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# The ACE Theater

3664 Grand Avenue

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Designation Report



Historic and Environmental Preservation Board

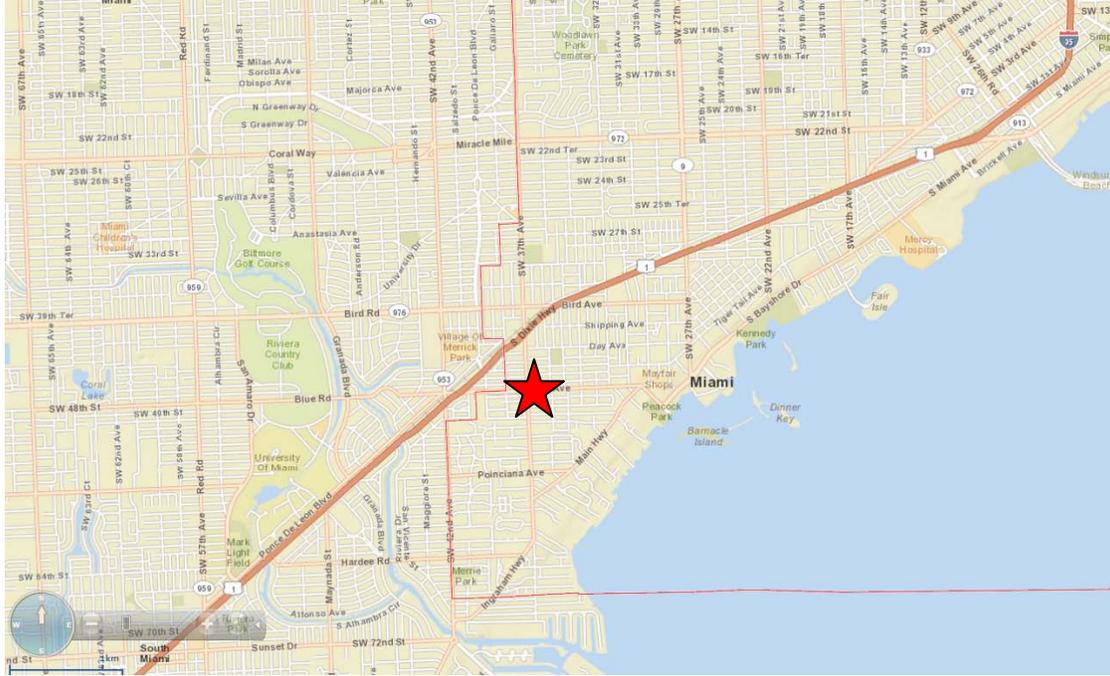


City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI  
PRESERVATION OFFICER  
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD  
ON THE DESIGNATION OF  
THE ACE THEATER  
AS A HISTORIC SITE

Written by: Marina Novaes  
Reviewed by: Dr. Denise Wallace  
July 2014

# Location and site maps



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## I- General Information

Historic Name: The ACE Theater

Current Name: The ACE Theater

Date of Construction: 1930 c.

Location: Coconut Grove

Present Owner: ACE DEVELOPMENT COMPANY, INC

Present use: VACANT

Zoning: T5 -O

Folio No.: 01-4121-007-4150

Boundary (Legal Description): FROW HOMESTEAD PB-8-106 LOT 10 & W1/2 OF  
LOT 9 BLK 26 & LESS N 10 FT THEREOF FOR ST  
LOT SIZE 75.000 X 131 OR 10926-111 1180 5

Setting: The building is located on the south side of Grand Avenue on an interior lot within the block bounded by Douglas Road (SW 37<sup>th</sup> Avenue) on the west and Plaza Street on the east.

Integrity: The Ace Theater possesses integrity of design, setting, materials, feeling, association, and location.

## II- Statement of Significance

For those of us who know the ACE, it became much more to us than a fading relic of yesterday's apartheid. Although the ACE has remained silent for years, and its structure is not as grand as that of the Olympia Theater (Gusman Center for the Performing Arts) in downtown Miami, its edifice is the last guardian of the Grove's black community's memories. The ACE houses our pain as we witnessed Sammy Davis Jr. alongside the Rat Pack and realized that he could not sleep at the same hotel with the others. The ACE beams with our smiles and pride as we applauded our children accepting graduation diplomas. The ACE shook with our laughter as we watched Tom and Jerry cartoons, always rooting for the mouse. The ACE helped shape our courage as we cheered when Mighty Mouse came to save the day.

*Dr. Denise Wallace, President, ACE Development Company*

The ACE Theater was built circa 1930 by the Wolfson-Meyer Theater Company and served as the local movie theater for the West Grove residents into the 1950s<sup>1</sup>; the theater was the only entertainment facility to serve the black community in Coconut Grove during the segregation era.

