

SAFE...For a While

by John Clark McCall, Jr.

On January 2, 1975, the Atlanta Fox Theatre, home of the famous 4/42 Moller organ, formally ended its career as a motion picture house. After the 9:25 showing of *The Klansman*, the last movie patrons listened

to a brief narrative from manager Mike Spirtous and took the last public tours to be conducted in the house before the padlocks were placed on the doors.

What was to follow after the mar-

Fox marquee proclaims an optimistic attitude on the theatre's last night of operation as a motion picture house, January 2, 1975.

(Bill Mahan Photo)



STILL THE GREATEST SHOW
ON EARTH
THE FOX THEATRE

quee letters came down is the story of a dedicated group of citizens, allied with all Atlantans, representing Atlanta Landmarks, Inc. — the emerging savior of an extremely important and useful entertainment complex.

Atlanta Landmarks was incorporated in the summer of 1974 through the leadership of Arnall T. "Pat" Connell, ATOS members Joe Patten, Bob Van Camp, and Robert Foreman, Jr.; and others. Connell, a professor of architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, was chosen president. The formation of the organization came after an interesting and rapid chain of events: lists of names petitioning to save the Fox began to multiply, and Helen Hayes, Mitzi Gaynor, and Liberace came forth with public pleas to Atlantans for saving the theatre.

Though the Fox was named as the immediate target of the organization's efforts, Atlanta Landmarks was chartered not only to save the Fox, but "to preserve, restore, and maintain landmarks, buildings, and other structures in the city of Atlanta or elsewhere in the State of Georgia which have historical or cultural value."

In early August, 1974, Atlanta Landmarks assisted in securing approximately \$11,000 in state funds to underwrite a feasibility study for the Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Section, on the Fox. The report would be placed in the hands of interested corporate heads and private citizens. On September 4, 1974, the well-known economic consulting firm of Hammer, Siler, George Associates was retained with a projected date of early December, 1974, for completion of the exhaustive report on the Fox's reuse potentials. Joe Tanner, Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and ATOS member Joe Patten, chairman of the Fox Theatre Advisory Committee, received the completed 129-page report around December 10.

The report concluded, "The proposed reuse of the Fox Theatre would serve as a hallmark for Atlanta — symbol of Atlanta's recognition of its past to complement its growth and spirit as a national and international city." Within the

report an extensive survey of existing Atlanta auditoria was made, and a detailed proposed "operating model" including financial statistics was graphed — underscoring the need for the Fox and its feasibility for reuse as a live entertainment center. With a background of data from other movie palaces that have been re-adapted as live entertainment centers, the report showed how the Fox's rental revenue would help the theatre to "carry its own weight" even in the initial years of new management.

