



STORY: Dr. Walter Beaupre • PHOTOS: Erv Heinz

What started out to be a repeat of the formula which proved fabulously successful last year (see *Theatre Organ—Bombarde*, Summer 1967) suddenly turned into a mushroom-cloud-type blast never to be forgotten by theatre organ fans in Omaha, Nebraska. The original formula was sufficiently fool-proof:

- 1 University of Omaha mellowed by the success of its T.O. concert last year.
 - 1 Organist Bill McCoy whose name is magic in the Midlands.
 - 1 Wurlitzer 235 Special honed to functional perfection by A.T.O.E. members.
 - 1 Orpheum theatre with its original 1927 decor and superb acoustics.
 - 1 Two-reel silent film comedy.
 - 1 Budget which guaranteed all expenses regardless of floods, earthquakes, blizzards or tornadoes.
 - 1 Thoroughly seasoned and dedicated population of "pipes" smokers.
- Tampering with a formula like that is, to put it mildly, pushing one's luck. But push they did—and thereby hangs the tale.

The Student Concerts and Lectures Committee of the University of Omaha, sparked by veteran Bob Miller, began making plans for another *Midnight Slapsticks* last December. Would the Wurlitzer be ready by April? Yes, in spite of the fact that the percussions were getting a complete overhaul and the wind chests in the Solo chamber needed work, all would be ready. Would Thomas Organs release their musical director Bill McCoy? Yes, Thomas would combine Bill's visit with a promotional venture of their own. Some red tape, of course, but no real ciphers.

Plans rolled like tibia glissandos until the Committee faced the problem of an appropriate silent movie. None of the available two-reel comedies satisfied the Committee. Dr. Beaupre then suggested that they look at some feature-length films with the idea of running an excerpt. And on one fateful night they stumbled upon two Cecil B. DeMille features starring Leatrice Joy. By the end of "Made for Love" the students were thoroughly hooked on Leatrice.

"Leatrice Joy really swings! Don't we have another movie with *her* in it?" The bleary-eyed Committee waited patiently while "Eve's Leaves" was threaded into the projector. By the time Leatrice Joy had shanghied William Boyd onto her father's ship the entire group was roaring its approval.

"That's it! Let's run the whole picture!"

"Seventy-three minutes? What are you trying to do to Bill McCoy, ruin him?"

The Committee decided to show only the first twenty-six minutes of "Eve's Leaves" and Dr. Beaupre began the laborious task of preparing a detailed cue sheet for Bill—who would only see the film once before he played it!

The plot thickens. The more times Beaupre ran the print of "Eve's Leaves" the more fascinated he became with Eve (played by Leatrice Joy). What ever happened to this superb actress? Was she still living? And if so, where? Keith Smith of Modern Sound Pictures, who owns the rights to many of Miss Joy's pictures, said he thought he had her address somewhere. Leatrice had once bought an 8 millimeter print from him.

"Keith," said Beaupre, "if you can find that address, I might be tempted to do something I've never done before, write a fan letter to a movie star."

To make a long story short, Dr. Beaupre wrote the letter telling Mrs. Leatrice Joy Gilbert that her film would be shown. He hinted rather broadly that the University would love to have her attend the performance, but would be satisfied with a letter or wire which might be read to the fans from the stage of the Orpheum.

To make the story even shorter, Mrs. Gilbert called from Connecticut to say that she would *love* to come to Omaha.

The plot gets frantic. The students were ecstatic. What a break! Of course, we'll have to run the entire film. But what about organist Bill McCoy? Would he consent to such a horrendous assignment, especially after Gaylord Carter had scored such a triumph at the Orpheum only five months ago. Would Bill think it was professional suicide?

There was a prolonged silence at the L.A. end of the telephones when Bill was told the "good news." Please, Bill . . . ?

"If you'll have the cue sheets ready . . . and if you really think I could pull it off, I guess I'll have to. It wouldn't be fair to . . . what did you say her name was?" With that, operation *Midnight Slapstick* slammed into high gear. Newspaper columnist Robert McMorris and film critic Denman Kountze were let in on the surprise. Both men went all out to help give Leatrice Joy and Bill McCoy the "star" treatment. A local night club "The Roaring Twenties" offered its white Rolls Royce and a chauffeur. The University reserved the V.I.P. suite at the Blackstone. Dave Letts of United Airlines (who went to school with Leatrice Joy's daughter) cleared the runways for a royal welcome. Students came to the airport with signs. All three TV stations had promised to send their camera-men to film Leatrice Joy's arrival. Then . . . it happened. The terrible news of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and reports of riots.

Fortunately, the momentum had been too great. In spite of the fact that thousands of Omahans stayed in their homes behind locked doors during the crisis, fifteen hundred to two thousand loyal fans braved the downtown streets at the midnight hour to hear Bill McCoy play the mighty pipes and to cheer Leatrice Joy, both on the screen and in person. It was a blazing two hours of nostalgia, happiness, and good will during a week-end of darkness, fear and confusion.