The Wolfson-Meyer Theater Company started in 1925 with one motion-picture theater on North Miami Avenue between Third and Fourth Streets in downtown Miami. The company grew to become one of Florida's corporate giants - Wometco Enterprises, Inc. Throughout the years, the company expanded the motion-picture theater chain to include four television stations, cable television franchises, subscription TV, tourist attractions [Miami Seaquarium], a Coca-Cola bottling unit and automatic vending services.<sup>2</sup>

During the first decade of the motion-picture (1896-1906), the short five-minute films commonly appeared as an attraction among a variety of acts known as "vaudeville" shows. The vaudeville shows attracted a primarily middle-class and lower-middle-class audience. Fairs, church socials, and traveling film exhibitors also provided opportunities to see films, often with prices more in the budget of people without much money for entertainment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Placencia, Alex Joseph. "A History of West Grove from 1925: Slum Clearance, Concrete Monsters, and the Dichotomy of East and West Coconut Grove." Graduation Thesis, Clemson University. May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "Business People; Wometco Names 2 to Replace Founder", New York Times, (Feb. 4, 1983) <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/02/04/business/business-people-wometco-names-2-to-replace-founder.html> (last visited June 15, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> "Who Watched the Film?" <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/film/question4.html> (last visited June 15, 2014).

In 1905-1907, the “nickelodeons” (nickel theaters) exploded onto the scene in major cities; there were probably more nickelodeons than there are movie theaters today. These small theaters were very popular as they provided the occasion not only for film viewing but for socializing as well.<sup>4</sup> Since their inception, movie theaters have proven to be a very lucrative business, and due to their accessibility, movies became a mass entertainment opportunity available to all.

Around 1912, the “movie palaces” became popular. These were more sophisticated and bigger theaters than the popular nickelodeons. With a capacity for thousands of patrons and luxurious architecture, movie palaces targeted a different audience -- the middle and upper-middle classes. Even though, movie palaces were grandiose, the ticket price was kept relatively low, which was attributable to patron capacity and the mass production of films.<sup>5</sup>

During Hollywood’s heyday (1917 to 1960), movies were described as the entertainment for all classes. And although American cinema aimed to please a broad audience, some differences remained: between rural audiences and urban ones, between luxurious movie palaces to smaller neighborhood theaters.<sup>6</sup>

One of the fundamental assumptions of film history is audience homogeneity (meaning that movie producers assumed that their audience was [white] middle-class Americans). Consequently, producers produced films focusing on this audience thorough the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We realize, however, that this single mass audience was never a reality. This can be seen most starkly in the South.<sup>7</sup>

The settlement of South Florida differs drastically from the rest of the United States. From Ponce de Leon landing on the southwestern coast in 1521 searching for gold and the fountain of youth to Andrew Jackson establishing a new territorial government on behalf of the United States in 1821, the Florida peninsula was nothing more than a wilderness with a few settlements of indigenous Indian peoples, Spaniards, runaway African American slaves, and free black men and women from the Caribbean islands, mostly from the Bahamas.<sup>8</sup>

During the late 1800s, a mass immigration from the Bahamas to the U.S. occurred because the islands’ rocky soil could no longer support simple agriculture and thus the food supply dwindled, making living in the Bahamas exceedingly difficult. Many Bahamians who came to Florida through the Florida Keys came looking for new

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gomery, Douglas. *The Two Public Spaces of a Moviegoing Capital: Race and the History of Film Exhibition in Washington, DC*. *Spectator* – Spring/Summer 1998. Vol. 18, No. 2, <http://cinema.usc.edu/assets/099/15925.pdf> (last visited June 15, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> A Brief History of Florida, <http://www.flheritage.com/facts/history/summary/> (last visited June 15, 2015).

opportunities<sup>9</sup>. After slavery was abolished in the English controlled islands, black Bahamians who were protected subjects of the British Crown<sup>10</sup> made South Florida their home and readily cultivated because it was so similar to their native topography. Early Bahamian immigrants and white pioneers shared a common struggle for survival. The black Bahamians taught white pioneers how to plant the rocky soil, how to build hurricane resistant homes using local materials, and introduced all sorts of tropical plants that would grow in the local terrain. <sup>11</sup> In exchange, white pioneers gave employment opportunity to black Bahamians. Similarly, with the end of slavery, African Americans from Georgia and the Carolinas migrated to South Florida, also seeking better lives and brought their skills and talents to their new homeland.

Although the large black population of South Florida consisted mostly of African Americans from Georgia, South Carolina and the Bahamas, African Americans were never treated equally. Miami always had racial conflicts, which at times was quite bloody. Although, African Americans were usually the victims, they never accepted their victimization quietly.<sup>12</sup> Some black Miami pioneers believed that the arrival of the railroad actually worsened conditions for blacks. Dr. Samuel Hensdale Johnson, a black man whose parents were early arrivals from the Bahamas, gave this account of Miami.

