During Hollywood's Golden Age in the 1930s and '40s, the Earl Carroll Theatre at Sunset and Argyle offered a Las Vegas-style showplace – a decade before Las Vegas itself.

The man behind the flashy, fleshy productions featuring "The Most Beautiful Girls in the World" was Earl Carroll, a World War I pilot and connoisseur of women. He was also a producer, director and songwriter whose quest for racy theatricals pioneered a trend in Los Angeles' nightlife.

“It was more than just a nightclub like the Cocoanut Grove, Mocambo's, Ciro's and Trocadero,” Hollywood historian Marc Wanamaker said in an interview. “It was the biggest theater-restaurant in town.”

When it opened Dec. 26, 1938, there were about as many stars in the audience as in the night sky. Marlene Dietrich, W.C. Fields, Robert Taylor, Betty Grable, Tyrone Power, Errol Flynn, Claudette Colbert and Edgar Bergen were among those who paid the $1 cover charge to see showgirls on revolving stages doing the cancan. Each performer hewed closely to Carroll's concept of the ideal woman: 5 feet 5 and 118 pounds.

Carroll inspired hundreds of Times stories as well as a 1976 biography by his friend, the late actor Ken Murray. In “The Body Merchant,” Murray wrote that Carroll persuaded pretty young hopefuls to audition in the nude, basing his choice on the “sway of their hips.”

Born in 1892 to Irish parents in Pittsburgh, Carroll was in love with show business by age 10. As a teenager, he embraced another passion, aviation, after taking a $2 flight with a barnstormer at the county fair.

By 17, Carroll was traveling the world, stowing away on ships. He returned home around 1912, when his father died, and went to work in a Pittsburgh publishing house pasting clippings in a scrapbook.

Wielding that paste brush may have given him the idea for “pasties,” which Murray credits Carroll with inventing.
At the publishing house, Murray says, Carroll began writing songs that earned him recognition in Tin Pan Alley – most famously, the lyrics to “Dreams of Long Ago,” which operatic tenor Enrico Caruso recorded in 1912.

In 1915, he wrote the music and lyrics for the musical comedy “So Long Letty,” which premiered in Los Angeles. He also wrote the song “Isle d’Amour” and sold it to his future competitor, Florenz Ziegfeld, for his Follies show.

World War I interrupted one of Carroll’s passions but reignited another: He became a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Service.

After the war came the Jazz Age, and Carroll dreamed of success on Broadway – but his ambition exceeded his $200 bankroll. His break came in the early 1920s, when Texas oilman William R. Edrington backed several of his productions.

Carroll built a theater at 7th Avenue and 49th Street, naming it after himself. In 1923, he produced his first “Earl Carroll Vanities,” to rival Ziegfeld’s Follies and George White’s Scandals.

“Let Flo [Ziegfeld] spend money dressing them; my plan is to undress them,” Carroll told the press at a gala party, Murray wrote. To get around obscenity laws, Carroll reportedly came up with pasties. The invention brought him box office riches and brushes with the law.

In 1926, Carroll paid Peggy Hopkins Joyce, a famous New York showgirl, to disrobe on stage in a bathtub of champagne at an after-hours party. This was Prohibition; the nudity didn’t matter as much as the champagne – which got him a six-month stint in federal prison.

The notoriety didn’t hurt his theater, but the 1929 stock market crash did. Carroll put his new show, “Sketch Book,” on the road.

Paramount rescued Carroll’s career around 1933, inviting him to Hollywood to help produce the 1934 film “Murder at the Vanities,” in which his new headliner, Beryl Wallace, had a role. The casting call, for “breathtakingly beautiful showgirls,” drew 800 scantily clad women to Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. Carroll chose only 11.

As Carroll gained a foothold in film, he befriended Jessie Schuyler, widow of wealthy Beverly Hills banker-real estate agent Walter Farnum Schuyler, for whom Schuyler Road is named. She backed his Hollywood theater.

To trump the film stars’ footprints at Grauman’s, Carroll asked 150 celebrities to sign 50-pound concrete blocks, which were embedded on the theater facade. The Wall of Fame – including signatures of John Barrymore, Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, Shirley Temple and Cary Grant – was removed in the 1970s. It’s now the property of the Society for the Preservation of Variety Arts, according to the society’s head and Magic Castle founder Milt Larsen. The spectacular showplace had satin walls and a patent-leather ceiling. Over its backstage entrance, Carroll hung a neon sign: “Thru These Portals Pass the Most Beautiful Girls in the World.”
From a trapdoor in the ceiling, Wallace was lowered 60 feet in a swing and performed above the audience. “Carroll resurrected the idea from the original turn-of-the century scandal,” Wanamaker said, in which famous showgirl Evelyn Nesbit cavorted nude for her lover in a red-velvet swing.

Carroll produced more films and judged beauty contests, including one in the early 1940s at the Ambassador Hotel. He chose a winner named Norma Jean Baker, who turned out to be only 16 – too young to hire, Murray wrote. By 1946, Norma Jean would be Marilyn Monroe.

On the morning of June 17, 1948, Carroll and Wallace were preparing to catch a plane to New York when Carroll’s phone rang. Former boxer-turned-comedian “Slapsie” Maxie Rosenbloom, who was scheduled to appear in Carroll’s next revue, called from Detroit begging them to stop there.

“We’re tossing a coin,” Carroll told Rosenbloom, according to Murray’s book. “Heads, we stop in Detroit. Tails, we fly straight through to New York. It’s tails, so we’ll see you in Manhattan.”

United Airlines Flight 624 never made it. The DC-6 crashed in Pennsylvania, the state of Carroll’s birth, killing all 43 aboard. The pilots died from carbon monoxide before the plane hit the ground. The day before, a flight memo had warned of the danger and told the crew to wear oxygen masks, Murray wrote. But Capt. George Warner never received the bulletin.

Carroll had directed that his estate go to Jessie Schuyler and Beryl Wallace, and to USC for women’s cancer research. “This was his way of thanking all the women who had given him fame and fortune,” Murray wrote.

Carroll’s theater closed after his death but reopened for a short time under his name, until 1953, when it became the Moulin Rouge.

During the daytime, for more than 18 years, ABC-TV host Jack Bailey would bound out from behind purple velvet curtains to ask a studio audience, “Would you like to be Queen for a Day?”

From the 1960s into the ’90s, the theater was known by such names as the Hullabaloo, Kaleidoscope, Aquarius, and the Chevy Chase Theater.

Today, it is the Nickelodeon Theater, where cable shows for children are taped – quite a change from the days when it was Hollywood’s raciest entertainment spot, with Carroll’s beauties parading half-naked across the stage.

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