

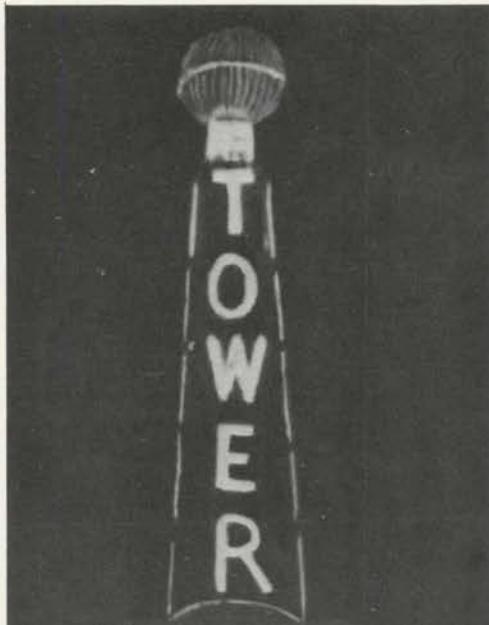
**I**N THE late months of 1927 going into the new year of 1928, the residents of Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, then a suburb of Philadelphia, wondered about the massive foundations and what the tons of bricks being delivered were for. After months of construction, the people no longer wondered. The great 3200 seat Tower theatre loomed before them. The completed Tower was one of the Philadelphia area's few atmospheric theatres, a "dream factory" designed to make the patrons feel as though they were in an immense Roman coliseum with its pure imported marble columns and vaulted ceilings.

Opening night at the Tower was one to be remembered in the now city of Upper Darby. Film star Francis X. Bushman\* was the master of ceremonies with a twenty piece orchestra playing on the rising orchestra platform. Then as the house lights dimmed within the many coves and niches, the pure white spotlight shone on the left side of the pit to reveal the rising tan console, with many-colored dragons painted on it, and Mr. William Andrews presiding at the 17-rank 260 special Wurlitzer. In the opening night audience was Mr. J. Earle Clarke, installer for the Wurlitzer company, who stayed for the first week to adjust tremulants and chase ciphers for Mr. Andrews.

Time and economics played the usual tricks on the Tower and in a few years all its shows came in a can. The well-appointed stage, the orchestra pit, the dressing rooms and the organ languished in disuse.

Years after vaudeville had left the great stage, a well-known Philadelphia musical celebrity signed with Epic Records and the Tower Wurlitzer was sing-

\*As the villain, "Messala," Bushman menaced the silent screen's "Ben Hur," Ramon Novarro.



## The Tower Lights Are Bright In Upper Darby

Story by Bert Brouillon

Photos by George F. Druck

ing once more. In the middle fifties the late Leonard MacLain had the great Wurlitzer put in shape for his now famous series of recordings. After these recordings were completed, the organ once again fell into a state of semi-repair; dead magnets, leaking leather and the usual things that go wrong with an organ not in constant use.

In 1966 the Tower closed under Paramount A-B-C Corporation management and was taken over completely by Ellis Theatres of Philadelphia. The house was given a complete interior facelifting: new seats, new carpets, chandeliers, and fixtures. In place of the huge chandelier that once graced the imported tile-floor lobby now hangs a "modern" lamp-shade monstrosity. The great marble columns lining the grand staircase are now covered with cream-colored wallpaper! But the eye of an experienced theatre goer is not deceived by these new "decorations" that conceal the grandeur the theatre once possessed. Articulate plasterwork, vaults and pillars still remain as a reminder that the Tower was, and still is, one of the great theatres.

When a patron enters the theatre, he is at once aware of the soft, colored lights that shine from the coves to give the 3200-seat palace a feeling of warmth and security.

A moment after that patron has been comfortably seated, a scintillating billow of pipe organ music bursts forth into the immense auditorium, although no console is visible. But the listener does not wait long before an immaculate tan and flowered console rises slowly at the left side of the arch. For approximately twenty minutes, the patrons are entertained by the mightiest Wurlitzer in Philadelphia. The house lights dim and the console descends into the darkness of the orchestra pit to signal the start of the evening film show.

The smoothness with which these operations blend together are deceptive.



To those unaware of the technical operation of a large theatre the many operations which must be dealt with prior to a performance are worthy of examination. In this case it is the responsibility of just a handful of dedicated people. Robert ("Bob") Lent, house organist, is responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the instrument. Six days a week, Bob drives from his home in Southern New Jersey (almost forty miles) to the theatre. For nearly three years the Wurlitzer has been cared for by this dedicated young man. Lent, who is only 19, plays solely by ear, but that is no handicap; his performance is certainly not that of an amateur. Bob has been a "purist" ever since he heard his first Dick Leibert record taped at the Byrd Theatre in Richmond, Virginia, when Bob was eight. Bob's father was also an organist at a small theatre in Collingswood, N. J. but left to become an engineer at RCA after "talkies" took over. Although Bob was not around during the "golden age," he still has the "feel" to accompany and "cue" the "flickers" during the silent film festival presented at the Tower each Christmas. These shows are well received and many patrons request that the "silents" be run more often.

