

NOW & THEN

BY PAUL DORPAT



COURTESY OF STAN STAPP

Throughout the 1950s the park department's Aqua Theater at the south end of Green Lake could pack in the crowds for water follies, musicals and concerts.

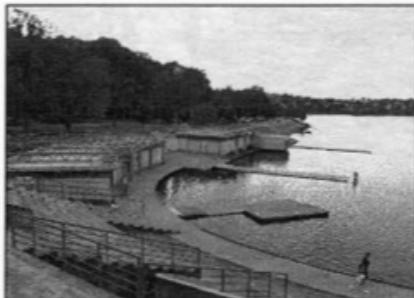
The Aqua Theater

THROUGH THE 1950s THE highlight of Seattle's summer entertainment was the Aqua Follies at the park department's Aqua Theater on Green Lake. The theater opened with Seafair in 1950, and until the hydros chased the Gold Cup on Lake Washington, the follies made the summer festival's biggest splash. An aquatic vestige of vaudeville wrapped in Vegas kitsch, it was entertainment for the '50s.

The theater's capacity of 5,582 — 940 of those box seats and the rest bleachers — seems to be nearly filled in this scene, which shows little else than the crowd. What we don't glimpse here is the monumental size of the stage, especially the twin diving platforms that framed it. The low-comedy plunges of the Follies' diving clowns descending in awkward threesomes from the top platforms were consistently the Follies' greatest attraction.

The Aqua Follies ordinarily ran for two weeks. The other summer nights were given to concerts and musicals as part of what the park department called, hopefully, its "Music Under the Stars" series. In the summer of 1962 the Follies was rained on for six of its 24 performances.

The World's Fair summer of '62 also featured the Aqua Theater's biggest night. Capacity was extended with seating in rowboats directly below the stage antics of Bob Hope, dancer Juliet Prowse and



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With the theater's destruction in 1979, a small portion of its concrete bleachers was saved for enjoying the free and unscheduled activities of park users.

singer Jimmie Rodgers. However, with the new venues at Seattle Center, the Aqua Theater was no longer "the only show in town," and in 1963 every act that performed there lost money. The follies and the musicals concluded with the 1965 season.

An irregular scattering of naturalization ceremonies, Easter sunrise services and concerts followed, and the Aqua Theater was destroyed in 1979. The small portion showing in the "now" scene was saved for viewing the '90s activities on and around the lake. P

Paul Dorpat's two-hour videotape on Seattle's early history, "Seattle Chronicle," is \$29.95 from Tarta Publications, P.O. Box 85208, Seattle, WA 98145.