

History student compiles book on Wichita Orpheum

By MEGAN PAULY
news@thesunflower.com

Unless you're a patron of the arts, you might not know that Wichita is home to the first atmospheric theater—characterized by a sky-like ceiling—in the United States.

During the days of vaudeville, more than 17,000 acts—including Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald and Houdini—graced the stage of The Orpheum Theatre in Downtown Wichita.

These are facts found in Wichita State history student Keith Wondra's new book, "From the Land of Andalusia to the

Wheat Fields of Kansas."

The title captures a main element of the atmospheric architecture: an illusion of a foreign setting such as Andalusia. Austrian architect John Eberson designed the theater in 1922.

"The name of the book comes from a headline in the 1922 Wichita Eagle," Wondra said. "It was basically saying, from the hands of Andalusia to the wheat fields of Kansas, The Orpheum Theatre in Wichita, Kansas is opening up. I just changed hands to lands because I thought it sounded better."

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Courtesy photo

Keith Wondra, a senior in history at Wichita State signs copies of his new book, "From the Land of Andalusia to the Wheat Fields of Kansas." The signing was held last Friday at the Orpheum Theatre.

The goal, as quoted by Ebersson in Wondra's book, was to give the illusion of "a magnificent amphitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky ... an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian temple year ... where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds drifted."

Wondra signed books at a reception in The Orpheum on Friday night. A long-time Orpheum volunteer, Wondra wrote the book after a suggestion from Mary Eves, past president of The Orpheum.

"He and I were in the box office one night, and we were looking at some historic pictures," Eves said. "I said, 'you know, I have always wanted to have a written and picture

history of the theatre, I think it would just be so special.' He said, 'I can do that.' I said, 'You can?' And he said, 'Well, yeah.' And I said, 'Well, let's do it!'

"And that's how it got started. So we set about gathering some of the pictures and doing the research, and together, we developed this book. He did the heavy lifting."

Wondra didn't anticipate his volunteer experience would lead to the publication of a book.

"I knew volunteer experience would help me out in the future, but not in writing a book," Wondra said. "I think writing the book will help out in the future of anything else I do."

Wondra attributes much of his success to WSU professors such as Jay Price.

"If it wasn't for being a

student at WSU, I wouldn't have had the chance to write the book," Wondra said. "My classes—and the teachings I've gotten here—have really helped out.

"I've always been a big fan of history. I took a couple classes at WSU that ingrained me into Wichita history. The Orpheum was kind of a thing I just went to for a concert, thought it would be a cool place to volunteer, had some time, so basically, everything fell through after that."

Local historian and publisher Patrick J. O'Conner, whose article was cited in Wondra's book, recognized The Orpheum as a destination in the 1960s.

"I'm glad he did it. If it turns people on to The Orpheum, that's good," O'Conner said.

In contrast to the red

velvet seats at the Warren Theatre, seats at The Orpheum in 1960 were red leather.

Wondra consulted various sources, including an article from a 1960 issue of The Wichita Eagle, which stated that a poor cooling system and warm summer weather combined to cause patrons' sweat to soak into the red leather seats, coating clothes in red, like "Indian war paint."

It wasn't the research Wondra minded. As a history major, Wondra is accustomed to writing papers, and said he didn't mind the research.

The book began as a paper Wondra wrote for his Introduction to Historical Research & Writing class, which he expanded upon during the book-writing process.

"It was a tedious process," Wondra said. "A

lot of yelling at the computer and trying to figure out what went wrong. It's a self-published book—basically, whenever someone wants it, they will hit click, pay for it and Amazon will print it off.

"It's done through CreateSpace. You do all the work, and then they see if it's OK and send it off. If it's good enough, they'll publish it. You order proofs, and you tell them what's wrong and everything. I designed it to put all the pictures in it and did the layout of the book."

Wondra's book can be purchased from Amazon.com, Cowtown, The Wichita Historical Museum, Watermark Books, Eighth Day Books and The Orpheum Theatre.

Copies cost \$25.

Wondra has also asked

the WSU Bookstore to sell the books. He mentioned the possible release of an updated edition in 11 years for the 100th anniversary of the theater.

"I am so excited that history has been captured, because it has a way of just disappearing," Eves said. "When I first got started in the theater, I wasn't so aware of how important capturing that history is as I am today.

"Some of the people who were involved in the early days aren't here anymore, so it's incumbent on those of us who do remember—and have access to some of that information—to make sure it's either safely stored at the Special Collections department or documented in some form. We just can't let a thing slip through our fingers, because once it's gone, it's gone."