

# The Saving of the CHICAGO THEATRE

by Bob Boin

It was with great joy and relief that CATOE greeted the November 2 press release from the Mayor's office that the Chicago Theatre had been saved. No group had fought harder or longer to save this 3380-seat palace and its magnificent Wurlitzer theatre organ. It is with a sense of pride that the CATOE membership can look to its part in saving this theatre, not once but twice in their 14-year association.

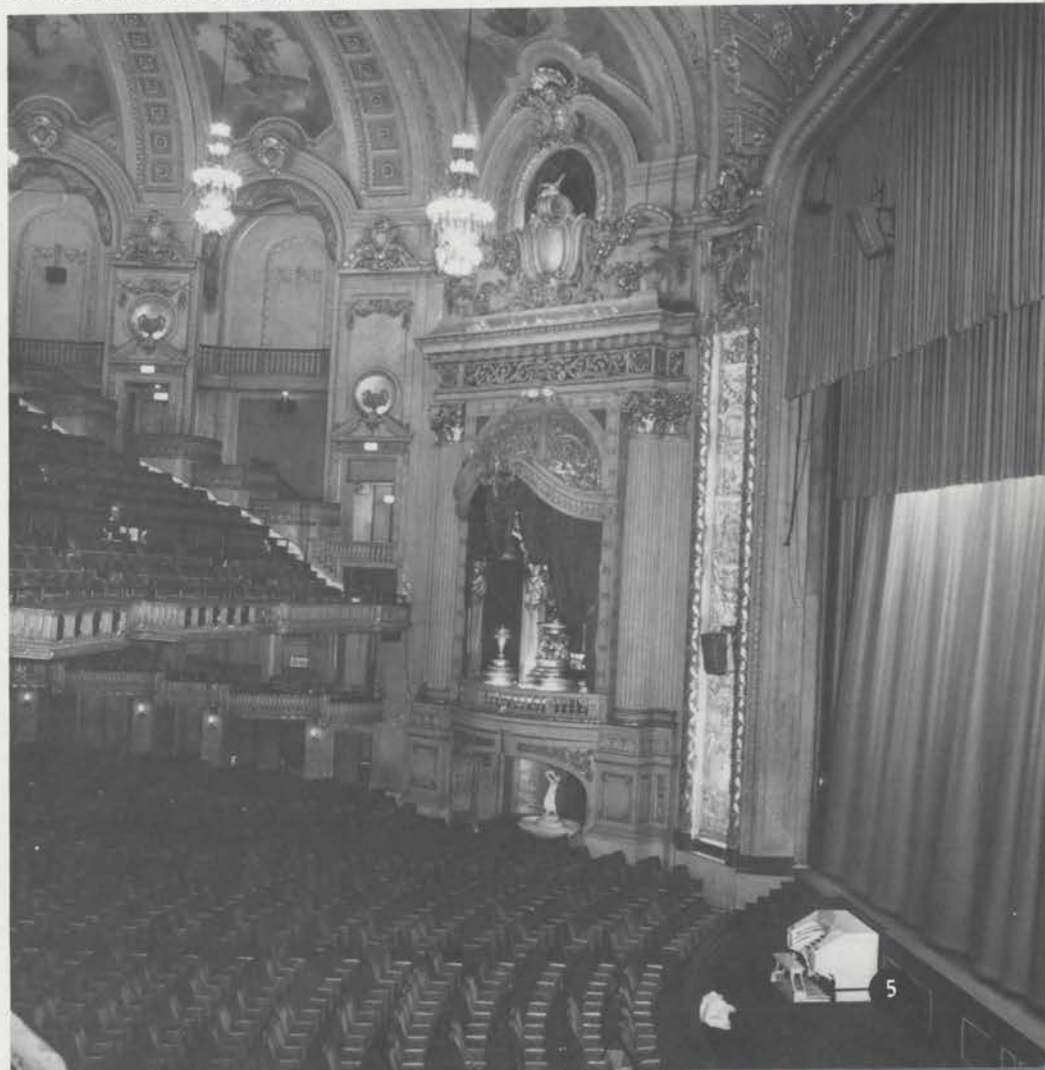
The new owners, the Chicago Theater Preservation Group, headed by prominent local attorney Marshall Holleb and consultant Margery al Chalabi, plan to renovate the 63-year-old theatre and adjoining 1870 office building, known as the Page Brothers Building, into a new entertainment center for the downtown area. The Page Building is the city's last remaining building with a cast iron facade.

