

# EMBASSY SAVED!

by Lloyd E. Klos

One of the most beautiful motion picture palaces in the middle west, built in the twenties for symphony orchestras, silent movies, and stage shows, was the 2763-seat Emboyd (now Embassy) Theatre in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The recent effort to save this magnificent structure is a story unto itself. However, its past history and salient features are of importance as well.

The theatre is part of a complex which includes the adjoining Indiana Hotel. It was designed by architects A. M. Strauss and Charles Ebersson, and their efforts were rewarded by a theatre of sheer beauty. Construction was begun in 1926 and completed two years later. The theatre's cost

was in excess of \$1.5 million. A consortium of individuals was responsible: Oscar Fox, Robert Fox, C. M. Niezer and W. C. Quimby. The Emboyd was built to be the largest theatre in the Quimby Theatre chain, and Mr. Quimby, the first operator, named the house for his mother, Emma Boyd Quimby. Manny Marcus was the first manager.

The grand opening was on May 14, 1928 at 1 p.m. The vertical sign above the colorful marquee, proclaiming *Emboyd*, was the largest in the state. It weighed 5½ tons, contained 3500 light bulbs and cost \$15,000.

As one purchased his ticket in the outer lobby (which was faced

with a rare French marble), he glanced down to the floor which was also inlaid with a very rare French marble. Continuing into the main lobby, our patron noted its Italian architectural design which featured a black-and-white marble floor. Next came the Grand Foyer of breathtaking magnificence. This 80-foot room has a barrel-arched ceiling with plaster design. (All designs were first drawn to full scale, then given to an ornamental modeler who made the molds). The grand staircase at the end of the foyer is made of imported marble, and the mirror on the back wall is over 20 feet high.

The auditorium is 140 feet by 110

Theatre interior, with the Page console at stage level. (G. Delobbe Photo)



feet, the ceiling more than 80 feet high and the main dome is over 60 feet wide. The ceiling is a false one, with catwalks above, which enable maintenance personnel to service the dome, the arches on each side of the auditorium, and the proscenium arch.

The projection booth is a separate structure, not a part of the auditorium.

The main balcony truss is 110 feet long, and weighs over 200 tons. It was designed with a plus-four safety factor, meaning that it is capable of holding four times the seated audience without collapsing.

A few other facts are impressive. The stage is 100 feet wide, 32 feet deep, and the area 55 feet high. Each of several chandeliers weighs 500 pounds, is 10 feet high and has 40 lights. Together they use 4,000 watts of electricity.

Yes, there is a pipe organ — a 4/15 Page. *The Fort Wayne Journal* in a feature on the instrument, a few days before the opening, said: "It will, in its superb effects and purity of tone, equal that of any other organ in any playhouse in the country.

"It uses a 10 horsepower blower with wind pressures from 10 to 30 inches. The console has four manuals, 260 stops and is decorated in rainbow gold (complete stoplist THEATRE ORGAN, Vol. VI, #3, Fall 1964, Page 8-9).

The opening program in 1928 was described as "one of the most lavish ever seen in Fort Wayne at popular prices." There was a special inaugural bill of Keith-Orpheum vaudeville, selected from among "the best available." It included The Honorable Mr. Wu, a musical revue; Tony and Norman, a comedy routine; Charles Bennington, harmonica revue; and Frank Richardson, the Joy Boy of Song.

On the screen was a romantic farce, *Easy Come, Easy Go*, starring Richard Dix. The dedication overture was played by the 20-piece Emboyd Symphonic Orchestra, directed by Wilber Pickett. The "Mighty Page Grande Organ" was played by Percy Robbins who subsequently had a long engagement at the theatre. Admission was 60 cents.

The Emboyd Theatre was the largest in Fort Wayne, exceeding the next largest, the Paramount, by 800 seats. Certainly, the Emboyd

has always been the most beautiful in the city.

And, it attracted some really big names who trod its boards and provided entertainment. Olsen and Johnson brought their zany antics

to the Emboyd in 1928, and Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll (*Amos 'n' Andy*) appeared in 1933. Others were Fred Allen, Portland Hoffa, Our Gang Kids, Ryan and Noelette (Irene Ryan of *Beverly Hill-*

The Grand Foyer, with its decorative barrel-arch ceiling, is 80-feet high.