In its early days Miami was a small town, where everybody knew everybody – whites and blacks. Sunday afternoons were times for boat trips to Ocean Beach (Miami Beach) for picnics and baseball games. As the town developed, however, the lines were drawn fast. We became hemmed in... Miami really became a hell-hole after the railroad arrived and Carl Fisher developed Miami Beach.<sup>13</sup>

The American Civil War did not directly impact remote South Florida. In the late 1865, Colonel Thomas W. Osborn, appointee of the Freedmen's Bureau in Florida, was responsible for matters relating to the newly freed slaves. After visiting South Florida, he and his team found that only three blacks were in need of assistance and concluded that South Florida's blacks were faring well.<sup>14</sup>

After the abolition of slavery in the U.S. (1865), the rights that new newly-freed slaves acquired quickly eroded with court decisions that determined that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment did not apply to the individual states. Consequently, laws enacted during the post-reconstruction era stripped blacks of basic human rights and reduced them to second class citizenship and persecution.

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<sup>9</sup> Novaes, Marina. *Evangelist Street/Charles Avenue* - Designation Report. City of Miami – Historic Preservation Division. June 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, Marvin. *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*. University Press of Florida. 1997, page 26.

<sup>11</sup> Merrick, George E., *Pre-Flagler influences on the Lower Florida East Coast*. Tequesta – Volume I. March, 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Dunn, Marvin. *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*. University Press of Florida. 1997, page 73.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 31

In places where blacks were a majority or where the populations of the two races were almost equal, whites used intimidation and violence to undermine the Reconstruction regimes. Secret societies such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Camellia, and others used terrorism to frighten or physically bar blacks from voting.<sup>15</sup> In addition to having their right to vote denied it was illegal for blacks to attend the same schools and churches as whites. African Americans could not enter parks, beaches, or picnic areas, sit in the same waiting rooms, use the same washrooms, eat in the same restaurants, or sit in the same theaters with whites. During the first years of the twentieth century a network of state and local statutes known as “Jim Crow” laws created an elaborate system of segregation reaching into almost every area of southern life,<sup>16</sup> including Miami.

By 1920, blacks constituted 32% of Miami’s population but occupied only 10% of the city’s available space. At that time, Miami had a larger population of black immigrants than any other city in the United States except New York.<sup>17</sup> Miami was always segregated; blacks lived in two major areas, West Grove in Coconut Grove (which consisted of blacks from Georgia, the Carolinas, Bahamas and other Caribbean nations), and Colored Town or Overtown, immediately north of downtown Miami – this geographical segregated housing pattern is still seen today.

At the beginning of the 1900s, Miami had only two “theaters” or movie exhibitor places, the Alcazar and the Kinodrome, both very rudimentary and located in downtown. At that time, movies were still in an experimental stage – silent, black and white, sometimes jerky, not much story line, no named stars. Some were very short, so the movie houses had to piece out a program with stills – “ladies please remove your hats” – adds of local merchants, vaudeville acts, and music.<sup>18</sup>

In 1909, F. W. Hahn built Miami’s first real theater. The theater was constructed of reinforced cement; the stage was forty feet square with an orchestra pit, there were four boxes, 700 seats on the main floor, and 300 in the balcony (reserved for blacks). The Lyceum Theater was initially leased for two years to the former operators of the Kinodrome. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, opening night, a racial conflict took place; the *Metropolis* ran an editorial entitled “A Disgraceful Affair,” which began with a quote from a letter signed Colored Citizen:

Editor *Metropolis*: The citizens of Colored Town beg to have you mention in your paper that we highly appreciate the kind invitation and the grand treat given to us at the new theater Monday night, but are more than sorry to have to state that we cannot afford to continue to show our

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<sup>15</sup> Brinkley, Alan. “The Unfinished Nation – A Concise History of the American People.” Volume 2: from 1865, page 388.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 397

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Peters, Thelma. “Miami 1909 – with excerpts from Fannie Clemon’s Diary.” Thelma Peters. 1984.

appreciation by patronizing the enterprise. We can't afford to buy a new suit of clothes every day after the play, made necessary by the stains of rotten eggs and stones and other missiles thrown at us in the dark, such as were thrown into crowds of our people coming home Monday night.

The editor's comment: It is a reproach upon the white race that such an occurrence as that recited in this communication should take place and it is a reproach upon the Miami police force that nothing has been done to find out the perpetrators of this act. The good behavior of the Negroes of Miami is frequently remarked upon by visitors...

The Negroes were invited to patronize the theater, an institution that we all want to succeed. The gallery of the theater has been reserved for their use and it is so arranged that they do not come in contact with whites in reaching the gallery.