The theatre with its 4/29 theatre pipe organ will be used for both live and film presentations. Plitt Theatres, the previous owners, will run three movie theatres on the lower level of the Page Building and book the larger Chicago auditorium for exclusive showings and world premieres.

Besides the lower level theatres, the entertainment complex will contain commercial space on the first floor of

Left side of the auditorium, showing present location of the organ console.

(Preston J. Kaufmann photo)





the Page Building, but the second floor will become a restaurant/bar complex accessible to the Chicago Theatre at two points on the mezzanine level. It is expected that the theatre will require at least three months for cleaning and restoration but will remain closed until the Page Brothers complex can be finished. Target date is November of 1985.

Theatre renovation plans call for all new carpeting and seats, a complete washing of the auditorium, including murals, and touch-up painting. The lobbies, stage, backstage and washroom facilities will receive the most attention. New light fixtures will be created to replace those lost in the 1950s remodelling, and the removal of a suspended plaster ceiling in the cross lobby will expose the original high relief barrel vaulted ceiling.

Although the theatre will not be officially open, the new owners have assured CATOE that the convention program will go on as scheduled, even if they have to rent folding chairs. They are very interested in the type of entertainment that CATOE provides and have agreed to provide for new separate organ and orchestra lifts when the stage area and pit are enlarged.

So much for the details of what will happen. What follows is a brief, though it may not seem so, description of how CATOE played its role in the theatre's fate. Although chance played no small part in the final outcome, it was CATOE members who were in the right place or knew the right people at the right time which brought the whole thing together.

Back in 1971, CATOE member Bill Reiger, who was working on the Oriental organ crew, paid a visit to the Chicago Theatre with the hope of resurrecting its long-silent organ. At first the district manager of ABC Great States Theatres, successors to the Balaban & Katz/Paramount-Publix theatre chain (a book within itself) told Bill that the organ was no longer in the theatre. Bill had closely followed the sale of all Chicago movie house organs when B & K announced its \$1000-per-keyboard policy and could not remember the Chicago's organ being among them. The district manager, Ray Thompson, had jealously guarded the organ since it had last been used. He was managing director at that time and when he was promoted to general manager con-

tinued to rebuff all offers to purchase or view it. Bill later returned to the theatre with Hal Pearl, organist for many years at the Aragon Ballroom. Hal was a friend of Mr. Thompson. This was the key that was needed. Bill found five large chambers which had been securely padlocked for some 20 years. The entire organ and relay sat there just as they had been left. Only dust covered the area. Although the organ had been abandoned, the theatre was still a flagship theatre and maintenance had not allowed the roof to leak into the chambers, as was generally the case in other recently uncovered organs. Bill and crew of Val Escobar, Tad Ducee, Frank Pokorny and George Smith eagerly began the task of restoring one of Wurlitzer's most renowned instruments.

Where the chambers had fared well, the console was not so lucky. As part of the Ice Shows presented in the '50s, a permanent stage extension was built out over the orchestra lift. Although the carpenters made sure that the organ console was not damaged by the platform, the continual freezing and melting of the ice allowed highly corrosive brine solution to run freely all over the console. After cutting a hole in the extension floor for closer investigation, the console was judged salvageable. With all parts now fully inspected, it was decided to turn on the organ. It just might work!

If there were any ciphers, they were drowned out by the sound of air rushing out of almost all of the regulators. Leather dry rot had taken its toll. Thus began a four-year odyssey which culminated in the re-premiere of Opus 434 in 1975. With a full house and Lyn Larsen and Hal Pearl at the console, the public heard once again what Jesse Crawford always called his favorite organ.

