

JESSE CRAWFORD AT THE CHICAGO THEATRE



PHOTO: Courtesy of the NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY

The following critique was found in the November, 1923, issue of the "American Organist," by Lloyd E. Klos. Mr. Widenor was a much-traveled theatre organist.

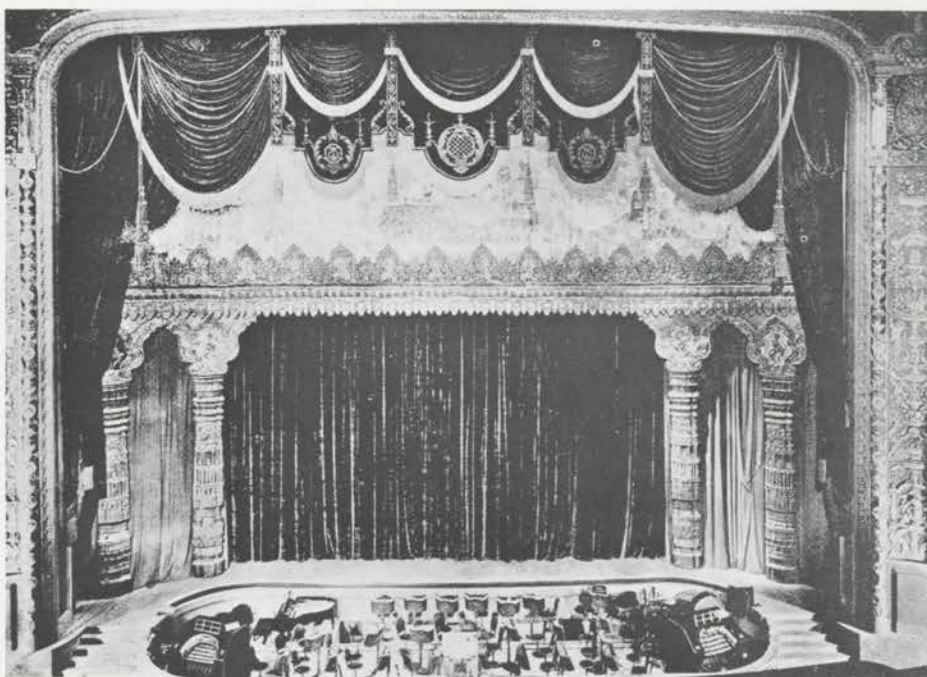
by D. Kenneth Widenor

The Chicago Theatre, the largest and finest in the Windy City, is advertised as the Wonder Theatre of the World, and in size and seating capacity is second only to the Capitol Theatre in New York. Naturally, one expects much from such an institution — and usually gets it, too. However, the writer feels that the program, which is the subject of this critique, was not up to the usual high standard of Balaban & Katz entertainment, but as it was the last one seen before leaving Chicago, and the only one for which we have taken notes, it must stand.

The overture was Adam's *If I Were King*, a dull and uninteresting number, musically mediocre. The orchestra, under the baton of Mr. Rudolph Kopp, seemed to feel that this was the case and played the number accordingly, which was greatly at variance with their usual splendid finesse, brilliance, and musicianship.

This being 4th of July week, there followed a short-reel subject, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, showing a history of our flag. This was nicely handled by the orchestra, musically interpreted by bits of various patriotic and national melodies, and brought to a successful climax by playing just a few bars of the national anthem — just enough to make it unnecessary for the audience to rise, as the customary mark of respect.

The first act was the Dennis Sisters—three girls singing several popular numbers in harmony. Their voices blended well, and their work had an air of refinement which is usually lacking in acts of this character.



The news weekly followed. It is usually very brief at the Chicago and, although usually well played by the orchestra, is not accorded a place of primary importance on the program, and is never sufficiently interesting to excite enthusiastic comment.

Mr. Jesse Crawford was next with his organ solo. As the main purpose of this critique is to review Mr. Crawford's work, I will hastily deal with the balance of the program and then return to the work of the organ and Mr. Crawford.

After the organ solo, the audience was treated to an act, entitled "Fun Aboard a Dreadnaught." The set was the typical battleship set, only constructed on the colossal scale which is characteristic of all the Balaban & Katz productions. There

was no apparent reason for this act and, as a whole, it was very cheap and unworthy of the Chicago Theatre. A male quartette, in white sailor costumes sang a couple of popular numbers, followed by six girls also in sailor costume, who did a dance. Then there appeared a couple of male dancers, who went through the usual sailor's hornpipe and various other sailor dances. All the performers in the act were dressed in identical costumes — they were all just "gobs." Then there was the big finale, during which the whole set (*i.e.*, the "Dreadnaught") moved forward to the extreme front of the stage apron, with bells ringing, whistles blowing, guns moving, etc., the big "thrill" coming when searchlights of enormous candlepower, placed in the mouths of the cannons, were trained on the audience.



