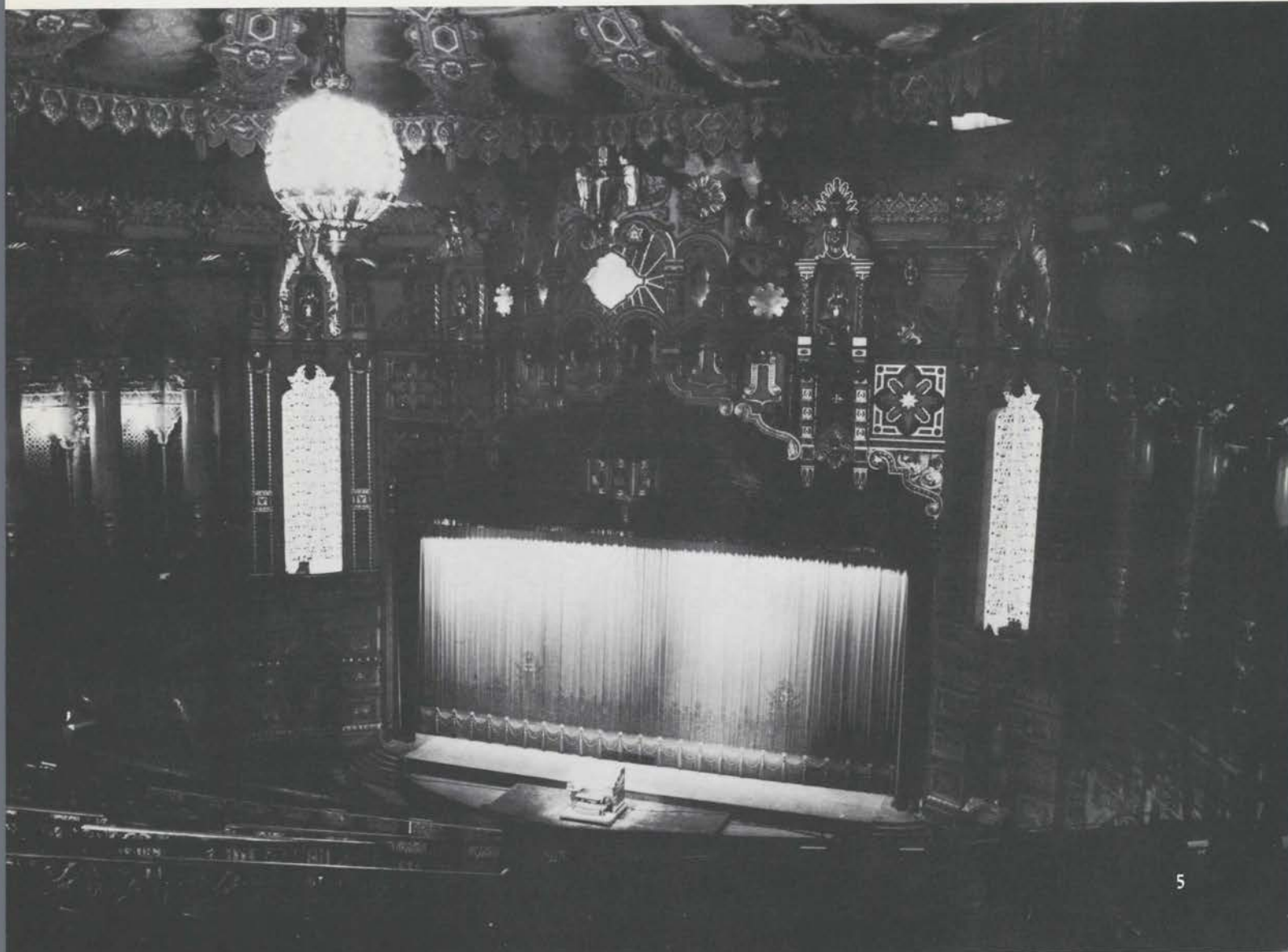


*Your Visit to the . . .*

# FOX DETROIT

by Harold Bellamy

*(Alfred J. Buttler Photo)*





When you arrive in downtown Detroit, you are immediately aware that its street pattern is different than most cities. Rather than streets running at right angles to each other forming square blocks, there is a radial system of streets interconnecting a series of circular parks. Detroit's first theatre district was formed around one of these parks named Campus Martius, just a short dis-

tance north of the river, east of Woodward Avenue at Monroe. The district included Detroit's first movie theatre, the Casino, which opened on March 3, 1906. Others to follow were the Cinex, Star, Columbia and National, to name just a few of the dozen nickelodeon and movie houses which concentrated in this area. Only the National remains intact as a reminder of that era. Less intact, the