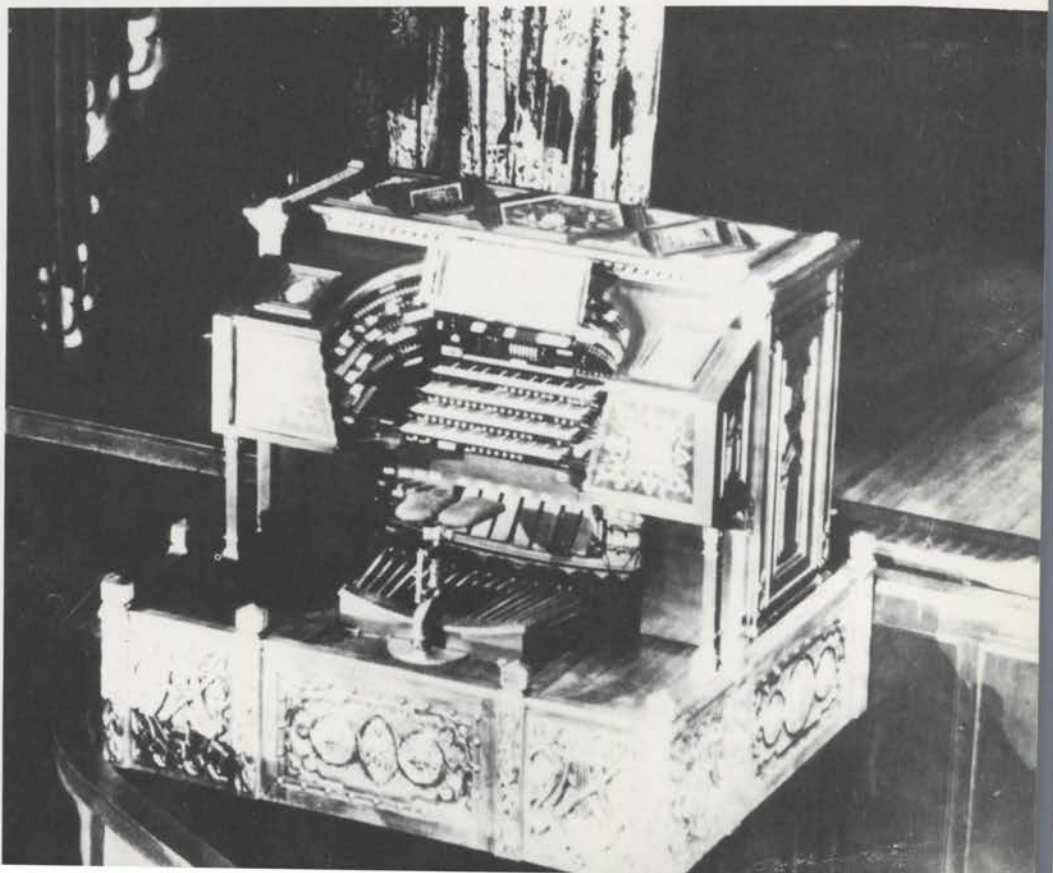
Following Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company's securing an option to buy the Fox and adjoining properties to construct an office complex, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson and the parties to the option announced an eight-month moratorium, on September 10, 1974. The moratorium was issued to allow time for any interested party who could meet the \$4,250,000 purchase price of the Fox and who had a viable plan of saving it to come forward and take Southern Bell's place in the deal. The Fox owners, Mosque, Inc., and Southern Bell, saw this as a gracious way of disengaging from the situation, and they encouraged the moratorium.

The final arrangements, involving lengthy and complex negotiations, permitted Atlanta Landmarks, Inc., to acquire ownership of the Fox, and Southern Bell to acquire the balance of the land on the block for its future building needs. First, Landmarks persuaded Southern Bell to separate the Fox itself from the larger land package, which included some adjacent parking lots. The price for the Fox alone was \$1,800,000. Then Landmarks, working through a major realty firm, and using money loaned from the five major Atlanta banks, acquired the rest of the land on the "Fox block" which Southern Bell had not itself acquired. Landmarks was then able to swap this land for the Fox. The banks agreed to lend Landmarks the money for these transactions provided that the shareholders of Mosque, Inc., would guarantee the loan. The exchange of property was consummated June 25, 1975, and Landmarks became the new owner of the Fox.

Although newspaper headlines and radio/TV announcements at the time tended to depict the situation as fully resolved, THE FOX IS NOT SAVED YET. It is, however, enjoying a stay of execution as it garners new purpose.

Thus the campaign to "save

Mighty 'Mo.' The 4/42 Moller organ — a musical triumph. Console is viewed here in original 1929 dress and rarely seen ornamental lift apron. (Edgar Orr Photo)



Mecca" has only begun. Should Atlanta Landmarks default on any payment (the principal of the loan is to be paid in June, 1978), the property automatically returns to the previous owners, Mosque, Inc. The first interest payment must be made in June, 1976, and in quarterly installments thereafter. Mosque shareholders have already secured a contract for demolishing the theatre and should Mosque repossess the property, the *Fox will be destroyed*. Additionally, the basic \$1,800,000 purchase price does not include closing expenses, interest on the loan over the three year period, or funds for a systematic renovation/restoration program for the theatre.