In spite of a scolding from the editor of the *Metropolis* nothing seems to have been done to atone in any way for the mistreatment the blacks had suffered.<sup>19</sup>

In 1915, Miami's theaters included the Fotosho, Hippodrome, Wigwam and Strand. The black community got its second movie house that year (the first was the Lyric) with the opening of the New Broadway Theater on Northwest Third Avenue between Ninth and Tenth Streets. The New Broadway cost \$3,000, was fireproof, seated 1,000 and had a stage for vaudeville. It opened with a six-reel program including a movie called *The Honeymooners*.<sup>20</sup>

Not only having a theater to watch the second class movies, usually the only category shown in black theaters, but to be represented in the actual films as citizens equally deserving his/her part in society became another and probably bigger challenge to the black people. Movies were made with a white audience in mind, and minorities were represented as stereotypes such as the drunken Irishman, the greedy Jew, and the lazy with limited intelligence black man.

Blackface stereotypes were the white man's characterization of plantation slaves and free blacks during the era of minstrel shows (1830-1890). Blackface makeup was a layer of burnt cork on a layer of cocoa butter or black grease paint, with exaggerated painted red or white lips, the costumes were usually gaudy combinations of formal wear, swallowtail coats, striped trousers, and top hats. The characters: Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Mammy, Uncle Tom, Buck, Wench/Jezebel, Mulatto, and Pickaninny; these

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 146.

<sup>20</sup> Historical Association of Southern Florida. "That's Entertainment". Update. Vol. 2 - No. 2. December 1974.

stereotypes were staples during the minstrel era and carried over into vaudeville, film and television.<sup>21</sup>

Between 1930 and 1950, animators at Warner Brothers, Walt Disney, MGM, Merrie Melodies, Looney Tunes, R.K.O., and many other independent studios, produced thousands of cartoons that perpetuated the same old racist stereotypes. This period is now known as the golden age of animation, and until the mid-1960s, cartoons were screened before all feature films. Later, these same cartoons would cycle endlessly for decades on broadcast TV or cable syndication.<sup>22</sup>

Eventually, the worst of the racist cartoons were removed from television or heavily edited. Many of these cartoons, however, can be found on the internet, if one knows where to look. To modern audiences, many of these cartoons are quite shocking and graphically illustrate how pervasive and institutionalized racism was in our culture just a short time ago.<sup>23</sup>

This white American attitude associated with blacks became the basis of the racial tension that stood in Hollywood for decades until well after World War II. On the rare occasions when blacks were given a chance to appear in films, these films usually omitted the richness of African-American culture and the talent of their performances<sup>24</sup>

A parallel and modest film industry developed in the early 1910s through the 1940s, films with all black casts made specifically for black audiences by both black and white producers and directors. "Race films," as they were called, were played in segregated theaters, made on limited budgets and by independent filmmakers. An example of such is the Norman Film Manufacturing Company, founded in Jacksonville, Florida by two white brothers; the company's films were aimed at a black audience between 1920 and 1928. Some of its most recognized films were: "The Green Eyed Monster", "The Bull-Dogger", "The Flying Ace", and "Black Gold".<sup>25</sup>

In 1916, Universal Pictures' actor Noble Johnson founded the black owned and operated Lincoln Motion Picture Company in Los Angeles. It was the first in the U.S. to produce and distribute films of and by blacks, portraying themselves in other than humiliating slapstick comedies. The company's first film was "The Realization of a Negro's Ambition" (1916), followed by "The Trooper of Company K" (1916) and "The Law of Nature" (1917).

By the end of 1940s and after World War II, with the culmination of the Civil Rights Movement, white America began to show an interest in social issues and used the

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<sup>21</sup> Black Face! <http://black-face.com/> (last visited June 14, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> The Vintage Years: 20 Years of Race Film [http://www.separatecinema.com/exhibits\\_vintageyears.html](http://www.separatecinema.com/exhibits_vintageyears.html) (last visited June 14, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

black cause as a vehicle for the metaphor of American justice; Hollywood started to produce films promoting racial integration and cultural assimilation, indicating early signs of racial integration. Thus, race films could not compete with the wealthy and superior Hollywood movie companies and faded away.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, it is imperative to point out the extraordinary work of black actors who despite the hostility and working conditions they came across, achieved the highest recognition for their performances winning the Academy Awards – The Oscar. In 1939, Hattie McDaniel was chosen Best Supporting Actress for “Gone with the Wind”, and in 1963, Sidney Poitier won the Best Actor Oscar for his performance in “Lilies of the Field.”