Star, Casino and Cinex are still identifiable in the facades of the "Monroe Block," a historical frontage. The Columbia also existed in the Monroe Block but was demolished and replaced in 1956 by a two-story commercial building. The Columbia is noteworthy because it was the most formidable of the movie houses in the district. Designed by C. Howard Crane, it had seating for over 1,000 people and had facilities for full stage presentations. Moreover, it featured a symphony orchestra to accompany silent films and presented Professor Anton Dailey at Detroit's first theatre organ, two years before New York had a similar instrument. The Columbia was the forerunner of another major phase of movie entertainment and in Detroit, the creation of a new theatre district.

Starting in 1917 with the construction of the Madison Theatre, this new district was located around Grand Circus Park several blocks north of the first district. This theatre district was to be very different and significant, as it ushered in the "movie palace" era in Detroit. These large movie palaces became the focus of an ornately decorative style of architecture wherein audiences of from 3000 to 5000 people could revel not only in the fantasy of the environment but in the elaborate presentations of orchestra, vaudeville, choreography, theatre organ and big-name entertainment in addition to the film presentation.

Responsible for the start of this new phenomenon were two individuals who were to become famous in this new, large-scale entertainment mode; John Kunsky, the entrepreneur (owner of the Casino) and C. Howard Crane, the architect (designer of the Columbia). Together, their efforts transformed the Grand Circus Park area so radically that it became locally known as "Kunsky Circle." In time, eight movie palaces graced the Grand Circus area, capable of accommodating more than 24,000 patrons. The largest of these was C. Howard Crane's mammoth Fox Theatre. The demand for theatres was so great that C. Howard Crane became responsible for the design of over fifty theatres in the city. At Grand Circus Park, he designed the Madison, Adams, Capitol (now Grand Circus), State (now Palms), United Artists and the Fox, all of

Lobby Grand Staircase. The windows on the upper level afford patrons a view of the Grand Lobby from the second balcony level. (Alfred J. Buttler Photo)





which are still in existence, although some operate on a sporadic basis. Added to the group was Percival Periera's Oriental Theatre (later Downtown) and George L. Rapp's Michigan Theatre. Unfortunately, the Oriental was destroyed and the Michigan, a true theatre gem, now exists as one of the most glamorous parking structures anywhere in the world. Of historical interest is the fact that the Michigan occupies the site of Henry Ford's early home and the tiny shop in which he built his first automobile in 1896.

Of the group of eight theatres, the only theatre organs to survive in their original setting are the two still located in the Fox Theatre. The fate of the others is varied and is generally believed to be as follows: the United Artists organ, a 3/17 Wurlitzer Model 260 Special, is now currently performing in a Detroit area pizza parlor, the Pied Piper Pizza and Pipes in the Universal Mall at Twelve Mile Road and Dequindre in Warren, Michigan; the Oriental, 2½/10 Wurlitzer, is believed to have been destroyed with the theatre; the Madison, a 3/34 Hillgreen-Lane, was split up for parts some of which remain; the Adams, a 3/28 Hillgreen-Lane, was split up for parts going to several parties; the Grand Circus, a 4/20 Publix No. 1 Wurlitzer, was first moved to a local skating rink, and after several ownerships much of it, including the console, is now located in the Paramount Theatre in Oakland, California; the Michigan, a 5/28 Wurlitzer, is now located in a private residence in Wisconsin (in a huge basement complete with lift); the Palms, a 4/20 Publix No. 1 Wurlitzer, is now located in the Oral Roberts University Chapel in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In order to better relate our visit to the Fox and to assist in appreciating its position in the movie palace era, it may be of value to briefly refer to the four other major movie palaces which were built by William Fox and to describe their status along with the large theatre organs which were designed to perform in them. To compete with other marvels such as the Chicago Theatre and the Paramount and Roxy Theatres in New York, William Fox built his wonders in Atlanta, Brooklyn, San Francisco, St. Louis and Detroit. To compliment these major movie palaces, the

Rudolph Wurlitzer Company and M.P. Möller Inc. built the equally formidable pipe organs to provide the great sound to fill these Fox Theatres.

