphalt-covered surface parking is found to the west of the auditorium and in the rear

of the structure. On the east side, a lawn area landscaped with trees stretches from the façade to the enclosing wall, which is located adjacent to the sidewalk on Santa Anita Street.

Related features on site include a six-foot tall decorative wall, a portion of which is adobe. This wall stretches along the east property line at Santa Anita Street and curves around the corner to the west on Mission Drive.<sup>i</sup>

Entry to the interior of the Mission Playhouse is through the afore-mentioned arcade. Three sets of wooden carved doors open to a rectangular lobby, with the central door as the largest. The flooring in the lobby continues the red brick from the arcade. There is a vestibule with ornate engravings facing the entrance that contains a bust of John Steven McGroarty, author of the Mission Play. The restrooms are accessible off the two ends of the lobby. The box office is accessible on the east end of the lobby, and on the west end, there is a stairway leading up to the balcony seating. The balcony seating is accessed from the two-story lobby by an internal staircases and has three seating sections with four aisles arranged in a stepped plan. Balcony access is accentuated in the lobby by an external walkway supported by heavy, rustic rafter tails and rimmed with wrought-iron railings providing views down into the lobby on three sides.

The ceiling of the lobby is comprised of exposed wooden beams and painted plaster with a decorative motif of arrows, flowers, and geometric shapes. There are three chandeliers that hang from the ceiling and the long sides of the lobby have decorative sconces, four to a side.

The doors that give entrance to the theater's house duplicate the motif carried throughout the lobby. Each side of the doors has moldings framing the painted motifs. A long vestibule runs along the back of the house that is divided into three sections with four aisles. The house slopes toward the stage ensuring that "there is not a poor seat to be had" in the theater. To achieve perfect sightlines, the theater has three different seat widths. Two outer hallways that run the length of the house provide access to the box seats. The walls of the theater are adorned with ten tapestries that were donated by King Alfonso XIII of Spain for the opening in 1927. The tapestries represent the various heraldic/kingdoms/states of Spain and were a gift to celebrate the opening of the theater. Ten lights hang from the ceiling and are designed to resemble the lanterns on the Spanish Galleons of the 1700s. In the center of the house are four hanging chandeliers.

The ceiling is an ornate, hung plaster ceiling with disparate stylistic threads that pay homage to Aztec, Mayan, Native American, European, and South-east Asian motifs. A color theme of blue, orange, yellow, gold, and brown hues dominates the ceiling.

The proscenium is one of the most striking features of the interior of the Playhouse and boasts an intricately carved and painted Mayan design. The central feature is a Mayan face/mask that looks back at the audience. The same motif is echoed in elaborate plaster grills that flank the stage and that hold the organ pipes. Doorways on either side of the stage lead to the outer hallway for the box seats and to the stage.

The orchestra pit currently houses a 1924 Wurlitzer Organ – historic in its own right although not original to the theater. The stage has an apron that is 54' x 6' wide. The stage depth is 48.1', not

accounting for back stage areas. Backstage areas include dressing rooms, restrooms, wardrobe and prop rooms, in addition to a green room.

The **location** and **setting** of the Mission Playhouse have retained full integrity since the construction. In 2004, the City of San Gabriel designated the area surrounding the Mission Playhouse and including the San Gabriel Mission as the Historic Mission District. Historic elements, such as the curio-shop, grapevine, and surrounding businesses and homes continue to define the character of the neighborhood and the setting of the Playhouse. The **design** playwright John McGroarty and architect Arthur Benton envisioned, which architects William Dodd and William Richard executed is retained. The façade, arcade, parapets and belfries continue to articulate the Spanish-Mission motif as intended. The Playhouse retains all significant original features on both the exterior and interior of the structure. The **workmanship** and **materials** also retain a high level of integrity. The playhouse retains its integrity of **feeling** as a cultural expression of the Indigenous, Spanish, and Anglo influences that shaped the history of Southern California. The playhouse certainly retains its **association** to John Steven McGroarty, the *Mission Play*, as well as to Arthur B. Benton and the joined architectural and theatrical recasting of the Spanish colonial legacy and Mexican history of Los Angeles.

#### Alterations:

During the 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake, the *Mission Playhouse* sustained damage to its façade. The 6.1 earthquake caused a belfry to collapse onto the roof above the theater's foyer. The theater closed for one year as the City undertook restoration of the façade. The restorations were completed according to standards for historic integrity and do not constitute an alteration. However, the materials used in the restoration differ from the original construction to place less weight on the structure itself.