Sidney Poitier was born in Miami. His parents crossed the Florida straits from Cat Island in the Bahamas to sell their tomato produce. Raised in the Bahamas, he came to live with his brother in Miami when he was only fifteen years old. Having grown up in the Bahamas where the majority of the population is black, Poitier found it difficult to adapt to the racism he encounter in Florida and Georgia, so he moved to New York where he decided to join the Army. Once back in New York, he volunteered as a janitor in the American Negro Theater in exchange for classes, and after a great effort and a breakthrough opportunity, he debuted in 1950 in the film “No Way Out”.<sup>27</sup>

Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte, Bill Crosby, Flip Wilson, Reed Foxx, Pearl Bailey, Ethel Waters, Ruby Dee, Hazel Scott, Spencer Williams, Louise Beavers, Sammy Davis Jr., and Alvin Childress are just a few of the many African American actors whose showbiz careers opened doors for the next generation of African American actors. These black pioneer actors conveyed a message of courage, hope, and perseverance despite the oppression and violence they endured. Perhaps more importantly, they inspired many black kids watching movies in segregated theaters all over the nation to dream.

The ACE Theater was neither designed by a renowned architect nor constructed with the latest technology available at the time; its architecture is quite simple with Art Deco details common to neighborhood theaters of the time. Its Significance, however, is attributed to its association with the social and cultural history of the black community of Miami-Dade during a segregated era.

Nevertheless, for the West Grove black community, the ACE Theater signifies a lot more than an aged building. “The ACE” is part of their lives and fetches good memories of a time when they did not have the mobility to go out and about as everybody else, good memories that kept this community united and strong to fight for equal rights and a better future.

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<sup>26</sup> The Vintage Years: 20 Years of Race Film, [http://www.separatecinema.com/exhibits\\_vintageyears.html](http://www.separatecinema.com/exhibits_vintageyears.html) (last visited June 14, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Sidney Poitier, Biography, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/poi0bio-1> (last visited June 14, 2014).

The excerpt of novel, "One More Mango Season", by Denise Wallace, provides a snapshot of why the ACE is so dear to many people in the Grove.

## One More Mango Season

The ACE Theater, "The ACE" as black folks called it, a pink concrete monstrosity, was built during the 1930's as a "colored" theater. Black folks from as far south as Homestead, sometimes even Key Largo, made the weekly Saturday or Sunday pilgrimage to the ACE to feast on double feature diets of Elvis Presley, Hercules, and Jason & the Argonauts movies, Tom & Jerry and Looney Toones cartoons. Before each feature, black and white reels of Fats Domino, his hair slicked back and wearing a pressed suit, wailed, "*I found my thrill, on Blueberry Hill,*" advertising the local black radio station, WMBM and local disk jockey, Wild Man Steve.

Architecturally, the ACE wasn't a palatial design. Nothing like the Olympia Theater in downtown Miami or the black-owned Lyric Theater in Overtown. But the memories it housed were no less grand. On Saturday nights, the ACE turned into a concert hall. And on Sunday evenings, it served as a gospel revival meeting place. Before the school board built the auditorium and gym at Carver High School, the school held its graduations at the ACE. Graduating seniors, in their black cap and gowns, marched solemnly from the western boundary of Grand Avenue three blocks eastward toward the ACE. Once they reached the theater, they stood outside in the Florida sun until the piano played the graduation march and then they marched inside the theater's cool interiors taking their places in the reserved seats down front.

During the school year, Dade County Public Schools always made sure that Teacher's Workday fell on the last Friday of the grading period. Wometco Enterprises, which owned the ACE and most of the "colored" theaters, in conjunction with the school board, and the City of Miami's park and recreation department, made sure that there was some activity – movies, ball games or concerts, for children to attend on that day. Wometco issued free movie passes along with free coupons for Squirt sodas to the schools. Teachers gave the free tickets and coupons to children with perfect attendance, children with all A's in conduct, and, of course, to honor roll students. The class clowns got tickets only as incentives to stop clowning. The class bullies got tickets by snatching them from the Goody Two shoes, who got replacement tickets from the teachers.

The line for the movies started in front of the box office and meandered down the block past the Drug Store, Mr. Steinman's store, the Fish Market, Williams Funeral Home and ended up, almost a block away, in front of Izzy's Market. The Dixie Kids, as usual, were the firsts in line, even though they lived almost a half mile away. Children who lived in the apartments directly behind the ACE and in the apartments on Grand Avenue relentlessly teased the Dixie Kids, saying that the roaches inside the ACE must be their relatives and held their spaces in line for them. When other Dixie Kids came and got in line, no one protested. No one except the kids who lived in Vietnam. Other kids from the Grove didn't mess with the Dixie Kids. And the Dixie Kids didn't mess with the kids from Vietnam.

Sukie, Lil Man and Ciana never waited in line for the movies. On Teachers' Workday, they went to the café with Mama Ruth. After washing the dishes, sweeping the floor and doing whatever else Mama Ruth could think of, they walked across the street to the ACE just before Big Ernest, the theater's four-hundred pound projectionist, ticket taker and bouncer, opened its doors.

