

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN

by John Muri

The reason so many of us older pipe organ buffs like to keep the vision and sound of the theatre of the twenties alive is that we remember the vitality and activity of the time. Theatre was a buzzing enterprise, with a large reservoir of talent to draw upon and usually enough customers to keep the doors open year in and out. Today's picture theatre suggests a mausoleum with its closed balconies, its lonely ticket taker and pop-corn girl, and its perpetual darkness that mercifully hides the decay.

There were dangers, however, in the "good old days." Most theatres were crowded buildings, and one could get into someone else's way in a hurry. I remember a night in 1928, when I was due to relieve the house orchestra at 10:30 p.m. in the Indiana Theatre at Indiana Harbor, Indiana. I had lain down backstage and gone to sleep (for I was feeling miserable with a flu attack and had virtually crawled to work that night) when suddenly I came to with a start, realizing that there was no music playing in the theatre. I looked at the clock and panicked; it was quarter to eleven, and none of the house staff had been able to find me. I hurried up through the orchestra pit and was making my way through the drummer's equipment when it happened. I dumped over his set of orchestra bells in a quiet theatre with two hundred people present. The bells fell into a couple of cymbals and set up a clatter that seemed to last an age, although the episode was probably all over in a few seconds. It created a big laugh, and I got a bawling-out from the manager.

There was a danger in going up into the spotlight on a lift. You became a beautiful target. There was a bald-headed organist at the Fisher Theater in Detroit who was the delight of the small fry who liked to shoot gum-wads at his head to see if they would stick. Another organist at the Fisher, Don Miller, got his the day he was riding up on the lift and was frighteningly bombarded with a multitude of small pellets that rattled all over him and the console. Don didn't stop playing while his rapid inspection revealed that someone had thrown a bag-full of jelly-beans at him. After the solo, Don hauled the young culprit into the manager's office for a severe dressing down.

I was up in the spotlight one night at the Palace Theatre in Gary, Indiana about five years ago, when I was shocked to have someone tap me on the shoulder. The lift was up at stage level, but the conspicuous position didn't phase this character, who asked if I would be able and willing to play the "St. Louis Blues." I didn't have time to explain anything to him at that busy moment, but I did succeed in shooing him off while playing up a storm of music at the same time. At the Hoosier Theatre in Whiting, Indiana in 1924 I had to play some unplanned exit music because the theatre-building was on fire. There wasn't much danger, for the fire was in a remote spot, but smoke was billowing through the house and I was alarmed. I was afraid that my job was going up in smoke with the theatre. Actually, we shut down for only one night.

We had vaudeville and movies at the Hoosier. One Sunday we had an animal act made up in part of five bears. At rehearsal, the bears got loose from their cage and they emptied the Hoosier stage of personnel in nothing flat. The rehearsal crew was chased out of the theatre — with the act right after them. Combined efforts of the trainer, policemen, firemen, and theatre employees rounded up the loose bears, some of them roaming happily in the back yards of homes in the vicinity.

You had to be quiet in most theatres when the show was on and you were waiting your turn to perform. Noisy conversation backstage or up in the projection booth was not the accepted thing. It was understood that no professional would disturb an audience; in those days mothers with crying babies were requested to take the children out to the lobby. Nevertheless, some employees would occasionally get out of line. In one theatre, the janitor got drunk periodically, and he would then go up to the projection booth and start cursing the lady-manager of the theatre. One night his timing was wrong, for I had just stopped playing the organ and was going out for a scheduled rest period. The janitor was delivering his customary high-pitched uncomplimentary and vulgar descriptions of the lady to the projectionist. It was all heard down in the auditorium, in which the lady was watching the

movie. She sprinted up to the booth, made her own loud speech (which all of us heard), and fired the mouthy offender. The next day she hired him back. I think they liked each other in a kind of oddball way.

One is not expected to make noise while a performance is going on, and old professionals like L. F. Steinert, now of Birmingham, Michigan, knew it and observed it. Steinert was architectural engineer on such theatres as the Chicago and Oriental (Chicago) and the Fisher and Hollywood in Detroit. He smelled trouble when he helped an organ purchaser remove an organ backstage during a matinee performance. The pipe chambers were quite high, and the entrance doors to them opened onto the stage, about four stories up. It was the intention to remove a five-rank Hillgreen-Lane chest by swinging it out and lowering it to the stage floor with a block and tackle. Steinert warned the fellows that they should not use any of the stage lines or ropes, because the old hemp had lost its spring and was in all probability very brittle. Ignoring Steinert's advice, they tied some old stage-line around the huge chest and pushed it out over the stage. Away she went! The rope broke instantly, the chest hit the stage floor with a crash, bounced around four or five times, hit against the back of the picture screen and ricocheted while falling to pieces. There was nothing to take home but a heap of kindling wood. The dirt and grime of forty years billowed up and out of the picture screen, sending a cloud of dirt into the auditorium. The audience, first petrified and then terrified, made for the exits. They thought that the theatre had been bombed and that it was now on fire. The manager ran around the auditorium trying to calm the people. He had a tough time getting anybody to come back in.

One of the more lasting misfortunes would occur when a manager would hire an organist merely on hearsay without an audition. I worked for one manager who needed an organist for a vacancy in his finest theatre. I wanted the job myself, but he wanted to bring in an outside name, an organist from the eastern part of the country. He found a man who had worked for Stanley and Publix theatres, but he did not take into consideration the fact that the man had moved about from job to job frequently.

