

Brandt's BEACON

IN PERSON TONIGHT 8 30

GLORIA SWANSON

QUEEN KELLY + "THE TRESPASSER"

LEE ERWIN

THE MIGHTY WURLITZER ORGAN

MARQUEE OF BEACON THEATRE,
74th and Broadway, New York City,
For New York Chapter, ATOE,
Production, "From Silents to Sounds",
May 8, 1967.

Photo by Walter Hilsenbeck

GLORIA SWANSON STARS IN NEW YORK CHAPTER'S BROADWAY SHOW

The New York Chapter once again made the New York theatre community sit up and take notice on May 8 when the chapter presented Gloria Swanson, in person, in "From Silents to Sound", with Chapter Member Lee Erwin at the console of the Beacon Theatre 4/19 Wurlitzer. The show packed the 2600-seat Broadway house on a traditionally slow Monday night in spite of threatening weather.

Miss Swanson showed two of her most significant films—*Queen Kelly*, her last silent, and *The Trespasser*, her first talkie—to illustrate the complexities of the silent-to-sound transition for stars and producers (she was both). In spite of her difficulties with a balky P.A. system, she completely captivated a predominantly young audience with her candid behind-the-scenes commentary on her struggles to satisfy temperamental directors, concerned bankers, and the ever-present censors.

For theatre organ buffs, the evening actually started as they approached the dazzling marquee with Lee Erwin at *The Mighty Wurlitzer* blazing over Broadway. They were pleasantly surprised to hear organ music drifting out through the front doors from deWaard Brother's lobby demonstration of the Rodgers 33-E Theatre Organ. And they saw a box-office line and a lobby throng jamming an A.T.O.E. event like never before. Although the show crew was ready for a prompt 8:30 curtain, the performance had to be delayed for ten minutes just to let Chapter Secretary-Treasurer Allen Rossiter and his theatre staff get the crowd into their seats.

The show opened with the "From Silents to Sound" coming-attractions trailer, made up in 1920 style with stills from the two films, shown without sound track on the colorful Beacon asbestos curtain (that still carries the Warner Brothers monogram). Then the asbestos

went up, a brilliant spotlight hit the center of the traveler curtain and New York Chapter Chairman Claud Beckham bounced out to tell the people that "they now know how distressingly silent a really silent film is".

Beckham received a thunderous round of applause when, as part of his mercifully brief welcoming remarks, he said, "This is a very proud occasion for an organization whose fundamental aim is to preserve theatre organs and theatre organ music **In Theatres!**" The audience was obviously in a joyous mood and there was more applause when Beckham mentioned that the New York Chapter, in hiring Lee Erwin for live accompaniment of a trailer for the Chapter's February Gaylord Carter show, had presented Local 802, A.F. of M., with the problem of setting a scale for

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GLORIA SWANSON, cont.

"theatre organist" for the first time in years.

At the magic moment when Beckham introduced Lee Erwin, the spotlight swung to the console pit, and the gleaming white and gold Beacon Wurlitzer made its roaring entrance singing *Hot Time In The Old Town Tonight*. After more thunderous applause, Lee Erwin played a heart-pounding medley from his record album *Oldies for Pipe Organ* with colored lights to match the mood and with frequent interruptions as the audience recognized old favorites with more applause.

The New York Chapter's famous Vice-Chairman, theatrical author and historian Ben M. Hall, took over the stage at that point, entertaining and informing the audience in his inimitable way about the background of the late twenties "when the squawk of the Vitaphone broke the spell . . . Careers tottered as the horns behind the screen revealed that many established stars had the voices of grackles"—the "period of the Great Change." Hall told the patrons that they were enjoying the "lush surroundings of one of the few genuine movie palaces in the nation (the Beacon Theatre opened on Christmas Day, 1929, just as the epulent era of never-neverland came to an end)! And, then, after whetting the appetites of an already excited audience, Ben Hall said the magic words of introduction that set off pan-

demonium—Miss Gloria Swanson. And there she was, with an ovation ringing from the far corners of the Beacon, exactly the chiffon-gowned figure that everybody imagines for a super-star of the screen. There was no way for her to be heard above the crowd's delighted shouts. All she could do was to let Lee Erwin sing her praises on the Wurlitzer while she graciously received the homage of her admirers. After they finally settled down enough to let her talk, she charmed them from the first, "I know some of you came tonight to hear the organ. I know some of you came to see silent pictures. And I know many of you came just to see what kind of shape the old girl is really in." After that she could have recited the alphabet and gotten laughs. Instead, she told them about Queen Kelly, about Erich von Stroheim, about the lavish sets and the extravagant shooting schedules . . . and about Lee Erwin's *Queen Kelly* music for theatre organ.

The New York Chapter had commissioned Lee Erwin, a long-time member of ASCAP, to compose and play an original theatre organ score for *Queen Kelly*. And, as the traveler curtain closed slowly over *The End*, the Beacon audience and Miss Swanson made it very clear that Lee Erwin's newest composition was an unqualified musical and dramatic success. The enthusiastic remarks of the milling crowd in the foyer at intermission (and the questions addressed to the Chapter Officers) showed that at least two generations of Americans had never

Gloria Swanson receives tumultuous ovation from Beacon Theatre audience after introduction by New York Chapter vice-chairman Ben Hall, theatrical author and historian. Beacon Theatre, May 8, 1967.

— Photo by Walter Hilsenbeck.



Gloria Swanson congratulates Lee Erwin (and awards him a carnation) for playing his new score for her last silent picture, "Queen Kelly" on Beacon Theatre 4/19 Wurlitzer, May 8, 1967.



GLORIA SWANSON, cont.

before heard the mighty Wurlitzer do its intended job—augmenting a great silent film to create a full dramatic impact for both eye and ear. Perhaps the highest compliment of all was a young man's saying, "I can't believe I was really watching a silent picture!"

Space here is too limited to permit a full discussion of the whole show. It was a great theatrical event, effectively promoted (with advertising and with personal interviews in newspapers, radio, and television) and produced by New York Chapter officers and professionally staged by members of the Chapter's Beacon Wurlitzer Restoration Project under Bon Smith. Jim Moe, former tech-



New York Chapter Chairman Claud Beckham joins Beacon Theatre audience in ovation for Lee Erwin at console of Beacon's Gold-and-White 4/19 Wurlitzer. May 8, 1967.

nical chief of the Project, was transferred to Minneapolis two weeks before the big night but he managed to fly back to New York to act as Stage Manager. Wurlitzer Widow Aline Beckham handled the 1000-seat advance ticket sales. Even the technical projection matters and rehearsal screenings were arranged by a New York Chapter member, Chapter Advisor Don Malkames. *From Silents to Sound* was an outstanding example of the way that A.T.O.E. can simultaneously give the public the genuine entertainment that it hungers for and spread the message about theatre organs in theatres.

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Next issue of *Theatre Organ Bombarde* will feature a review of the concert played by Don Kinnear, on the 3/17 Moller in the Sedgewick Theatre. This was the farewell concert prior to the demolition of the theatre.

The organ was purchased by the Delaware Valley Chapter several months ago.

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