Signage for the playhouse has changed over the years. An early, but not original, metal and neon sign located on top of the auditorium property was removed in approximately 1945 and replaced with a detached, lighted monument sign. This too has since been removed and replaced by a new sign that consistently articulates the workmanship and materials of the playhouse and that more closely resembles signage captured in souvenir postcards from the play's run.<sup>ii</sup>

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations**

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A.  owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B.  moved from its original location
- C.  birthplace or grave
- D.  cemetery
- E.  constructed building, object, or structure
- F.  commemorative property
- G.  less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Performing Arts  
Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**Period of Significance**

1927-1947

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**Significant Dates**

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**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

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**Cultural Affiliation**

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**Architect/Builder**

Benton, Arthur B. (1858-1927)

Dodd, William J. (1862-1930)

Richards, William (1871-1945)

**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The San Gabriel Mission Playhouse is significant on a local and state level under **Criterion A in the area of Performing Arts, and Criterion C as the work of a master architect in Mission Revival style.** Designed by master architect Arthur Benton, the building articulates the romantic, idealized notions of early California Mission life that developed during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that had major impact on the evolution of local and regional architecture and upon the way in which we view of our history. Built to house John Steven McGroarty's *Mission*



*Play*, the performances recast the colonial legacy of California as a passion play, explaining the Mexican history of Los Angeles to a national audience. Working closely with McGroarty, Benton's design for the Playhouse elevated and perpetuated the euphoric and ironic mythology of the Mission Play in architecture, thus blurring the very lines of history and heritage in the iconic Mission Revival for which Benton is best known. The period of significance is 1927-1947, from initial construction to the theater's initial reopening as a playhouse.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

### **CRITERION A: PERFORMING ARTS**

On March 5, 1927, the newly constructed San Gabriel Mission Playhouse opened its doors on the sixteenth season of John Steven McGroarty's *Mission Play*. "With a premier of unqualified brilliance, old California as typified in the *Mission Play*, and modern California as exemplified in the new Mission Playhouse, joined in luring a great throng to San Gabriel last night."<sup>iii</sup> Remarkably, the construction of the playhouse had the **sole** purpose of presenting a single play: The *Mission Play*. With more than 3,000 performances spanning two decades, an estimated 2.5 million visitors traveled to San Gabriel to view a modern-day "passion play" that recast the Spanish colonial legacy in California, presenting a "white-washed"<sup>iv</sup> and persistent version of the Mexican history of Los Angeles within a unified narrative and experience that defined the "Spanish Fantasy Past."

The origin of the *Mission Play* and subsequent Mission Playhouse are intertwined with the history of the San Gabriel Mission and the Anglo settlement of Southern California. Announcing its 1912 debut, the Los Angeles times claimed that the play, ". . . had been almost literally taken from the pages of history."<sup>v</sup> As Historian William Deverell points out, "The ever so slight distinction between drama and history would be erased, and regional culture would canonize the play as Southern California history itself, come back to life where all assumed it had begun, under the stars at the San Gabriel Mission, that ancient engine of civilization."<sup>vi</sup> Indeed, drama and history merged in the person of the playwright. John Steven McGroarty, poet, journalist, and congressman, had published a history of California in 1911.<sup>vii</sup> Consensus among historians is that McGroarty may have worked on his history and the play simultaneously. However, the popular narrative for the genesis of the *Mission Play* points to Frank Miller, owner and developer of the Mission Inn in Riverside, suggesting that McGroarty was specially prepared to render the history as a drama.<sup>viii</sup> A variety of cultural trends serves to locate the impetus to dramatize California's history: the experience of Oberammergau's Passion Play, the "history on parade" exemplified in *La Fiesta de Los Angeles*, and the fascination with the "Spanish Fantasy Past" that swept through Southern California.<sup>ix</sup> According to the popular account, McGroarty requested leave from his newspaper duties, moved to the Mission Inn in Riverside, and took up residence at a writing desk.<sup>x</sup> Later, while recounting this period in his life, McGroarty stated that the Spanish Colonial Revival architecture of the Mission Inn directly influenced his desire to hire Arthur Burnett Benton as the architect for the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse.<sup>xi</sup>

From its opening in 1912 until the completion of the Mission Playhouse in 1927, performances were held six times a week in an outdoor wooden theater structure situated beside the San

