

A BOMBARDE First-Person Account from 'Down Under' . . .

Lyn Larsen — 'My Australian Adventure'

# I SUPPOSE I EXPERIENCED

## something of the explorer's fear of the unknown as I

stood there with the telegram in my hand—the message affirming my engagement at the Dendy Theatre in Melbourne, Australia. It was right after Christmas, 1967, and I had just returned to Hollywood after a rewarding but exhausting tour which introduced me to wonderful audiences and fine pipe organs in Salt Lake City, Chicago, Detroit and Rochester, N. Y. I needed a rest; but this was a challenge—a chance to explore a world half a planet away. I had read a lot about theatre organ activity in Australia and here was my chance to investigate it first-hand.

I boarded a huge Pan-Am airliner on January 5 after being practically shoved aboard by my hard-working and faithful secretary, Nora Peters. At the last moment I almost decided I didn't want to go, but Nora wasn't going to see all that preparation go down the drain. So I spent the next 20 hours in an aircraft seat. We sat down briefly in Honolulu, American Samoa, Auckland—and then Sydney. I decided to return to terra firma at Sydney, and continue on the next day. So I rested in a hotel room until the next morning and boarded another plane for Melbourne.

When the plane landed at Essendon (Melbourne) Airport, I was glad that I had changed into my trademark—the white tie and tails I always wear when playing concerts, because there was a real "Hollywood" welcome awaiting me. As I descended the steps from the plane, photographers were busily snapping photos. I looked over my shoulder to see if some notable was behind me, but I was alone. They were shooting pictures of me!

I couldn't have been much more uncomfortable with a summer overcoat thrown over my shoulders because the temperature on landing was a steaming 95 degrees!

And, in addition to the photographers and reporters, there were dozens of organ enthusiasts waiting to greet me—more than a hundred, all counted. I felt like some big movie star with all that attention and that's exactly how the



(Mr. Larsen, recently returned from a three-month engagement playing theatre organ for Melbourne audiences, granted the BOMBARDE this exclusive account of his journey to a land where the theatre organ is an accepted part of theatre programs.)

crowd regarded me. So, I decided to drift with the tide. I held an impromptu press conference right at the airport, and the next day the entertainment columns of the Melbourne papers were loaded with the story of my arrival. Right then I started a collection of clippings.

I was soon to learn that there is a vast difference regarding the presentation of theatre organ music between the United States and Australia. The attitude of Australians toward their theatres is much different than here. For example, an Australian wouldn't think of throwing popcorn containers or soft drink cups on the floor of a theatre. For one thing, such items aren't available there. And an Australian has too much respect for his theatre to use it for a waste container. When he goes out for an evening, he isn't the least time-conscious. He's out to have a good time and he does just one thing—in this case, attend the cinema. That's where another difference comes in. Time was when consoles in the USA were spotlighted for solo presentations. Those remaining are used solely for intermission music, rarely in solo. But not so "Down Under." The organ is a definite part of the show; each night I had

a half-hour concert period to fill. Because it was a first run "road show" presentation house, I didn't have to change my program too often but the extracurricular promotional activities kept me jumping. Someone was forever setting me up for a TV or radio show, usually the agency which handled my publicity, the Jenny Ham Agency of Melbourne.

Before I arrived I was told that *Oklahoma* would be the film which would be presented during most of my two-month stint at the Dendy. However, that film had played Melbourne in "normal width" screen and the wide-screen version, although equipped with a brand-new stereo music track, didn't draw the expected crowds and I was soon playing a brand-new concert opposite *Zorba the Greek*, which played for several weeks.

The instrument proved to be a fine Wurlitzer of 15 ranks which the Victorian Division of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia had installed in the Dendy. A Compton Harmonic Tuba had been added for some extra "zing" and also a second Glockenspiel and a single-tap Xylophone, the last two outside the swell shutters.

At first I had trouble with the tuners, who were in the habit of tuning only the eight-foot pipework—just the pipes on the manual chests while ignoring the bass and high treble offsets. After the first tuning job I tried a few pedal notes and found them to be out of tune with the ranks just tuned. I finally got them to tune everything—and also to adjust the tremors to a slower, deeper beat instead of the fast chatter I noted at first.

Where did I aim my performances? Mostly in the direction of young audiences—not the organ buffs, necessarily, although they showed up in force, too. I brought back a packet of mail from kids who appreciated the music I played. They were forever coming down front to ask for autographs—including one pretty young miss who wanted my autograph inscribed on her bare arm. I managed, somehow, and later received a letter of thanks from her. She said she hadn't washed her arm since I signed it!

One very attractive feature at the Dendy Theatre was the management-employee relationship. To the manager of the Dendy, Robert Ward, Jr., I was like a member of his family. He couldn't

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do enough for me. My elaborate dressing room was always fragrant with fresh flowers, and there was a bowl of fresh fruit on the table daily. There was a TV set and a well-stocked refrigerator. I could have lived there and enjoyed it. When I left, the Wards presented me with a fine suit of clothes — and an invitation to return. I never before met a theatre manager like Bob Ward. And his family was in every way as attractive.

In fact, all of the people I met were friendly to North Americans, although they had complaints about the more brash type of night club entertainer whose stock in trade is "slam humor." Humorists who make their points by running someone else down don't go over Down Under.

