



Letters to the Editors

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Letters concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are welcome. Unless clearly marked "not for publication" letters may be published in whole or in part.

Address:
Editor, THEATRE ORGAN
3448 Cowper Court
Palo Alto, CA 94306

Dear Bob:

After much soul-searching, I've decided to devote most of my time to raising a family. Therefore, I won't be able to contribute to "Konsole Kapers" for a while. Deadlines are difficult to make with a young baby in the house!

It's been a lot of fun writing the articles, and I hope that at least a few of the ATOS membership may have learned and grown in their musician-ship as a result of the series.

Thank you for the privilege of writing for such a professional magazine. It's been a joy.

Sincerely,
Shirley Hannum Keiter

Dear Sir:

Something which seems to endlessly occur in stories about theatres and pipe organs is the repeating of rumors, falsehoods and incorrect statistics, even those having their origins over 50 years ago. Billy Nalle in the July/August 1983 THEATRE ORGAN interestingly brings up several areas of misinformation in his article "Sacred Cows and Foxes." However, even the sources he has relied upon for his "facts" aren't necessarily correct.

After spending over ten years attempting to ferret out the facts from the fiction on the San Francisco Fox Theatre, for a book I wrote on that long-since demolished house, I have learned a great deal about the "facts."

Nalle's details on the five 4/36's (an extra rank for the Brooklyn Fox) that were built by Wurlitzer as "specials" puts matters pretty well into perspective. Yet, in my discussions with the

late Richard Simonton about this subject, my interpretation was written as follows in *FOX — The Last Word*: "During construction of the Paramount, Jesse Crawford was lured away from the Chicago Theatre and hired to play the soon-to-be-opened New York house. Crawford made suggestions to Wurlitzer on specifications for the instrument. The organ builder officially referred to this particular model as a 'Special.' However, the unofficial and most commonly used title, 'Crawford Special,' was apparently bestowed by an employee in the factory."

Probably all the facts on this particular model instrument will never be fully known. People tend to affix labels that reflect an association not based on official records — "Fox Special" because four of the five "Specials" were installed in Fox Theatres.

More importantly, Nalle's remarks about the "largest and most expensive" theatre are somewhat easier to ascertain. Tracing history back to the early days of New York's Roxy Theatre reveals a much different picture than either Nalle or one of his sources, Ben Hall's *Best Remaining Seats*, gives.

When Hall was assembling his impressive book, he also was the unsuspecting victim of a fair amount of fiction. He states William Fox signed papers for purchase of the theatre after perhaps only one visit to the structure about a week before it opened in March, 1927. Trade publications reported on the matter of its purchase by Fox in the beginning of April, 1927, noting that the deal had

been consummated a short time earlier and no dollar amounts were released at that time. They also noted that purchase by Fox had been the culmination of some six months of negotiations. Study of the matter further suggests it is doubtful Fox signed paperwork in the theatre; rather it all appears to be a reporter's scenario — may sound good, but not necessarily accurate.

Until court records or other documents can be studied, I doubt the figures cast about on the Roxy's cost are correct. Trade magazines noted an \$8,000,000 figure; newspaper ads tossed out ten million, while Ben Hall (and Billy Nalle) thought it to be twelve million. There are many factors involved in the cost of a theatre — actual construction, equipment and land. Possibly the total might be the latter figure, if you combine all of these elements or maybe even throw in a land lease or such other cost.

The "trades" have also reported that the first mortgage was \$4,250,000. Ownership or lease of the land has not been fully detailed. In any event, until concrete evidence is gathered, the actual cost will not be known, but it probably is not the excessive \$12,000,000 so far reported.

An example of building cost was assembled on the Fox, San Francisco. Although complete information on this house is also lacking, merging facts and careful estimating revealed a building, furnishings and land costing under \$5,000,000. Adding in the lease covering 25 years, one can come up with nearly \$11,000,000.

In Nalle's story, he also touches upon the area of seating capacities, a subject usually very difficult to state in accurate terms. However, blueprints reproduced in an architectural book, *American Theatres of Today*, show the Roxy seating at 5920 in 1927, which rounded equals 6000, but to give the effect of being factual, the theatre's publicity department it might be assumed, came up with 6214 (even with breakdowns for each level). Other records show Radio City Music Hall closer to 5960, which means the Roxy was not the "world's largest theatre" for very long, but *one of the largest*.

And the statement that "... never has there been such a theatre of its expense and with all its features and decor..." leaves plenty of space for discussion. Maybe no one movie pal-

ace had all that was outstanding as a whole, when reviewing some 20,000 theatres in existence in 1929; it is true the Roxy was one of the most famous, with many wonders.

So whenever one does research on which future generations must rely, it is necessary to assemble such materials so that fact and fiction can be separated. Unfortunately, even Billy Nalle hadn't done his homework, thus falling victim to that against which he also cautioned.