Gabriel Mission.<sup>xiii</sup> The original structure claimed to have the largest stage west of the Mississippi, though, “with its thin façade of mission architecture and roofline, looked every inch like a motion picture backlot.”<sup>xiii</sup> Nonetheless, the theater accommodated as many as fifteen hundred people, which is notable given that the population of San Gabriel did not exceed two thousand until 1920.<sup>xiv</sup> The cast of this epic production numbered 150, including adults, children, and animals. Actors, dancers, and musicians figured prominently in the script, including the popular “fiesta” scene, featuring a Spanish-influenced music and dance number. McGroarty imagined and Benton then programmed the permanent home of the *Mission Play* to maintain and perpetuate productions of this scale. Attendees arrived via the popular Red Car transit system, in Ford Model-T’s and other cars of the period. The proximity to the Mission, gave added weight to the subject matter of the play, and allowed people to attend the play and visit the Mission in one trip. Richard Burton, professor and author of *How to See a Play* noted that, “The entire history of California could now be seen in an afternoon.”<sup>xv</sup> Journalist Elizabeth Murray noted that the trip to San Gabriel from Los Angeles constituted a small-scale pilgrimage.<sup>xvi</sup> Playgoers could view “Ramona’s Home” (a real structure attributed to a fictional character that served to attract fans of Helen Hunt Jackson’s novel), shop for souvenirs at the Curio Shop, and stroll the miniature El Camino Real populated with replicas of the California Missions. So successful were these efforts that the *Mission Play* became a veritable destination for residents and visitors alike. It was said that if you were visiting Southern California, there were three not-to-be-missed landmarks, Mount Wilson, Catalina Island, and the *Mission Play* in San Gabriel.<sup>xvii</sup>

Concurrent with the initial production of the play, McGroarty founded the *Mission Play Association*, which borrowed money and issued stock in the endeavor to manage the costs, marketing, and production of the play. Through the Association, McGroarty went to work to raise funds for the construction of a new playhouse. McGroarty believed that a new theater, whose sole purpose would be the presentation of the *Mission Play*, would preserve the play for future generations. He envisioned a grand theater with a large stage, flyhouse, and dressing rooms, suitable to accommodate the cast of 150. He also had fanciful visions of “drive-in box seats” for patrons arriving by car, and hoped that Benton’s design could accommodate permanent sets that included live grasses and trees.<sup>xviii</sup> He intended that the design would preserve the replica Missions in a garden arcade along with ephemera to “instruct” patrons on the history of California and the Camino Real. He also articulated hope that Benton could design an adjoining compound for an “Indian Village” so that patrons could see the way in which the “Indians in the play....still cling to their traditions and mode of life.”<sup>xix</sup> In 1923 the cornerstone for a new building was laid. However, by 1924 the *Mission Play* itself faced financial peril, starting its thirteenth season \$11,000 in debt. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, recognizing the inherent value of the play, established a committee (The *Mission Play Committee* of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, chaired by W.I. Hollingsworth) to study the situation. The committee made three conclusions: First, the *Mission Play* was a profitable investment opportunity; second, a profit could be turned with a season that ran twenty weeks, and third, that the play was so important to the region that the desire for it to persist was universal.<sup>xx</sup> To put their findings to action, the businessmen of the Chamber of Commerce formed a corporation: The Mission Playhouse Corporation. They intended the Playhouse construction as a non-profit endeavor, leveraged with McGroarty’s donation of the copyright of the play, and all profits from the annual operations to the Chamber of Commerce, to go toward the preservation of historical landmarks in California through the California Landmarks Club – founded by Charles Lummis

and Arthur Benton. In essence, it was a gift to the State, and its people, from those who contributed to its existence, a veritable list of developers and businessmen who shaped modern Los Angeles.<sup>xxi</sup>

As a result of the promotion and fundraising efforts, and with an estimated construction cost of approximately \$750,000<sup>xxii</sup>, the Mission Playhouse opened just in time for the sixteenth season of the *Mission Play* on March 5, 1927. “With a premier of unqualified brilliance, old California as typified in the *Mission Play*, and modern California as exemplified in the new Mission Playhouse, joined in luring a great throng to San Gabriel last night.”<sup>xxiii</sup> It was a gala affair with a \$100-a-ticket showing of the *Mission Play*. McGroarty and Lyndon Ellsworth Behymer, the promoter that the Chamber of Commerce hired, attended along with the notable patrons who had stepped forward to rescue the *Mission Play*. The attendees viewed the first performance in the new Playhouse designed by Arthur Benton and completed by the firm of Dodd and Richards. Its façade was inspired by the Mission San Antonio de Padua, albeit three times larger and finished in faux adobe. The interior was sumptuously decorated with Indian designs on the ceiling, Spanish textile banners representing the various regions of Spain, and a gold-encrusted Indian’s head hanging over the stage. Department store magnate, Arthur Letts, development baron Harold Janss, and other donors had contributed the gift of an Aeolian Pipe Organ to the Playhouse. Nonetheless, at the end of opening night, the attendees left an additional \$60,000 in donations to further furnish the Playhouse.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In his article detailing the newly opened theater journalist Marquis Busby captured the essence of the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse. “Out at Old San Gabriel, where the past still keeps its lingering hold, a dream house has been built. Like all dream houses, it has the spaciousness and proud beauty of air castles in Spain, and yet it has all the tangibility of twentieth century America.”<sup>xxv</sup> The Mission Playhouse did stand as a testament to the past, built on ground once contained within the “cactus-walled” grounds of the Mission compound, adjacent to the Old Grapevine – mother vine of grapes in California, and surrounded by adobe structures. Yet, simultaneously, the *Mission Play* and its new home, the Mission Playhouse, articulated a modern image of California to the thousands of people who traveled to watch performances.