LEATRICE JOY AUTOGRAPHS her picture of "Eve" which now has the place of honor at the 20's, an Omaha night club. Dr. Walter Beaupre watches.



BILL AND LEATRICE arrive at the Orpheum in a white Rolls Royce at 11:45 p.m. On the right is chauffeur Buddy Dundee—a P.R. man by day.

BILL and LEATRICE

The lobby of the Orpheum was jammed at 11:45 when Leatrice Joy and Bill McCoy arrived at the theatre in their white Rolls Royce. The movie crowd leaving the last show of "Planet of the Apes" stared at the beautiful matronly woman in the white jeweled gown, silver slippers, gorgeous orchid corsage—who was eating popcorn with reckless and delightful abandon. Leatrice was having a ball and the theatre organ buffs loved every minute of it. Special arrangements had been made with the management so that Bill McCoy's dad, confined to a wheel chair, could be settled comfortably before the mad rush for seats. Papa McCoy had never heard his son play pipes.

At the stroke of 12 the houselights dimmed, Ed Workman, president of the O. U. Student Union, introduced the organist "unanimously drafted as king of nostalgia," and Bill pressed the lift button. From his opener "Keep Your Sunnyside Up" it was obvious that we were to hear a different Bill McCoy. His registration for the tune was full, rich and gutsy—but no screaming piccolos. His tempos were restless and driving, not hurried or frantic. "Mame" featured a swing chorus punctuated with cymbal bursts. The fans in the Orpheum trenches were gassed.

Next Bill threw caution to the winds and dragged out the battered score of "West Side Story." "Tonight" came on fresh and new as a gorgeously restrained beguine featuring the tibias, chrysolott, and sprinklings of castanets. The tibias were joined by masses of strings for a "Maria" duet. "I Feel Pretty" got the Boston Pops treatment as a rousing waltz with triple-tongued trumpet riffs alternating with a hurdy gurdy sound. Bill was taking full advantage of the improved responses of the tremolo systems. The medley closed with a quiet reprise of "Tonight."

Throughout the concert Bill McCoy constantly changed tempos and registrations. It was as though he had decided to throw away the books and search for new sounds and new musical ideas. As soon as he found one he let it go and looked for another. After the concert Bill seemed dissatisfied with his performance, but his fans and critics of long standing were ecstatic in their praise. Said one organ teacher, "I thought I had Bill all figured out,—but he showed me a whole new facet of his genius. Fantastic!"

This creative restlessness was most apparent in "Pops Go the Classics." Everyone has heard "Tonight We Love," "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows," "Melody in F," and "Til the End of Time" a drillion times, but not the way Bill played them on April 5, 1968. Tschai-kowsky came on sans piano but with a glorious oboe solo; then masses of strings urged on by a light 4-4 beat. Chopin was endowed with a fleeting tuba solo. Rubenstein's "Melody" was played in every key but F, with harmonic progressions that would have made old Anton green with envy. The Chopin "war horse" featured tibia and tuba dialogues with strings, but there were pauses while we listened to the delicate chrysolott. To climax the piece he brought in the full theatre organ tremmed to the ultimate, then suddenly let the tune die away as an untremmed church organ.

The hand microphone Bill had been using to announce his selections began to generate percussions of its own. McCoy chuckled, put the mike away, and

returned to the business at hand . . . "Around the World In Waltz Time." The medley might better have been called "Around the World in 80 Key Changes" because by this time there was no holding the Master. He romped through "Oi Marie!" Gave "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" the mellow romantic treatment with chimes. Played with the phenomenal Orpheum acoustics all through "Emperor Waltz" alternating jolts of massed sound with dramatic pauses. Turned "East Side West Side" into a concerto for full organ and hurdy gurdy. Introduced "Lady of Spain" as a rubato waltz shimmering with tremmed tibias and strings. Took us "Out to the Ball Game" along with a full brass band. Then closed with a Strauss-y underplayed treatment of "80 Days." Bravos! Stompings! Whistles! The audience knew where it had been and loved it.

Then Bill went Latin. His "Miami Beach Rhumba" was a request dedicated to fans of his electronic salad days at a local night spot. I braced myself for the usual frantic finale of "Temptation" only to be surprised and delighted when Bill let the tune lapse into a funky swing ballad. "Yours" was again mellow and restless. "Adios" proved to be a handsome *tour de force* of fancy counterpoint with some wild foot work. His finale for the set "Jalousie" was mercifully understated with single solo voices, a fast and furious last chorus—which metamorphosed into a delicate and lovely quiet tango. "Jalousie" hasn't had it so good since Kathryn Grayson.

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BILL MCCOY preferred a church bench to the Howard seat—which wobbled!

BILL MCCOY—LEATRICE JOY

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Bill wound up his formal concert with tributes to the great radio shows: Amos 'N Andy, Road of Life, the Tommy Dorsey and Glen Miller bands, and the Mickey Mouse Club (TV, I believe).

