

# THE AVENUE THEATRE

by Dr. Edward J. Mullins

A high point of the 1975 ATOS Convention was the program at the Avenue Theatre in San Francisco. It will also be a venue during the 1983 conclave.

The Avenue was built in 1927 as a typical 1000-seat neighborhood theatre of the era. It was designed by Reid Brothers, the same architectural firm that designed San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel and Oakland's Grand Lake Theatre. San Francisco theatre pioneer Ben Levin has owned the house since 1930.

Originally, a Style D 2/6 Wurlitzer, Opus 1626, was installed in a small chamber to the right of the proscenium. The Avenue's full stage was used for vaudeville. The organ was later removed. In its halcyon days the best of Hollywood was screened for up to 5000 movie-goers per week.

The Avenue has been the home of many "firsts." It was first to revive vintage silent films in a 1927 theatre on a regular basis, of which more later. Most importantly, it was the first theatre to put a pipe organ back in, at a time when they were all coming out.

The organ installed in 1966 was the Style 240 Wurlitzer, Opus 1773, removed from Chicago's State-Lake Theatre in 1962. Originally a 3/13 installed in two chambers, it has been fully restored and modified. It now sports 15 ranks and is installed behind the screen. Main and Solo chambers are at stage level, with relays and switches in the basement. The percussion chamber is high above, just behind the proscenium crest.

The organ has been expanded to include a Wurlitzer English Post Horn on 15 inches of wind pressure, and a large-scale set of Wood Diaphones playing on 25 inches of wind pressure, originally installed in San Francisco's California Theatre. While almost completely rebuilt following its purchase in Chicago, the organ has recently been undergoing major re-leathering and expansion.

The chamber analysis is as follows.

Main chamber: Celeste, Clarinet, Diaphonic Diapason, Flute, Horn Diapason, Salicional, Viol d'Orchestre, Vox Humana. The Wood Diaphones are exposed over the Main chamber. Solo chamber: Brass Trumpet, Kinura, Orchestral Oboe, Post Horn, Tibia, Tuba. Percussion chamber: Chimes, Chrysoglott, Marimba Harp, Tuned Sleigh Bells, Xylophone. There is an upright piano in the pit. Toy counter: Bass Drum, Bird

1927 — workmen apply finishing touches to San Francisco's Avenue Theatre. Poster at lower left reads "Opens July 20."





Call, Castanets, Crash Cymbal, Door Bell, Fire Gong, Horses Hooves, Jazz Whistle, Ooga Horn, Siren, Snare Drum, Steamboat Whistle, Surf, Tambourine, Wood Block.

In its 16 years of exhibiting silent films the Avenue has operated with volunteer help, including organists, projectionists and house staff, for its Friday evening classic film shows. Many Avenue staffers, while enthusiastic about the organ, also share a deep interest in film.

A Barton four-poster lift, originally installed in the National Theatre in Milwaukee, has recently been added. Organists playing in the elevated position are now able to hear the organ much better. Current Avenue organists include Miss Jo Hughes, Kevin King, Warren Lubich, Lewis J. (Joe) Smith and Robert Vaughn.

Bob Vaughn began accompanying pictures in 1926 playing Saturday matinees at the Brayton Theatre in Long Beach, California. "Talkies" and church organ work interrupted his film cueing. He resumed his career as a movie organist in 1968.

In 1973 Vaughn was the first theatre organist to accompany on a theatre pipe organ the complete version of Abel Gance's 1927 film masterpiece *Napoleon*, using Kevin Brownlow's five-hour work print.

It was at the Avenue in 1973 where Francis Ford Coppola first saw *Napoleon* and developed the idea of presenting it with a full symphonic score. The film was exhibited twice with score compiled by Vaughn and four original three-screen tryptychs. In 1975 *Napoleon* was screened three times at the Avenue with Bob providing musical background at the Wurlitzer.



A stern Napoleon Bonaparte gazes down at organist Bob Vaughn during the 1975 presentation of the complete 1927 film epic *Napoleon* at the Avenue Theatre. (Joe Smith photo)

The five-hour version took the London Film Festival by storm in 1980, where it was accompanied by a 45-piece symphony orchestra with a score written by Carl Davis. The American version has a score composed and conducted by Carmine Coppola, Francis' father. The present edition runs four hours and uses only one tryptych for the finale.

The Avenue has been in the vanguard of silent film revivals, and is one of the few film houses to continue weekly silent film presentations using a Wurlitzer organ. It recently unreeled the original silent version of *Show Boat*, produced by Universal in 1929, which was its first showing in the Bay Area in fifty years. The film was believed lost, but was found in a film library in Russia. It had been taken from East Germany by the Soviets at the end of World War II. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer permitted the

Avenue to screen the 35mm restored print. Screen rights were acquired by M-G-M in the 1930's.

The Avenue also had the first major revival of dual projector 3-D films from the fifties. Studio prints of *It Came from Outer Space* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* were re-premiered to large audiences.

The Avenue has had several major organ concerts with Gaylord Carter, Ann Leaf, George Wright and the fondly remembered Eddie Dunstetter. The organ has been recorded several times on L-P albums with Lyn Larsen, Tom Hazleton and Warren Lubich. Both Larsen and Hazleton performed weekly during the late sixties, doing solos as well as picture cueing. The organ was the instrument heard in the background of "The New York Experience" with quadraphonic recording. □

Avenue Theatre's lighted dome and stage. Four-poster lift in concert position.

(Rudy Frey photo)



Avenue Theatre under construction, circa 1927. Note legend "Boulevard" theatre before name change.