"Mr. Ernest, here's your lunch." Sukie handed him a plate wrapped in wax paper. It was filled with fresh fried chicken, collard greens, white rice with tomato gravy, black eyed peas and a slice of lemon pound cake.

"Mmm-mmm. Thank you, Lil Miss Wilson. Y'all gone inside," he said, smiling as he smelled the plate. As he pulled the door open. Groans of "That ain't right." and "Oooh, make them go to the back of the line" came from the children standing near the door. Sukie, who couldn't stand the girls from the Dixie, stuck out tongue and slipped inside the door.

"Lil Man. Ciana. How much money you got," Sukie asked, watching the yellow kernels of popcorn spill from the big metal popcorn machine.

"Why?" Lil Man asked smartly.

"I thought we could all pitch in and get a fifty cent bag of popcorn and share it. That way we get more money to spend."

"Nope. I'm buying my own popcorn. You always hog the bag," Lil Man said, pushing his dime on the counter for a bag of popcorn. He handed the lady behind the concession stand his coupon for a free Squirt.

"Don't look at me," Ciana told Sukie, handing the lady a quarter. "I'm getting me a sausage sandwich."

Sukie counted her change. Papa gave them each a quarter to spend. With that she could buy a hot dog for fifteen cents and a bag of popcorn for a dime. Or she could spend it all on a sausage sandwich like Ciana did. But she wanted a box of Raisinetts too. And they cost a dime. She didn't have enough, unless she spent the money she was saving for Christmas. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Henry Lee coming out of the boy's bathroom.

"Henry Lee. . . ."

"Spend your own money," Henry Lee said.

Sukie pushed her quarter on the counter. She bought the Raisinetts, a bag of popcorn and used her coupon for a free soda. She'd just have to beg Ciana for a piece of her sausage sandwich, she concluded.

During intermission, Sukie, still hungry, used five cents from her savings for a pickle. The line at the concession stand was long. The theater darkened for its next feature before Sukie could return to her seat. Parting the curtains that separated the concession/lobby from the auditorium, enough light illuminated the back rows of the theater for her to make out faces. She saw Honey Bun, Cassandra Riley, and Alice Jean, girls who had their names scrawled on the outside wall of the ACE inside of big hearts. Each week a new boy's name replaced the one crossed out. They all had some guys tongue stuck down their throat and his hands plastered to the outsides of their blouses. Seated in front of them were the football and basketball players.

Adjusting her eyes to the faint light, she groped her way to her seat in the middle of the theater. Before she sat down good, someone yelled, "Juby Jack, where your black butt at?"

"Over here!" Juby Jack answered.

"Kiss my butt!" the voice replied.

"That's okay. I kissed you mama's butt last night!"

The entire theater erupted in laughter.

Suddenly the curtains in the rear of the theater parted like the Red Sea. Big Ernest blocked most of the light streaming in from the concession area. Whenever the curtains parted and a flashlight beamed down the aisle, kids knew that Big Ernest was looking to put them out. Big Ernest knew where everyone sat. Waddling down the aisle, his footsteps planted solidly on the concrete floor, making the seats closest to the aisle shake, he'd walk up to where the person was sitting, beam his flashlight in the person's face and bellow, "Hey, your mama say come home." Shining his flashlight throughout the theater, he bellowed, "Ain't no cussing in here. Respect these children."

Hushed whispers of "Sorry." "Excuse me," echoed throughout the theater. Roars of laughter

followed as two boys trying to sneak in the EXIT doors of the theater walked into the beam of Big Ernest's flashlight.

### III - Testimonies (Kindly provided by Mrs. Renita Ross)



**Annette Wallace Turner**, a third generation Groveite, is a Miami Dade County School teacher. Her grandparents are from Chipley and Fort Valley, Georgia. Her grandfather migrated to Coconut Grove to work on the railroad with Henry Flagler. She currently lives in Coconut Grove. She remembers attending the theater as a child.

*Certain Families on Dixie Highway were always first in line at the ACE and would hold places for their friends. Families that lived across the street from the ACE were never first in line regardless of how hard they tried. We couldn't figure out how they did it. When it was your turn at the ticket booth to purchase your movie ticket, Bobbie Sands, the cashier, made you count your money. If you couldn't count your money, she would give your money back to you. You had to know how to count your money before you could purchase a ticket. "Fat Ernest" also known as Ernest, Ernie, and Ernie Fat was the ticket taker. He allowed no nonsense in the theater. Fat Ernest would have that flashlight going down the aisle; and, he knew where you sat and he knew your voice. He would put you out in a second. Then there was the Butterball Radio Show on WMBM. Butterball would do a Review at the ACE and we were there."*



**Florence Hopkins Berry** is a native of Coconut Grove. She worked at the ACE in the 1950s. Although she has memories of racism and segregation, she still has fond memories of the ACE.

