

"Old Rahway" Celebrates Its 50th



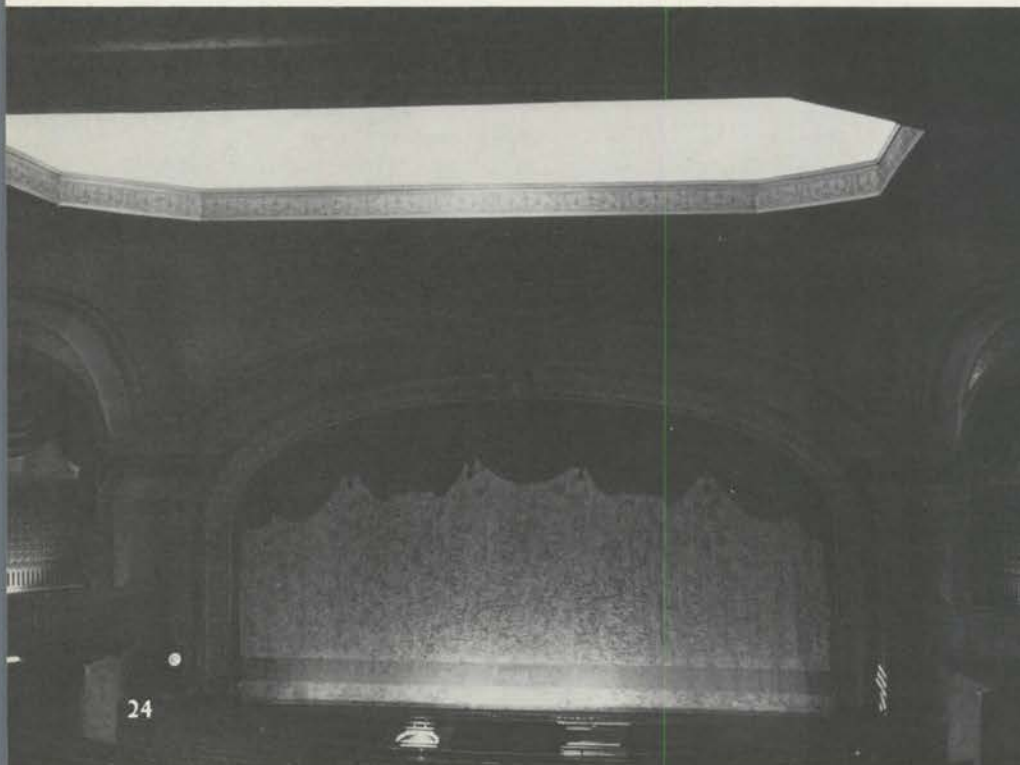
by Bill Stanmyre

Fifty years is a milestone in any endeavor, but among the grand movie palaces of the 1920's, New Jersey's Rahway Theatre's celebration of its 50th Anniversary was truly a miracle. Many grander and more palatial theatres are now just faded memories of a bygone era across our land. In the New York Metropolitan Area such historic show palaces as the Roxy, Paramount and Capital, just 20 miles away, are now gone and the last vestige of this grand era, Radio City Music Hall, hangs on the edge of extinction. So, the Garden State

Chapter decided to throw a fitting party for the theatre and its unique 50-year-old "biggest little Wurlitzer." We had some new stage curtains to show off for the occasion, the first in 30 years.

Wednesday, April 19, turned out to be a foul day, weatherwise. A real northeaster raged day and night but did not discourage some 800 from attending the gala show. Several local radio stations had run ticket contests and interviews for a week prior to the event and the area daily and weekly newspapers ran several feature

Interior of the 1600-seat house before the audience arrived. It is one of few intact theatres in the area, others having gone either the steelball or twinning route. It is hoped it will eventually become a performing arts center.



stories and ads. We even obtained a copy of the original program, had it reproduced and included as part of our program.