CATOE's relationship with the theatre continued to grow after the re-premiere. CATOE member Pete Miller was now theatre manager and with his encouragement, work began on uncovering much of the decoration hidden by the 1950s remodelling. Club members Joe Duci Bella, Bill Benedict and John Peters made great strides in lobby restoration, while Charlie Habschmidt and Dave Schultz joined the crew. Greg Simanski and John Peters fixed the orchestra lift and all cast a gleeful eye toward the long-darkened stage. Luckily, the Chicago had stage shows well

Exterior of the Chicago Theatre. Page Brothers Building at the left of the theatre.

into the '50s and the stage was in fairly good shape. The screen, largest picture sheet in continuous use in the United States, and its six huge "Voice of the Theatre" speakers was still capable of being flown off the stage (with the help of four strong stage hands). So in 1978, CATOE was ready to present the largest stage show in a downtown house in 20 years. With Sally Rand and her famous fan dance as the headliner (the same dance on the same stage for which she was arrested during the 1933 World's Fair), CATOE sold out the house, turned away many at the door and proved that good entertainment could draw and that the Chicago Theatre could still put on a show.

1978 was a very active year for CATOE and the theatre. Paper work was prepared by Don Lampert to have the building put on the National Historic Register and considered for city landmark status. To continue the fight for landmark status, which was sure to anger the owners, a separate support group was founded by CATOE members Bill Berry and Doug Christenson. Chicago Landmarks, now known as Chicago Theatre Trust, CCT, allowed CATOE to continue work on the organ and theatre without direct involvement in saving the building.

1978 also saw the theatre nearly slip through the cracks and reemerge as a new ABC studio and office building. A chance look at an overexposed photograph by CATOE member Paul Jannusch, who noticed that a new office building appeared to be on the sight of the Chicago Theatre, and the discussion that followed later that evening at the Oriental crew session, lead to an investigation by CATOE friend and theatre critic Richard Christenson. Mr. Christenson, who writes for the *Chicago Tribune*, was able to confirm ABC's plans to tear down the theatre and erect a new studio/office building. His subsequent article created such a public outcry that ABC publicly dropped plans for the site.

The next three years were relatively uneventful, with CATOE doing an annual show at the Chicago each October. Pete Miller left Plitt Theatre management to become a projection-







ist and Stan Hightower became the new theatre manager. Times were changing for downtown theatres. They were becoming a financial drain on their owners. Because he did not want the home office to think he had the organ's interest above the company's, Stan chose not to renew his CATOE membership. This actually worked very well for both the organ and the company. Stan was an avid theatre organ nut and a pretty good organist. Many nights after closing the books, he would retire to the console and play for several hours. The continuous use of the organ helped to keep it in better repair. And as a dedicated employee, Stan made sure the theatre stayed as clean as his budget allowed.

1981 marked another key year in the theatre saga. The 1927 classic silent film *Napoleon* had opened with live orchestra and organ accompaniment to rave reviews in New York's Radio City Music Hall. The studio was considering a national tour with Dennis James as the organist. When a Chicago date was considered, Dennis immediately called CATOE Chairman John Peters to advise him of the studio's plans to use the Arie Crown Theatre and a rental electronic organ. John began a nonstop telephone campaign to move the performance to the Chicago Theatre, at one point referring to the modern Arie Crown as a "dirigible hangar with dreadful acoustics" (true). John even helped work out an arrangement between Zoetrope Studios and Pat Burns, the district manager, which made everyone happy, especially CATOE.

The theatre was, however, a little dirtier than the public had remembered and so it was decided to close one week before the scheduled performances. In its 60-year history, this was the first time the Chicago Theatre had been "dark." (The house had been completely redecorated without closing in the '30s. At that time all new murals, eight huge auditorium chandeliers and all new seats were installed.) CATOE took advantage of this opportunity to help spruce up the theatre. Vice Chairman Bob Boin, along with members Bob Chaney, Chris Carlo and Bill Benedict, arranged to take days off from their regular jobs and spent the week completely repainting the rear colonnade and wall of the auditorium, including brushed gold accents. With

the exception of a blown wind sock, quickly repaired by CATOE members Grant Meyers and Bob Boin by wrapping seating material around the hole, the performances all went well. The marriage of organ and orchestra set in a magnificent movie palace with its thousands of hidden colored lights was an experience which will be long remembered. The movie that was only scheduled for four shows was able to sell twelve. Some 20,000 people paraded through the Chicago in those weeks, many for the first time. They were awestruck by what they saw. For those who had been there before, it was like running into an old and dear friend who looked as good as ever.