Despite its impressive opening in the new Playhouse, the popularity of the *Mission Play* continued to decline. The year 1927 marked historic developments for show business, the first “Talkie” “The Jazz Singer” was released, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science was established with Douglas Fairbanks as President, and Graumen’s Chinese Theater opened in Hollywood. Public entertainment tastes shifted toward the new modern medium and enthusiasm for the *Mission Play* continued to decline. To help bring revenue, the Playhouse hosted the *Mission Play*, as well as a few “stock” Broadway theater productions from 1927 to 1932. At the end of the 1932 season, and an astounding 3,198 performances, the effects of the depression in addition to a failed attempt to produce the *Mission Play* on Broadway, ended the long run of the play (there was a brief revival of the *Mission Play* in 1936 and again the 1940s).

After the play’s closure in 1932, the San Gabriel *Mission Playhouse* was soon returned to the holders of the mortgage where its future was in doubt. During the ensuing decade, the Playhouse operated as a movie theater. And during the severe housing shortage of the war years the Playhouse dressing rooms were converted into apartments.

It was in the mid 1940s that a group of San Gabriel residents, headed by two local photographers, formed a citizen's committee whose goal was to see the City purchase the Playhouse. This committee drew the support of a variety of local organizations such as Kiwanis, the American Legion San Gabriel Post 142, Recreation Commission, and the Chamber of Commerce. Arguments for the purchase of the Playhouse called upon the legacy of the *Mission Play*: "Only through the acquisition by the City of San Gabriel of this property can the *Mission Play* be again presented in the building built expressly for that purpose. We in San Gabriel now have the opportunity to keep faith with the originators of this romantic tradition and to bring to life again this most beautiful story."<sup>xxvi</sup> Although voters rejected the first initiative in April of 1945, it was successfully passed in August of that year at which time the City purchased the *Mission Playhouse* with a \$160,000 bond measure and renamed it the San Gabriel Civic Auditorium. Election materials promised that the Playhouse would serve as a cultural center for the city as well as provide a central location where celebrations could take place (ranging from graduations to the San Gabriel Fiesta). Tellingly, supporters argued the purchase was an important step forward in the "soon-to come Post-war era".<sup>xxvii</sup>

On September 26, 2007, the City renamed the theater, reverting back to the original name, the San Gabriel *Mission Playhouse*.<sup>xxviii</sup> And, in 2013, as part of the City of San Gabriel's Centennial celebrations, the Playhouse staged a "re-imagined" version of the *Mission Play*. This new version incorporated much of the original play while ensuring that modern sensibilities around the Native American experience, religious colonialism, and the Asian community, were taken into account. The play was a great success in terms of community engagement and fundraising, providing something of a 'jumping-off' point for both these areas of the Playhouse. Through a series of events and meetings, Anna Cross (*Mission Playhouse*, Director) and Jonathan Salisbury (*Mission Playhouse*, Program Coordinator) successfully raised over \$60,000 in cash and in-kind support. They achieved this through personal contact with donors and sponsors, through presentations featuring artists from the show and artifacts from the original production.

More recently, in sharp contrast to the story and spectacle of the *Mission Play*, an original drama entitled *Toypurina* was presented at the *Mission Playhouse*. It recounts the rebellion against Father Junipero Serro led by a Gabrieleno-Tongva woman known as *Toypurina*. This play was well received and critically acclaimed, and there is hope for future performances and educational/curriculum outreach opportunities for this production.

