

NOW OFFICIAL . . .

THE BYRD

RICHMOND'S HISTORIC THEATRE

The Byrd Theatre, a Richmond, Virginia, showplace for the past forty-nine years, has now been placed on the Virginia Register of Historic Places. It is awaiting clearance for the National Register.

The following description was prepared by Miles J. Rudisill for the nomination form for the National Register of Historic Places, the National Park Service, the United States Department of the Interior.

Except for the removal of the marquee and lobby fountain, the Byrd Theatre has survived its forty-nine years of continuous operation with few alterations. The front of the building, in keeping with its inte-

The interior of the 1396-seat Byrd Theatre recalls an Italian opera house in the elegant and flamboyant Rococo style in hues of amber and gold.

(Ray Brubacher Photo)

riors, generally follows Italian Renaissance precedent. The facade is of red brick with white terra cotta ornament. The plain but impressive box office is black Italian marble, a material also used in framing the main entrance. There is an outer lobby between two sets of a dozen plate-glass doors framed in brass.

The ceiling of the main lobby is

twenty-five feet high, vaulted and heavy with gold-leaf plaster decoration. There is a large crystal chandelier, and the walls are covered half-way up with heavily veined marble. Three hand-painted murals line one wall, while the other three sides open onto a mezzanine lounge, itself heavily decorated with gold-leaf plaster, crystal chandeliers, wall brackets, and solid bronze handrails. A concession counter stands today where formerly a twenty-by-eight-foot pool and fountain were located. The marble fender, bronze rails, and other parts of this feature are carefully preserved in storage.

The auditorium recalls an Italian opera house in the elegant and flamboyant Rococo style expressed in a superabundance of marble, crystal, gold leaf, crimson velvet, and elabor-



rate plaster decorations. The basic colors are amber and gold, with red velvet accent. The 1,396-seat auditorium is spacious but not so large as to lose its feeling of intimacy and elegance. The color scheme and detail are continued in the balcony, an integral part of the theatre's visual effect.

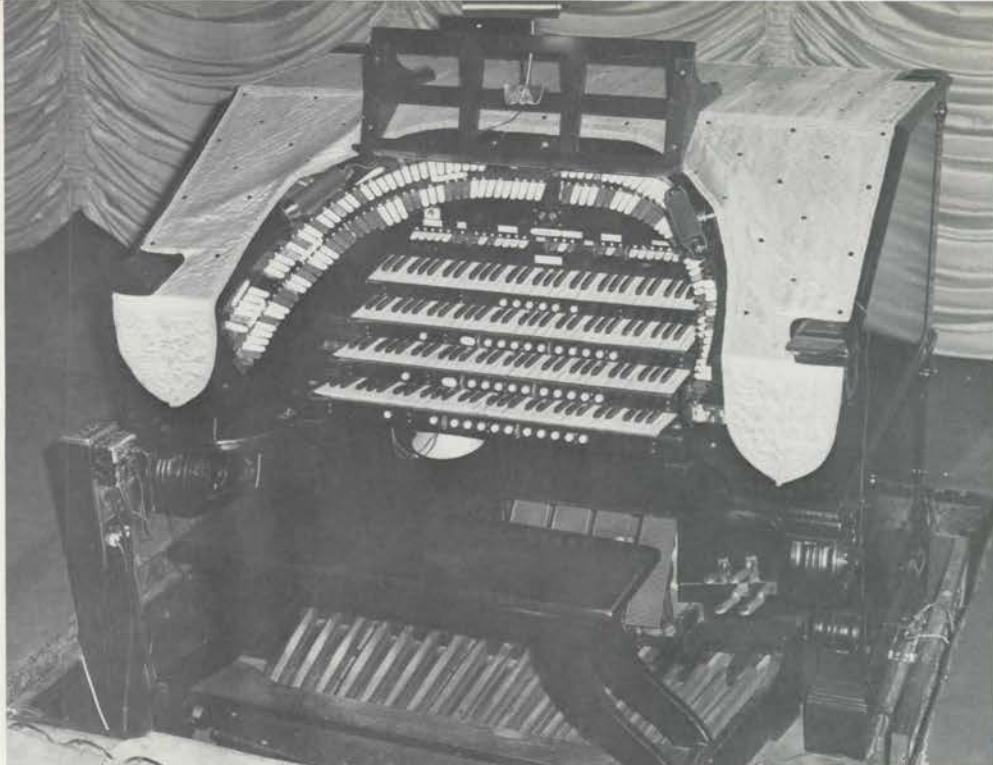
A huge chandelier in the dome, containing four thousand imported hand-cut crystals and three hundred bulbs in four colors, weighs some two tons but can be lowered for cleaning and relamping. There are an additional eight chandeliers, smaller in size, but also in four colors. Along the top of the auditorium's side walls in the niches are six hand-painted murals. The large murals on each side of the stage form a background to the opera-style boxes in which are displayed a grand piano and a harp.

