

Thomas Lamb's architectural masterpiece at opening — March 17, 1928

# the beautiful ohio

by Dennis James and Carlos Parker

Hundreds of thousands of people, both natives and visitors, have been impressed with the beauty of Capitol Square in Columbus, Ohio. The classic architecture of the State House, the well kept and beautifully manicured lawns and shrubs are impressive when viewed from any angle. At the same time these people are admiring the majestic state capitol, an unassuming cream-colored brick building directly across State Street goes unnoticed by

most of the same Columbusites and visitors to this great city. They are unaware that this building houses one of the architectural wonders of the midwest — one of the last survivors of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace — the Ohio Theatre.

Opened on March 17, 1928, and dubbed an "amusement palace," the 3,100 seat Loew's Ohio Theatre was built for live performances. The advertisements the day before opening

depicted the wide variety of entertainment that awaited the premier audiences:

Tomorrow is **THE Day!** — and the surging thousands of Columbus will catch their breath in amazement! . . . glorious Greta Garbo on the screen . . . on stage "Milady's Fans," Benny & Western "Two Foot-Loose Fools," Bernice and Emily "Whirlwind Dance Stars," Rae Elanor Ball "The Violinist

Virtuoso . . . Bert Williams will conduct the Ohio Grand Orchestra — and Henry B. Murtagh will be at the gold console of the mighty-voiced Robert Morton Organ!\*

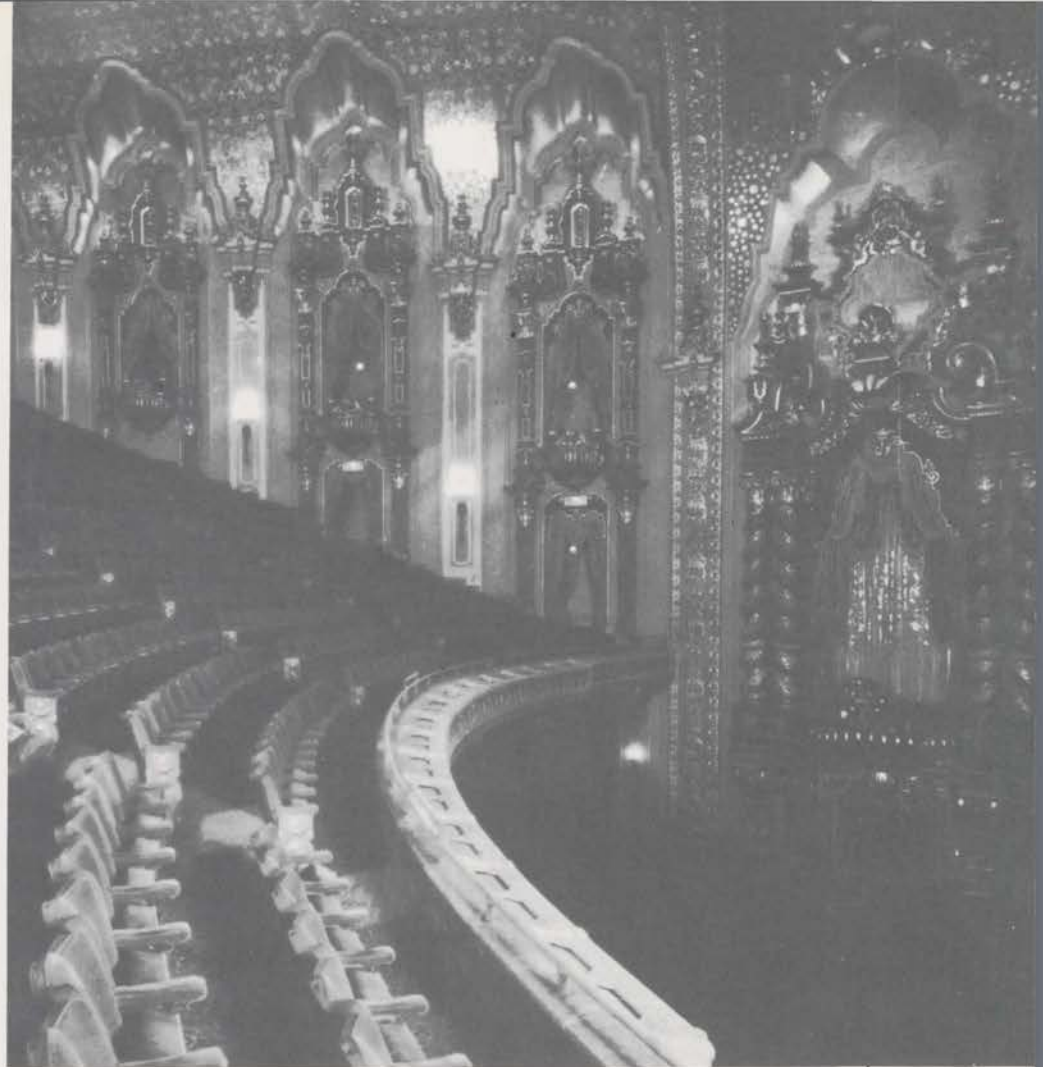
To most patrons of the motion picture showings in the theatre, the size and complexity of the building were unknown. Here were five floors of dressing rooms, rehearsal halls, restaurants and meeting rooms which housed 50 musicians, a chorus of 12 girls, provided space for 7 acts with as many as 6 people each, a host of projectionists, spotlight operators, electricians and stage hands, and, of course, the organist.

