

Vancouver Rescues Its Orpheum

by George S. Francis

"Watch the eyes of a child as he enters the portals of one of our great theatres and treads the pathway to fairyland. Watch the bright lights in the eyes of the tired shopgirl who hurries noiselessly over carpets and sighs with satisfaction as she walks amid furnishing that once delighted the hearts of queens. See the toil-worn father whose dreams have never come true and look inside his heart as he finds strength and rest within the theatre."

George Rapp

Thus did one of the USA's great theatre designers justify, the ornate movie palace of the '20s. His words sum up the general attitude toward the often rococo houses of the "golden age." They provided an escape from reality.

Forty-seven years later reality was even grimmer, but escape to the theatre was no longer in vogue, especially

Orpheum Theatre, Vancouver B.C., which hopefully has been saved through the diligent efforts of Vancouver citizens and ATOS members of the area. Note marquee billing and autos in this 1928 photo.





The 340-bulb chandelier highlights the dome of the auditorium. The stage is 50 feet wide and 34 feet deep.

if the neighborhood had deteriorated to the point it wasn't safe to walk the streets at night. That's another type of reality. One by one, the wonderful old landmarks became liabilities and, because theatres are a business they had to make way for other land uses — often simply parking lots. One of the first to go was the famous New York Roxy, a real shock to theatre buffs. The Roxy was only the starter. In the decade since actress Gloria Swanson posed for her photo midst the rubble of the Roxy, every large city in the USA and Canada has witnessed the destruction of theatre landmarks. For a time it seemed that all large houses would eventually succumb to the blows of the wrecking ball.

Then, slowly but certainly, a reaction set in. This is the story of a vaudeville/movie palace saved for posterity through the concentrated effort of local citizens.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, "The Grand old Lady of Theatre Row", the Orpheum, was about to undergo surgery, to be lobotomized into seven "pup" theatres by its owners, Famous Players. To them, there was no other way; the 2874-seat house was a financial liability. It was rebirth as a litter of "pups" or demolition.

When word got around the citizenry, things started to happen. True, they had taken the \$1,000,000 Orpheum for granted. It had been there

since its opening in 1927, although its style 240 Wurlitzer hadn't been heard by the public for 22 years. It seemed to the citizens that the Orpheum was part of Vancouver, a cultural asset which shouldn't be subject to vagaries of financial fluctuation any more than perhaps the statue of Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square, London, or the Washington Monument in the Capitol of Canada's neighbor to the south.

When the plan to carve up the cavernous Orpheum into "pup" tents got to the Vancouver City Council, there were rumblings which got to the office of Mayor Art Phillips. Didn't the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra need a better showcase than the Queen Elizabeth theatre, with its limited seating and poor acoustics? Hadn't a study been made which indicated the city would have to spend around \$23,000,000 to build a suitable theatre complex from scratch? The answer, in both cases, was an unequivocal YES!

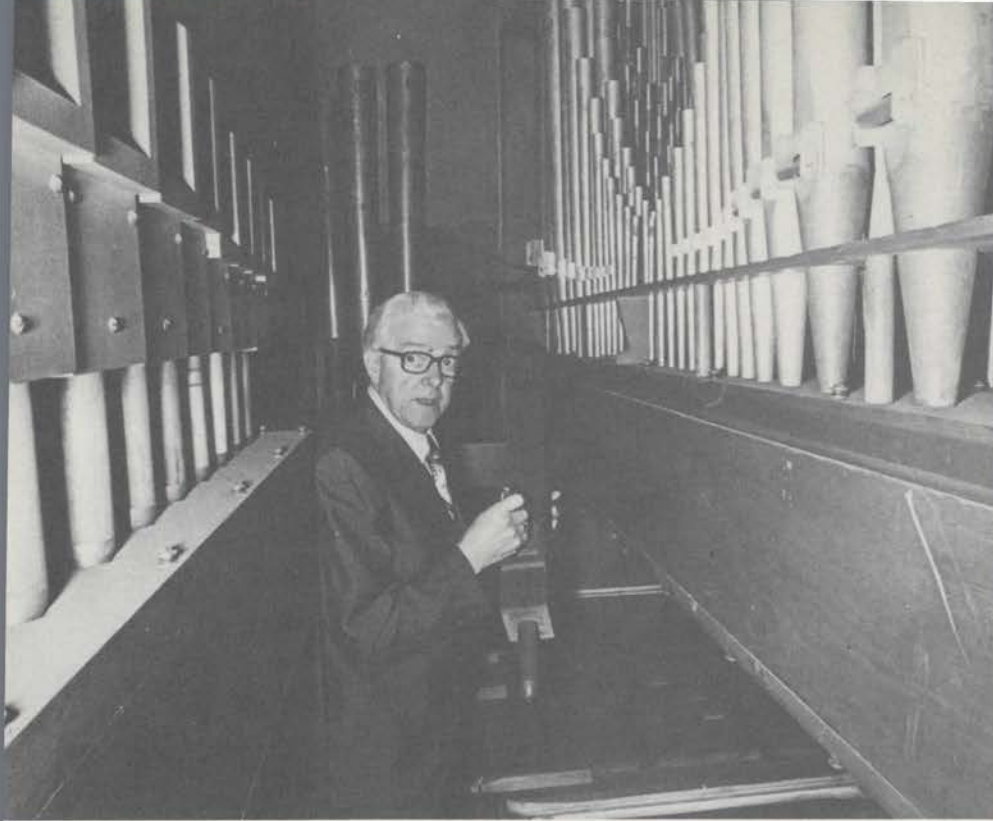
Meanwhile, other quarters were heard from. Theatre organ buffs, among them Stanley Haddon (retired organ maintenance man), Ken Hodgson (who has serviced the Orpheum's 3/13 Wurlitzer for some years), Bill Hale, Ted Holmes, Ivan Ackery and George Francis, some of them ATOS members, got together to see what they could do to save the Orpheum. And representatives of the symphony got word of the rescue effort and resolved to help acquire a new home for their big orchestra. But what would the cost be?