JESSE CRAWFORD AND CHICAGO—Top-left: NBC's "Poet of the Organ" is shown here at the console of the new pipe organ, Studio G—one of the three new studios built in 1936 in the penthouse of the Merchandise Mart, which housed the National Network's Central Division Headquarters. Lower-left: Stage and orchestra pit of the Balaban and Katz Chicago Theatre, built in 1922. Above: Exterior of the Chicago Theatre.

PHOTO: Courtesy of Bill Peterson

After the uproar had quieted down, the feature picture was flashed on the screen. It was *A Man of Action*, with Douglas McLean. The less said about it, the better. Immediately following, was the comedy—Ben Turpin in *Home-made Movies*. The orchestra usually opens the feature picture at the Chicago, the organ plays the majority of it, then the orchestra closes the picture and opens the comedy, which the organ plays through.

The organ at the Chicago Theatre is a large four-manual unit. The console is at the extreme right foreground of the orchestra enclosure, and is mounted on an electric elevator. During the organ solo, the console is raised so that the performer is in full view of the audience, then, during the balance of the show, is lowered until it is nearly out of sight of the audience.

Jesse Crawford's solo was—*Question: When Will the Sun Shine for Me? Answer: Morning Will Come*. It was the usual popular song, with the words of the song thrown on the screen. Only, in this case, Mr. Crawford had taken two popular songs and cleverly combined them to make one number out of the two. Mr. Crawford's work in playing popular songs and ballads, with the screen slide accompaniment, is admirable and in this particular field of organ solo work he is doubtless without a peer. The words of the song are flashed upon the screen, two lines at a time, with the syllables all carefully divided, wherever there is a different musical note for each syllable. The signal for the change of slides is given by somebody in the orchestra who has a con-

nection with the operating booth. Thus, Mr. Crawford is able to devote his entire attention to the interpretation of the song, and rarely, if ever, looks at the screen. In addition, he always memorizes the song he is playing. With the wealth of resources available for such kind of work, on the Chicago Theatre organ, Mr. Crawford never fails to make his number interesting, as his effects are always varied. He uses his combination pistons throughout his number, usually changing the combinations of his registers every four or eight bars of the music. This requires the setting up of new combinations every week, to avoid monotony.

The outstanding feature of Mr. Crawford's numbers is that the melody of the song is always plainly discernible—even to the most musically ignorant. This is as it should be, for if in playing solos of this character, the melody is obscured, there remains nothing of any interest to the audience. Perhaps the next most noticeable feature of his song interpretations (as he styles them), is his sense of rhythm. It is accurate, unerring, and pronounced—yet never distorted or exaggerated. Mr. Crawford usually keeps his work within the confines of good taste, and there is an unmistakable atmosphere of musicianship about everything he does. It is the woeful lack of these characteristics which makes the playing of such ballads and popular songs (as solos) so lamentable among the great majority who attempt to do this kind of work. There is also a certain repose in his playing, a feeling of poise and assurance, which is subconsciously conveyed to the audience, which makes his playing all the more enjoyable to his listeners.

Mr. Crawford's solos may be said roughly to consist of melody and accompaniment. The melody has been spoken of already. The accompaniment, however, is always a distinct entity. It is never the kind of accompaniment which is written in the published copies of the songs. The accompaniment consists of elaborate figurations and counter-melodies, all of which are carefully worked out in advance and exactly adhered to—nothing is left to chance, or the inspiration of the moment. At the same time, the original harmonizations of the printed copy are always carefully retained.

In the matter of registration, Mr. Crawford excels. If he is playing a light, fast one-step, the registration fits the mood of the number. There are flutes, piccolos, xylophones, piano (incorporated in the organ proper), and a combination of which Mr. Crawford is very fond—which

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he often overworks—that of using the kinura, with its rasping, harsh, nasal tone quality, in combination with other stops. Of course, the kinura will not blend with other stops—its voice is unmistakable whenever it is heard. Yet, there is no denying but that it adds a punch or zip or tang to a registration, which nothing else will give. Mr. Crawford is also very much inclined towards the use (one might say over-use) of sub-octave couplers, or 16' tone, which at times predominates to such an extent as to become quite noticeable and to overbalance the fundamental tone, making it heavy. But these occasions are fortunately rare. If the number is a waltz or ballad (in 6/8 or 4/4 tempo) there are the vox humanae—which of course, are of primary importance in such numbers, the flutes, occasionally the keen, shimmering strings—the latter usually used in combination with other tone colors rather than individually or separately, and such percussion stops as the harp, chimes, and glockenspiel or chryso-glott.