This was "the" theatre of the mid-west and not just because of its size. Here was, and is, one of the world's most resplendent theatres. Everywhere you looked was beauty unmatched in any other theatre of the time. From the moment you entered the main lobby you knew this building was an irreplaceable "one-of-a-kind." Thomas Lamb, architect of the Ohio Theatre, explained his use of such an opulent design in the June 30, 1928 issue of MOTION PICTURE NEWS:

"To make our audiences receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of the city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and freed from their customary thoughts. In order to do this, it is necessary to present to their eyes a general scheme quite different from their daily environment, quite different in color scheme, and a great deal more elaborate. The theatre can afford this, and must afford it for our public is large, and in the average not wealthy. The theatre is the palace of the average man. As long as he is there, it is his, and it helps him to lift himself out of his daily drudgery."

It was this same "average man" that saved the theatre from destruction 41 years later. The people of Columbus and interested persons from all over the State of Ohio and across the United States raised their voices to protest the planned razing of the Ohio in 1969. Detailed architectural and engineering studies showed that the theatre was maintained over the years in excellent

\*Contrary to the publicist's imagination — the console was white and gold.



East wall and solo chamber in the main auditorium.

1931.



condition and, with appropriate funds, it could be converted into a center for the performing arts. The initial financial obligation was met so that the building could be saved, and the rewarding task of restoration began.

The first project was the installation of a completely new roof and the cleaning and waterproofing of the outside of the building, revealing the long camouflaged bas relief intricacies and Spanish red tiles. Soon followed the complete refurbishing of the proscenium arch and sounding board (including new gilt and paint), redecoration of the dressing rooms and backstage areas and the reflooring of portions of the stage. The marquee with its original stained glass panels has been restored. The most recent major accomplishment has been the reseating of the main floor and loge. The new seats incorporate the original end standards (totally restored and repainted) and are faithful reproductions of the original designs, enlarged slightly to accommodate modern anatomy.

Future projects include the installation of 1928 street lamp replicas on State Street, new carpeting, replacement of the wall tapestries and the completion of the ceiling restoration.

The Restoration Committee was fortunate to acquire a remarkable set of archive photographs of the theatre from which the majority of this article's illustrations are drawn. Depicted are many of the original furnishings and other building appointments from the opening days of the theatre.

