

Sadly, I have to tell you that the era of the solo organist in British movie theatres finally came to an end April 26, 1974. On that day, neighbours found *Gerald Shaw*, resident at London's Leicester Square Odeon and last surviving full-time cinema organist, dead in his apartment.

At the time of writing, the word is that the Odeon's famed Compton 5/17 (known to all and sundry as "the Duchess") will be maintained and used at premieres and organ concerts. But no resident will be appointed.

What makes the whole business even sadder, Shaw, 63, had returned earlier in the week from a successful visit to Australia, where he had appeared as a special guest at the annual convention of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia. His sudden and tragic end has mystified friends.

It is not my intention to encroach on the province of the Closing Chord department, but a few words about Gerald Shaw seem appropriate. He was the son of a well-known writer of sea and adventure tales, Captain Frank Shaw (who also skippered the ship carrying the first and only set of 64' pedal reed pipes to Australia).

He seems to have started on music early in life. In 1946, he jovially claimed that his first public ap-

pearance as a pianist was at a concert for wounded soldiers at the age of four. In fact his first serious training came later in Edinburgh, Scotland. He served a few years as a "music and all trades" schoolmaster before getting his first cinema post at the Regal, St. Leonards-on-sea, which boasted a Compton 3c/6, in 1932.

There followed a spell in his native Scotland before he was signed to the Paramount circuit and sent to various parts of the British Isles. The army claimed him from 1940-45 and soon after his release, he broke into the big time with a London job at the Swiss Cottage Odeon.

He opened the Compton in the Rivoli, Cairo, Egypt, in 1948 and a Theatreone (that was Compton's famous pre-war "pipeless organ" invention) at the San Jorge, Lisbon, Portugal, in 1950.

Then, in 1954, he went to the big Christie (Europe's largest unit organ) at the Regal, Marble Arch, before moving over to Leicester Square in 1958.

Visiting firemen from that time on can testify to his love for the instrument in his care and also his hospitality. In recent times, no trip to these isles, it seems, has been complete without a visit to "the Duchess" and

her keeper. And many is the visitor who has had to be pried away from the console in the early hours of the morning.

They noted how *Gerald Shaw* had been alert to the possibilities of raiding broken-down organs for improved ranks and traps, how he had worked without cease to make sure the old girl carried on singing in fine voice.

I popped into the theatre for what must have been one of his last routine spots in the programme before he left for Australia. He presented his usual impeccable solo blending light classics and evergreens with fine taste as ever and linking the last chords of one film with the first of another like everybody used to do in the good old days.

The "fruit jelly" illuminated console was not lit up that day because of the energy crisis. That was a saddening thought. I would have been desolate had I known that I was seeing and hearing Britain's last cinema organist for the last time.

STACCATO SNIPPETS

Ralph Bartlett, longtime Hon. Secretary of the Theatre Organ Club, estimates that there are about 70 theatre organs remaining in Britain, both playing and silent, not including some 20 reinstalled in homes, schools and churches... The *TOC* monthly Newsletter, published by Bartlett, reveals that the Hampshire Theatre Organ Trust (Portsmouth area) has purchased the Wurlitzer formerly in the Lido Cinema, Hove... **BRITISH ORGANS ON THE MOVE:** The Compton organ from the Regal cinema (Putney) is due for reinstallation in a Middlesborough home, while the Compton from the Regal cinema (Ilford) goes to the Finchley Methodist church... Another issue of *TOC's THEATRE ORGAN REVIEW* has reached club members. For many years a regular and well-done slick quarterly, the *REVIEW* got behind about four years ago and re-appeared for one issue in 1972, and now this 1973 issue. No explanation has been offered for the virtual disappearance of the respected magazine, once a mainstay of the T.O. hobby. □



GERALD SHAW, Britain's last full-time theatre organist, at "the Duchess."
(J.D. Sharp Photo)