The crowds generated by *Napoleon* brought a new life to the downtown, a point which was noticed by the city administration. Shortly thereafter a winter festival, called "Loop Alive," was scheduled for the following February. The idea was to use the downtown movie houses, all of which had stages, for various forms of live and special film entertainment. People staying downtown generated excitement and tax revenue. The city soon learned that of the seven movie houses (excluding the Auditorium theatre and the Civic Opera House complex), only the Chicago's stage was still usable. The Chicago became the focus for the big name acts. Liza Minelli, whose father Vincent once worked in the building for Balaban & Katz, and Bob Hope headed the bill that year.

At first, the promoters hired by the city were reluctant to accept CATOE's suggestion to use the organ for "seating music." They finally agreed to 30 minutes before each performance. However, the reaction was so favorable that they asked the organist to begin when the doors opened and continue until performance time.

The second "Loop Alive," billed as bigger and better than the first, saw the Douglas Fairbanks feature *Robin Hood* with Dennis James at the organ and a 36-piece orchestra as a regular scheduled event. CATOE would have had a hard time paying for that show on its own, but its only cost was postage to mail flyers to the membership.

The performance was spectacular. Those ATOS members who had seen the same performance given at the Detroit convention, all agreed that the Chicago show had been just as good, if not better, for the Chicago's

audience really participated. They booed and hissed the villains and oohed and aahed at the love scenes.

Because of all the favorable publicity, CATOE decided that it was time to use the organ for intermissions on the weekends. Club members Bob Chaney, Dennis Wolkowicz and Cary d'Amico shared the honors on a regular basis. With a series of good film bookings, the audience was very appreciative.

In the fall of 1982, the question of city landmark status for the theatre had finally reached the public testimony stage. After much debate, the CATOE board reluctantly concluded that it should limit itself solely to the significance of the organ. Plitt Theatres had become increasingly unhappy with the landmark process. Vice Chairman Bob Boin and board member Bob Chaney presented the official club testimony as to the use of the organ for the first electronically recorded phonograph records and to the significant part that Jesse Crawford and Opus 434 played in the marketing of Wurlitzer's Unit Orchestra. The remainder of the testimony saw a number of CATOE members giving supporting statements while "wearing different hats." Over 40 percent of those presenting statements were CATOE members. After all testimony, the Commission unanimously recommended landmark status for both the theatre and its organ. In January of 1983 the full City Council voted to adopt the Commission's recommendations. Chicago had its first movie palace landmark, its second landmark theatre and its first musical landmark.

Not unexpectedly, Plitt Theatres filed for a demolition permit. When the permit was refused, a lawsuit followed. The suit dragged on for months with no resolution. As each day passed, it became increasingly clear that the theatre was in real danger. The only ideas put forth, so far, for the theatre's reuse were the "Theatre Row concept" (much like Cleveland's Playhouse Square) and the Chicago Theatre Trust's proposal for live performances. CCT's proposal was based on a 1980 study by the Shlaes Company jointly funded by CCT and CATOE. CCT's proposal was very sound but lacked the political backing necessary for anything to get accomplished in Chicago.