The price was high — a staggering \$5,900,000 to purchase and recondition the venerable theatre!

The enormity of the cost never fazed the disparate groups now joined in a "SAVE THE ORPHEUM" 1974 campaign. The first thing to do was to gain public support.

Side view of the Vancouver Orpheum as it appeared at the age of one year (1928). The five story building has actually nine floors, counting from the bottommost cellar.





Stanley E. Haddon helped install the Orpheum's 3/13 Wurlitzer in 1927 and maintained it until recently. Haddon was an organ maintenance man for 43 years and is now retired.

A schedule of Saturday tours of the Orpheum was set up. Citizens were invited to inspect what some of their tax money would be buying. During each of the tour days, the Wurlitzer added its theatrical voice to the occasion as the citizens were conducted through the auditorium, backstage and through the dressing rooms, offices, lobbies and mezzanine. Local enthusiasts did the playing. This went on for months because there was more than the people's tax money involved. A lottery had been initiated and citizens were being urged to buy tickets to help "Save the Orpheum" — Canada's last remaining major theatre with a pipe organ.

To the credit of Famous Players, the chain agreed to sell the theatre to Vancouver for circa \$5,000,000, instead of performing the "seven dog-house" surgery. Then the group approached the Canadian Government in Ottawa for funds.

But just what would Vancouverites get for their five million? Let's take a closer look at the Orpheum.

The present Orpheum, the third Orpheum built on the site, opened its doors on Nov. 7, 1927 with a vaudeville and movie show. The opening film was *The Wise Wife* starring Phyllis Haver, but the real attraction was the vaudeville acts which included Toto the Clown, Maria White and the Blue

ing night. Citizens already knew about the dome chandelier 10 feet high and 16 feet across with its 340 candle lamps which even now requires four workers to relamp, working all night. This in addition to three somewhat smaller chandeliers in the Main Foyer and three more above the grand stairway.

At its opening the new Orpheum was hailed as a "triumph of beauty, elegance and luxury." The style was described as 'conservative Spanish renaissance.' It was well endowed with columns, colonades, pilasters, rich hangings, tapestried walls, terrazzo floors, stone balustrades, decorative marble and gilding. The aforementioned crystal chandeliers were imported from Czechoslovakia. The auditorium tapestries had felt backing for acoustical deadening. Three large Chinese wall hangings were placed above the mezzanine stairway. On opening night no less than 12,774 light bulbs illuminated the large vertical "Orpheum" sign, the marquee and the roof sign.

The million dollar house opened under the Radio-Keith-Orpheum aegis with a staff of 75 which included organists, orchestra, stage crew, projectionists, about 22 ushers, cashiers, managers and a cleaning crew of about ten broom wielders. The featured organist was Sydney Kelland who had arrived in Vancouver six years earlier to play a Karn Warren organ at the Capitol Theatre. His appearance at the Orpheum's style 240 Wurlitzer ap-

Slickers, dancers Chaney & Fox and songstress Ethel Davis.

Retired Famous Players executive Maynard Joiner was then the Orpheum's assistant manager. He recalls that opening night was something of a nightmare because the theatre wasn't ready.

"We were letting people in one side and still laying carpet on the other," recalls Joiner.

Interest in the new theatre had been building for months before open-

Ken Hodgson gives the Orpheum Wurlitzer a workout. He has been active in the rescue project and now maintains the instrument.



parently needed the competing Capitol into importing Oliver Wallace to play the Capitol's brand new Wurlitzer style 260. But Wallace remained only a short time, then returned to his style 285 Wurlitzer in the San Francisco Paramount. Sydney Kelland, now in his eighties, recalls the events of 1927 with a smile.

The dignitaries flocked to opening ceremonies, including Mayor Louis B. Taylor — but the fate of the theatre was already sealed — a month previously Al Jolson's soundtracked Jazz Singer had been released.