### **CRITERION C: WORK OF A MASTER ARCHITECT**

Arthur B. Benton was born in Peoria, Illinois, in 1858, educated in Topeka, Kansas where he earned his degree in 1887, and moved to California in 1891 where he left a rich architectural legacy as one of the great masters of the Mission Revival style. This style came into fashion as Benton arrived in California. Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona* had popularized the idea of an idyllic period between the indigenous populations of California and the Spanish Colonizers. Shortly after his arrival in California, Benton, under the leadership of Charles Lummis, helped to establish the California Landmarks Club (1894) which set its conservation efforts on the crumbling Missions. The architectural style that developed used details from the Mission

churches on all types of new buildings, such as homes, commercial centers, city halls, the YWCA, and theaters. Dominant features of this style include mission arches, tile roofs, gables, domes, and quatrefoil windows. Benton gained notoriety as a master of the Mission Revival Style when Frank Miller commissioned him to build the Mission Inn in Riverside, California. It was here that John Steven McGroarty took up residence as he worked on the Mission Play. Deeply inspired by the design of the Mission Inn, McGroarty commissioned Benton to design the permanent home of his Mission Play: The San Gabriel Mission Playhouse. The Playhouse stands as the last major commission of Arthur Benton, although his ill health required that the firm of Dodd and Richards complete the work.

Benton's contributions to the popularity and the very character of the Spanish Colonial Revival style are many and the influence of his designs span California and the Southwest. While the Spanish Colonial Revival style found its earliest articulation in private homes, of which Benton designed many – including the Tujunga home of John Steven McGroarty – it moved easily into the civic sphere and gave rise to the idealization and mythology of the “Spanish Towns” of California. During his career, Benton designed multiple homes (Butts, McGroarty, Wallace Homes and, notably, the Mary Andrews Clark Memorial Home [YWCA] - listed on the National Register of Historic Places), theaters (the Riverside Municipal Auditorium and the Mission Playhouse), churches (First Church of Christ Science in Riverside, Church of the Advent in Los Angeles), hotels (the Mission Inn, the Arlington Hotel in Santa Barbara, the Arrowhead Hotel, and San Marcos Hotel), and commercial centers. The period of Spanish Colonial Revival in California dove-tailed the chronology of Benton's career. In *California's Architectural Frontier*, Harold Kirker argued that there was a palpable desire at the turn of the century to identify an architectural style that was both indigenous and unique to California.<sup>xxix</sup> However, David Gebhard is quick to establish that, “The Spanish Colonial Revival, from its Mission phase on, was almost totally a myth created by newcomers to the area. Few artificially created architectural myths have succeeded in retaining a firm hold for so long...”<sup>xxx</sup> Benton's commission to design Frank Miller's Mission Inn firmly established him at the forefront of the style. Evident in his commissions are the characteristic elements of Spanish Colonial Revival: Mission Façades flanked by belfries; parapeted, scalloped gable ends; simple arcades; tiled roofs; and broad, unbroken exterior surfaces of cement stucco. It was Benton's ability to articulate the Spanish Fantasy past that made him an automatic choice to design McGroarty's Playhouse.

Benton collaborated with McGroarty resulting in a uniquely-designed theater space unlike any other due to the demands of the play and its extreme popularity. In a 1921 article published in the Los Angeles Times, McGroarty articulated his vision for the Playhouse and elucidated his collaboration with Benton. His grandiose program for the structure included drive-in seating so that patrons who arrived on the Santa Anita side of theater could enjoy “the play without leaving their cars” – defacto “private loges.”<sup>xxxi</sup> He envisioned gardens, an Indian Village, and shops that introduced patrons to Spanish cuisine and crafts. He acknowledged that, through collaboration, he and Benton had selected the Mission San Antonio de Padua as the model for the theater. He also acknowledged that Benton was the most acclaimed student and master of Spanish-Mission architecture.<sup>xxxii</sup> This at once ambitious, euphoric, and ironic vision that McGroarty published in the Los Angeles Times concluded with the statement that, “...today in 1921 as in 1771 the Indians are again making adobe bricks at San Gabriel...”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The task to execute this vision of place and prominence was now in the hands of Arthur Benton.