The piano and harp are playable through the organ console, which can be raised from the basement to stage level. A gold grill extends along the entire length of the proscenium, concealing the organ chamber openings. Three chambers housing the pipes are located directly over the stage, which has been extended over the original orchestra pit.

All the lighting for the stage and auditorium, as well as the curtain and screen maskings, is controlled from the main switchboard located in the projection booth at the rear of the lobby. The only discordant element at the Byrd is the plastic and metal marquee built in 1971 as a replacement for one in the art deco style. The original marquee was a simple bronze structure with no lettering.

The grand opening of the Byrd Theatre on Christmas Eve of 1928 was a great civic event. Richmond's citizens could point to a bona fide movie palace which, in its design and interior appointments, could justifiably be described as comparable to the famed Paramount and Roxy Theatres in New York and the Atlanta Fox. It was certainly similar to them in representing the popular extravagance of the 1920s and the epic age of motion pictures.

"In our big modern movie palaces," an observer of contemporary culture wrote in 1929, "there are collected the most gorgeous rugs, furniture and fixtures that money can produce. No kings or emperors have



The 4/17 Wurlitzer at Richmond's Byrd Theatre has been used nightly since the theatre opened. For the past 16 years Eddie Weaver has been the house organist. (Ray Brubacher Photo)

wandered through more luxurious surroundings. In a sense these theatres are social safety valves in that the public can partake of the same luxuries as the rich and use them to the same full extent." The Byrd, constructed for Walter Coulter and Charles Somma at a cost approaching one million dollars, was in this class.

Fred Bishop of Richmond was the architect and contractor, with decoration and art-work done by the Brounet Studios of New York. The great chandelier in the auditorium was assembled and hung by the electrical contractors Union Electric of Richmond. The Byrd was built for talking motion pictures and was equipped with Vitaphone, a relatively new sound synchronization system pioneered by Bell Telephone Laboratories and commercially developed by Warner Brothers.

Walter Coulter, dean of Richmond showmen, employed his brother Robert as manager of the Byrd. The theatre opened with *Waterfront* and remained, during the heyday of Hollywood, the showcase theatre for such major studios as RKO, Universal, Fox, Disney, Paramount, First National, and Warner Brothers. While the limited backstage area would not support stage productions, major film stars appeared on stage to celebrate the Richmond premiere of their pictures.

The Byrd enjoys a national reputation achieved through the many recordings made on its great house organ. The Rudolf Wurlitzer Company, which custom made organs for the leading theatres of the country, installed the organ when the theatre was built. It has four manuals and seventeen ranks of pipes plus a complete percussion section. Patrons have enjoyed live organ music on a daily basis since the theatre opened.

The Byrd remains, with the Radio City Music Hall, one of only two theatres in the country today that has a regularly employed organist. Among its nationally known musicians was Dick Leibert, who left Richmond to become staff organist at the famed Music Hall when it opened in 1932, a position he held until his retirement in 1970. The Byrd has been the scene of many organ concerts, most recently during April 1977. The 1972 national convention of the American Theatre Organ Society was held in Richmond, with two concerts at the Byrd figuring prominently in the program.

Robert Coulter managed the theatre from 1928-1971 and was succeeded in this capacity by his long-term assistant, George Stitzer. Although the Byrd is currently leased to Neighborhood Theatres, Inc., it is managed by Stitzer and owned by Charles Somma, Jr., son of an original owner. □