*When a good movie show came and we waited in line to buy our ticket Students from the University of Miami would drive by and throw live snakes at us. This happened before 1963, which was before integration. I remember Walter Thomas as the movie manager, and then it was Miss Beatrice Eve.*

*As a teenager, I worked every weekend, Saturday and sometimes on Sunday; me and Shirley. We made about 75 cents an hour and were very happy with it.*



**Lorraine Dean Bethel** is a native of Coconut Grove. She worked at the ACE from 1958 to through 1960 in the ticket booth and at the concession stand. For Mrs. Bethel, the ACE holds a special place in her memories. As a teen she worked there and also dated David Bethel. They dated until 1963 and married, 32 years later in 1995.

*I recall having 30 minute breaks. The ACE stayed crowded and I had to be home by 10 p.m. After the movie everyone would gather at the Rainbow Inn. One night close to 10 p.m., I cut my right foot running home through the alley from the Inn. The scar still remains. The best thing about the ACE was meeting all of the people who came there.*



**Barbara Elizabeth Sands**, known as Bobbie, began working at the ACE in 1962 in both the ticket booth office and concession stand.

*Uniforms were not required, but when you worked the confection area you were required to wear a little white jacket. The cost of movie entry was 35 cents for adults and 15 cents for teenagers. To see the Tammy Show featuring James Brown, the line was down the street to the fish market and sometimes down to the Bethel Williams Funeral Home. And I remember that the Lover's Lane was the back row in the theater."*



**Dorothy Martin Wallace** remembers people coming from Homestead to the ACE Theater. Her husband, Harvey Wallace, owned a liquor store in Doral and was offered first right of refusal to purchase the ACE in 1979 for \$50,000.

*Harvey's plan was to build a 5 story Bahamian Marketplace with retail on the ground floor, an auditorium/entertainment venue on the second floor, and apartments on the top floors. After the McDuffie riots the community businesses could not get loans and*

*insurance. My husband completed his business plan in 1984 but was unable to implement his dream before his death in 1988.”*



**Renita Ross (Samuels Dixon)** is a third generation resident of Coconut Grove. She was born at Christian Hospital (Liberty City, Florida), which was the “colored” hospital. Her grandparents (Mr. & Mrs. Melvin R. & Hattie A. E. Jackson) migrated in the 1920’s from Kentucky and Georgia, respectively. Her grandfather, Boy Scout Troup Master Melvin R. Jackson, would get complimentary tickets from the ACE Theater for the Scouts.

*The ACE Theater was the Community Theater. Friday evening, after school, my cousin and I couldn’t wait to walk from my grandparent’s home on Florida Avenue to the ACE. The ACE was a major location for our social entertainment and cultural arts activity; and even before my birth, the ACE hosted Carver High School Class of 1950’s commencement program. The ACE was once part of a robust Black and Jewish business corridor on Grand Avenue. The historical designation of the ACE would be a great tribute to the legacy of Black Entrepreneurs in Coconut Grove dating from the 1800’s to present.*



**Vernon Hawthorne Clark**, President & CEO of Bahamian-Haitian Pioneer Newsletter of Coconut Grove, was born in Coconut Grove and attended Christ Episcopal Church, George Washington Carver High School. He's grateful to the Rev. Theodore R. Gibson for making him a part of the Civil Rights Movement.

*The late Lawson Bell built the Ace Theater in the late 1940's. Mr. Bell was given the task by the Wolfson family who owned Wometco Theaters. The Wolfson made sure that Mr. Bell hired all black sub-contractors to ensure that community benefited from the project. Mr. Bell was an outstanding and well-respected builder who was a faithful member of the Church in God in Prophecy in Coconut Grove. The Ace Theater has many strange stories. People of color from as far away as Homestead, Goulds, Perrine, South Miami, and also the Seminole Indians from the Tamiami Trail area came to enjoy the theater because of segregation. It was the only theater that allowed people of color. The Bahamian-Haitians and Caribbeaners of African descent also frequented the theater.*

*The Wolfson family, through the Ace Theater, also helped community churches, organizations, and civic clubs to raise money by having special showings of movies. Tickets were sold through the churches and organizations and a portion of the proceeds went back to the organization. Some of the movies included: Imitation of Life (1934 & 1959), Stormy Weather, Red Ball Express, Carmen Jones, The Defiant Ones, Porgy and Bess, A Raisin in the Sun, Island in the Sun, Louis Jordan and His Comical Band, and other movies featuring black actors who were struggling to find opportunities.*