Mr. Crawford makes very effective use of the swell shades for his expression, although the effectiveness of his numbers does not depend entirely upon this one device for their success. In other words, he is not a slave to his expression pedals. His nuances and shadings are just as much a result of careful rhythmi-

tronic reverb is being added and I also picked up a Haines Ampico electric piano, which will be connected in as an Organ Piano. I fully realize that this horrible sounding mishmash looks awful in cold print, and the specifications look worse, giving the appearance of a classical "baroque" which somehow had mated with a Wurlitzer!—as most ranks except the Tuba, Clarinet, Vox, Trumpet, etc., go right up to the top of the 2-ft.; but the actual tonal result is extremely good—or at least I should say that it suits me, and is what I have been looking for in a residence organ, but I freely admit that it would not be everyone's idea.

Finally and just to be sure that no one picks me up on any inaccuracies, it will be noted that earlier I referred to my organ, as now existing, as a 3-12, whereas in the specification of ranks it appears to be a 3-10—how come? That's easy: I have two voxes paralleled and working on a vent chest, and the same with the Celeste.

of learning how to design railway locomotives, it was also equally necessary to eat. Engineering apprentices in the U.K. in prewar years were notoriously poorly paid. As such, I played for Paramount Theatres, Gaumont British, and Granada, and also broadcast the 4-14 Wurlitzer from the Gaumont Theatre, Manchester, for the BBC. I left the business when it began to conflict too heavily with my work, and did not touch an organ again for many years, until we opened a factory in Johannesburg, South Africa, when I became the official organist for the South African Broadcasting Corporation—on a Hammond, of all things. This was a very refreshing spare-time occupation from running a locomotive manufacturing works. During my time in Africa, I made many commercial recordings for Decca and RCA in both 78's (yes, they still use 78's in South Africa) and L.P.'s. Came to Australia in 1957, and got roped-in for doing a series of broadcasts for Australian Broadcasting Corporation from the State Theatre, Sydney, but the organ was not up to it, and terribly unreliable for any serious work.

After then deciding to install an organ in my own home, I found that anything worth having had long since been sold—or was grossly overpriced—so, I imported the 3-manual Compton Console from the Paramount Astoria, Brixton, London; purchased some Wurlitzer chests, relays and switches. To go into the story as to how this Heinz "Comptowurlichristizer" came into being would need a whole article to itself, but in brief, the ranks are, as now installed:

Tibia (Compton—Gaumont Theatre, Lewisham, London—very large scale on 18" pressure)

Diapason—Wurlitzer Phonon Type

Stopped Flute—Wurlitzer

Gamba—which is more like a solo string (Compton—original source unknown)

Celeste—Wurlitzer

Vox Humana—Aeolian Skinner (ex-Australian Broadcasting Corporation Theatre, Sydney)

Brass Trumpet—Wurlitzer

Harmonic Tuba—Wurlitzer

Clarinet—Christie

Saxophone—Of all things—a much-bewitched, battered and bewildered Kimball!

The organ is of interest inasmuch that all 16-foot tone except that of the Tuba is electronic. Reason!—the usual complaint of lack of space, but it's very, very successful indeed. To this lot, I am adding much of the organ from the Melba Theatre, Strathfield, which will include the Christie Tibia, Vox, String and Celeste, and a thumping great, fat Quintadena, Open Diapason. Synthetic elec-

cal and technical considerations, as they are of the proper use of the swell shades. In one respect, though, Mr. Crawford errs. From close observation, on many occasions, the writer has noticed that he almost invariably uses his swell shades all hooked up together, by means of the crescendo coupler. There is little or no attempt made to use the individual expression available in any one organ, or organs. The crescendos and diminuendos always seem to be "en masse."

One of Crawford's pet devices or tricks is the deplorable vice of a glissando, portamento, or slide between successive notes of a melody. In vocal music, or on the violin, cello or trombone, there may be a legitimate use for such, but assuredly there is none whatever upon a keyed instrument, especially when overworked, or used to an excess. I say, assuredly none, when presenting a musical number apparently in a dignified musical way, as a solo for the approval of an audience. For the purpose of burlesque or mimicry, such as playing a comedy (on the screen), or certain situations in a picture, this device can be used effectively, but there is no excuse for such an assault on musical taste in a legitimate solo number. Fortunately, Mr. Crawford is to be congratulated on his good judgment in doing less and less of this from week to week.

His work in playing pictures is of another kind entirely. His playing for pictures consists solely and almost exclusively of improvisation. It has been only on rare occasions that the writer has ever heard him play a written composition during the course of a picture—either features or comedy. Usually when he does play something, it is because of a direct cue in the picture. I may bring upon my head the wrath of many theatre organists by this statement, but I firmly believe that improvising by theatre organists, except in rare cases, should be conspicuous by its absence. There are, of course, places in certain pictures which can be best musically interpreted by improvisation on the organ, but they generally consist of short bits, connecting situations, and situations for which no written composition can be found to exactly fit. These places, however, are the exception rather than the rule. With the wealth of all music literature at the disposal of the theatre organist—music composed for the orchestra, piano, organ, violin, and voice, and written by all the great masters of composition who have ever lived—what possible excuse is there