A great deal of the original interior furniture and objects of art came from the estate of the former owner of the Kansas City Star. Included in the antique collection were some cabinets and chairs from the Vanderbilt home at 54th St. and 5th Ave. in New York City. One of the most interesting objects still exhibited at the Ohio is the large ship model, an exact reproduction of a Spanish galleon of the time of Morgan and Drake, featured originally in the lower lounge. It was built by an old sailor on Long Island on special commission by the Loew's decorators.

The main decorative style of the theatre was Spanish with the color scheme predominantly red and gold. Many of the furnishings were in keeping with this Spanish character of the building. In addition to the ship model there was a painting of a Spanish galleon, an old Moorish gun, a can-

delabra, a very ornate table and a large bronze clock representing the time of Pizzaro.

The lower lounge was unique in decor combining many contrasting styles to such a degree as to be dubbed the "Four Corners of the Earth" room. The African corner was the most dramatic, featuring large lion and zebra skins, 2 antelope heads and numerous shields, spears and other war implements from various tribes in Africa. China was represented by the floor covering and a delicately inlaid chair.

To get a glimpse of the many unique design features of the theatre one should first enter past the ornate ticket booth, through the brass doors and into the main lobby with its chandeliers and gilt-iron balcony railings; then up one of the grand staircases found at either end of the lobby to the mezzanine, where there once was a baby grand reproducing piano.

The huge sweeping balcony can be entered from either end of the mezzanine or from the second mezzanine upstairs. These lead to an unobstructed view of the main auditorium — a sight calculated to take your breath away. The design is described

Bert Williams and the Ohio stage orchestra. Murtagh is at the organ.





The mezzanine — note the reproducing piano for the pleasure of the patrons.

grow naturally nevertheless it yields, as it were, to a law of pattern and design. The ceiling gradually merges into a sounding board. This is one of the most original schemes ever produced in theatre decoration. It is one vast surface of deep red, completely covered with stars of innumerable sizes and shapes, closely spaced, in fact, almost touching. It forms a mosaic of gold, silver and red but of such variation and such a play of pattern, that it defies the mind to discover the pattern on which it is built. It's effectiveness lies in its texture of metal stars spattered and super-imposed on a ground of red.

again in the words of architect Thomas Lamb:

For the last few centuries we have been copying and rehashing our European styles, and adding little to that which has already been done. There has been in recent years (circa 1928) a decided movement and a successful one to create something that should represent our own century. But neither extreme is entirely right. Both may be blended and this has been accomplished in this theatre.

It contains the sumptuousness of Spain and the intricacy and construction of our modern art. In the auditorium one finds the sidewalls are divided into bays or sections, in the center of each there is an elaborate shrine, as it were, of carved walnut and gold. This is surrounded by numerous covers which turn and mitre upon each other in the most intricate manner, and being gilded reflect the light in as many directions as there are planes. But rising above these shrines there is one vast dome of gold culminating in a star formation of rich relief ornament. This vast dome of gold is completely covered with modern painted ornamentation, a semi-natural, semi-conventional ornament of flowers, leaves and birds. While this seems to



Roger Garrett (in the striped trousers) when he first came to the Ohio — Circa 1932. On his right is Tod Roper, critic for the COLUMBUS DISPATCH.

Service Staff at Loew's Ohio. Dr. Perrone of Columbus is third from left.





The East stairway in the grand lobby.

The sounding board, in turn, through various transitions passes on to the proscenium arch, which is burnished gold on the richest of relief ornament, with touches of red in the background.

This theatre auditorium has probably as rich an interior as will be found in the country, and with all there is created no feeling of gaudiness, that result which the decorator has most to fear."

In discussing the physical aspects of the Ohio Theatre it must be acknowledged that the stage of the theatre is among the most completely equipped in the midwest. There are five stage lifts by which 3 different levels of stage can be created at the push of a

button. The orchestra pit has three of these lifts and the grand piano alone can be raised from basement to solo stage level, as can the entire orchestra platform. Lighting for the stage is accomplished with numerous banks of border lights, strip lights, spots, disappearing foot lights and 42 focusing spotlights across the front of the balcony.

