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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 17-13  
American Theater (Sylvan Theater)  
104-108 Rhode Island Avenue NW  
Square 3109 Lot 810

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019  
Applicant: DC Preservation League  
Affected ANC: 5E

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate the American Theater (Sylvan Theater) a Historic Landmark in the District of Columbia Inventory of Historic Sites. HPO further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance with a period of significance from 1913 through 1972.

### **Preservation Background**

The American Theater at 104-108 Rhode Island Avenue NW is a contributing building in the Bloomingdale Historic District. This nomination was filed before the historic district was designated. The landmark application does not propose to designate the interior, so there will be little change to the existing protected status of the property.<sup>1</sup> However, the theater is architecturally notable and stands out as a distinctive commercial building within the largely residential neighborhood that it was built to serve. It also shares in the neighborhood's social and cultural history as it evolved from a principally middle-class white neighborhood to an African American one. The theater also fits within a larger, city-wide context of theaters, is architecturally distinct, and survives as one of the earliest of the city's neighborhood theaters. The American Theater meets D.C. Designation Criteria B (History), D (Architecture and Urbanism), E (Artistry) and F (Creative Masters).

### **History and Architecture**

Constructed as the "American Theatre" in 1913 (later renovated and rebranded as the "Sylvan Theatre" in 1930), the theater is a distinctive buff brick building located along the south side of the 100 block of Rhode Island Avenue NW in Bloomingdale. Built by real estate entrepreneur Jesse Sherman, the building was constructed by him concurrently with an adjacent row of commercial buildings at the intersection of 1<sup>st</sup> and Rhode Island Avenues intended to serve the fast-growing community of Bloomingdale. The theater, designed by local architect Nicholas T.

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<sup>1</sup> Future permit reviews would concentrate on preserving character-defining features of the exterior and the building's structure. Because the preservation law encourages the restoration of historic landmarks, a somewhat more rigorous application of the guidelines would be appropriate, but there are few specific regulatory distinctions between landmarks and contributing buildings. The regulations for window treatment and replacement are stricter for landmarks, but this building lacks original window openings. The division of a landmark into more than one lot would require a Mayor's Agent review, but it seems unlikely that this property would be subdivided. Perhaps most important is the preservation law's requirement that the painting of unpainted masonry at a landmark requires a permit.

Haller, stands out from the adjacent commercial row, both for its double-height façade obscuring the volume of the purely functional theater box behind it, and for its eclectic and decorative elements including Classically-influenced features such as pilasters, a balustrade and blind recessed panels, along with craftsman-inspired diaper patterning in the second story. Although not an original feature, the vertical Sylvan Theater sign, ca.1950, adds to the building's character and represents a notable period in the building's history. Other alterations are found mostly on the first story—the original theater doors on-center of the first story and flanking poster boxes on the ends, have been replaced with doors and glazed storefronts.

Construction of the American Theater in 1913 coincided with what cinema historian Robert Headley identifies as the “first palace” era, when technical advances in presentation and increasing popularity of movies spurred the replacement of small nickelodeons by full-scale theaters specifically designed for the showing of films. According to the landmark application, a burst of construction in 1913-1914 saw 35 new theaters open in the District. Many of these were located outside the downtown commercial district in burgeoning residential neighborhoods along the city's streetcar lines and were built as amenities to serve the communities where they were located. The application notes that the American Theater is one of the earliest surviving and best-preserved examples of the neighborhood theater that were built exclusively for films. The Minnehaha Theater at 1213 U Street, built 1909-1910, is more indicative of the small nickelodeons that preceded the “first palace” era, while the larger Howard and Apollo theaters from the same era were built for stage performances, or as combination film/playhouses/music venues.

Throughout its history, the American Theater was operated by various motion picture exhibitors. The first, Fayette Thomas “Tom” Moore, was a performer-cum-theater operator who, in the year before establishing the American Theater, controlled nine theaters in D.C. Despite Moore's anticipation that the American, with its 700-seat capacity would add to his business success, he faced financial difficulties from the start and ceased his operations within a matter of months. The second operator, L.W. Atkinson lasted a bit longer, though he appears to have had greater success renting the theater to community and church groups, than showing films. In 1917, Harry Crandall took over the American, renovated and re-branded it as “Crandall's American Theater.” Crandall added the American to his circuit of theaters that then included the Knickerbocker, the Savoy and three other theaters. Crandall would later develop the Tivoli Theater and other grand movie palaces throughout the city. For the next decade, the American Theater, for whites-only, thrived under Crandall's ownership with only two nearby theaters competing for the same market.

