

# CHAPTER OWNED!

Story by George Winters    Photos by William Vogel

Where in the United States can one attend a theatre pipe organ concert classic movie, a variety show, body-building championship, and a variety of other events at a theatre owned and operated entirely by a staff of volunteers? In the Motor City.

The Redford Theatre, in Detroit, is the only theatre in the country to have the distinction of being owned and operated by an ATOS chapter — the Motor City Chapter. While every event staged at the Redford is not always chapter-sponsored, chapter members are on hand to aid in the running of the show. But, before we become too involved in relating the Motor City Chapter-Redford Theatre story, a look back into the theatre's past may help the reader to understand the reasons for the chapter's unique purchase.

The Redford Theatre was built in 1927 for Kunsy Theatres, the largest theatre chain in Detroit at that time. The Kunsy organization operated such large downtown houses as the Capitol and Madison theatres. The Redford is the only Detroit theatre known to the writer to have been designed by the architectural firm of Verner, Wilhelm and Molby, and R.F. Shrieve.

The auditorium was designed as a large Japanese garden, with organ chambers housed in large pagoda-like pavilions on either side of the proscenium. The proscenium arch and the chambers were each capped by a pagoda-style tile roof. Overhead, a deep blue sky was sprinkled with stars and lazy clouds. Throughout the theatre were Japanese murals and stenciled designs. On either side of the organ grilles were Japanese figures in oriental dress. To crown all of this was a splendid 3/10 Barton pipe organ console, on the left side of the orchestra pit, complete with Japanese dragons. A magnificent sight indeed, in black and gold.

Opening night, on January 27, 1928, was a gala affair and featured

vaudeville, movies, and a special appearance by organist Don Miller. Don was then organist at the Capitol Theatre downtown, and also played at the State and Fisher theatres during his career.

The organ had fallen into disuse by the late forties. In the 1950s, Community Theatres took over the operation of the Redford, and ran top-rated films there for over twenty years.

Shortly after the chapter was organized in 1964, members approached the theatre management about the possibility of using the Redford organ. Permission was granted, and in 1965 restoration and maintenance of the instrument was begun. By the fall of 1966 after-midnight organ concerts were being given following the last showing of the current attraction.

Don Miller was made an honorary member of the chapter and gave an early morning concert at the Redford in May of 1967. He was also a featured artist at the DTOC Wurlitzer (formerly in the Fisher Theatre) during the 1967 National ATOS Convention hosted by the chapter.

In 1973, an upright piano was added to the organ and placed on the right side of the orchestra pit. In 1974, it became possible for the chapter to lease the Redford, for the owners no longer considered it a profitable venture.

Eventually, after utilizing the theatre for many shows, and realizing what a fine theatre with organ they had, the membership began to discuss someday possibly purchasing the theatre. In 1977 this became a reality when Community Theatres proposed sale of the theatre to the chapter for \$125,000. A meeting of the membership was called and it was decided to purchase the theatre. It was the continuation of a wonderful relationship with Community Theatres.

The first order of business after

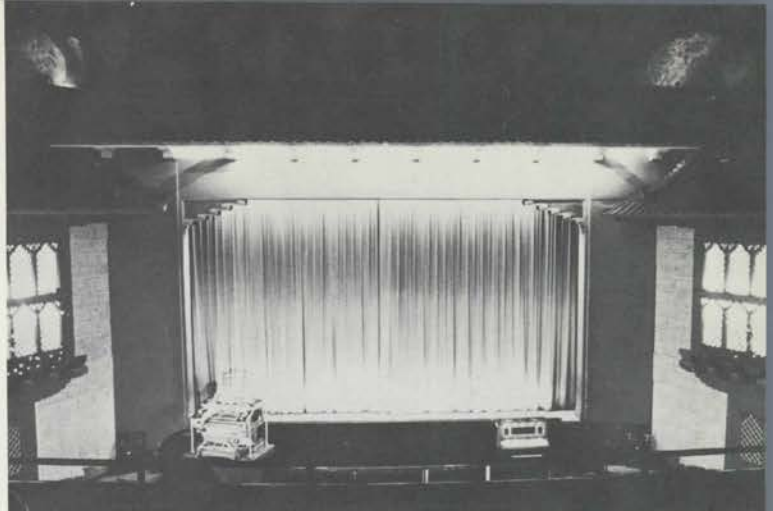


purchase was to determine ways to raise money. It was decided to try to purchase the theatre without any help from public money in the form of grants. Many members donated sums of \$25.00 to \$1,000. A carnival in the theatre's parking lots helped to raise money toward the purchase. Soon, however, it became apparent that organ shows alone would not be able to support the purchase and operation of the theatre. Another source of steady income was needed. Shortly thereafter, the Redford Movie Series was established.