After the advent of "talkies" and the demise of vaudeville, it was a slow

Sidney Kelland, who opened the Orpheum Wurlitzer, was much in demand as a theatre organist before the demise of silent pictures. Unfortunately, no photographs of Mr. Kelland at the Orpheum Wurlitzer exist.

With the coming of talking pictures, he left the theatres and was engaged as a full time organist at St. Andrews Wesley United Church for sixteen years, at the First United Church of Vancouver for four more years and at Shaughnessy United Church (Vanc.) for another seventeen years until his retirement in 1970. During these years many of his church concerts were broadcast over radio stations CFDC, CKWX and CNRV.

Now 84 years old, Mr. Kelland retains his health and vitality and still performs occasionally.

downhill journey for the Orpheum, which managed to survive the '30s with stage presentations, operettas and musical shows. But movies alone were never enough to keep the seats filled. Yet the Orpheum had its moments.

Retired Orpheum manager Ivan Ackery recalls one, the opening of *Gone With The Wind*, near the end of the '30s.

He says, "The 'Wind' premier was the first time we sold refreshments — bottled Coca-Cola — in the mezzanine. Every night of that run I wore a tux."

So much for history. Back to the present.

The appeal to the federal government bore fruit. Canada came through with two million dollars in the Spring

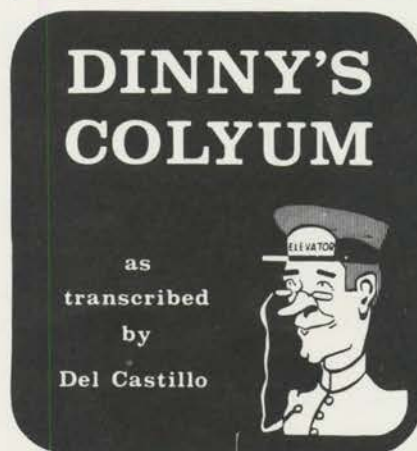
of 1974. The provincial government (British Columbia) donated \$333,000. And the lottery netted \$300,000 dollars. The City Council plans another lottery in 1975 and it is hoped that a further grant will be forthcoming from the Federal or Provincial Government.

With this much cash in the coffers, the Vancouver group has redoubled efforts to raise the difference — and chances are good because plans have been expanded. In addition to the sounds of the mighty Wurlitzer, the symphony orchestra and opera, plans are underway to include perhaps a community theatre group, ballet and youth concerts, all of which adds up to a cultural center in the Orpheum.

Of course, it's all in the future. The sale and transfer will take place in July 1975. Then the restoration/renovation will require another year.

But Vancouver is determined to see the project completed, thus setting an example for other communities with threatened theatres worth saving.

Vancouver is proving it can be done. □



I dunno where in tunket the time goes. Seems like I jest about get all the Xmas bills paid up when the ads start acomin out about get your Xmas presents early and get your Xmas cards at a discount and we start agoin through the whole danged thing all over again. Now mind you, I aint agin Xmas and I like to get presents as well as the next feller, but jest the same they's a limit to the number of hundreds of times I can hear Jingle Bells and O Come All Ye Faithful.

And they's another thing. I love California and I wouldnt live no place else if you paid me, but jest the same Xmas out here aint quite the same thing as it was in Boston where I come from. It's swell to get out and lay around in the Cal. sun with the ther-

mometer at 80 degrees, but I guess I still got enough Eastern blood in me to think they ought to be snow at Xmas time. Why, we used to get a gang together and go around and sing Xmas carols at different houses back in Boston and sometimes we'd get invited in for some punch or cookies, but that would seem kinda silly out here with people goin around in sport shirts. Seems more fittin somehow when you have to keep a muffler around your neck and blow on your fingers and stamp your feet to keep warm. Even the bells that the Salvation Army people ring to get you to put some money in the pot dont sound quite the same.

And still another thing. Seems to me when I was a kid, people really enjoyed Xmas. I aint so sure they still do anymore. You go into the big stores and they is loud speakers blarin away Xmas carols and Jingle Bells and White Xmas and Winter Wonderland and songs like that there, but the people is millin around and grabbin at bargains and everybody getting kind of mad because the prices are so high and they cant find what they want. And then you go out and start up the old bus and pretty soon some smart Alexk is blastin you with his horn or glarin at you because he wants to go faster than you do, and you wonder what in tarnation has happened to the Spirit of Xmas.

I aint much of a churchgoer but it seems to me that maybe you get a little more of the Spirit of Xmas there than any place else. The choir sings Xmas music and the organist plays Xmas music and the minister gives Xmas sermons and then they have extra services and extra music and they get a chorus together to do the Messiah and you come out feelin well maybe they is somethin more to Xmas than jest gettin presents that most everybody goes back to the store the next week to get exchanged, or else puts them in the closet sos they can give them to somebody else the next Xmas.

Well, I aint ready to give up yet. We still got the Santa Claus Parade every December, and I have to admit all the lights and decorations they look real pretty, and I even got a bang when they put up tin Xmas trees on Hollywood Bullyvard. But I guess that what I wish is that at Xmastime maybe they could be a little less takin and a little more givin. □