Curator of the Wurlitzer (Opus 1923, divided 2/7) and producer of the show, Bob Balfour, did the MC chores. He announced the overture, played by one of the theatre's original organists, Rex Koury, now of Reno, Nevada. Rex grew up in Cranford, N.J., a town adjacent to Rahway, and at age 14, served as relief organist at the Rahway when it first opened. Now Rex is traveling the country with silent films and organ shows, much like in the '30s when he toured the RKO theatre chain billed as "The World's Youngest Professional Theatre Organist." Since then Rex has distinguished himself as a composer, conductor and musical director for all three networks on the Coast and has scored and composed music for many films and TV shows, most notably, *Gunsmoke*. When we told him how extremely pleased we were to have him back with us, he said, "I wouldn't have missed it for the world," and "Gad, is it 50 years already?"

We tried to follow 1928 tradition as closely as possible. We were even going to try to re-create the original show, but when we found out that the film *The Grain of Dust* was no longer in existence and the stage presentation was four vocal soloists with operatic arias, we decided that today's tastes dictated presenting a typical weekend bill from 1928. So after the overture, we returned something that has been missing from theatres across our land for the last 25 years: our National Anthem. It was also heard on opening night in 1928.

The manager of the 1600-seat Rahway Theatre for the past 15 years, Mrs. Emile Lockner, was introduced, and Mayor Daniel Martin then presented the theatre and the Garden State Theatre Organ Society with a proclamation declaring Wednesday, April 19, as Rahway Theatre and GSTOS day in Rahway.

Nine people who were at the opening show 50 years ago were introduced in the audience, and several original staff members were also introduced as well as the members of the Rahway organ crew.

Next came five acts of vaudeville.

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 1978



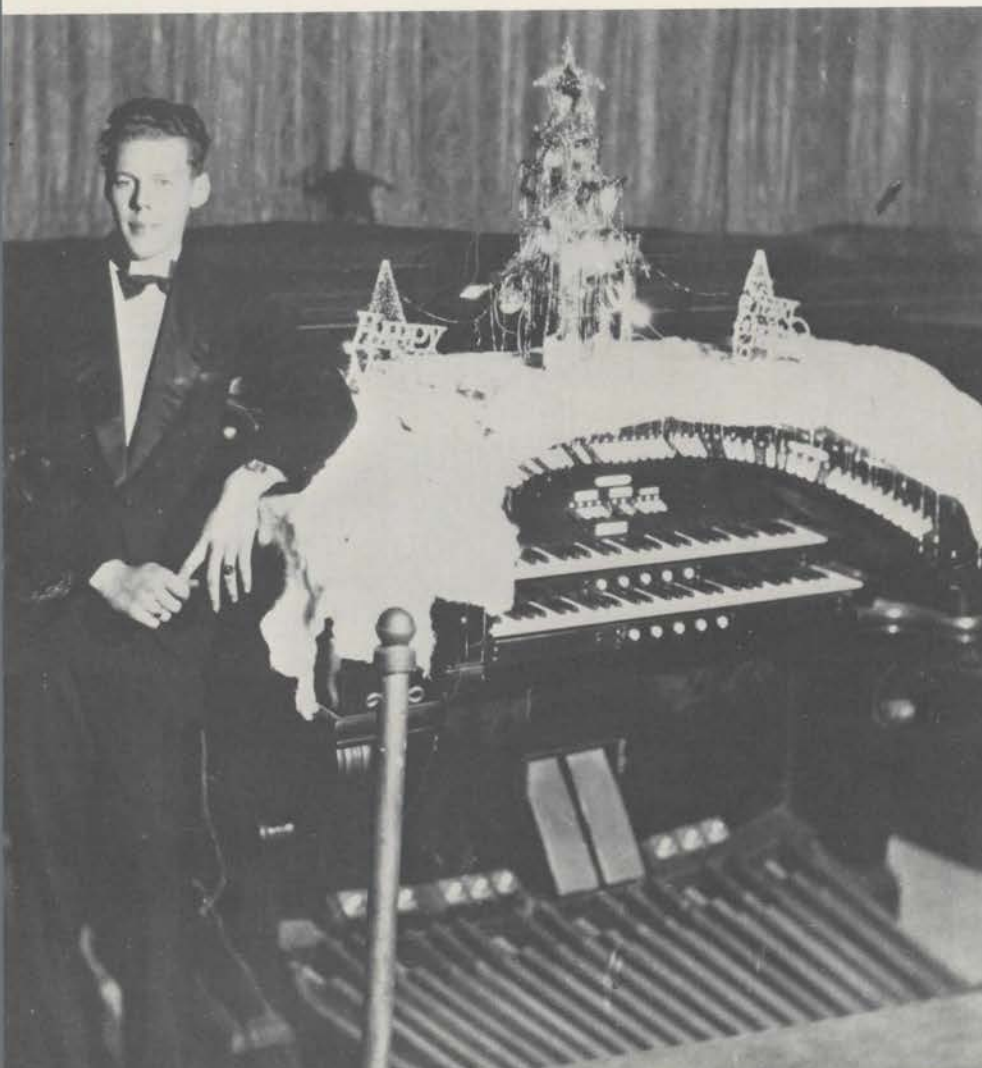
Teresa Vandre was the between-the-acts attraction as she changed the annunciator cards which introduced the vaudeville acts.