When Bob first entered the Tower, he learned that another New Jersey resident had been working on the organ but not regularly. He applied for and got the job as house organist (which included organ maintenance) — his first "mighty Wurlitzer." Although the organ was in fairly good shape, much had to be done to bring the 17-rank "special" into A-1 condition. Pizzicato action had to be adjusted, dead magnets replaced, air lines resealed, along with solving other problems common to a neglected theatre organ. Keeping the organ in tune was a problem due to the great temperature differences between summer and winter. This was solved by



"Coming Up". Bob Lent at the Console.

sealing an air ventilation duct which was no longer in use, although before it was bricked up it conducted "weather" to the organ.

Next project to be tackled by Lent was repairing the elevator that once brought the three-deck console into audience view. The old motor had been submerged in two feet of water for years and would have cost many hundreds of dollars to repair or replace. After much searching, Bob heard Sam Riley of Delaware Valley ATOE mention that he had a motor with the same rpm and horsepower as the old one. After some bargaining with Sam, Bob soon had the new motor bringing the console into view again.

During the course of redecorating the interior of the Tower, the organ chamber openings were covered with a heavy drapery to conceal the much-deteriorated grills. These thick draperies hampered the sound of the organ so much that a change in the positioning of some pipework was indicated because the draperies were there to stay. Bob and his crew decided that the Posthorn located in the left chamber had to be moved to the right chamber where it could be unified much more than it had been on the left. This move balanced the overall sound coming from both chambers and made the Wurlitzer sound much larger in size but not louder. The Posthorn now occupies the old Tuba

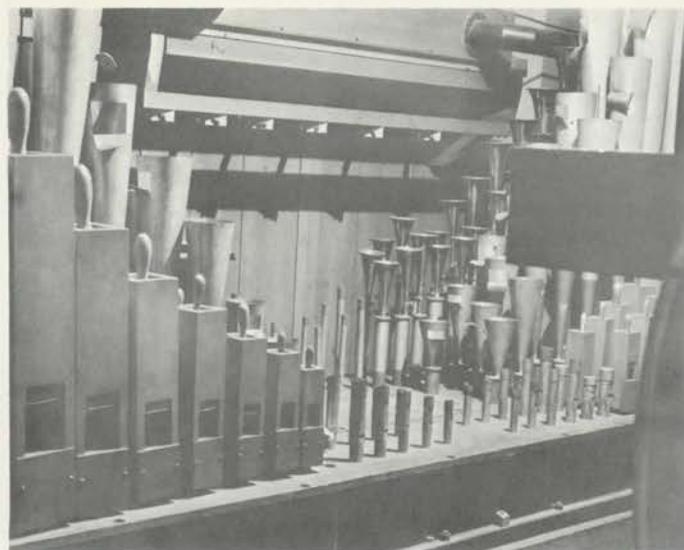
Frosted glass lampshade monstrosity where original 20-tier crystal chandelier once was suspended deep within an arched, vaulted ceiling dome.

Modernized lobby showing original oil painted murals in the center.





Shot from first of three balconies—total seating, 3200.



Solo Chamber: Front to back: Tibia, Tuba Mirabilis, Brass Sax. Bass drum in lower right corner.

Horn chest which could be unified and coupled to 32', 16', 8', 4' and 2'. The added unification gives the organ an excellent chorus reed usually lacking in Wurlitzers of this size. Even with the draperies covering the chamber openings, the sound comes through sharp and clear. In addition to moving the Posthorn, the Flutes were "opened" ever so slightly to increase their speaking volume but not enough to impair their tone. The Flute and Tibia offset extensions were also opened to increase the high-pitched "bite" of notes that were muffled before.

The Tuba Horn now is waiting for a chest so that it may once again be heard but it is not really missed due to the many other subtle stops in the organ to enhance the Wurlitzer sound.

Late in the fall of 1967, another volunteer came to the Tower. Jan Carroll,

formerly of the Lansdowne theatre, became Bob's righthand man. Between the two, the tuning was done and many odd jobs completed. Jan, only 17, now controls the lighting effects in the theatre. He also fills in as substitute organist if Bob fails to appear. Neither thinks it strange to devote sixteen to eighteen hours a day to their hobby. Another devotee of the organ has also been on hand to assist in many ways — Dan Bernstein.

At a recent concert at the Tower, two more faces appeared. Fired with interest by the sound of organ music, Peter Broselow and Earl Wesner volunteered their services and are now "leather scrapers" and "replacers." Neither had much "know how" about or-

gans prior to coming to the Tower. They now have a working knowledge of all the Wurlitzer's parts and operations.

The organ is not the only thing that has been renovated by Bob and Jan and their crew. The simulated "stars" of this atmospheric house once again twinkle and shine, projected "clouds" roll across the deep blue ceiling and the marquee once again flashes and "candy-stripes" as it did back in 1928.

The hearty reception of two Carter shows has encouraged the chapter to plan a regular series for the future. Even the theft of the Brass Saxophone hasn't dulled the devotion to pipes so ardently displayed. The Tower now has a happy future with a talented crew, fine management, a working chapter, and an appreciative public.

