

EGYPTIAN THEATER (Bala Theater)
157 Bala Avenue
Bala Cynwyd
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HABS NO. PA-6040

HABS
PA
46-BALA,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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Location: 157 Bala Avenue, Bala Cynwyd, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The Egyptian Theatre, currently known as the Bala Theatre, is an excellent example of the Egyptian Revival style, a rare form of exotic revival popular during the mid-nineteenth through the early-twentieth centuries. Like most movie palaces built in the 1920s, the Egyptian Theatre originally featured silent movies and Vaudeville acts and was embellished with an array of ornate elements.

Description: The Egyptian Theater is a five-bay building constructed of brick and steel, and faced with poured concrete and terra cotta. The theater faces west and follows the curve and grade of Bala Avenue. The northern two bays are two stories while the southern two bays are three stories. The first floor of the flanking bays contains storefronts, while the upper floors are apartments and have three contiguous windows with concrete surrounds and double-hung sash. The center bay projects out and extends above the flanking bays. The first floor of the center bay is a modern theater entrance above with a contemporary, metal marquee. The second story has four large Egyptian-style temple columns, five recessed windows with double-hung sash and is crowned by an Egyptian gorge cornice consisting of a large cavetto decorated with vertical leaves and a roll molding below. In keeping with its Egyptian theme, the theater's facade features terra cotta moldings of hieroglyphics, a charioteer, a Nile River barge and the mythical Egyptian phoenix. The highly decorated structure enlivens the streetscape and captures the interest of those who pass by.

The spacious lobby contains a typical ticket window and concession stand. It also has two flanking grand staircases which lead to an upper foyer (originally there was a second-floor balcony, but this has been closed off). On the west wall of the upper foyer there is a large, hand-painted mural of a bucolic fantasy featuring five Egyptian maidens dancing in a garden. In the approximately 1,000 seat auditorium, fourteen massive columns showing influence from the Egyptian Temple in Karnak line the wall and pharaoh figures dominate the carved centerpiece in the ceiling.

History: Patrick J. Lawler commissioned Paul J. Henon of Hoffman-Henon Company, established in Philadelphia in 1921, to design the Egyptian (later the Bala) Theatre on the land of the former M.A. Lawler estate in 1926. Henon produced a number of Catholic church designs in his early practice, yet both Hoffman and Henon concentrated on theaters and movie houses for most of their careers. They designed such

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notable examples as the Mastbaum Theatre in Philadelphia, the Century Theatre in Baltimore and the Stanley in Atlantic City, New Jersey. William H. Hoffman died in 1925, though Henon continued to use the name Hoffman-Henon Co. until 1930. Throughout most of Hoffman-Henon's operation, Daniel T. Henon, Paul's brother, headed the engineering department.

The theater opened as a silent movie house with a stage, an orchestra pit containing a large pipe organ, an impressive balcony, box seats and a grand reception area on the second floor. The original 1,416 seat theater was built at a cost of \$276,269. This cost included the stores and apartments that flanked the theater. In 1927, the theater was converted to sound in order to accommodate talkies. Today it remains as one of the few theaters in the area that retains its large auditorium and single screen.

Egyptian Revival was among the exotic revival styles popular during the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. The style was generally applied to public buildings, though its use in general, public or residential, is fairly rare. Interest in Egyptian Revival resulted from the consideration of Egypt as a source for the architecture of Greece and Rome subsequent to Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798-99.

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