Just as things were moving from

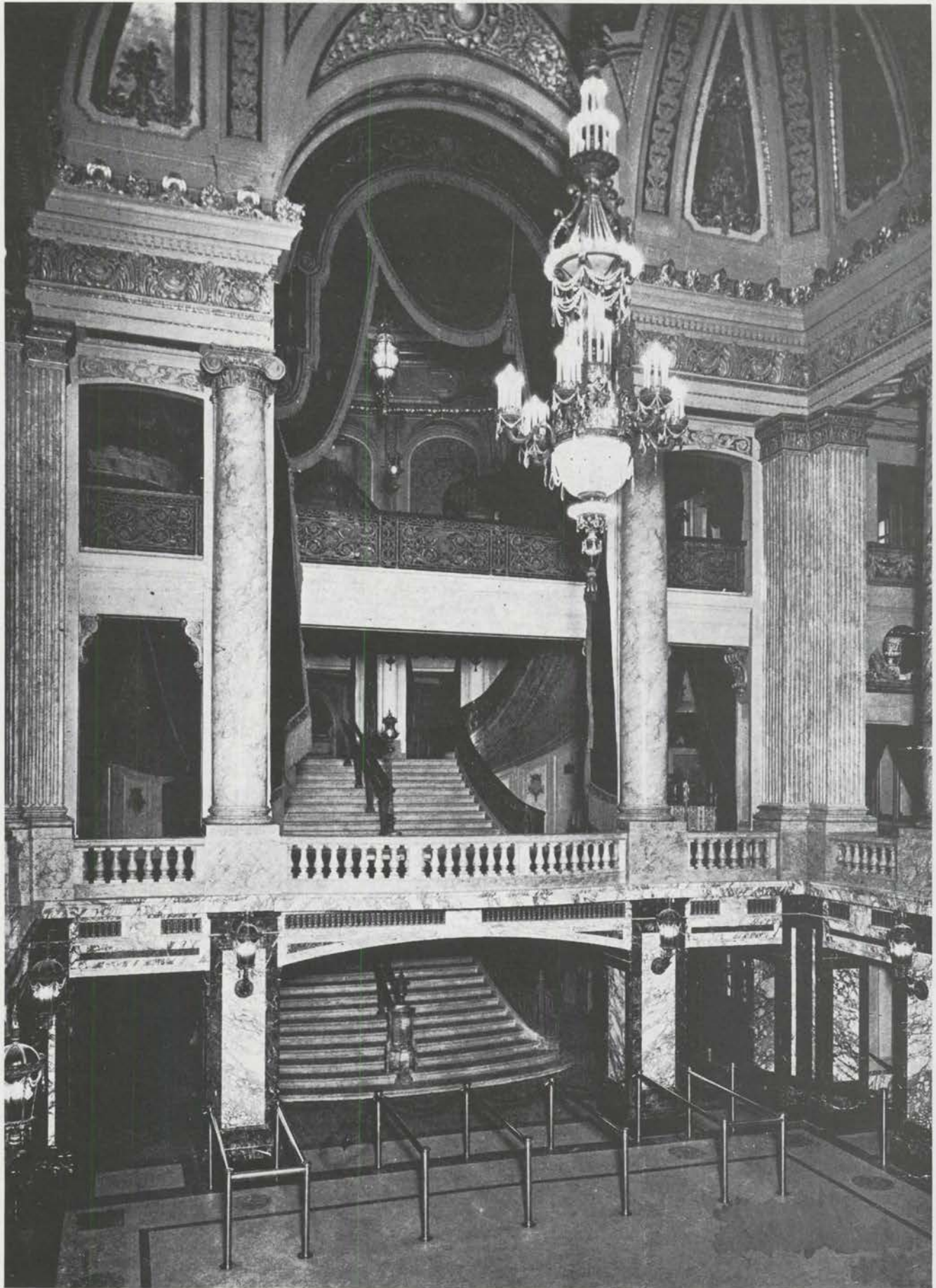




Grand lobby, looking toward main entrance on State Street.

