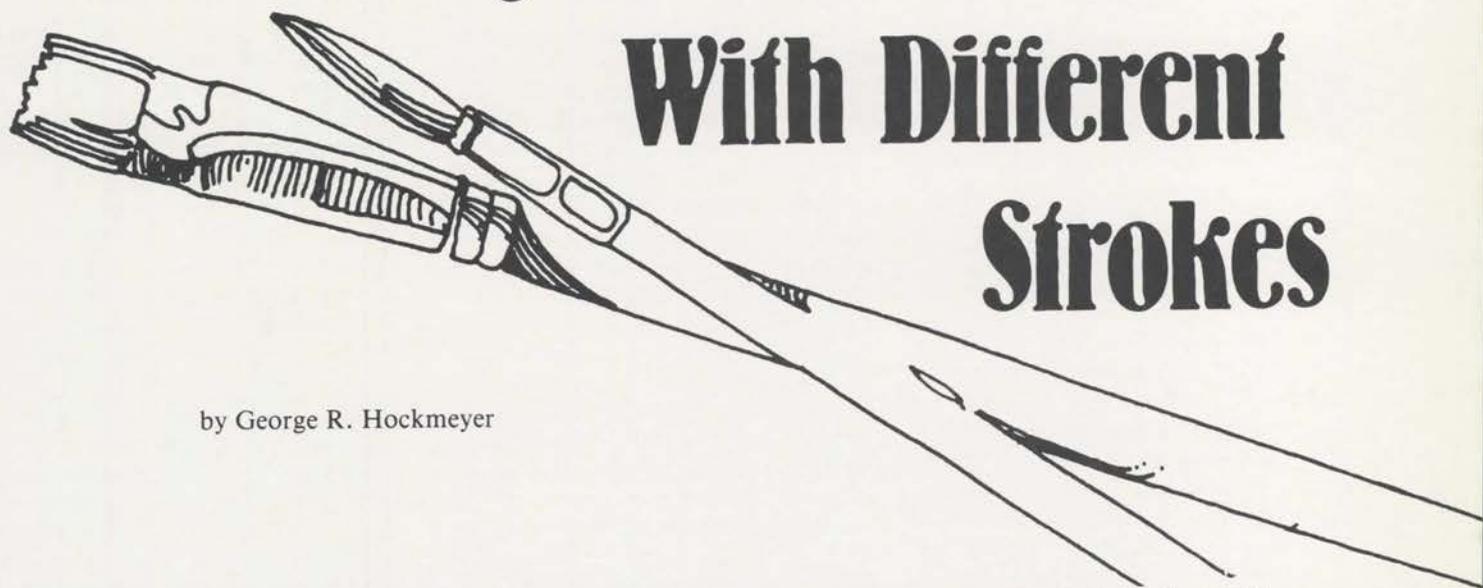


Theatre Organist

With Different Strokes



by George R. Hockmeyer

The colorful picture of the Beacon Theatre of New York City on the cover is not a photograph, but an oil painting done by William H. Tunstall of Shreveport, Louisiana. Bill and Mary Jo Tunstall are long time ATOS members and enthusiastic theatre organ buffs.

In 1977, while the Tunstalls were living in Houston, they were among the founders of the Houston Area ATOS Chapter, and Bill served as that chapter's first chairman. A year or so later business took the Tunstalls to Shreveport, but they retained their Texas contacts and membership in the Texas chapter.

Bill's inspiration for his Beacon Theatre painting came some years ago when he purchased Lee Erwin's album, *The Sound of the Silents*. Erwin recorded this album on the 4/19 Wurlitzer in New York's Beacon Theatre. The album came with an illustrated booklet about the Beacon and its organ. The text was written by the late Ben Hall.

Bill had always wanted a large color picture showing a pipe organ in an old theatre that he could hang on the wall over his own electronic theatre organ. He felt that this would establish the proper atmosphere for his own "vintage style" concerts.

Hall's booklet contained several photos and one of them was exactly what Bill had in mind. However, it was in black and white and rather small. So Bill, a gifted painter as well

Bill and Mary Jo Tunstall, members from Shreveport, LA, and the painting of the Beacon Theatre which appears on the cover of this issue. (George R. Hockmeyer Photo)



as a musician, decided to paint his own picture, using Hall's photo as a guide. The photo showed the gleaming white console of the organ, as well as the ornate detail of the Beacon interior.