(G. Delobbe Photo)



billies), Bob Hope, Chester Lauck and Norris Goff (Lum & Abner), Dick Powell, Betty Hutton, the Mills Brothers, Vic Hyde, Martha Raye, and Donald O'Connor with his family.

Most of the big bands played the Emboyd in those days, too: Henry Busse, Ted Weems (with vocalists Perry Como and home-towner Marilyn Maxwell), Horace Heidt and His Musical Knights, the Champagne Music of Lawrence Welk, and the Waltz King, Wayne King. This was during the Big Band Era of the Thirties and Forties. The last one to play the Emboyd was Orrin Tucker with Wee Bonnie Baker in 1952.

In 1952, the Alliance Corp. took over the Emboyd and renamed it the Embassy.

The present house organist, Buddy Nolan, has supplied us with some information and anecdotes concerning the Page organ and those who played it. We are most thankful for his contributions.

"Percy Robbins was the first organist. He told me that on opening day, Wilbur Pickett was bringing up the pit orchestra for the first overture. He was quite nervous about finding the foot switch to stop the ascent at the proper level. Controls

for the orchestra elevator were on the conductor's desk and duplicated on the elevator floor. He bent over to check its location and as the spotlight hit him, the audience was treated to a view of his posterior in a pink spotlight! A real grand entrance!

"Marguerite Hitzman was Robbins' assistant, later becoming house organist. Jeanne Brown broadcast over WOWO for a time, using the Emboyd organ.

"I did a couple special programs during these years over radio, but no regular broadcasts. When Alliance took over the theatre, I became house organist, and was featured before every showing of the main picture, five times a day, seven days a week. The management was very pro-organ and budgeted \$300 for special effects and production for every other feature change. For alternate pictures, the organist did shows with the house equipment.

"Extensive use of costuming and even black-light effects were used to enhance organ numbers. When I went to California, this was continued for a time by my successor, Evelyn Osborn, who has a most unusual experience.

"When the lift switching system was being overhauled, and with

Evelyn aboard one day, the console passed the upper limit! It tilted toward the deep pit on her right, and she hurriedly crawled off on her hands and knees to the stage. I assumed she got a big hand for her bravery, but her answer was, 'Hell, it was a super show and there was a small crowd, darn it!'"

The organ became silent for most of the time Nolan was away, except for occasional use, or each year when he spent vacations in Ft. Wayne. He would have the organ tuned, and play during his entire vacation. Buddy sure liked this instrument!

"The original organ maintenance man was Ed Bohn. When I came in, Al Buzby took over, and in due time, he taught an electronics expert, Bob Nickerson, the arts of tuning and maintenance. Bob has been the main reason the organ plays today, and in many ways, has improved the original installation. He is still the key man on maintenance of the Page, and in later years, has been assisted by ATOS members Ellsworth Smith and Bill Zabel. Major restoration work on the instrument is planned by these men.

"There were some funny things which happened over the years, of course. One unintentional marquee billing was:

Tab Hunter  
"The Girl He Left Behind"  
Buddy Nolan at the Organ

"One introduction slide we used was done in script printing, and projected on the silver curtain. The D's projected on the curtain, and because of the folds, reversed and Buddy Nolan came out as *Buggy Nolan!*"

Nolan returned to Ft. Wayne in 1962, mainly for the desire to play the Page, and went back on the payroll for weekends only. He continued after Cinecom purchased the property and remained until two months prior to the theatre's closing. It was during this time, Buddy did the famous series of 10 *Theatre Organ At Midnight* concerts. In some of these, Dyne Pfeffenberger, using the original white grand piano which rose from the orchestra pit, played organ-piano duets with Nolan.

Buddy has recorded the Embassy's Page in two albums. One was heard not long ago on an FM show in Man-

Percy Robbins in 1928. Newspaper accounts of the opening program reported him as playing the "Page Grande Organ."  
(Buddy Nolan coll.)



chester, England. In recent times, two visiting British organists have stopped to see the organ. So, it has become famous to some degree.