But the evening had just begun. After tributes to the A.T.O.E. crew (George Rice, Stan Gross, Murray George, Milton Thorley, Bob Miller and others), the Committee, Bill's mother and dad, and theatre manager Don Shane, the projectionist opened the golden curtain for "Eve's Leaves" starring Leatrice Joy and William Boyd. It should be said in passing that the film made in 1926 was a sophisticated comedy about a girl who had been raised as a boy aboard her father's schooner. Of course Eve (Leatrice Joy) is curious about love and romance and gets some wild, second hand advice from the ship's cook. While on shore leave with her father Eve discovers Bill (played by William Boyd) and proceeds to win him in unorthodox ways.

Bill McCoy's strategy was to support the action of the film with music which would heighten the drama and add to the gaiety. He avoided the usual "Winter's Tale" and "William Tell Overture" and used more modern music. Gershwin's "Love Walked In" became Eve's theme; Jerome Kern's "Bill" served the manly William Boyd; "Limehouse Blues" kept the villain Chang Fang at bay. Other melodies judiciously employed were "Chinatown," "Slow Boat to China," "Love Is A Many Splendored Thing," "O Mine Papa," "Love and Marriage," "Volga Boatman," Bach's "Tocatta and Fugue in D. Minor," "You've Got a Lot to Like in a Winston!" "Hold That Tiger!" and countless little invented melodies and transitions dreamed up by Bill McCoy. Bill injected some mighty sly musical gags but never at the expense of the plot. As Leatrice Joy remarked later, "That wonderful man had spotted every dry episode in the film and generously pumped life into it until Bill Boyd and I had some better scenes. I'll never forget him for that!"

During intermission Leatrice Joy was brought to the stage and given a 10 minute standing ovation. She told some delightful stories about herself, Bill Boyd and Mr. DeMille. Then she was officially made an Admiral in the Nebraska Navy by order of Governor Norbert Tieman. The fans went wild. The woman on the screen and the woman on stage were equally wonderful.



SHOW STOPPER—Walter Beaupre, Leatrice Joy and Ed Workman try to stop the overwhelming 10-minute ovation.

And where was the *other* star of the evening during all this? Bill was down in the organ pit pumping out music like they do at the Academy Awards so that a silent movie queen could re-live an hour of adulation and triumph. In the excitement no one noticed this magnanimous gesture until Leatrice stopped at the console and threw her arms around Bill. It was one of those high, holy moments in show business none of us will ever forget.

Bill McCoy played the remaining half of the movie brilliantly, but by the time Leatrice Joy and William Boyd were clutched in their last happy embrace it was 2:15 a.m. Bill declined to play any encores because he knew the theatre management was having fits by this time. Ironically, the fans refused to leave the theatre. They crowded around Bill and Leatrice for autographs, and hundreds waited in the lobby to cheer the stars as they sped away in the Rolls.

Rumor has it that Bill stopped the car a block from the theatre and came back to join a hundred of his fans in a blast that lasted until 6 a.m.

They're still cheering the gala event in Omaha. However the Sudent Concerts and Lectures Committee at the University is in a blue funk. "How in the name of Hollywood can we ever top THIS one?" A good question. But give those college kids a year to work on it and they may have an answer. I'm willing to wager that part of the answer will be a talented young organist whose name begins with B.

George Wright 'Hams It Up' At RTOS Reunion

During intermission, this reviewer witnessed a reunion of George Wright and one of his former co-workers in New York, Eddie Dunn. They were on the Jack Birch radio show for Prudential for seven and one-half years after World War II. It was their first meeting in over 10 years. And what did George give Eddie as a souvenir of the occasion? A ham sandwich! Yes, a genuine ham sandwich, in memory of an oft-repeated remark Eddie used to make in the old radio days. When Eddie would come into the studio each day, he'd exclaim, "Gee, I'd give eight dollars for a ham sandwich!" One day George decided to take up the offer and brought in a sandwich. But Eddie didn't cooperate immediately and the sandwich languished in the organ bench for a couple of days. When he did come through with the quote, George gave the slightly over-ripe sandwich to his colleague, then demanded and *got* the \$8.00! The much fresher Rochester sandwich is going to be framed, said happy Eddie Dunn.

—Lloyd E. Klos

1968 A.T.O.E. CONVENTION VIGNETTES • 2

BADGES FOR ALL CONVENTIONEERS—Those planning to attend the ATOE convention are urged to register as early as possible in order that registration kits can be prepared in advance for as many visitors as possible. In fact, the first 300 registrants will be rewarded by a special performance not available to later registrants, a limited attendance concert played on the Universal Studio music scoring stage Robert Morton organ by Paul Beaver (we can have the studio only a short time because it's in almost continual use). Those registering for others should include the name, city and chapter name for each person attending so that badges can be prepared for all attendees.