The Tunstalls made several trips to New York and visited the old Beacon, where Bill made numerous color photos of the inside of the famous theatre. On one such trip Bill and Mary Jo even tried their hands at the organ.

The Beacon was opened by the Warner Brothers on Christmas Eve in 1929. It was built by "Roxy" Rothafel, father of the famous Roxy Theatre. He commissioned architect Walter W. Ahlschlager to design both theatres. Located in the vicinity of 72nd Street and Broadway, the Beacon housed over 2,600 seats. Hall described it as "an incredible bit of Baghdad on upper Broadway."

In 1970, armed with a sizeable collection of color photos of his own making, together with some acquired from Brother Andrew Corsini of the Theatre Historical Society and ATOS' official photographer, Bill Lamb, Bill began work on his painting.

The work was slow and painstaking. Bill and his wife were already working long hours in building management and he could only paint for brief periods at a time.

But at long last — some six years later — the 32 x 40 inch painting was completed. The view shown in the picture is the same one an observer would have were he to be standing on a 15-foot ladder near the statue on

the left side of the theatre.

The painting truly reveals the classic beauty of the old movie palace and it captures, for the viewer, a feeling of genuine "in-theatre presence."

Both Bill and Mary Jo are quite accomplished in vintage theatre playing and, while listening to them, you could almost expect the magnificent red curtains in the painting to part.

The Tunstalls' passion for old theatres and theatre organs is at once apparent upon entering their home in Shreveport. Aside from their electronic theatre organ and Bill's painting, their walls are decorated with an array of theatre memorabilia. Decoupage plaques of theatres and organs from THEATRE ORGAN magazine covers and related periodicals are visible in almost every direction.

These include interiors of the Ohio Theatre in Columbus, the Atlanta Fox and the Oriental in Chicago. There are consoles from Downer's Grove, Illinois, the Oakland Paramount and a host of others.

While in his early teens, Bill Tunstall studied oil painting only to a rudimentary degree as a school project. With no formal training he pursued it as a self-taught hobby by copying paintings he wanted, mostly of landscapes, seascapes and sailing ships. Notable among these is his reproduction of Kurzwelly's famous Autumn Leaves, which strikingly resembles the original. Some of his original oils are: Grand Canyon from Hopi Point, Beaver Dam in Rocky Mountain National Park, Square Rigger Sailing Ship at Sunset, and a full-length portrait of his wife, Mary Jo. Some of the decoupage plaques are of black and white prints of theatre interiors which he tinted in photo oils. Bill will tell you that he painted only when he wanted a painting of some particular subject, as the Beacon Theatre.

One other hobby endeavor Bill had that is worthy of mention here is that of scale modelling, especially of old sailing ships and antique horse drawn coaches and carriages, which also adorn the Tunstall home. The best of these is the glass enclosed 100% handmade model of the Fisher Body Napoleonic Coach.

Organ/theatre buffs, whether residing in Shreveport or just passing through, are always welcome at the Tunstall home. □

1980 CONVENTIONEERS ENJOYED NATIONAL MUSICAL MUSEUM

by Lowell Ayars

Though practically not known through the pages of any organ journal, here, or in England, one of the most interesting spots in the Greater London Area is the National Musical Museum. Located in an abandoned church near Kew Bridge in Brentford, it houses an unbelievable collection of rare and exotic instruments all in playable condition. A busload of conventioners fitted themselves in the limited space available to hear the founder, Frank W. Holland, demonstrate three different types of reproducing pianos and then conduct a spirited question and answer session. Time sped by with such rapidity that there was a limited demonstration of the magnificent 3/12 Wurlitzer which had its home originally in a private residence in our own Chicago, Illinois. Shipped to England in 1931, it was installed in the Regal Kingston on Thames. It is presently fitted with a piano and a Wurlitzer roll player mechanism. Known by British cinema organ enthusiasts as the "Joseph Seal" organ it surely must be one of the most cohesive and richest sounding instruments in the British Isles. It is maintained by Richard Cole, a member of the London ATOS Chapter. It was with great reluctance that the group left the museum and the many other superb instruments that could have been heard had time allowed. □

HOLIDAY GREETINGS

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