

PRESERVATION  
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## Savoring Perino's

**A dance troupe briefly serves up the past.**

By Kerri Westenberg

LOS ANGELES - Since its founding in 1985, members of the Collage Dance Theatre, known for staging performances that interpret cultural and architectural places, including historic sites, have flung their bodies into oversized washers at Laundromats, climbed the cell bars in a jailhouse, and become living statues in a corporate plaza fountain. Recently, they staged Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*, a dark story about a man who turned fasting into performance art, in the once-luxurious Perino's restaurant of Wilshire Boulevard.



Italian immigrant Alexander Perino opened the restaurant in 1932, offering upscale continental cuisine and charging \$1.25 for dinner when other places got only 10 cents. Perino's became so popular that it needed more space, and in 1949 Paul Williams, one of the country's first notable African American architects, designed a sleek concrete and stucco building adorned with wrought-iron flamingos and a sheet metal awning. It was soon frequented by the likes of Cole Porter, Cary Grant, Elizabeth Taylor, Charlie Chaplin, and Bugsy Siegel. (Perino's

was used as a movie set for *Bugsy* in 1991 and *Chaplin* in 1992.) By 1969, interest in formal dining had waned, and Perino sold the restaurant. Subsequent owners failed to retain the old luster or clientele, and the legendary building was slated for the wrecking ball last summer.

Heidi Duckler, artistic director of the troupe, saw great potential in the long-neglected landmark. "I love places that are stuck in time," she says. "Perino's was the height of glamour in its day. We wanted to honor that somehow." So she shined the crystal chandeliers in the oval ballroom, tuned the Steinway grand in the cozy piano bar, and dusted off the rounded, high-back booths in the salmon-pink dining room. Then she and her dance

troupe gave Perino's the spectacular, if unorthodox, sendoff it deserved.

A violinist played at the front door while an actor posing as a maître d' welcomed ticket holders to the avant-garde performance. In the first act, held in the ballroom, patrons (who were asked to wear pink to match the restaurant's interior) watched a highly stylized version of the marathon dance contests popular in the 1930s. The troupe then moved to the bar, the main dining room, and eventually the kitchen. In the brief final act, a chef prepared dishes for the hunger artist, who rejected each one by smashing the plate.

Despite the weeks of effort that went into the production, Duckler doesn't mind that the restaurant is gone (it was demolished in May to make way for a luxury apartment complex.) "There is something ephemeral about dance. This building was like any dance performance: When you leave, it is just a memory."