Preston J. Kaufman
Pasadena

Billy Nalle responds:

Dear Sir:

Pres Kaufmann is liberal in his allegations, claiming my article in the July/August 1983 issue of THEATRE ORGAN contains "several areas of misinformation." He defines these as "rumors, falsehoods and incorrect statistics." Without knowing all my sources, he states further that "even the sources he [Billy] has relied upon for his 'facts' aren't necessarily correct." I'll begin by saying that neither are my sources necessarily incorrect. In addition to research done personally through the years from 1950 to 1972, I consulted many times four highly knowledgeable people of equally high integrity, historian Ben Hall, organ technician Dan Papp, businessman Dick Simonton and, through the latter, Jess Crawford. Simonton and Crawford had an exceptionally close friendship and such afforded me direct answers to questions I submitted to Simonton. Dick and I had many long talks during his stops in New York on business trips. I was living there during those years with many opportunities to talk with, and pour over documents and letters of, both Papp and Hall. There never has arisen any reason to doubt the validity of what I was shown and told.

Crawford said emphatically that he did *not* prepare the specifications for the New York Paramount Wurlitzer. Simonton quoted him as saying that "some genius at the factory was responsible; I never learned the person's identity. All I did was ask for a few more soft ranks on the accompaniment." Dick indicated such as being a third diapason (Horn), the Liebhich Flute and the Krumet. It matters not who coined the phrase "Crawford Special" as the point,

stated in my article, is that Wurlitzer *itself*, officially, never called it that.

Regarding William Fox signing a five million dollar agreement to finish the Roxy Theatre and gain control of it, if my words are read for themselves, and nothing read into them, what was written did not preclude the usual period of negotiation prior to signing. Does anyone think it logical that a man like Fox would come inside off the street and on a lark sign such a document *without* having reached at least a tentative decision through negotiation? Hall told me he had had several talks with Roxy, Jr. (last manager of the theatre) who provided the account of Fox coming to the theatre to check it directly before making a firm commitment. The *point* is that, had Fox *not* been as impressed with the theatre as Roxy, Jr. reported, Fox would not have consummated the deal. After all, he already was well along in planning for the Fox Theatre in an area of Brooklyn close enough to Manhattan to draw patronage fully as much from the latter as from Brooklyn.

As to the twelve million cost of the Roxy, such was noted more than once from some of the documents Ben had collected through at least 15 years for his famous book. There was no indication, either yea or nay, whether that figure included land cost. However, if you take any other theatre, add its land cost to its total construction cost and then compare the total with the Roxy's cost *minus* its land price, the Roxy still will be by a fat margin the most expensive motion picture theatre to have been built. Various letters and memoranda from Roxy revealed clearly his intention to have the most expensive materials and features. In view of all this, it does not strain credulity in believing the figure of twelve million was not "excessive." In projection, lighting, sound and stage equipment, etc., it was far advanced and the Radio City Music Hall alone today is comparable. Through the years, beginning in the summer of 1950, I've toured the highest nooks and lowest crannies in all the major Fox theatres, among numerous others. I say categorically to anyone that even a one-eyed pirate could have discerned the Roxy being in a class by itself. (Its lone "weak sister" feature was the auditorium organ with its bland voicing and understage installation.) Now, saying this infers nothing

unkind and unfair about any of the other great theatres, Fox-owned or not.

As to the Roxy seating total, Ben Hall showed me letters and memoranda from Roxy to the architect and the seating supply company with clear indication that the theatre opened with 6214 seats. A letter from the seating company to Roxy, with a carbon copy indicated to the architect, offered to supply somewhat smaller seats for most of the balcony so Roxy's desire for a record capacity could be satisfied. Roxy's initials were in the margin with indication of approval. This was at a time later than the blueprints to which Pres refers. This is bolstered further with what occurred barely three years later, as my article stated, management deciding the balcony seats were too confining and replacing them with larger ones. That reduced the house total to approximately 6100. At that figure, it still retained the largest capacity of any regular, commercial, motion picture theatre.

There was one error in my article and corrected information from my Associated Press source did not reach me before the printer's deadline. The correct seating number of the Music Hall remains as it was on its opening, 5960. My AP friend had written an article about the *Porgy and Bess* show early in 1983 and his story point turned on seating capacity. He told me what management had told him, that there were 5800 seats. Subsequently, my source learned that the theatre's office withholds about 150+ for complimentary purposes. That cleared the matter and, surely, not for the world would I do injustice to the Music Hall's seating "calories!"

In all the foregoing, I submit that clearly my "homework" indeed *was* done, that fact was separated from fiction, through 22 years of research with the aid of respected, trustworthy sources. It suits me fine to have readers now play judge and jury and draw their own conclusions.

Billy Nalle
Wichita

Indianapolis

Sat., July 7 thru Thurs., July 12, 1984

**ATOS 29th
Annual Convention**