To really save the Fox, a total of \$2,400,000 must be raised.* The salvation call falls precisely at the feet of Atlanta's citizens and all concerned ATOS members. Only through contributions (fully tax deductible) will the Fox remain Atlanta's entertainment center, complete with its great Moller organ . . . the true "Mecca."

It is important that ATOS members and Atlanta citizens alike realize the long-range benefits of making a firm commitment to save the Fox. For ATOS, the commitment means the continued preservation of one of the country's finest and most original theatre organ installations extant. For Atlanta, the Fox is even more, and citizens are showing their unwillingness to let the Fox go the way of so many other useful landmarks representing Atlanta's architectural heritage.

On May 17, 1974, the Fox was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Fox's election to the register accords immense status and recognition to the house (structures less than 50-years-old are not normally considered except under certain conditions — one of those being the Fox qualifier: "outstanding architectural merit").

Undoubtedly the Fox is outstanding architecturally . . . but what about its *usefulness*?

Here the reasons for saving the

*\$1,800,000 to retire the principal of the loan; \$64,000 closing costs; \$436,000 estimated prime rate interest over the three years; and \$100,000 for immediate renovation needs and operating expenses. Total: \$2,400,000.



Pianist Liberace, one of many who made a plea to the public, with organist Bob Van Camp, and the Fox Moller organ (January, 1975). (Bob Connell Photo)

Fox become even more convincing. The Fox is a serviceable, in fact, superior hall for the performance of a wide scope of entertainment, convention, and business functions. The Fox's inherent good design runs the gamut — from decorative merit to functionality. The Fox was designed for people. Its acoustics and sight lines are outstanding and are far better than other halls similar in size. The Fox is flexible in its service features, and most importantly, the theatre can host an audience in complete comfort with the added (and often lacking in other structures) ability to delight the eye.

Aside from the aforementioned facts, the Fox is *needed*. As Atlanta grows, so does its demand for space and facilities. The 4,600-seat Civic Center auditorium, the only other

modern Atlanta facility of similar size, is booked to capacity on weekend nights. In 1974, for example, the Civic Center auditorium was in use 208 nights. This figure represents virtual capacity in scheduling during prime time. Many nationally-known touring shows bypass Atlanta when they are unable to book the Civic Center on appropriate nights.

In fact, the Fox is the only Atlanta auditorium that can do justice to certain specialized events. Silent movie presentations and organ concerts, are two events that immediately come to the minds of those in the theatre organ perspective.

With Southern Bell's announced intention of locating an automobile parking facility for about 1,600 cars adjacent to the Fox, and with a Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit

Authority (MARTA) station also on the block, the Fox's future transportation situation should be excellent.

To further support its cause, the Fox represents a bargain to Atlanta in these hard-pressed financial times. With about 200,000 square feet of usable space, the purchase price of the Fox is roughly nine dollars a square foot. Consultants have estimated that to reproduce any structure of similar size, design, and service capability, the cost would run well over fifty dollars a square



The Fox Theatre officially reopened Thursday, November 6, 1975 with the appearance of the Moscow State Symphony Orchestra. The Atlanta Music Club, celebrating its sixtieth anniversary, has moved its entire concert series to the theatre — as it once did in the years 1935-1938. Future concerts at the Fox include an appearance by the Vienna Choir Boys (January 31, 1976), Philippe Entremont, virtuoso pianist (March 1, 1976), and the Fox stage again becomes alive with people for the engagement of the Mazowsze Polish Song and Dance Company (March 13, 1976). Organ programs and other benefit and special events are coming to the theatre, as well as a rock music series which began October 29, 1975 with a concert by Linda Ronstadt.



foot. Furthermore, recent restoration/renovations of similar theatre "palaces" have proven that not only does a city gain a superior auditorium, but a structure whose cost is conservative and whose worth is seen both in an historic and contemporary perspective. For example, Pittsburgh's Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, formerly Loew's Penn Theatre, was renovated beginning April, 1970, at a cost of \$10,000,000 . . . \$9,000,000 below the cost to build a new complex of similar design. In contrast, the condition of the Fox is relatively good, and its most extensive renovation would run only into the thousands of dollars, and not into the millions. Today's economics do not permit the sensitive and elaborate design originally reflected and preserved in

Heinz Hall or the Atlanta Fox.