First, **the Atlanta Fox:** Last of the Foxes, it was designed by Marye, Alger Vinour and opened December 25, 1929. It has 4,504 seats. Rescued from demolition, the theatre is now operating viably as a music hall and

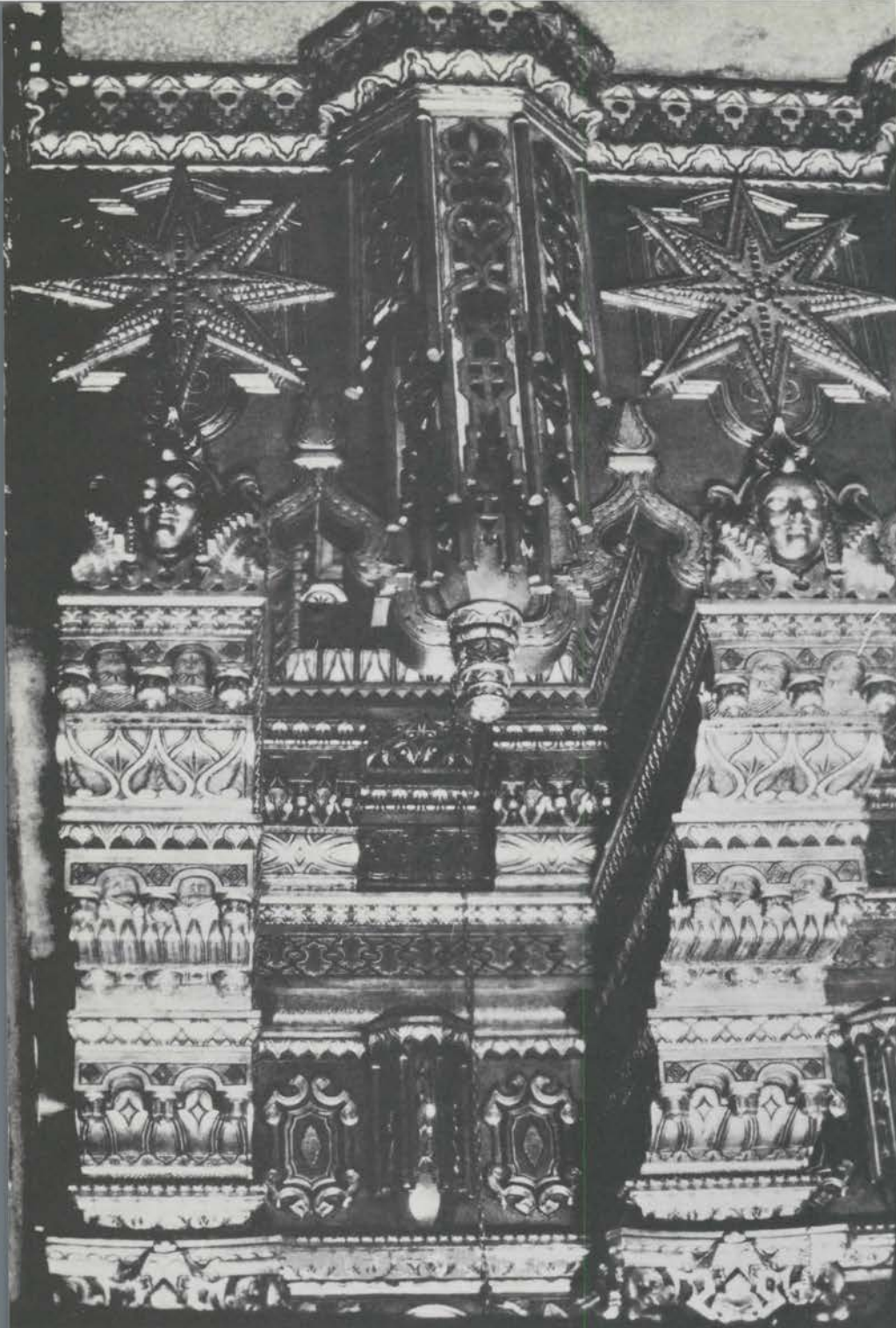
for special events. The organ is a 4/24 Moller and is used regularly in concert.