Of course, the most important part of the theatre for the readers of this article is the magnificent Robert Morton theatre organ. The 4 manual/20 rank instrument was originally valued at \$85,000. The 2-ton console specifications included 244 keys, 204 stop tablets, 45 pistons, 32 special effect controls, 32 foot pedals and 2 expression pedals plus Crescendo. The pipes are housed in two chambers on either side of the proscenium (Solo on the left, Main on the right) with the console located on its own lift to the left side of the orchestra pit. A 50-foot extension was spliced into the main cable to allow the console to be moved to the center of the orchestra lift for special presentations and offstage for storage.

Henry B. Murtagh, coming to the Ohio from Loew's New York Capitol Theatre, was the first organist to preside at the console. He was sent to premier the new instrument until a regular organist could be found.

Bill Dalton, already a Columbus

The lower lounge at Loew's Ohio.





SRO crowds waiting to get in at Loew's Ohio — a regular sight in the later 30's and during the WW II years.

resident, was named the first official house organist on May 6, 1928, six weeks after the theatre opened. Dalton was quite popular in Columbus, having played in a succession of area theatres prior to the Ohio appointment. Dalton was succeeded by Roger Garrett in 1933. There followed 10 years of one of the most popular Columbus entertainment features at that time: Roger Garrett and the Ohio Theatre sing-along presentations. Garrett stayed at the console until 1942, when he left to serve in World War II.

The organ was rarely heard from that time until the mid 1960's, when members of the Central Ohio Chapter of the ATOS, with the permission of Loew's management and cooperation from the local staff, began restoring the instrument and playing it for weekend movie intermissions.

By the late 1960's the organ was in such condition that occasional organ concerts were presented. Roger Garrett, John Muri and Bill Dalton were among the early concert artists. On February 16, 1969 a "farewell" organ program was presented to a sell-out crowd of over 3,200 — the largest audience ever permitted in the theatre. A full account of that concert may be found in the April, 1969 issue of THEATRE ORGAN/BOMBARDE in an article entitled "A Farewell to Loew's Ohio."

Shortly thereafter the theatre closed. During this next period of time the organ played a major part in keeping the public interest in the "Save the Ohio" campaign. When the

theatre reopened as a Center for the Performing Arts organ concerts became a regular attraction. Featured over the last several years have been many of the currently famous theatre organists including George Wright, Gaylord Carter, Lee Erwin, Lyn Larsen, Ashley Miller, Hector Olivera, Tony Fenelon and Dennis James.

Many recent improvements to the Morton have made it one of the finest concert theatre organs in the United States. A tonal restoration of the reeds was completed in 1973 prior to the



Africa corner of the lower lounge.

Note announcement — Garrett at the organ.



production of the Dennis and Heidi James recording *Puttin' On The Ritz*. Latest modifications such as the electric stop action and combination system have added greatly to the versatility of the instrument.

The theatre organ revival has come full circle in Columbus with the appointment of Dennis James as Organist for the Ohio Theatre — the first time in more than a quarter century that the position has been filled. In addition to concerts he will be performing at all