Far more than ambition, financial constraints limited the extent to which Benton could fully articulate the architectural program of McGroarty. True to the initial plans, an enlarged façade of the Mission San Antonio de Padua was created for the playhouse. The persistent characteristics of Spanish/Mission architecture were elegantly executed: the low, long profile of the missions gave way to the rise necessary for staging. Belfries and heavy finials accentuated the profile of the theater. Arcades and arches define the entries and interior spaces of the theater. The massing of the structure, situated in a triangular piece of land – which had been protected through purchase by an unnamed “friend” of the *Mission Play*<sup>xxxiv</sup> – neither overshadowed the actual Mission nor cowered next to it. Rather, intermediary structures, such as the historic grapevine, curio shop, and Ramona’s house provided an ambulatory transition between the Mission and the Playhouse. The outdoor reliquary housing the miniature replicas of California missions completed the pilgrimage-like experience. Although the playhouse opened to the 19<sup>th</sup> season without complete furnishings, the gift of tapestries from Spain completed the narrative that the play and playhouse sought to communicate. In 1927, the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse paid homage to the Mission San Antonio carrying forth and expanding the Franciscan Mission design of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. While performances of the *Mission Play* no longer communicate the idealized and ironic vision of the past, the architectural program executed by Arthur Benton remains as a physical and literal iteration of the Spanish fantasy past that excluded the contemporary Spanish-speaking populations. The playhouse stands as an important and final example of Benton’s articulation of Mission/Spanish Colonial revival architecture in California, which cannot be under-estimated as it literally gave place and prominence to the sustaining mythologies.

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## 9. Major Bibliographical References

**Bibliography** (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # 37-8A
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
  - Other State agency
  - Federal agency
  - Local government
  - University
  - Other
- Name of repository: California Historic Resources Inventory, County of Los Angeles, City of San Gabriel

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** 19-188836

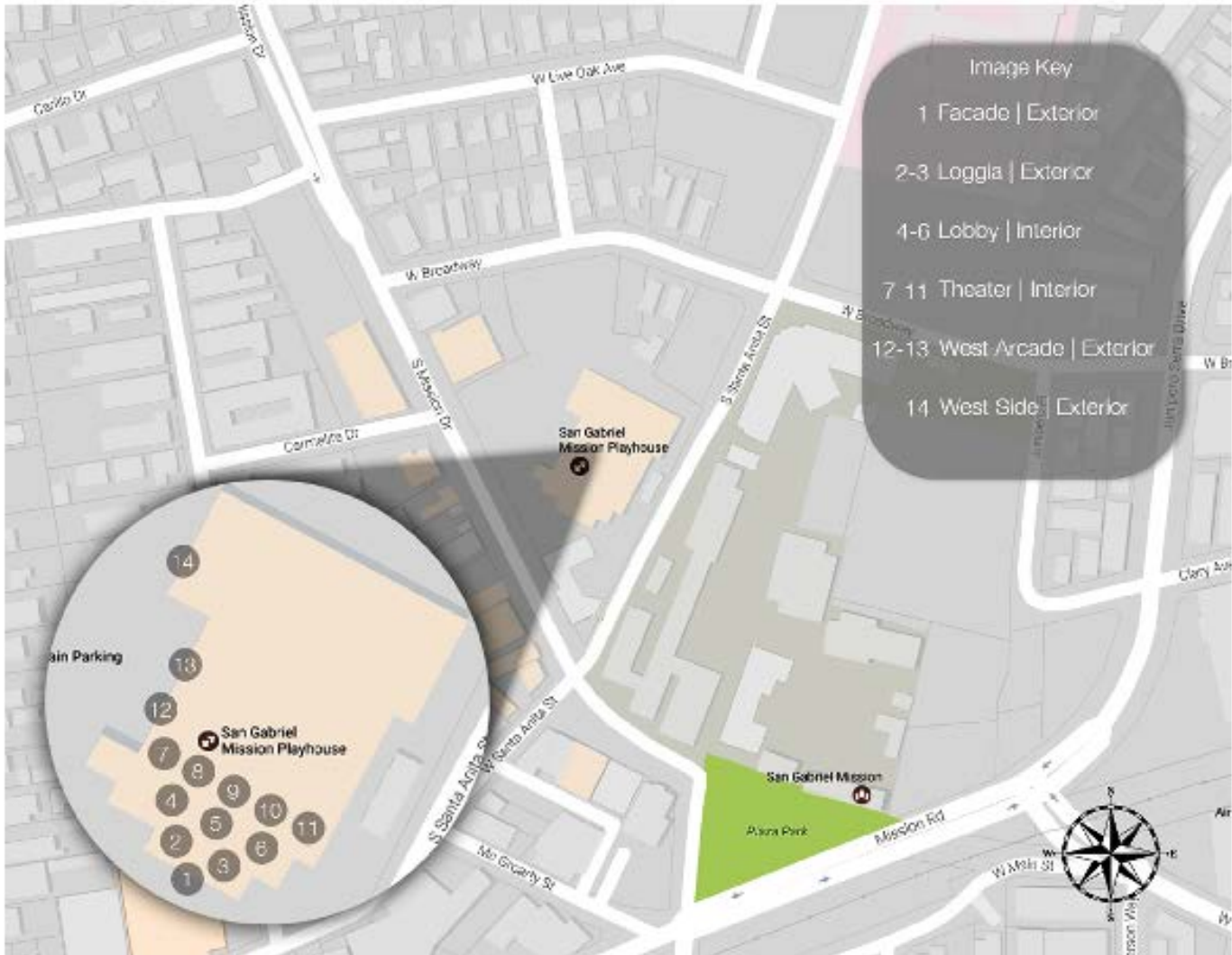
**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreege of Property** Less than 1 acre