### STOPLIST for Wurlitzer 260-Special, opus No. 1901, installed 6/29/1928 in the Tower Theatre, Upper Darby, Penna.

#### PEDAL

- 16' Orphicleide
- Diaphone
- Tibia Clausa
- Bourdon
- 8' English Posthorn
- Tuba Mirabilis
- Tibia Clausa
- Octave (Diapason)
- Clarinet
- Saxophone
- String
- Cello
- Flute
- 4' Flute

#### COUPLERS

- Solo to Pedal 8'
- Great to Pedal 8'

#### PERCUSSIONS

- Bass Drum
- Kettle Drum
- Snare Drum
- Crash Cymbal
- Cymbal

#### ACCOMPANIMENT

- 16' Viol (ten C)
- Bourdon
- Vox Humana (ten C)
- 8' Tuba Mirabilis
- English Posthorn
- Diaphonic Diapason
- Open Diapason
- Tibia Clausa
- Clarinet
- Saxophone
- String
- Viol d' Orchestra
- Viol Celeste
- Quintadena

- Oboe Horn
- Vox Humana
- 4' Octave (Diapason)
- Viol d' Orchestra
- Viol Celeste
- Vox Humana
- Flute
- 2-2/3' Nazard
- 2' Piccolo
- Marimba-Harp
- Chrysoglott
- Snare Drum
- Tambourine
- Castanets
- Chinese Block
- Sand Block
- Tom-Tom
- Octave Coupler 4'
- Solo to Accomp. 8'

#### GREAT

- 16' English Posthorn
- Diaphone
- Tibia Clausa
- Bourdon
- Clarinet (ten C)
- Saxophone (ten C)
- Diaphonic Diapason
- Open Diapason
- Tibia Clausa
- Clarinet
- Saxophone
- Flute
- String
- Viol d' Orchestra
- Viol Celeste
- Vox Humana
- 8' English Posthorn
- Tuba Mirabilis
- 4' Clarion
- Octave (Diapason)
- Tibia Clausa
- Flute

- Viol
- Viol Celeste
- 2-2/3' Twelfth (Tibia)
- Twelfth (Flute)
- 2' Piccolo (Tibia)
- Piccolo (Flute)
- Fifteenth (VDO)
- 1-3/5' Tierce (Tibia)
- Marimba-Harp
- Chrysoglott
- Orchestra Bells
- Sleight Bells (Tuned)
- Xylophone
- Glockenspiel
- Chimes
- Sub-Octave Coupler (16')
- Octave Coupler (4')
- Solo to Great Coupler (8')

#### SOLO

- 16' Solo Trumpet
- 8' Brass Trumpet
- English Posthorn
- Tuba Mirabilis
- 8' Open Diapason
- Diaphonic Diapason
- Tibia Clausa
- Clarinet
- Kinura
- Saxophone
- Orchestral Oboe
- String
- Oboe Horn
- Quintadena
- 4' Clarion
- Octave
- Piccolo (Tibia)
- Xylophone
- Glockenspiel
- Orchestra Bells
- Chimes

- PEDAL 2nd Touch
- 16' Diaphone

#### PEDAL PIZZICATO

- 16' English Posthorn

#### ACCOMP. 2nd Touch

- 8' English Posthorn
- Tibia Clausa
- Chimes
- Xylophone
- Orchestra Bells
- Triangle
- Solo to Accomp. (8')
- Solo to Accomp. Pizzicato (8')

#### GREAT 2nd Touch

- 8' English Posthorn
- Tibia Clausa
- Solo to Great (8')
- Solo to Great Pizzicato (8')

#### TREMULANTS

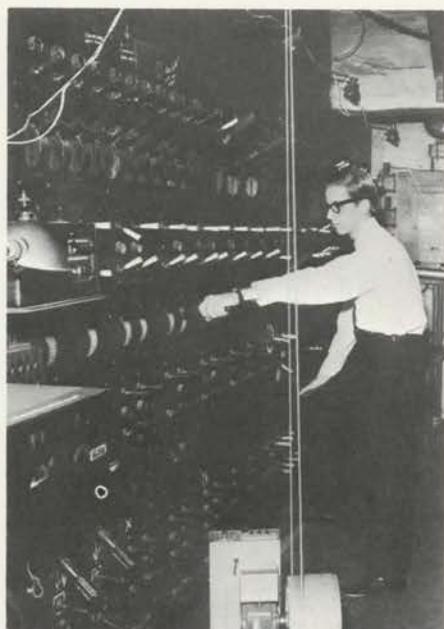
1. Main
2. Solo
3. Tibia Clausa
4. Vox Humana
5. Diaphonic Diapason & Tuba

#### TOE STUDES

- 1-2-3 Pedal Combinations
- 4 Fire Gang
- 5 Boat Horn
- 6 Horse Hooves
- 7 Surf
- Right Shoes: Grand Crash
- Sforzando
- Thunder 1, Thunder 2

#### Manual Effects:

- Birds 1 & 2 on Great
- Auto Horn, Door Bell on Accompaniment



Jan Carroll — Lighting technician — controls 275 different lighting combinations available within the theatre.