



A MOMENT IN TIME

A WEEKLY SURVEY OF LOCAL HISTORY BY PROFESSOR DAN ROBERTS, UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

A theater's many lives

In late 1978, Norfolk lawyer Robert Brown invited several friends to his turreted Victorian in Ghent. They assembled regularly to explore the transformation of the Norfolk Theatre Center into a professional, world-class regional operation.

As legend has it, they may have had some help from beyond.

This story begins just before the turn of the 20th century, when two brothers became infected with a passion for the theater.

Jake Wells was a baseball player and coach in Richmond, strikingly handsome, with a nose for business. In 1898, he gave Spence's Trunk Store a new life with vaudeville.

In a previous existence, Spence's had been Barton's Opera House on Broad Street. Wells noted its exotic architecture, assumed the lease and, several weeks later, opened Bijou Family Theatre. It was Richmond's first vaudeville venue and played to packed houses.

Clean, family entertainment was popular, and soon Wells expanded his operations to Norfolk. He recruited his younger half-brother, Otto, to help him.

Eventually they would manage 42 theaters in nine states, including at least half a dozen in Norfolk, which they made their base of operations.

The flagship venue was the new Wells Theatre, which opened in 1913. Technologically advanced, with ornate decorations and poured-concrete construction, the Wells had a magnificent beaux-arts classical design.

The finest acts in America played the Wells. Will Rogers,

Dan Roberts is the host of "A Moment in Time" and teaches history at the University of Richmond. The program is heard at 6:33 weekday mornings on WHRV-FM 89.5. Reach him at (804) 289-8679 or at www.amomentintime.com.

Billy Burke, John Philip Sousa and Fred and Adele Astaire graced the stage, as did horses astride treadmills in "Ben Hur."

In 1926, the Wells brothers sold out and turned to other pursuits.

Just a year later, inexplicably, Jake Wells committed suicide while building a hotel in Hendersonville, N.C. Otto Wells continued to be a major player in the Norfolk business community until his death in 1940.

Otto's body was shown before burial in the living room of the Victorian on Pembroke Avenue. Perhaps the shadow of Otto Wells oversaw the plans of attorney Brown and his friends as they sought to transform a small theater company.

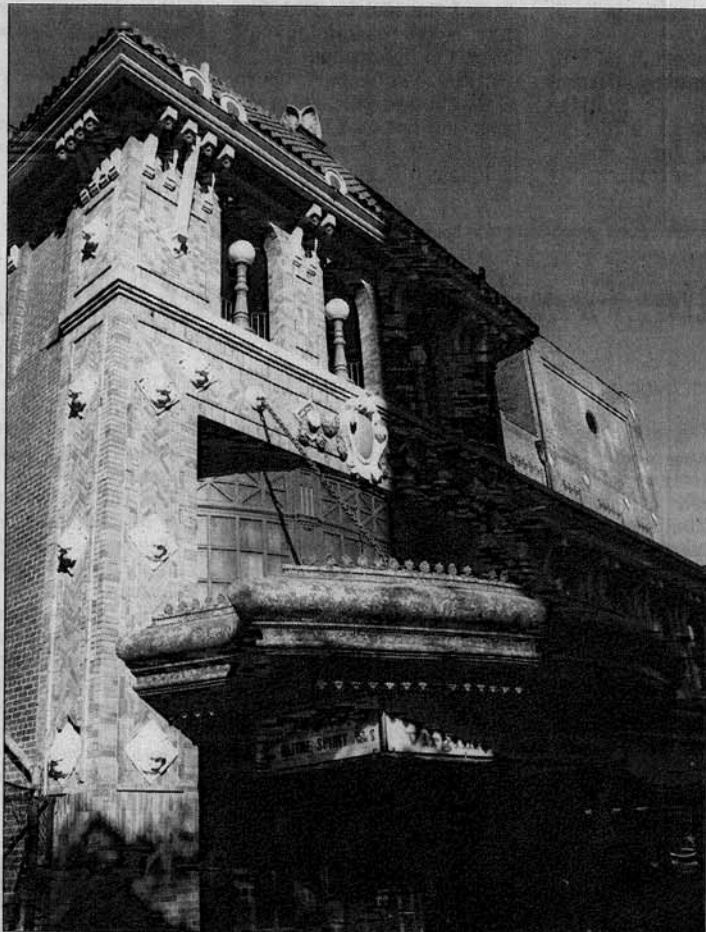
Whether outside intervention was at work cannot be verified, but the project has gone from success to success.

The year of transformation was 1978. The organization acquired a new name, Virginia Stage Company; a full-time artistic director; multiple state and local grants; and a new home, the Wells.

Jake and Otto's old theater had fallen on hard times. Over the years, it had hosted audiences to a wide variety of entertainments. When VSC optioned the lease, it was a soft-porn movie house.

Brown tells, with great glee and the obvious polish of repetition, the wonderful story of the day in 1979 when board members gathered in the slowly emerging opulence of the Wells lobby. Patrick Tovatt was the new artistic director, and a photographer was there.

Just as he was about to snap the shutter, the door swung open and one of Norfolk's leading citizens



THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT FILE PHOTO

The Wells Theatre in Norfolk has, in its different incarnations, been a vaudeville venue, a soft-porn theater and the home of the Virginia Stage Company.

emerged from the porn theater. The soon-to-be victim surveyed the scene and slowly retreated back into the darkness, as if the scene had been rehearsed for a piece of slapstick comedy. But no pictures were shot.

For 28 seasons, the Virginia Stage Company has provided superb entertainment to theater-hungry crowds in Hampton Roads. It has completely restored the

Wells, secured additional working and administrative space in the Monroe building next door, and presented the entire physical plant to the city of Norfolk at a quite reasonable cost to the community.

Otto and Jake Wells obviously are no longer concerned with such mundane matters, but it would be nice to think that they could only be pleased to see what has happened to their creation.

RESOURCES

Klein, Jean. "The Redemption of a Fallen Lady: The Wells Theatre Gets a Facelift," *Metro* (February 1980).

Scott, Glen Allen. "Virginia Stage Company: After 20 Years, Theater Still Getting Applause," *The Virginian-Pilot*, Feb. 2, 2000, B12.

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