**The Brooklyn Fox:** Designed by C. Howard Crane and Kenneth Franzheim, it was opened August 31, 1928, and had 4,060 seats. The theatre has been demolished (demolition date not available). The organ was a 4/36 Wurlitzer-Fox Special. The organ was split up for parts and the

*(Alfred J. Buttler Photo)*







Intricate plasterwork of the Grand Lobby ceiling.

(William C. Frisk Photo)

console is now in the Cardinal Music Palace family restaurant in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

**The San Francisco Fox:** Designed by Thomas Lamb, it opened June 28, 1929, with 4,651 seats. After a farewell concert on February 16, 1963, with many celebrities in attendance, demolition of the Fox began on February 28 and was completed on August 12, 1963. Everett Nourse was the organist at the farewell. The organ, a 4/36 Wurlitzer-Fox Special, is now in a California residence.

**The St. Louis Fox:** Designed by C. Howard Crane, it is almost an exact replica of the Detroit Fox. It opened January 30, 1929, and had 5,035 seats. The theatre operated complete with theatre organ use before film presentations and closing intermission into the early 1970s when organ participation was dropped. The theatre continued with films until March 1, 1978, when it closed. The theatre has been purchased by the Pantheon Corporation and is currently undergoing a restoration for a

Fall 1982 opening. The organ is a 4/36 Wurlitzer-Fox Special which has been maintained and is played frequently.

Now for the fifth Fox palace, **the Detroit Fox!** Designed by C. Howard Crane, it opened on September 21, 1928. It has operated continuously since that time as a movie theatre with occasional special shows. In recent years, it was not able to sustain first-run movie presentations and its economic viability was therefore in jeopardy. The theatre, however, has been temporarily rescued from a closure and possible destruction. On the verge of tax foreclosure a few years ago, a reprieve was made possible through a re-purchase agreement.

The house has been recarpeted and the seats have been refurbished. In addition, much repair work has been done and maintenance is again a practice. Unfortunately, because of poor economic conditions and the generally negative position of the movie industry in large cities, the prospect for continuing with first-run features is not bright. The new owner is working hard at seeking a solution for continuing the use of the theatre. He has recognized the need and value of maintaining the organs and has permitted the programming of special shows and concerts in order to provide funds for that purpose. Prior to his involvement, the organ was, for the most part, only minimally maintained because of the lack of funds. The organs' restoration has been accomplished by a dedicated group who titled themselves "Friends of The Fox." Recently, the group has reorganized as "Downtown Theatre Enthusiasts." They are enduring the usual problems associated with organs, such as repairing the 50-hp blowers after a very heavy rain put them under six feet of water. This required slow baking to dry them out.

Let us now take a closer look at the Detroit Fox. This grand movie palace with its 5,042 seats is second only in size to New York's Radio City Music Hall. As already noted, the theatre and adjoining office building were designed by Detroit architect, C. Howard Crane and Associates. Except for minor details, the same design was utilized in the St. Louis Fox. As you approach the building, note the entrance doors framing the



ticket booth. Made of solid brass, cast bronze and marble, this ornate entrance is a hint of more to be found within. Passing through the doors, you find yourself in the outer lobby which serves as the transitional space into the Grand Lobby. Entry into the lobby is always an experience, for one is suddenly aware of being exposed to a fantasy environment framed by towering oxblood-colored pillars, topped with jeweled friezes and canopied by extruding buttresses capping the 80' x 125' lobby which is six stories high! Niches and shrines containing figures of Asiatic gods are featured here and throughout the theatre. Crane's firm designed and executed all of these interior plasterwork features and statues. Inner doors are solid mahogany, ebony finished with Art Deco-inspired stenciling and fittings. Decorative moldings are not stock items from a supply catalogue. Casting of the ornamentation took place right on the site.