## Sketch Map



## Photographs

### Photo Log

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

City or Vicinity: San Gabriel

County: Los Angeles County State: CA

Photographer: Antonio Montesione

Date Photographed: 2012

Description: Main/south Façade, camera facing northeast

Photo 1 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Loggia/entrance to theater, camera facing west  
Photo 2 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Loggia/entrance to theater, camera facing west  
Photo 3 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Lobby of theater, camera facing west  
Photo 4 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Front doors of theater, Lobby, camera facing south  
Photo 5 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Front doors of theater, Lobby, camera facing south  
Photo 6 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA

Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Interior of theater, view from the balcony seats, camera facing northwest  
Photo 7 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Berger/Corser  
Date Photographed: 1999  
Description: Interior of theater, view of box seats and theater beyond, camera facing west  
Photo 8 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Interior of theater, ceiling, camera facing upward  
Photo 9 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011  
Description: Interior of theater, organ grid stage right, camera facing northwest  
Photo 10 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Berger/Corser  
Date Photographed: 1999  
Description: Interior of theater, view toward back of theater toward balcony and lobby area, camera facing southeast  
Photo 11 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse  
City or Vicinity: San Gabriel  
County: Los Angeles County State: CA  
Photographer: Johnny Vy  
Date Photographed: 2011

Description: Exterior west arcade, courtyard, and miniature missions, camera facing northwest

Photo 12 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

City or Vicinity: San Gabriel

County: Los Angeles County State: CA

Photographer: Johnny Vy

Date Photographed: 2011

Description: Exterior west arcade, miniature missions, camera facing northwest

Photo 13 of 14

Name of Property: San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

City or Vicinity: San Gabriel

County: Los Angeles County State: CA

Photographer: Johnny Vy

Date Photographed: 2011

Description: Exterior west side of building, camera facing northeast

Photo 14 of 14

## Figure Log



Figure 1 of 10

San Gabriel Mission Playhouse, San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, CA

Photographer: unknown

Date Photographed: 1927

Description: Main/south Façade, including original neon roof signage, camera facing north



Figure 2 of 10  
San Gabriel Mission Playhouse, San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, CA  
Photographer: unknown  
Date Photographed: 1927  
Description: Main/south Façade, camera facing northeast



Figure 3 of 10

San Gabriel Mission Playhouse, San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, CA

Photographer: unknown

Date Photographed: 1937

Description: Main/south Façade, camera facing north, when it was leased for showing movies by O.W. Lewis from 1932-1942, after the Mission Play closed





Figure 4 of 10

Retail building, downtown Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, CA

Photographer: G. Haven Bishop

Date Photographed: April 2, 1915

Description: Street scene on Broadway Ave, between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Street at night with illuminated sign advertising the Mission Play in Old San Gabriel

Courtesy of Southern California Edison Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.



Figure 5 of 10

Mission Play program, San Gabriel, Los Angeles County, CA

Photographer: unknown

Date Photographed: March 1927

Description: Program Cover for the Mission Play, 16<sup>th</sup> Season, opening of the new San Gabriel Mission Playhouse, March 1927



Figure 6 of 10  
 Advertisement Flyer, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, CA  
 Date: circa 1913  
 Description: Advertisement Flyer for the Mission Play



Figure 7 of 10  
 Los Angeles Sunday Times newspaper article, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, CA  
 Date: March 6, 1927  
 Description: Article covering the opening of the Mission Playhouse, Courtesy of Glendale Public Library, Special Collections





Figure 8 of 10

Tourist map of California

Published by A.M. Robertson, San Francisco, copyright 1927

Artist: Jo (Jacinto) N. Mora

Description : Map altered to show section featuring the Mission Play in San Gabriel





Figure 9 of 10

Orange crate label, San Marino Growers Packing Association, San Marino, CA

Date: 1923

Description: Orange crate label featuring the Mission Play, for national distribution

Courtesy of Jay T. Last Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA



to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

<sup>i</sup> Description prepared by Diane Plava, Los Angeles County Community Development Commission, 11/8/1985.

<sup>i.i</sup> Mission Play Exhibit, San Gabriel Historical Association Museum

<sup>iii</sup> "Opening of Mission Play a Brilliant Affair", Shallert, Edwin, Los Angeles Times, March 6, 1927, p. 3.