Similar success has been realized in the renovation and re-adaptation of theatres including the Paramount in Oakland, Ca. (scene for an ATOS-sponsored event during the last annual convention); the Brooklyn Paramount, now a part of Long Island University and still boasting its mighty four-manual Wurlitzer; the Olympia Theatre, now Gussman Hall, in Miami, Fla.; the St. Louis Theatre, renamed Powell Hall, in St. Louis, Mo.; and the Ohio Theatre, in Columbus — complete with its original Robert Morton installation. This is by no means a complete listing. So it is inexcusable that the dynamic city, Atlanta, would let its opportunity expire in a mass of rubble.

To avoid this civic embarrassment, and moreover, to avoid a tragic blow to the health of the inner city and to the preservation of the theatre organ in its original and intended environment, we must all demonstrate our convictions through participation and pocketbooks.

As Atlanta Landmark's president, Pat Connell, has so aptly put it . . . "Public opinion saved the Fox temporarily; public support will save it permanently."

How can ATOS members help? All contributions of \$10.00 or more to save the Fox will become members of Atlanta Landmarks. Members will be kept abreast of the organization's progress and will receive advance notification of all special events to be held in the Fox Theatre Building. Sponsoring and Charter Members will receive a copy of the color and black and white brochure, *Atlanta Fox Album* by ATOS member John McCall. The *Album* is a pictorial and historical presentation of the Fabulous Fox with special attention to its greatest asset, the mighty Moller organ.

For tax deduction, please make checks payable to:

*Atlanta Landmarks, Inc.
Fox Theatre Building
Atlanta, Georgia 30308*

*Memberships are as follows:
\$10.00 — General membership;
\$25.00 — Sustaining Membership;
\$50.00 — Sponsoring Membership;
\$100.00 — Charter Membership; or
a contribution in the amount of your choosing.* □

NEW SCHOLARSHIPS FOR ORGAN STUDY ANNOUNCED

by Lloyd E. Klos

Mr. and Mrs. John J. Strader of Cincinnati, possessors of a 3/18 Wurlitzer from the Paramount Theatre in Peebles' Corners, Ohio, firmly believe that to play popular music correctly, one must learn to play the classics first. In 1970, the Straders presented the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music a Balcom & Vaughn organ which was installed in the school's recital hall.

In the same year, they established and promoted the Strader Organ Series, recitals by such great artists as Gaylord Carter and Virgil Fox, and members of the CCM organ faculty. The series is still going strong with three or four internationally known organists presenting concerts, seminars and master classes this season.

In September, it was announced that Mr. and Mrs. Strader are establishing two Strader Competitive Scholarships in organ at CCM, beginning in the 1975-76 academic year. The first is a full-tuition scholarship for an incoming undergraduate; the second is a \$500 prize to an incoming graduate student, plus an assistantship which covers full tuition and a living stipend. Applications are available from Dr. Thomas G. Owen, Asst. Dean of CCM, university of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio 45221. Deadline for application is February 16, 1976; audition tapes are due March 1, with final competition on April 10. □

CORRECTION DEPARTMENT:

In the October-November Vox Pops column, we inferred that the 3/11 Wurlitzer in the Newark Casa Italiana had been superseded by an electronic while the 4/28 Wurlitzer from the Paterson Fabian Theatre is being installed. We are happy to report that the 3/11 is played each Sunday by Bill Gage. Our apologies to Bill and to Walter Froehlich, who not only heads the installation crew, but also maintains the smaller instrument. □