**Broadway comes to Harlingen in 1928**

**Rio Rita, a romantic comedy plays to a large crowd**

By Rene Torres

Bringing Broadway to Harlingen became a reality in 1928, as one of the most famous musicals of the era—“Rio Rita” took the stage at the Municipal Auditorium on December 17th. City officials had negotiated for weeks with booking agents to bring the first and only great New York production to play in the Valley.

There were no arrangements for presentations at any other Valley locations, so Harlingen’s Municipal Auditorium would serve to audiences’ from throughout the region. Ticket prices ranged from one to three dollars and there was not a bad seat in the house.

Rio Rita, the musical comedy, opened on Broadway in 1927 and ran 494 performances, becoming one of the longest running shows of the decade. The show was filmed twice, first in 1930 with John Boles and Bebe Daniels and in 1942 with Abbott and Costello.

The production had an abundance of romance and plenty of humor. The story was about a Mexican beauty, Rita, who was courted by two caballeros: a powerful general, Esteban and a mysterious Texas Ranger, Jim Shelton, who was in search of a crafty bandido, The Kinkajou.

Among and between the story of betrayal and romance—humor changes the mood of the audience when Chick Bean and Ed Lovett bring outrageous comedy to the stage.

To the audience, especially to J.L. Sheppard Jr., who wrote and served as the local critic, expressed his satisfaction as far as being a great show, but otherwise criticized its authenticity.

Sheppard wrote, “There was no denying that Rio Rita was good entertainment but if the program hadn’t told that the story was laid around the Rio Grande near Brownsville, no one would ever have been the wiser. It is Broadway’s conception of the Mexican border and about as unreal as most of Broadway’s ideas. “

The evening production made up for its flaws with an extraordinary number of beautiful girls and a menu of brilliantly played music with scores such as, “The Ranger’s Song,” “If you’re in Love you’ll Waltz and “I’m on the loose tonight.”

The stage scenery and costumes were speculator, but again, Sheppard had some choice words related to the true portrayal of some of the attire used in the production.

“The Texas rangers, portrayed in the program, were the typical drug store conception held by the New York City boulevardier. They came as far from the type as could have possibly been selected,” wrote Sheppard.
Perhaps Sheppard failed to realize that this was a romantic comedy and that the old school ranger was not the image they wanted to portray. But be that as it may, the play gave the audience all it wanted to see in Miss Nyra Brown, who played the part of Rio Rita.

Rita brought to the platform, a beautiful physical appearance with grace given to few. Her voice was described as uplifting with an unusual sweetness—she was flawless on stage.

But it was the comedy parts that were considered the brightest spots in the entire presentation—humor that kept the large audience in a constant up-roar.

The dancers, in their silver sombreros, red blood shirts and embroidered waistcoats were also a sight to see. Applause rang in unison as they marched in squads, heel to heel, until the stage was one glittering design of beautiful girls. The stage decorations added to the splendor of the evening.

Rita’s love for the Texas Ranger is finally realized in the last scene when the real bandido, “Davalos” is caught, General Esteban arrested, and Jim and Rita married—and lived happily ever after.

The first musical comedy from New York to play in the Valley was greeted with a large and enthusiastic audience. The grandeur of the overall presentation made a splash in Harlingen and the Valley—with the crowd outwardly expressing their approval.

Florenz Ziegfeld, who produced Rio Rita, was considered as far as showmanship was concern, “a master of style.” What the local audience experienced that evening was a sheer extravaganza of beauty.

According to Brooks Atkinson, a New York critic, Rio Rita “had no rival among the contemporaries. The musical was said then, to have been a dress rehearsal for the great “Show Boat,” which Ziegfeld produced eleven months later.