With motion picture palaces being demolished right and left throughout the country, serious interest in preserving the Embassy Theatre manifested itself in 1960 when a group of 20 formed a committee. Generally, they saw to the organ's maintenance and kept the theatre usable with a degree of cleanliness.

In 1972, the Embassy Theatre Foundation was chartered as a non-profit, self-perpetuating organization. The affairs of the Foundation are managed by a Board of Directors and its elected officers. Membership is open to all, with a fee of \$10, and the address is: Embassy Theatre Foundation, Box, 1266, Fort Wayne, Ind. 46802.

Robert Goldstine, ATOS member and amateur organist, has been the spearhead in the efforts to save the theatre, and is in good position to explain the complicated ramifications, legal and otherwise, of this project.

"At the time the Foundation was created, the property (including the Indiana Hotel) was owned by Cinecom Corp. which had become bankrupt, and the disposition of its assets was to be made by the Bankruptcy Court in New York City. It was this court which authorized our use of the building on a month-to-month basis for \$1 a month, cancellable on 30 days' notice.

"On March 4, 1974, the Court awarded the property (subject to tax liens, mortgage indebtedness, and our lease) to Solarsystems Inc., one of the largest creditors. Solarsystems subsequently gave us our 30 days' notice to vacate the property on April 30, 1974, which we did. The mortgage holder on the property was Montgomery Ward & Co., whose payments from Cinecom were approximately one year delinquent.

"Therefore, Montgomery Ward filed a foreclosure suit against Sport-service Co., the new title holders, to obtain the property to satisfy their mortgage in the Allen County Court, as the mortgage pertained to the Embassy Theatre. A receiver for the court, Fred Hunter, of Fort Wayne, was appointed to see that the property remained intact and that no damage occurred. He enlisted the aid

of the Embassy Foundation to aid him in this endeavor."

In the meantime, the Foundation was faced with the task of raising \$500,000 — half for purchasing the theatre and hotel, and half for refurbishing both properties. By October 28, 1974, which was the deadline for raising the money, the group had raised only \$10,000, which was far short. An extension was granted until June 1, 1975. The Ketchum Corp. had been called in for a feasibility study which indicated that given added time, the money could be raised.

Another firm, James Associates, comprising architects and engineers, issued a most favorable restoration report. The first three pages were a brilliantly written chapter, "A Future For the Past." Briefly, it decried the attitude that if money couldn't be obtained from a higher governmental authority, "tear it down!"