Looking ahead from this massive lobby the grand staircase looms, guarded by two huge lions at the foot of the ballustrades. The staircase reaches up to the inner lobby and to the balconies which overlook the grand lobby. In one of these balconies to the left is the lobby organ, a 3/12 Moller. This organ was used to entertain patrons as they entered or left the theatre or while waiting for the house to empty after a performance. This organ may be played from the console or automatically by the "Artiste" system which uses perforated paper rolls, capable of duplicating the music of famous organists. The instrument speaks from chambers located on the two floors above the console. As we pass into the inner lobby we may go either to the left to the ladies' powder room, or to the right to the men's smoking room. In either direction, we pass through a two-story "court" with a mirrored ceiling on the mezzanine level reflecting and highlighting the ornate ballustrades, stencil work and ornamental figureheads. Extending from the lobby area are the concourses connecting with the inner staircases which provide access to the loges and balcony. Throughout the promenades and lobbies, you will continue to be amused and entertained by the variety of artistry depicted in plaster, marble, brass,



The 3/12 Moller lobby organ.

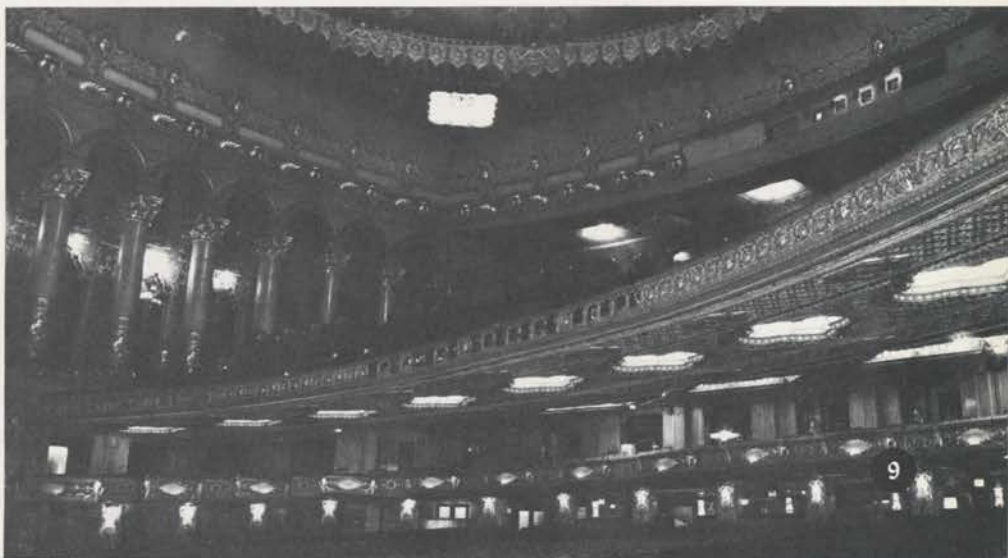
(William C. Frisk Photo)

wood and stone. Look for the Samurai warriors, elephants, lions, peacocks, dolphins, dancing maidens, camels, sorcerers, monkeys, dragons, goddesses, eagles and more.

Now let us enter the main auditorium. This huge space, especially when viewed for the first time, is an overwhelming experience. The reason for awe is its immense size — measuring over 100 feet in height, 175 feet in width and 200 feet in length. Huge red scagliola columns, 4½ feet in diameter and 35 feet high, are the main elements framing this cavernous space. Suspended above these colonnaded walls is a draped, jeweled and tasseled tentlike ceiling, supported by spears and opening to a starry blue sky. Hanging from that sky is a large stained and leaded globe-shaped chandelier over 13 feet in diameter. The proscenium is massive. The ornate organ grilles on each side of the stage and the huge decorative overhang above, capped by a crowned elephant, only serve to put the almost-80-foot-wide stage into

perspective. Behind the main drape is a full complement of curtains and backdrops necessary for major entertainment extravaganzas. Wrapped around the stage are seven floors of dressing rooms, carpentry and tailor shops, a screening and rehearsal room, a broadcast studio and a music library, interconnected by elevators. Elevators, lined in real leather, also serve the loge and balcony areas. Stage and organ lifts and "band cars" which allow lateral movement provide an added dimension to the imagery and fantasy of presentation. Hearing sound before one visually identifies the source tends to conjure a mystical experience. When the organ lift rises in the Fox, it reveals a huge gold-toned console with gold decorative trim across its top and side panels. As a 4/36 Wurlitzer-Fox Special, it is one of five nearly identical instruments created by the company for the largest Fox theatres in the country, with the prototype installed in the New York Paramount Theatre. The De-