MC Bob Balfour brought out a huge 25-foot stage hook to set the mood. We had two magic acts, a barber-shop quartet, an improvisational comedy team, and as our finale, the New Jersey State Twirling Champs from Rahway, who ended with a good old Rockette high-kick-line. Accompanying all this was a small pit band from the local senior citizens center. It was all quite representative of vaudeville on the local circuit in the '20s and the audience loved it.

A slide and film pictorial history of the theatre followed, after which the proceedings were turned over to Rex Koury at the Mighty Wurlitzer to take us to intermission with a 1928 silent newsreel and sing-along. Did they ever sing!! Fred Waring would have been proud.

Following intermission, we held a record drawing for some of Rex's latest discs on the Wichita Century II ex-N.Y. Paramount "Dowager Empress," which Rex had the honor of premiering in it's new Wichita home several years ago.

A bit of history. This 1928 photo shows the original house organist, Chester Kingsbury, at the Rahway console decorated for the Christmas show. He was 19. His assistant was a 14-year-old named Rex Koury.



The Man of the Hour. It was old home night for Rex Koury. He first played the Rahway's 2/7 divided Wurlitzer when he was growing up in the area 50 years ago. The instrument is equipped with double sets of swell shutters in front of each chamber, providing exceptional volume control.

Finally, to cap the evening, Rex superbly scored a 1928 Buster Keaton Comedy, *Seven Chances*, which had the audience nearly rolling in the aisles with laughter. The show started promptly at 8 p.m., the movie ended at 11:45 p.m. and the audience didn't want to go home, so Rex played several encores including his famous *Gunsmoke* theme until just before midnight. Afterwards, Rex and the organ were mobbed by a grateful crowd who kept asking, "Why don't you do this every week?" Well, it would be nice, but . . . (sob). Maybe, if the Old Rahway ever becomes a performing arts center — someday, hopefully.

On the following day Rex Koury returned to the pit of the Old Rahway, and recorded one of the most listenable records you may ever hope to hear, to be released in the fall of 1978 to commemorate the theatre's 50th Anniversary.

As MC Bob Balfour said in closing the show, "You know, when all is said and done, in spite of the need for a good paint job, this theatre and organ may well be the most precious thing this city has. It is uniquely designed, well built and should be cherished and preserved as part of this city's cultural and architectural heritage. If we all make an effort to support it and play our cards right, we'll all be back here in 50 years to do it again. See you all in 2028." □