But it was the concentrated attention I rated while performing that amazed me most. The audiences listened in respectful silence for a full half-hour of organ music. Each had paid his \$1.20 admission and he was happy to get his money's worth. Many times I couldn't help comparing the attitudes there with those back home. In Australia I played a half-hour concert nightly for 64 days without a single day off! That's in addition to special shows, purely organ concerts and silent movie shows I did within my engagement. In the USA, an organist does well if he can sell two or three concerts a year in one locality.

One pleasant aspect of the engagement was the vigor with which the organ was advertised. As long as I was on the program, newspaper advertising listed me, sometimes with a photo. And there were many special newspaper stories, such as when I'd play a silent movie. We'd "ham it up" for the photographers and the resulting newspaper publicity would help fill the theatre. Even officialdom is enthusiastic. For example, the Lord Mayor of Brighton attended my opening.

Theatre organ buffs are as well organized in Australia as in the USA. The "ATOE" there is "TOSA" — Theatrical Organ Society of Australia, and it's national in scope with most activity concentrated in Melbourne and Sydney. In fact, all three purely organ concerts played at the Dendy were sponsored by the Victorian Division of TOSA. The Dendy Wurlitzer actually belongs to TOSA. Members moved it from its original home in the Capitol Theatre in 1963. They are just as enthusiastic toward the old giants as we are here in the USA. Incidentally, the organ has a name — "Eliza."

Silent movies? They have a large following in Australia. I had a lot of fun

accompanying the old Lon Chaney chiller, *Phantom of the Opera*. It was so well attended (for a midnight performance on Sunday) that over 500 people had to be turned away.

Yes, there were personal appearances and special stage shows. I was always being called on for TV panel shows, and Dean Mitchell arranged for a weekend show at Hobart, Tasmania. They flew a Baldwin theatre model over with me, just for the show.

Perhaps my biggest thrill was in having a whole variety show named for me. Near Melbourne there's an outdoor concert hall similar to our Hollywood Bowl. It's called "The Myer Music Bowl." That's where they staged the "Lyn Larsen Variety Show." It was all "live," with a 15-piece stage band, a 120-voice Italian (descent) chorus, a gorgeous "thrush" named Suzi Miller, and I played that same Baldwin model HT-2 I took to Tasmania. We had a ball rehearsing, and 40 little girls from the Italian chorus were intent on getting my autograph. Judging from my stiff fingers next day, most of them did. It's a wonderful experience to participate in a live show which the audience appreciates. Pianist Tony Fenelon and I played some well-received pop duets and the nine-man Dixieland band really hit the spot with the audience. So did the Helen Driessen Trio, one of Australia's finest folk-song groups — somewhat on the Peter, Paul and Mary pattern. That was really a high point in my summer adventure — yes, summer; Australia is on the other side of the equator, making December, January and February hot weather months.

Another "high" was in hearing my own arrangements being "played back" by other artists and musical groups — artists who had attended my shows and, using their sharp musical ears, had picked up some of the devices which were in my arrangements. It's satisfying to know that part of one's "bag of tricks" is considered valuable enough to become part of the local musical language.

Frankly, I didn't do much traveling. There just wasn't time, with my average 14-hour day. But I managed a brief trip to Sydney to play three concerts.

When the Dendy weekly program booklet advertised "Gala Farewell Concert — Lyn Larsen at the Wurlitzer," I suddenly realized that my great adventure was coming to an end — even though I had already extended my stay at the request of Mr. Ward. It was a wonderful concert. Again pianist Tony Fenelon and I played organ-piano duets and the Helen Driessen Trio sang. Present was that "final show" atmosphere and considerable pangs at the thought of parting.

But it was real enough and one bright morning I found myself aboard the S.S. *Canberra* bound for the USA. I was in deep gloom for awhile but then I busied myself by occasionally playing "cocktail piano" in the ship's "filling station," and the three weeks it took the *Canberra* to reach the coast of California gave me time to both recover and reflect.

Would I do it again? Would I travel that far to play for audiences who support nightly theatre organ spotlight concerts?

Does a hippie take to beads?

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**TRANSPORTATION LOGISTICS**—One of the rougher problems faced by the convention planners is the bussing of conventioners to all events. All transportation to and from events will be by bus (starting and ending at the Ambassador Hotel). The registration fee each visitor pays also covers bus fares for the whole four days of visits, programs and concerts. As many as 40 busses will be involved at one time, each with a capacity of fifty persons. Therefore, units of 50 make up the "chessmen" with which transportation chairman Bill Exner makes his plans. It would be simple if all halls, homes and theatres on the agenda would accommodate 1,000 visitors at a time — but they don't. The range is from 50 (the average "crawl" home visit) to over 3,000 (Wiltern Theatre). The Loren Whitney Studio holds about 250 comfortably while the George Wright Studio may "sardine" 200 (he's never tried it). The Elks Temple can seat about 700 comfortably. The Rialto and Wiltern theatres present no problems. But the homes along the crawl route can take about 50 in a batch, a transportation balancing act which just might whiten Bill Exner's brushcut by convention time.

Why busses? Because each conventioner will travel about 400 miles between locations during the four days, so widely separated are the places with pipe organs. Therefore, all other transportation was ruled out. Parking facilities are not available for private autos at the many locations, so conventioners arriving in their own vehicles will do best to park them in a lot at or near the Ambassador. So don't miss the bus.