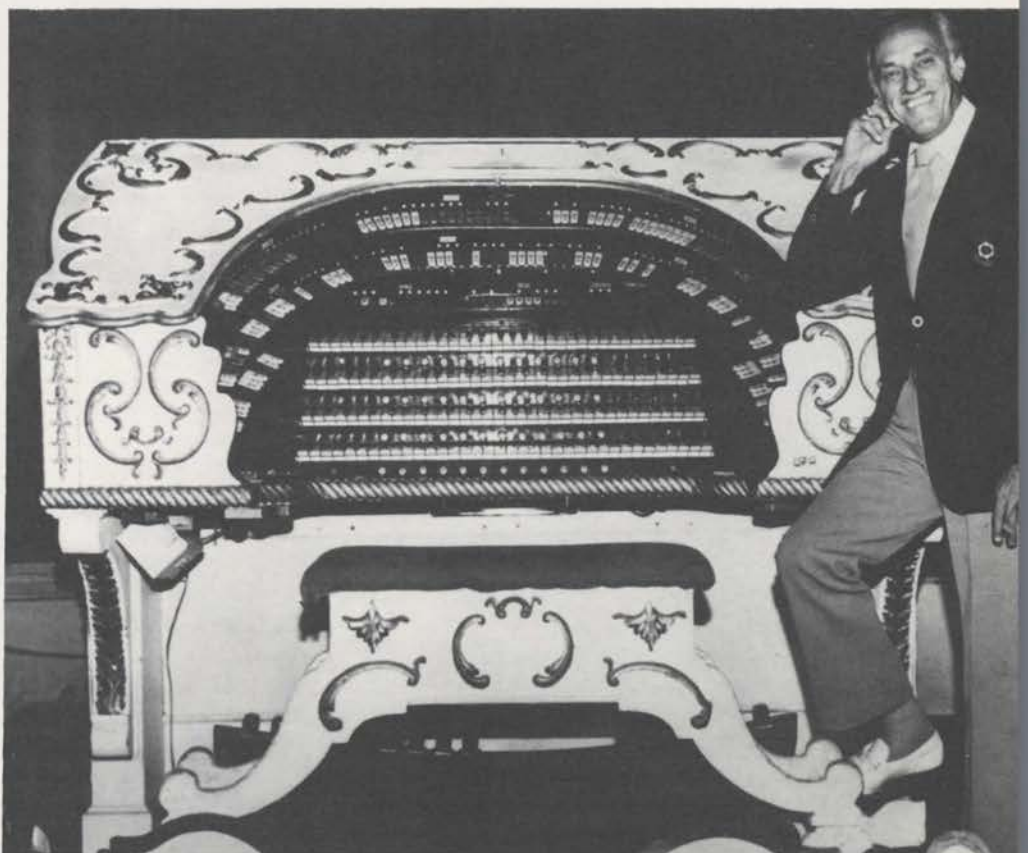
As to the project's utilization, the report further stated: "An operational Embassy Theatre would complement and be non-competitive with other auditoria within the community. With regard to the Scottish Rite Auditorium, the Embassy would permit scheduling of additional cultural events and would

offer greater flexibility in seasonal planning for civic attractions and functions. With regard to the Civic Theatre Auditorium, which seats 700, the Embassy provides additional space, both in the house and in supporting facilities, creating the potential for a greater diversity of community activities. Because the Embassy Foundation is chartered as a fine arts corporation, money-making activities and programs may be scheduled, thereby providing self-sustaining funds for operation, maintenance and support for other cultural activities. A restored Embassy could serve every segment within our city with the singular restriction that users respect the value of the property.

"Whereas the Embassy is primarily a restorative project, it is envisioned that the companion Indiana Hotel be preserved thru adaptive use technique as an adjunct to the Proposed Convention Center across Washington St.

The Foundation realized that memorabilia and artifacts were most important, and every effort to collect anything pertaining to the property was made. Pictures, clippings, programs and other items were earnestly sought. Former employees were asked to talk about their ex-

A smiling Buddy Nolan at the refurbished Embassy console. Nolan played this organ in the thirties, and when it was restored, became famous for his midnight concerts. (G. Delobbe Photo)



periences into a tape recorder. A souvenir booklet was promoted, once sufficient material was gathered.

The walls and ceiling of the auditorium were in the original decor, but other areas were changed. A sample of original carpeting was found, to be used in authentic replacement. Above the outer lobby, the original lounge is to be restored, and the old player piano placed there. The seats will be repainted and reupholstered in the deep wine shade. The original marquee and vertical sign will be duplicated. A new roof and heating system will be the first order of business. In brief, every facet of the theatre will be restored.

Even the name will be changed — back to its original *Emboyd*. This will be done after the theatre has become a community enterprise.

The cost of acquiring and renovating the property was placed at \$500,000. To construct a theatre, comparable to the Embassy in size, would cost over \$8 million today. Indeed, a real bargain!

After the foundation got a six-month extension to raise the necessary funds, a meeting was held of those interested on December 9, 1974, with over 100 in attendance. The Foundation's Board of Directors was enlarged from 8 to 21, and plans were formulated for one, big, all-out, last-ditch fund drive to raise \$500,000, which included the \$250,000 purchase price and the remainder for refurbishing, including a new heating plant which was badly needed.