*(B'hend and Kaufmann Archives from the Helgesen collection)*

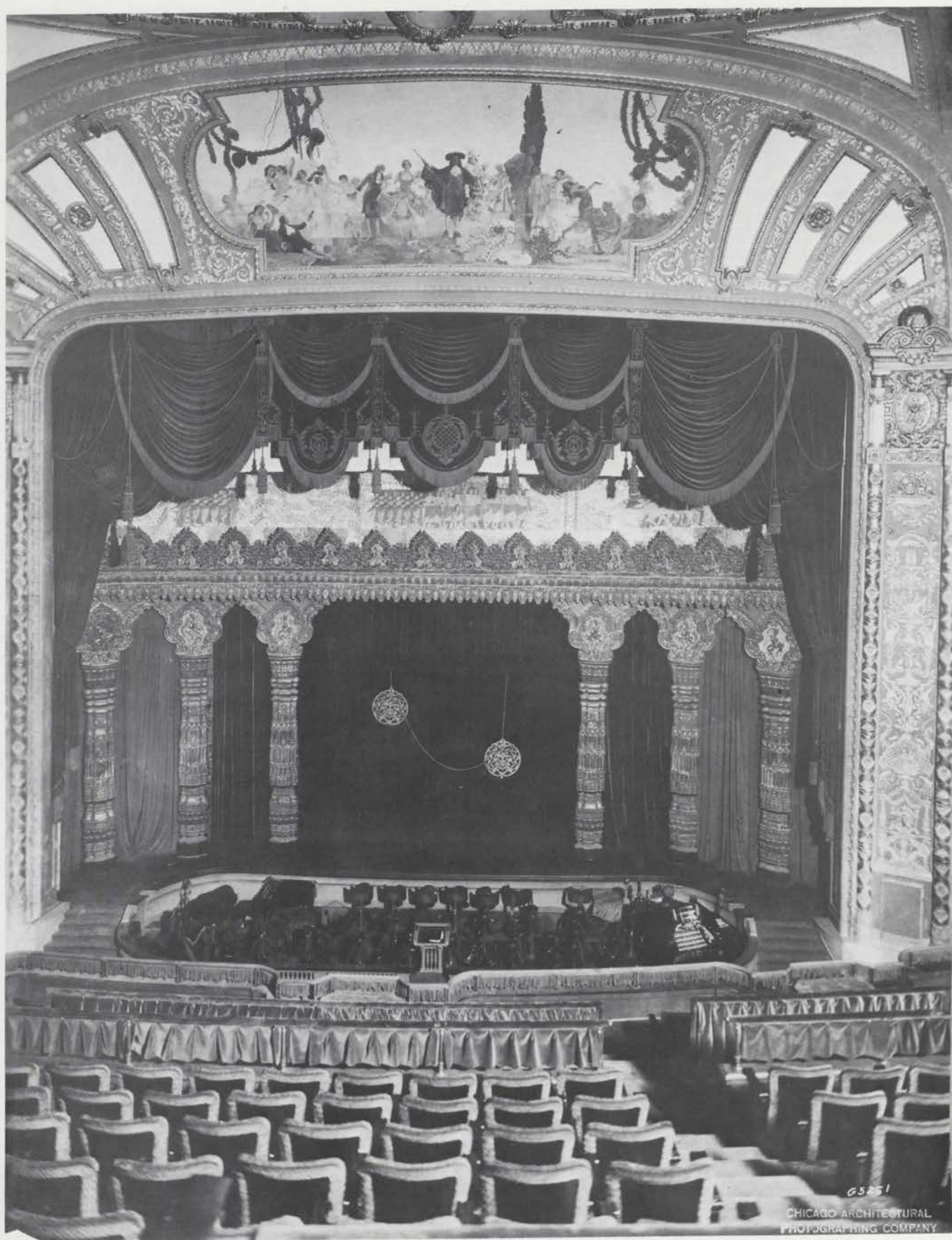




Grand lobby and grand staircase.

*(B'hend and Kaufmann Archives from the Helgesen collection)*





65251

CHICAGO ARCHITECTURAL  
PHOTOGRAPHING COMPANY

View of the stage, proscenium and orchestra pit when the theatre opened on October 26, 1921.

*(B'hend and Kaufmann Archives from the Helgesen collection)*



bad to worse, the prestigious City Club announced that it had adopted the saving of the Chicago Theatre as its project of the year. Through its director, Larry Horst, a specialist in publicity, the theatre's fate became front page news. The City Club's proposal was a mixture of movie museum with a return to the good old days of movie premieres and stage presentations. Unfortunately, both CCT and the City Club plans suffered from the same drawback — both required large amounts of city money. The new administration had discovered, however, that they could not afford to fund the project.