Shortly before the Depression, Crandall sold his lease to the theater partnership, Wilcox and Bernheimer. At its re-opening in 1929, the theater was re-named The Sylvan, for theater manager Sylvan V. Dietz, who “although only 25 years of age [in 1929]... has been identified with the exhibition of motion pictures for a decade.” Under Dietz's management, the Sylvan successfully served the neighborhood both as movie theater and as a venue for occasional community events. In 1949, Louis Bernheimer Theaters, Inc. purchased the building from original builder and owner, Jesse Sherwood.

At the time of the building sale, Bloomingdale was experiencing a racial shift, and the Sylvan followed suit. In early 1950, the Sylvan opened to African Americans and during the 1950s, was known as a “black theater.” Around 1950, the large metal Sylvan Theater blade sign was mounted to the building’s east end along with a similar blade sign at the west end, and one on-center (the latter two have since been removed). During the 1950s and 1960s, the Sylvan survived the forces of population loss and television when other theaters were not able to do so. The Sylvan did eventually succumb, closing its doors in 1965.

However, after being sold at a bankruptcy auction in 1967 and again in 1969, the theater was re-born as the first home of the Black American Theater (BAT) company. The company founded in 1969 by Paul and Thomasena Allen and run “entirely by and for the black community” was a subsidiary of a performance and educational entity known as the New Theatre of Washington which had grown out of the civil rights movement. The BAT staged its first production, *El Hajj Malik*, a drama about Malcolm X, at the Sylvan in June 1971 to great acclaim, and other productions followed over the next two years. Although the BAT’s residence at the Sylvan was brief, it was, according to the application, highly influential: “the BAT was the earliest significant theatrical company representing the cultural flowering that accompanied the political self-empowerment of the District of Columbia’s African-American community and anticipated the arrival of Home Rule. Its record of successful productions was a key achievement in what has been called a “mini-renaissance” and a golden age of African-American Theatre in Washington.”

After the BAT departed the Sylvan in 1973, the building reverted to sporadic rental uses. The Metropole Cinema Club leased the Sylvan in 1975-76 before closing. It was followed by a store called Antiques ‘n Old Stuff, and now holds a store and restaurants.

### **Evaluation**

The American Theater (Sylvan Theater) meets D.C. designation Criterion B (History) for its “association with historical periods, social movements and patterns of growth that contributed to the heritage and development of the District.” Constructed in 1913, the theater, in conjunction with a nearby row of shops, greatly enhanced the commercial center of the neighborhood. It remained a stable and viable commercial entity during periods of change, accommodating the needs and desires of the residential community, shifting along with its demographics.

The American Theatre is also significant for its association with the Black American Theater (BAT), among the earliest significant theatrical companies produced by the African-American community. The BAT’s record of successful productions in 1971-72 was a key achievement in what has been called a “mini-renaissance” as well as the golden age of African-American Theatre in Washington. Its success is a symbol of community rebirth after a long period of economic decline that accelerated in the aftermath of the riots of 1968.

The American Theater meets D.C. designation criterion D, E and F as an excellent example of an early neighborhood theater, particularly one that represents the transition from storefront nickelodeon to the “first palace-type” motion picture theater. It is an excellent example of the work of skilled architect Nicholas T. Haller, one of Washington’s most prolific and

accomplished practitioners of the early twentieth century, and possesses high artistic value, including its highly decorative façade with integrated brickwork.

For the same reasons as noted above, the property also meets National Register Criteria A and C.

### **Period of Significance**

The Period of Significance extends from 1913, when the theater was constructed, through 1972 when the BAT moved out. This period of significance takes in several periods of demographic and social change.

### **Integrity**

The American no longer functions as a theater, and although largely intact, it has seen some substantial alterations over time. Ownership changes and the change from movies to live theater resulted in renovated interiors and new signage. After the theater closed in the 1970s, the auditorium was carved up into commercial spaces, and the early interior features were destroyed or concealed. On the exterior, the original entrances and the poster cases on the first story were filled with storefronts; above that point, the building is intact. One of the two huge “SYLVAN” blade signs installed ca. 1950 under the Bernheimer management survives and is an essential character-defining element of the building.

The building its massing, materials, design and craftsmanship and evokes a palpable sense of time, place and association.

### **Boundaries**

The boundaries of the landmark are consistent with the lot upon which it sits. The one-story façade that encloses the space now occupied by the Boundary Stone Public House between the theater building and the rowhouse next to it (120 Rhode Island Avenue) is not part of the original building and is outside of the period of significance.