<sup>iv</sup> This term is taken from William Deverell's book titled, "Whitewashed Adobe".

<sup>v</sup> "Franciscan Glory-Story: "American Oberammergau" of John S. McGroarty", Los Angeles Times, April 28, 1912, III-1.

<sup>vi</sup> Deverell, William, White Washed Adobe, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 209.

<sup>vii</sup> McGroarty, John Steven, California : Its History and Romance, (Los Angeles: Grafton, 1911).

<sup>viii</sup> Deverell, William, White Washed Adobe, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 211.

<sup>ix</sup> A phrase attributed to Carey McWilliams in Deverell, White Washed Adobe, p. 28, 264. The phrase is also articulated in tourism literature. See "Southern California Through the Camera" published by the Los Angeles "All Year Club" in the 1920s.

<sup>x</sup> McGroarty's biographer offers alternatives to the traditional narrative and timetable of the play's creation. Mary Eleanor Craggs, "The Career of John Steven McGroarty", M.A. Thesis, Catholic University of America, San Rafael, California, 1958. Elizabeth Murray gives a very dramatic rendering of the play's origin that falls between the regional lore and the historical consensus: "A Sketch of Play's Creation and History", Elizabeth Murray, *West Coast Magazine*, volume 12, 1912. See also, William Deverell, White Washed Adobe.

<sup>xi</sup> "New and Larger Theater for the Mission Play," Los Angeles Times, February 20, 1921.

<sup>xii</sup> "Mission Play's Novel Home: New Theater Building Rapidly at San Gabriel", Los Angeles Times, February 25, 1912, p. II-11.

<sup>xiii</sup> Deverell, William, White Washed Adobe, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 215.

<sup>xiv</sup> Population data: <http://www.laalmanac.com/population/po26.htm>; The city of San Gabriel incorporated in 1913.

<sup>xv</sup> Quoted in a 1915 Mission Play playbill, copy, Huntington Library.

<sup>xvi</sup> Elizabeth Murray, "A Sketch of Play's Creation and History", *West Coast Magazine*, volume 12, 1912.

<sup>xvii</sup> During a span of 20 years, 2.5 million people attended some 3,000 performances of the play This figure is widely reported in playhouse programs, the Los Angeles Times, and literature pertaining to the play. The playhouse also figures in Joseph "Jo" Mora, California Tourism maps

<sup>xviii</sup> "New and Larger Theater for the Mission Play", John Steven McGroarty, Los Angeles Times, February 20, 1921, p. V1

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xx</sup> Deverell, p. 232.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid. To assist in raising funds, the Mission Play Corporation sold stock options. Board member and businessman, George I. Cochran stated that his purchase of preferred stock was, "not a subscription but a loan..." which appeared to be a common belief among notable investors.<sup>xxi</sup> Henry E. Huntington and D.L. Doheny contributed \$10,000 each, the Retail Merchants Association gave \$6,000, Harry Chandler, George Cochran, Samuel Rindge, W.I. Hollingsworth, Henry Robinson, Title Insurance Corporation, and Eli Clark pledged \$5,000. And Frank Miller, owner of the Mission Inn in Riverside contributed \$3,000. As a result, the support for the *Mission Play* and Playhouse drew from Southern California's elite.<sup>xxi</sup> Despite their patronage, the Corporation hired Lyndon Ellsworth Behymer, a promoter with a long history in Los Angeles show business to manage the *Mission Play* and Playhouse construction.

<sup>xxii</sup> Approximately 10 million dollars today.

<sup>xxiii</sup> "Opening of Mission Play a Brilliant Affair", Shallert, Edwin, Los Angeles Times, March 6, 1927, p. 3.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Deverell, pp. 244-245.

<sup>xxv</sup> "New Mission Play Theater Opens Doors in San Gabriel", Busby, Marquis, Los Angeles Times, March 6, 1927, p. C-17.

<sup>xxvi</sup> "A Cultural Future That Awaits San Gabriel", pamphlet, San Gabriel Mission Playhouse

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xxvii Ibid.

xxviii Connie Rothstein Collection of California Missions, the Mission Play and Southern California, Huntington Library, Box 28.

xxix Harold Kirker, *California's Architectural Frontier*, p. 120

xxx David Gebhard, *The Spanish Colonial Revival in Southern California, 1895-1930*, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, p. 131.

xxxi "New and Larger Theater for the Mission Play", John Steven McGroarty, *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 1921, p. V1

xxxii Ibid.

xxxiii Ibid.

xxxiv Ibid.