(Alfred J. Buttler Photo)





troit Fox Wurlitzer is completely original. It is powered by twin 50-hp Spencer blowers located in a room in the lower of two basements. It fills seven chambers, plus rooms for the blowers and relay. The foundation, main and diaphone chambers are to the left of the proscenium. The orchestral, solo and two percussion chambers are to the right. Distributed among all of the chambers are two Marimbas, two sets of Cathedral Chimes, three Xylophones, two Chrysoglotts, Piano, tuned Sleigh Bells, Glockenspiel, tuned Tympanis and many drums, traps and effects. The pipework includes three Diapasons, three Flutes, three Tibia Clausa ranks, four Vox Humana ranks, eight sets of strings, Dulciana, Quintadena, Kinura, Krumet, Musette, Saxophone, Clarinet, Orchestral Oboe, Oboe Horn, French Horn, Tuba Mirabilis, Trumpets, Tuba Horn, two Brass and an English Post Horn. Eleven ranks are extended to 16' pitch and the Diaphonic Diapason is extended even further to 32' pitch. These lowest twelve pipes are housed in a special room. Four of the major ranks are voiced on 25 inches of wind along with the 32-foot Diaphones. To the right of the stage is a slave console which has access to the same relay and, therefore, the total organ.

Only a few recordings have been made on this fine instrument. The first (about 1955) by Reginald Foort is still available and includes selections from the Fox and the Mosque in Richmond, Virginia. Two other recordings, Ed Gress in about 1959 and Raymond Shelly in about 1961, are out of print and copies are very difficult to locate. Three concerts were performed by John Muri, two in 1967 and one on May 23, 1971. A recording of this latter concert is still available and represents the last commercial effort on this instrument. John Muri notes that an exact roster of the organists who played at the Fox is not available but that Armand "Jack" Franz played for many years, finishing his last engagement in 1939. Don Miller is known to have played in the mid-thirties. Merle Clark came from the Toledo Paramount for a short time before leaving for California. Tom Montgomery and "Wild Bill" Holleman have also played for short periods extending into the sixties.

The organ was featured during the 1967 ATOS convention but was not available for the 1974 convention program. However, an impromptu session did take place during that convention. At 1:00 a.m., after the theatre was emptied of its patrons, Don Baker took control of the console and was followed by many others until it was time for breakfast. Later in 1975, Bill Holleman played a concert on the Moller lobby organ. Because of the large number of people who showed up for this event on a stormy Sunday morning, a concert on the Wurlitzer was in order. This took place in December, 1976, when Fr. Jim Miller played a program which attracted a large audience. This was followed by a concert in May of 1977 with Gary Reseigh presiding. In November, 1978, another even larger presentation took place. This time it was Dennis James doing his score for the classic film *Wings*. Another highlight of that day was the personal appearance of Buddy Rogers, one of the stars of the film. The most recent concert at the Fox was presented on Sunday, October 11, 1981. For the first time in recent years, the concert

was staged on a Sunday afternoon rather than a Sunday morning. This concert was billed as a "Three Organist Extravaganza" featuring Dennis Minear, Fr. Jim Miller and John Steele, all organists at the Theatre Organ Pizza and Pipes in Pontiac, Michigan. Nearly 3000 attended this event, which lasted over 3½ hours!

Concerts such as this have been very important to those of us who are interested in theatres and theatre organs. For, in addition to viewing the theatre, we can hear the big sound of the pipes within the original huge space designed for them. Although you will not be privileged to experience the opening night festivities with three hours of entertainment consisting of 32 dancers, a 60-piece orchestra and 50-voice choir, the Movietone appearance of George Bernard Shaw and a first-class movie *Street Angel* featuring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, you will be able to imagine the grandeur of the night during some of the passages as played by our own artists during our convention in the same elegance that existed in 1928. SEE YOU AT THE DETROIT FOX! □

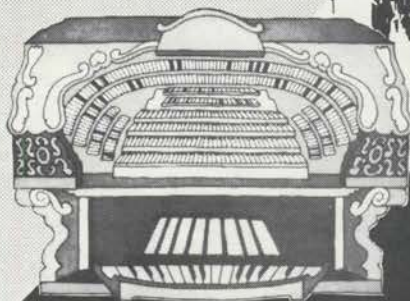
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