When the new man got to town and played his first performance, the manager was very upset. The organist's playing was stiff and amateurish, and I was called over to the big theatre for

a midnight conference, at which I was ordered to play the organ so that the new man could get an idea of what kind of sound was desired and required. The poor fellow just couldn't give what was demanded; he got his notice the following evening and the management had to eat crow because of the big buildup that had been given the new organist in the press. That experience taught me that one should never buy a pig in a poke — particularly when the pig is an organist.

Liquor would bring about accidents in our fraternity. I know of at least two well-known organists who used to get so full that they would fall off the organ seats. Both of them did it by taking their bows and not remembering to come up again. One of them landed in the orchestra pit. He just bowed until he disappeared.

With all its vicissitudes, the theatre-organ period was a good one in which to be young. There was individualistic opportunity, innocence and joyfulness (call it naivete if you like), and creativity on a small but eminently satisfying scale. Even if things went haywire; at least you had something to talk about afterward. What's a hippy got to talk or laugh about?

P.S. In those days we found the organs complete; they had all their pipes and parts in them. □

LAND O'LAKES CHAPTER PRODUCES RECORD TO HELP GORDON KRIST

"Just for the Fun of It" is the name of a record produced by our Chapter. When Gordon Krist attended his first meeting with our Chapter, members who knew of his unusual ability at the organ urged him to play the 2/5 Special B Wurlitzer at the home of Don Peterson. Fortunately the tape recorder was on and it is from this tape that the record was made. When Gordon first heard the record he asked Don Peterson, who's idea this was, how they dubbed in the drums — Don replied, "We didn't — this is all your doing".

The reason for making this record is a most unhappy one. A few months ago, while in Chicago, Gordon suffered an aneurysm resulting in brain surgery. His left side is completely paralyzed. The final outcome is hopeful but he faces many, many months of therapy. As mentioned on a local radio show, Gordon was without insurance. Gordon, who is 30, had been playing organ at the Ranch House Restaurant in Minneapolis, in a dining room reserved for organ music devotees, where one could enjoy Gordon's playing with a mini-

NEW MUSIC FOR THEATRE ORGAN

During the past 40 years very little original music has been composed for the theatre organ. Thousands of arrangements of popular tunes and transcriptions have been printed, but publishers will give a "researched" opinion concerning any original organ compositions: "It won't sell."

Early this year one of the major publishing houses in New York City approached Lee Erwin with the idea of putting together a folio of theatre organ music. Mr. Bernard Kalban, Director of Publications for Edward B. Marks Music Corp. had read a review, in The New York Times, of an ATOE event at the Academy of Music Theatre on 14th Street where Lee had performed his score for the Valentino silent film "The Eagle," and Mr. Kalban had come to the conclusion that it was time for some original organ material to be published.

As a result of considerable negotiation with Lee and ATOE President, Al Mason, E. B. Marks is embarking upon the publication of the first theatre organ music folio. □

A group of outstanding performers, active in ATOE, have been asked to contribute original materials for inclusion within the book, which will be under the general editorship of member Lee Erwin.

Already contributing are Don Baker, Al Bollington, Jeff Barker, Allen Mills, Lee Erwin, Eddie Weaver and Rosa Rio. Manuscripts have also been promised by Ann Leaf, Ashley Miller, Gaylord Carter and Lyn Larsen.

ATOE members have long been asking for a collection of compositions by stellar theatre artists, members. So many times they have asked for those identification marks, styles, sounds of the organists heard in person and on records. This new folio, to be published in September, affords the opportunity to play like the artists, in a variety of moods.

President Al Mason has announced that this publication "will broaden exposure for the renaissance of the big music makers." The Edward B. Marks Music Corp. feels that the folio will be an important contribution to its 75th Anniversary Year. We are all glad that Mr. Kalban read about Lee Erwin in the New York Times. Let's hope that this folio will only be the first of many yet to be published! □

mum of conversation from adjoining tables. Spontaneous applause from diners was commonplace.

Gordon, who is self-taught, credits his success as a musician to being a good listener! Hoping to be on an outpatient basis in July he will resume teaching, hopefully full time.

"Just for the Fun of It" will sell for \$1.00 plus postage. It is a 7 inch, 33 1/3 record with two numbers, "Spanish Flea" and "The Way You Look Tonight". The U A Recording Studio in Minneapolis, where Gordon is known, offered, at no cost, the use of their studios and equipment for cleaning the tape and the work of cutting the record will be done for us at cost. The Chapter members are assuming the job of gluing the gloss cover to the cardboard sleeve. The entire proceeds, after cost, will go to Gordon. With modern technology the recording is good. Gordon's unique styling and versatility at the organ are proudly presented by our Chapter. "Just for the Fun of It" is available from the Chapter secretary. □



"My sincere admiration for the superb music that Gordon Krist has created throughout the years. I had occasion to hear him perform on my Fall tour. It was an experience not soon to be forgotten." JOHN SENG

Stricken with paralysis of the left side following brain surgery, it will be a long time before Gordon Krist is heard again.

The 7 inch 33 1/2 R.P.M. record is the only theatre pipe organ recording of Gordon Krist now available. Features "Spanish Flea" and "The Way You Look Tonight".

Send \$1.00 plus 25c for postage and handling to:

**Land O'Lakes Chapter, ATOS
16925 Linden Drive
Minnetonka, Minn. 55343**

All proceeds from record sales will help to defray expenses of Gordon Krist's rehabilitation.