

FAREWELL to the ORIENTAL

Recently word came to the Chicago Area Chapter of ATOE that the Oriental Theatre was to be separated into two theatres. CATOE chairman, Bill Benedict and CATOE secretary Bill Rieger, persuaded the management to allow the organization to have one last concert before the conversion took place.

With the full cooperation of the management, the half ton console was removed from the 12 foot pit and placed on the main floor as the new screen was to cover the orchestra area. Some fifteen energetic CATOE members participated in the after midnight work. More than 1,000 man hours were spent in the restoration work of repairing and cleaning before any tuning could be done — always between midnight and 9 a.m.

It takes a truly dedicated T.O. lover to give up their night's rest and come down night after night to get such a monumental job accomplished in such a short span of time. The console of the 4-20 Wurlitzer presented quite a challenge for CATOE. The sides were badly marred and the top had been completely stripped and painted red. A restoration crew, headed by Joe Duci Bella, turned the ugly plain console top into the thing of beauty and wonder we all marveled at on the 20th. Michael Thornton, a professional artist and photographer, painted the firebirds on the top. Michael thought ahead to lighting effects and mixed white in on each part of the firebirds — thereby attaining the dazzling effect under the blue spotlights. The gold ornamentation

was actually vinyl art forms and are produced by the company that used to make the plaster ones formerly used on the original consoles.

The Oriental Theatre, built in 1925 by the famous theatre architects, Rapp & Rapp, is described as a work of art. The auditorium is beyond words with its intricacies of Eastern magnificence featuring grotesque dancers and Indian animal figures complete with illuminated stained glass around the shrine-like niches. This theatre was a showcase for Paul Ash and his Merry Mad Musical Gang and organist Henri A. Keates. Stage shows and the sound of the Wurlitzer had long departed in favor of bigger first run screen shows.

Publicity for this show under the capable hands of chairman, Bill Benedict, brought television crews from both ABC and NBC to interview both Bill and Hal Pearl, with accompanying live organ music from the Oriental on their news casts. Numerous radio stations carried the story as well as every major newspaper in Chicago.

The night of the show was marked by the large numbers of young people that couldn't possibly have remembered the Oriental in its hey-day. The chairman introduced the master of ceremonies, Ben Hall, who in turn introduced the organist, Hal Pearl, organist at the Aragon Ballroom for seventeen years. Hal opened the program by playing "Hail to the Mighty Wurlitzer" followed by a nostalgic "My Blue Heaven" and the firebirds almost came to life under the blue spotlight.

Ben Hall presented his Magic Lan-



Ben Hall addressing audience during Sept. 20th CATOE concert featuring Hal Pearl at the Oriental Theatre Wurlitzer (Chicago).

tern Slide program entitled "Best Remaining Seats, Chicago Scene." This really brought back memories to the Chicagoans that were around when the Uptown, Chicago, and other great movie palaces were new.

Hal then accompanied a newsreel "Gay Nineties Live Again," played a medley from the 20's, accompanied a serial, "Purple Dagger" and finally played for a vigorous sing-a-long.

After intermission Bill Benedict read a telegram from the Wurlitzer Company congratulating CATOE. Then he and Ben Hall led a rally requesting the management to retain the Wurlitzer and move the console to the upper theatre.

"A Salute to the Oriental" slide show was then presented by Ben Hall whose sharp wit and humor were much appreciated by the audience. Hal Pearl closed with a medley of tunes as his "Farewell Tribute."

It is only fitting to mention the names of at least some of the restoration crew led by Sam Holte, and Terry Kleven: Joe Spurr, Charles Peterson, Frank Pokorny, Jack Hadfield, Bill Rieger and a myriad of CATOE members that drove as far as 80 miles to lend a hand. We must also thank the helpers of Joe Duci Bella: Ruth Kapp, Yvonne Sinye Cheng, Bill Becker and Michael Sainsbury.

Theatre management has told CATOE the contractors are not planning on starting to work on the Oriental until fall. Therefore, we are expecting a program at this theatre during the convention this summer.



The Oriental 4-20 Wurlitzer in place on the original organ lift and before redecoration by Joe Duci Bella and his crew.