

A TIMES SQUARE ORGAN TRANSPLANT

NEW YORK SAVES RIVOLI WURLI!

by Bob Balfour

The scenes from the sidewalks of New York are just not what they used to be! A walk up Times Square today sadly reveals a bank and a shoe store where the Paramount once stood. A large hole a block away represents the Astor Hotel. The Times Building is now the Allied Chemical Tower. Farther north, another large hole marks the site of the Capitol Theatre, and down the block, Cobbs Corner Restaurant resides in the Roxy lobby. So, I suppose it was inevitable that Labor Day, 1969, marked the closing of another of the great Broadway Movie Palaces, the Rivoli. Although it has been extensively remodeled over the years, the facade and some of the original splendor of the auditorium are still visible. Thus, the only remaining monument to Roxy, save Radio City Music Hall (and its future is questionable) was the Rivoli; all else has disappeared.

Shortly after the first of the year, a group of New York chapter members contacted United Artists, who now own the Rivoli, in an effort to restore the long silent 3/15 Wurlitzer but received a response of "not interested." Then early this summer, United Artists announced that the Rivoli too would suffer the fate of so many of the existing houses of late, but with one exception. Instead of being entirely demolished or piggy-backed, it would be quadruplexed. We had hoped to present this instrument at the 1970 convention as it is the last remaining theatre organ in the Times Square area. A phone call in mid-August from the demolition contractor, dashed all hopes of this. We were informed that the theatre would close September 1st and the transformation into four theatres would begin immediately. The contractor also stated, "there is an organ in here and if it isn't removed by Labor Day, it will be demolished with the interior."

The next few days were wrought with much frantic phoning and planning and on August 20th, the New York chapter swung into action as never before. All of the various organ restoration crews were welded into one unit. Spearheading this operation was chapter member Biff Butler, who had been trying unsuccessfully for the past several years to convince United Artists to let him restore this organ. Biff had been an organ maintenance man with Radio City Music Hall some years ago and a key figure in restoring a style D Wurlitzer in Bound Brook, N. J. He is currently

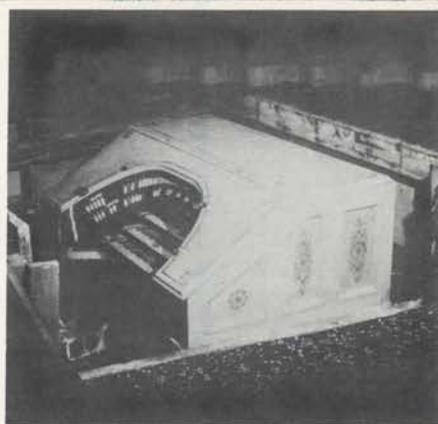
involved in the restoration of the 4/23 Wonder Morton in the Loews Jersey in Jersey City. Heading up the technical aspects of this task were chapter members Mel Robinson and Clem Young, of New York City, both professional organ builders.

The unique part of this operation centers around Biffy. The company he now works for in New York, The Charizma Organization, producers of radio and TV commercials as well as industrial and entertainment shows, made all of the relocation of the organ possible. The president of Charizma, Mr. Earl Fultz, had been looking for a theatre organ to install in the Charizma Building in midtown Manhattan to provide background music for some of their commercials and films. An exciting plan evolved out of a quick meeting with Mr. Fultz and the New York chapter officers. If the chapter would remove, restore and re-install the instrument, he would provide a large sound studio for it in his building and pay all expenses involved. In appreciation of the work the chapter would perform, Mr. Fultz told us to consider this a chapter organ and would allow us access to it evenings and weekends. This has truly been a dream come true.

The rest of this tale, the frantic effort to stay one step ahead of the demolition crew in removing this unique organ, is familiar to many. Unique — yes, very much so. It is a 3/15 Wurlitzer, a 260 Special, installed in 1925 — 8 years after the theatre opened. This organ replaced a straight organ, probably an Estey. The console was on a lift at the front left of the band car, and there were 4 chambers, each very shallow, allowing only 4 ranks plus a few offset chests for 16' pedal extensions in each chamber. This



Rivoli crew members dwarfed by giant 32' diaphones on backstage wall.



Rivoli console rises for the last time before its farewell ride down Broadway.

organ really must have filled the theatre with sound but as it was partially disconnected, there was no chance to hear it.

Then, two amazing discoveries. There were piano stop tabs on the console but no piano visible. A quick search found a fine Wurlitzer upright on a ledge over the switchboard backstage. The greatest shock of all, however, came upon entering the stagehouse, which had already been stripped to the walls for impending remodeling, and being told, "there are some pipes on the ledge opposite the switchboard and they must come down first as the wall they are on will be demolished in the next few days." The electrician hooked up some lights to cut the gloom and revealed, to our horror (and awe), a rank of 32' diaphones, unmitered, standing on a ledge 3 stories above the stage floor and reaching through the grid to the very top of the stagehouse. With all of the fly work removed, the pipes stood out like a squadron of redwoods. There was no stop tab on the console for these pipes but closer examination revealed the stop tab had been removed — perhaps they were too much for the building, as in most cases, and had to be disconnected. Mr. Fultz decided that although they couldn't possibly be used in the new studio installation, someone else could use them and so they were rigged down by the demolition company, disassembled and hauled by the chapter crew to the Charizma Building where they are now awaiting a purchaser. Anyone interested?

The organ now safely lies in the Charizma Building and plans are being drawn up for the studio to properly house the instrument. Charizma has made a 16 mm color sound movie of the removal operation and will also film the restoration and re-installation, resulting in a documentary film on a pipe organ transplant. The New York chapter and ATOS will be eternally grateful to the Charizma Organization and Mr. Earl Fultz for, without his generosity, this miracle on Broadway could not have taken place. WE SAVED A MIGHTY WURLITZER, AND WE DID IT TODAY. □