The brainchild of Redford Operating Committee members, the movie series soon became a popular feature and attracted people from all over the city. An early series featured well-known organists such as Dennis James, Ashley Miller and Jonas Nordwall playing overtures and intermissions at the Barton. For each movie thereafter, we have featured our own chapter or local organists for the overture and intermission. Many are fine young musicians who may, before too long, be well-known names on the theatre organ circuit. It is a great way to develop talent of all ages, and an excellent means of giving these talented people public exposure. This helps us to meet an important chapter goal. A record made by some of our organists will be available for the convention this next



A bimonthly movie series continues to provide a steady source of revenue. The present marquee is an adaptation of the original.



Stars once again twinkle above the Japanese garden setting of the Redford's 1661-seat auditorium.

summer.

A typical evening of movies at the Redford will find the theatre opening at 7 p.m. Most of the time the outer lobby is already jammed with people. At 7:30 the organist begins his overture by playing the National Anthem before a large American flag which fills the stage. A gift from a loyal member, it is well-liked by our audiences. At 8:00 the organ descends to the pit and the film begins. And what films we have had! Everything from *2001 - A Space Odyssey* to *The Sound of Music*, to Alfred Hitchcock films and Laurel and Hardy film fests. A wide variety of films draws audiences with many different tastes, in an attempt to attract people who may never have heard a theatre pipe organ in its original setting. Our mailing list request forms show that many in our audiences for theatre organ shows were first exposed to the Redford organ while attending one of our movies. Hence, more fans for the theatre organ are won. Many of our films draw sell-out crowds of over 1500. Besides helping us pay our bills at the theatre, we provide a great entertainment option for the people

of Detroit.

Because the main purpose of our owning the Redford is to preserve the organ in its original setting, we feature many concerts on the Barton from fall through spring. Many nationally-known artists, as well as local talents, have appeared at our console. Very often a live stage act or silent film is part of these shows.

The Motor City Chapter uses the theatre for its own functions as well. In addition to board and committee meetings, it is also the site of the chapter's annual meeting and Christmas party, as well as annual garage sales and bazaars. The Barton organ also serves as an excellent practice instrument for our playing members, and allows willing volunteers to gain experience in organ maintenance.

The theatre building itself allows Motor City members the opportunity to discover firsthand what it is like to restore a 1928 movie house to its original grandeur. We have begun to do so, but it will take many more years to complete the task.

Currently, the foyer, or grand lobby, is the object of our restoration efforts. The original painted stenciling

on the ceiling has been re-created, after first removing layers of paint and matching the original colors. Two large, ornate oriental chandeliers will be hung in the foyer. These were acquired by members of the chapter from the lobby of the Downtown Theatre (formerly the Oriental Theatre), which was demolished many years ago.

The Motor City Chapter is looking forward with great anticipation to hosting the 1982 ATOS National Convention. In addition to featuring our home, the Redford Theatre, we also plan concerts on two other chapter-maintained Barton organs, in the Michigan Theatre in Ann Arbor, and the Royal Oak Theatre in Royal Oak. The Royal Oak instrument was given to us and is chapter-owned. As a special plus, the Crawford Special Wurlitzer in the fabulous Fox Theatre is also included in our plans. In contrast with this large Wurlitzer will be the small but delightful one in the Punch and Judy Theatre, also chapter maintained. We hope to see you in Detroit in July for a convention that should be an unforgettable experience. □

The Redford Operating Committee directs the business affairs of the chapter-owned theatre.



Restoration of the Redford's 3/10 Barton organ was begun in 1965. In an effort to preserve the sound of this instrument, still in its original setting, the only addition has been a player piano.



The ongoing restoration in the foyer includes accurate reproductions of the intricate original stenciling, long hidden under layers of paint. Soon, chandeliers from Detroit's Oriental Theatre will be added.