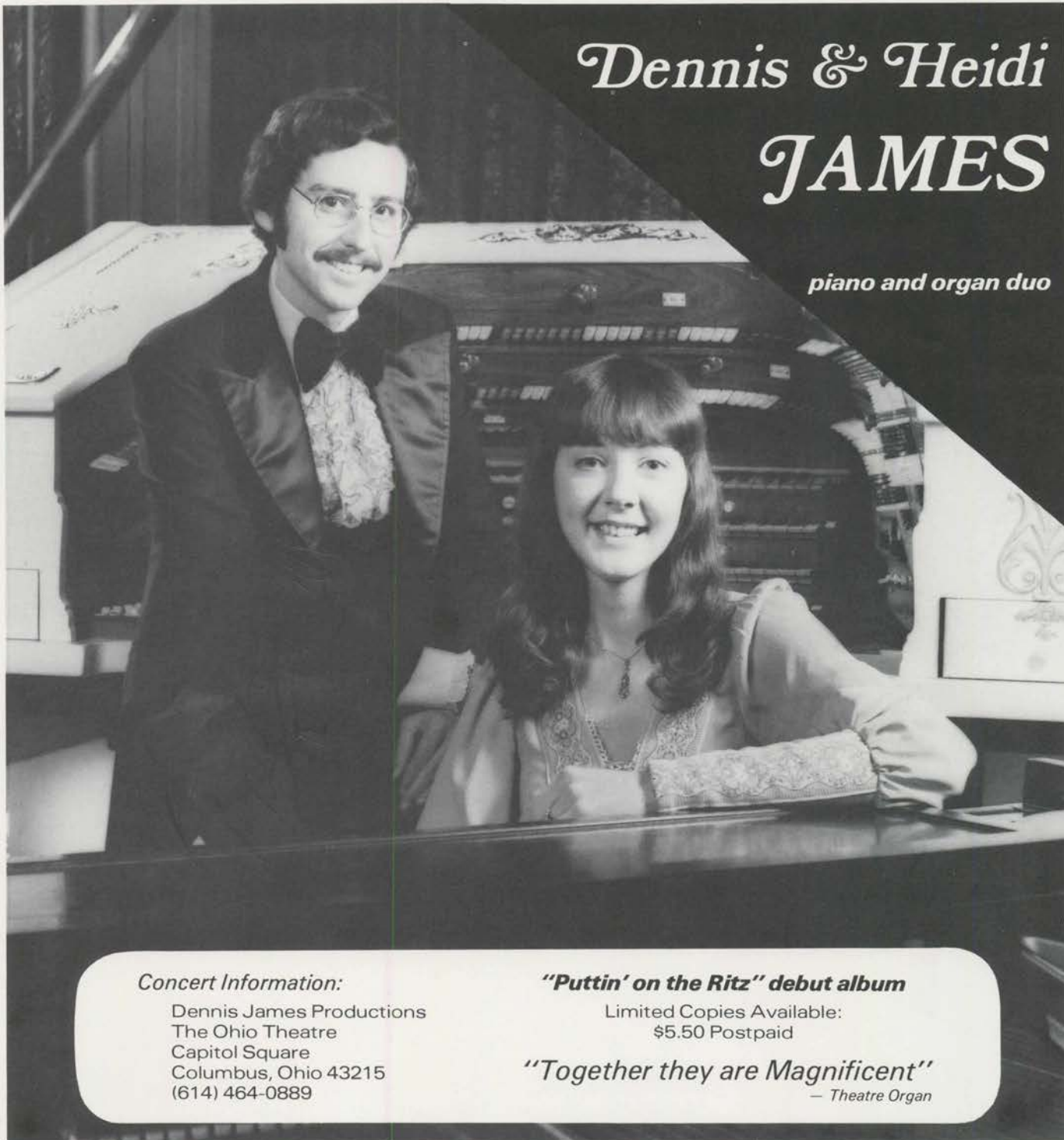
theatre-sponsored events, including variety programs, banquets, parties, educational demonstrations and tours, and for a silent film series that begins with *Lilac Time* on March 15th.

On November 7, 8 and 9, 1975 a Regional Convention of the ATOS will be held in Columbus, Ohio. This convention, hosted by the Central Ohio Chapter, will feature many events at the Ohio Theatre, including several concerts and a catered banquet in the theatre. Specific details will be forth-

coming in future issues of THEATRE ORGAN.

The Ohio Theatre is a living monument to one city's determination to preserve an important part of its past. As the home of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra and the locale of hundreds of live programs each year the theatre has again taken its place as a vital part of the community's cultural life.

*"Beautiful Ohio, in dreams again I see Visions of what used to be."* □



# *Dennis & Heidi* **JAMES**

*piano and organ duo*

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— *Theatre Organ*