At some point in this soap opera, the al Chalabi group formed and put together a package of tax shelters and credits such that the city need not participate. The city was all for this idea but the court case between Plitt and the city had become so bitter that it was impossible to get all the parties to sit down together. Add to this a city council at odds with the Mayor and numerous land swap deals and counter law suits and you have the makings of a great movie.

Meanwhile, CATOE had continued to meet with all the new participants as they came and went. Tuesday crew night became Tuesday tour and arm twisting night. Once the talks between the al Chalabi group and its backer settled down to concrete proposals, all that was necessary was to get the buyer and the seller together. In the delicate, and sometimes not so delicate, negotiations which followed, two CATOE names stand out. The Very Reverend Thomas Franzman, "Father Tom," rector of Quigley Seminary, a high school for men wishing to enter the priesthood, and now-former CATOE chairman John Peters. Father Tom, an avid theatre organ nut, also collects full-size fire engines and provided CATOE with the space to store the Oriental Wurlitzer in his "garage." It was a lucky coincidence that a number of leading aldermen and other city officials are also Quigley alumni. With the help of Father Tom, John Peters representing CATOE was able to shuttle within the city administration and the al Chalabi group relaying information, often suggesting, cajoling and arm twisting compromises to the numerous problems which would pop up.

Planning Commissioner Elizabeth

Hollender actually looked forward to her daily phone calls and barrages from John as much as she enjoyed the theatre tours and arm twisting. At least twice the deal was just about to be announced, only to fall through. Then the ceiling fell in. On advice of its legal counsel, to prevent possible catastrophic losses should it lose in the lawsuit with Plitt Theatres, the city announced it would issue the demolition permit. A court injunction granted a 30-day reprieve, but it appeared that all was lost.

About this time the Mayor's office announced the appointment of Thomas Coffey, a Quigley alumnus, as Director of Intergovernmental Affairs for the City of Chicago. Before he even had time to settle in his new office, he was met by Father Tom and John Peters for lunch. That evening he had a three-hour tour and jawboning session at the theatre. Mr. Coffey agreed that it would be a good idea for the city to meet with the theatre owners and settle this affair once and for all. After a scheduling mixup, a meeting did take place on Tuesday, October 30. All that anyone would say about the meeting was that the theatre owners went away smiling. It appeared that a deal might go through. The only point remaining on the al Chalabi group's list of problems was the question of a UDAG grant.

"Would the city support them in this effort?"

The chief administrative officer for the finance committee, which handles UDAG grants, Dan Kubasiek, was a personal friend of Father Tom's. With that information, John and Father Tom descended on his office. Mr. Kubasiek stated that had "anyone asked him the question earlier, the answer would have been the same, YES. The city would do everything it could to assist in processing the grant application."

The Mayor's office announced the sale of the theatre three days later.

There still are a few minor details to iron out, but all sides are happy. No one is happier than the CATOE membership. It was their determination to keep the magnificent Wurlitzer in its original setting. The work needed to put on the big public show to keep the theatre in the public eye often made little profit, but they did it anyway.

To those CATOE members who dragged friends and family to these shows, to the crew members who kept the organ always playable, to those who helped paint and repaint the lobbies so the theatre always looked its best, and to those other ATOS members who supported CATOE in its letter writing campaigns, the Board of Directors says "thank you." We all did it and we are proud. □



**HOTEL  
AND  
CONVENTION CENTER**  
Albuquerque, New Mexico



**HOME OF THE FORMER NEW YORK ROXY  
KIMBALL ORGAN CONSOLE**  
Organ restoration by Hockmuth-Stankey Organs, Inc., New Lenox, Illinois

**THE CLASSIC**  
6815 Menaul NE  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110  
(505) 881-0000      Reservations: 1-800-528-1234

Five Manual Kimball Roxy Theatre Console with 28 ranks now owned by Phil Maloof.