*The theater had a positive impact on the area's life. It exposed the community to encouraging images of black actors like Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, and many others. It also showed the News Reel which helped keep the community informed on world developments. It was an important part of the balance of life in the area.*

*I would like to thank the Wallace family, members of Macedonia Baptist Church, who has worked to preserve the theater, the liberals and 'closet liberals' of Riviera Country Club of Coral Gables, City of Miami, and Coconut Grove who helped to support the construction of the theater. Also, the 'closet liberals' of the City of Miami Police Department during segregation, all social organizations in Coconut Grove, and the AME,*

*Pentacostal, Baptist, and Episcopal churches of the community whose support of the theater made it a center of the community.*



**Dr. David White** (shown in the black and blue shirt with his youngest child, Kelsey) graduated from George Washington Carver High School. He was one of 68 students known as The Crusaders whose commencement exercises were held at the ACE Theater under Principal Frances S. Tucker.

*As a little boy it was 10 cents to attend the ACE Theater and as a teenager we paid 25 cents; ticket sales were handled by Carnet Johnson. We saw mostly Westerns featuring John Wayne. I remember, one time they put me out (of the ACE) because I was infatuated with a young lady who didn't want to be bothered. So I learned not to bother people if they do not want to be bothered with you.*

*Everyone met at the ACE for the graduation ceremony, which lasted about an hour; then everyone went their separate ways.*

## IV - Owners/Principals



Dr. Denise Wallace

The ACE is owned by ACE Development Company, Inc., a family owned business. The principals are Mrs. Dorothy M. Wallace and Dr. Denise Wallace. Dr. Wallace is a third generation Groveite. She attended elementary school at the then segregated Francis S. Tucker Elementary and George Washington Carver Junior High in Coconut Grove. Dr. Wallace has been active in the Coconut Grove Community for many years. In 1992, she became the first Co-Chair of the Coconut Grove Village Council, representing parts of the West Grove and the predominately all-white South Grove area. She has practice law for over 25 years in both public and private practice. She has served as the Director of Policy and Legislation, Office of the Mayor, City of Miami under Manny Diaz and as an Assistant City Attorney for the City of Miami. She has also served as Assistant School Board Attorney for Miami Dade County Public Schools and as an Assistant Attorney General for the Illinois and Florida Attorney General Offices. She is currently Vice President of Legal Affairs and General Counsel for Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana.



Dorothy M. Wallace

Mrs. Dorothy M. Wallace, like her husband Harvey, has a long history of civic and community involvement in Miami-Dade County. Mrs. Wallace, a native of Missouri, migrated to Miami after she married her college sweetheart, Harvey, lured by promises of swaying palm trees and orange groves. Her career as an educator spans more than 30 years. She began teaching as a substitute teacher at George Washington Carver Senior High School in Coconut Grove, and later accepted a full time position at Mays senior High School in Goulds. Both schools were segregated at that time and have since become middle schools.

Breaking barriers is not anything new for Mrs. Wallace. In 1963, she was one of two black women to integrate the University of Miami's school of Education, graduating with a Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling. In 1972, she was appointed administrator of COPE Center South, an alternative school for pregnant teens and teen parents. In 1997, the Miami-Dade County School Board renamed the school Dorothy M. Wallace COP Center South.

In 1980, she was a delegate to the Republican Convention. She has served as Secretary of the Dade County Republican Executive Committee, Financial Secretary and Committee chairman of the Florida Black Republican Council and President of the All American Republican Council. Former Governor Jeb Bush appointed Mrs. Wallace to serve on various committees.

Mrs. Wallace shares her husband's dream to preserve the ACE and make it once again a viable part of the Coconut Grove community.

## V - Description

The ACE Theater is a Vernacular Masonry building with Art Deco characteristics; the symmetric building consists of three bays, the central bay first story is recessed and contains three opening entrances, a concrete canopy projects out over the sidewalk, and the parapet is prominent.

At the extremities of the canopy, the name of the theater sits perpendicular; the concrete letters are painted white with red edges. The side bays are very plain containing an opening door each on the first level, one of which must have been the ticket box. A ventilation window is located on the second story of each side bay.

The building is painted white with two cream vertical strips at the central bay and two "L" shape strips in cream color bordered in red gives movement to the façade, the streamlined details are consistent with the Art Deco Style common in the 1930s.

## **VI - Application of Criteria for Designation**

The ACE Theater has significance as it relates to the historic heritage of Miami and possesses integrity of setting, feeling, materials, design, association, and location. The property is eligible for designation as a historic site under the criterion (3) as numbered in Sec. 23-4 (a), of Chapter 23 of the City Code.

### **(3) Exemplify the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community;**

The ACE Theater is associated with the social history of the black community of Miami-Dade in the segregate era.

## VII – Bibliography

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## VIII - Photographs