While the drive was in progress,



The crowd begins to gather at the theatre before its grand opening, May 14, 1928. Above the marquee was the state's largest sign, weighing 5½ tons. If present plans materialize, "Emboyd" will again grace the marquee of the Embassy. (Roberta Photo)

nationwide attention to the project was attained by an unusual source. Cartoonist, Dick Moores, who draws *Gasoline Alley*, heard about the drive from a Fort Wayne resident, started asking questions and making long-distance calls. This resulted in a nine-week sequence in the strip, in which the theatre was prominently featured by name and the climax was that the house was saved through clever promotion and the giving of \$498,522 by "Boone Farledge" of the XBC Network, to the cause.

Moores' interest was quite natural.

He was the first doorman when the theatre opened in 1928. He later was promoted to assistant manager in charge of the 5 to 7 p.m. shift "when nothing happened."

By June, 1975, it was apparent that the fund drive was successful enough to guarantee the saving of the theatre. Though the drive was \$7,000 short, and \$40,000 more was needed for immediate repairs when this was written, that money was available thru borrowing.

At the risk of leaving out some names of the many persons whose

"Gasoline Alley" character Walt tries to explain to aging vaudevillian Papo why the beautiful Embody Theatre must be torn down in the comic-strip version of the story by real Emboyd's first doorman, Dick Moores.



ardent contributions to the saving of the Embassy were immeasurable, those connected with the radio and television media were exceptionally noteworthy in arousing the public to the cause.

Ed Metcalfe and Burt Sherwood are station managers who were especially helpful in enlisting public response. "Their efforts were nothing short of phenomenal," says Bob Goldstine. "Every local radio, television and press facility has featured the project, figured in every promotion of it, and in doing so, their work was measured by thousands of dollars of time and space to the fund-raising effort.

"The results were evidenced by contributions from financially hard-pressed, senior citizens, grade school music classes, junior and senior high schools, church groups, service clubs and people from every segment of the population."

Fund-raising was co-ordinated by Gretchen Wiegel, Dyne Pfeffenberger, Bob Cordell and others. Legal services were contributed by several attorneys.

Ellsworth Smith, Robert Martin, Fred Hitzeman and Gene Witte have put in countless hours of work as house committee members, often supervising the efforts of volunteers.

Bob Mickerson, Bill Zabel, Ellsworth Smith and Byron Fogt have been the leading lights of the organ maintenance crew.

People with names of Hicho, Reynolds, Fox, Cayot, Miller, Sumpter, Lotz, Purvis and Danford will be remembered for the countless hours they contributed to this effort. Especially helpful were some of the city's leading businessmen and women who contributed time and money.

Thus, another beautiful theatre has been saved from the maws of the wreckers. Its future is indeed bright if the plans of its "angels" are realized. The place is sure to be a part of the theatre organ circuit, and in that connection, THEATRE ORGAN will be carrying the news of this activity. In the meantime, the American Theatre Organ Society extends its congratulations and best wishes to Bob Goldstine, the Embassy Theatre Foundation, and to each and every person responsible for the successful culmination of this excellent project. □

## American Film Institute Acquires Wurlitzer Pipe Organ From Loew's Inc.

The American Film Institute headquartered in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., has recently been given the 3/13 Wurlitzer organ from the Loew's Theatre, Richmond, Virginia. This is truly an outstanding donation from one of this country's largest and oldest theatre corporations.

Acting on a tip from Potomac Valley Chapter member Dick Kline that the organ would be available, A.F.I. staff organist Ray Brubacher lost no time in contacting Loew's eastern division manager Fred Erling who, as a theatre organ fan and the last manager of the now gone Loew's Capitol in Washington, D.C., was interested in seeing the Richmond organ preserved intact in a place

where it could be heard. Negotiations were completed for acceptance of the instrument and utilizing experienced help drawn from the membership of the chapter, Brubacher removed the instrument and brought it to the Kennedy Center where it will undergo complete refurbishment before installation.

At this time several prospects are good for the future of the organ, among those being the possible installation to the to-be-completed third floor experimental theatre at the Kennedy Center which would be used for various A.F.I. functions. The present theatre houses a fine Rodgers three manual theatre organ and due to space limitations the Wurlitzer will not go into the present theatre. □

Ray Brubacher at the ex-Loew's Theatre (Richmond) console.

