



Joliet's Rialto Theatre

by Taylor J. Trimby

One of the highlights of "Pipes Alive in '85" will be a trip to the Rialto Theatre in Joliet, Illinois. The theatre has been restored and renovated to show its original splendor.

The Rialto Theatre, a dream of the Rubens brothers, opened on May 24, 1926. These men had been involved in this business for some time, including building the largest theatre in Joliet at the time, the Princess, which seated 813 and had a two-manual Hinners organ. But the brothers wanted more, and decided on the building of the Rialto.

The project began in November of 1919, with the purchase of land and houses in the area. Five years later, the excavation commenced and was finished May 10, 1924. C. W. and George Rapp were commissioned to design the Rialto. They had designed

many other houses, including the Chicago, Uptown and Oriental theatres in Chicago. Their designs brought pleasure and escape to a whole generation of Americans who wanted to make believe.

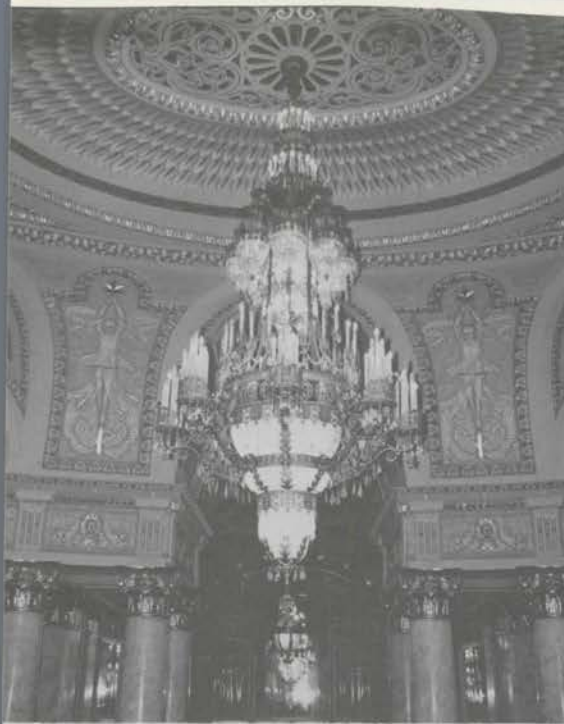
Opening night brought people from all over the area to see Joliet's "Wonder Theatre." The opening was the exciting conclusion to "Greater Joliet Week." People lined the streets to get in to see the theatre. The lucky 1900+ who had tickets were treated to an event they would never forget. As they entered the theatre, their eyes focused on the "Hall of Mirrors," and beautiful plaster-cast figures made by Gene Romeo, sculptor. They saw the mighty arch between the Esplanade and Rotunda areas, and the

ABOVE: The auditorium of the Rialto Theatre, as seen from the stage.

eight-arm crystal chandelier — 20 feet high with 250 lights — in the center of the rotunda. Patrons heard music from the lobby organ, which was operated from the Barton console in the theatre. Upon entering the auditorium, they looked at the gold and silver colors which continued from the lobby, and the beautiful proscenium arch, which was adorned with Apollo, Diana and other Greek and Roman figures.

The house lights dimmed and the show began. Organist Leo Terry played the Barton, the stage show was the "Evolution of Joliet," and the feature film was *Mlle. Modiste*.

Throughout the many years, the Rialto Theatre was host to many rising stars — Bob Hope, Burns and Allen, Jack Benny, all the Big Bands and many other performers. As the times



The huge crystal chandelier in the rotunda of the Rialto Square Theatre. Twenty feet tall with 250 lamps, it weighs 4000 pounds.

changed, so did the theatre. Out went silents, stage shows and regular organ performances. In came the fads — talkies, 3D and color movies. The late 1950s brought the theatre a “face-lift.” The house was painted, and the main floor seats were changed from the straight back to recliners.

It was about that time that the organ group “Kimbar” came into being. They kept the organ going after Joe Lyons left and revived stage shows featuring organists Kay McAbee, Larry Roou, John Muri, Don Baker and others, as well as local bands, choirs and other groups. They produced these shows several times a year.

Then in the late 1960s the downtown began its decline. Stores moved to the west side of town. The theatre began to show movies with less quality, and the audience changed. After Kimbar left in 1969, the organ usage was almost nil. For the next two

years, the organ was abused by ushers and others in the theatre. But in February of 1971 JATOE was organized. The club began to work on the organ to keep it playing, and got an agreement with the theatre management to play the organ during the early evening intermissions on Saturdays. The work crew started to rebuild, but they were hampered by many factors, including lack of help.

Patronage fell off and talk of selling or tearing down the Rialto began. JATOE had an organ concert featuring the late Tony Tahlman in 1974, and Dorothy Mavrith heard of the theatre’s problems. She began the campaign to “Save the Rialto,” and it was through her efforts that the theatre was saved. She formed the Rialto Square Arts Association and began fund raisers to help. Several programs were presented in an effort to raise the needed cash to purchase the theatre. With the help of the State of Illinois, the City of Joliet, and the concerned citizens of the area, the theatre was saved — but the fun had just begun.

After completing a detailed analysis of the history and architecture of the Rialto Square Theatre, Conrad Schmitt Studios of New Berlin, Wisconsin, began the artistic restoration of the Rialto. Colors and materials were matched to complement the theatre’s elegant architecture. The restorers made every effort to transform the interior back to, or surpass, its original splendor. The broken plaster was repaired or replaced and the entire theatre was repainted by hand, with the final touch being the highlights of gold and silver leafing.

With the theatre closed for repairs, it was easier for the JATOE work crew to repair chests, windlines and reservoirs. The organ was beginning to return to its original sounds as re-

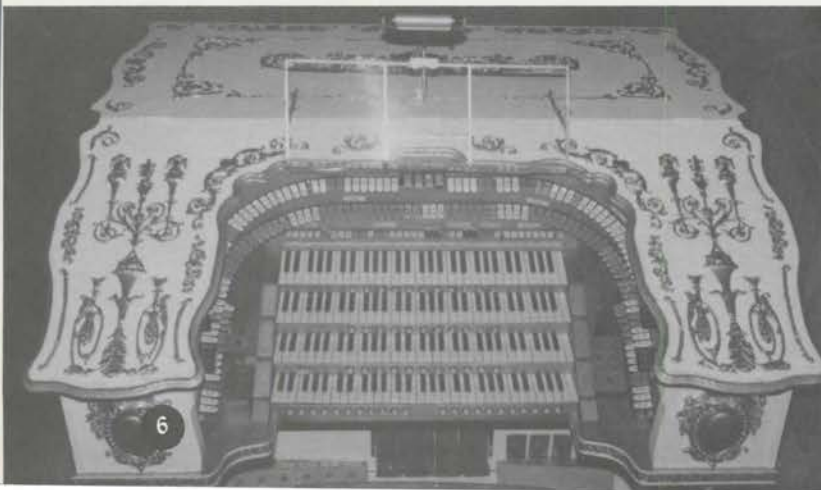
pairs were completed.

Then the finishing touches were made, and the theatre was ready. The “new beginning” finally occurred on November 27, 1981. Since that time, the theatre management has tried to keep the performances equal to the theatre’s beauty. Many performers, including Victor Borge and the Chicago Pops (grand re-opening November 27, 1981), Liberace, Bobby Vinton and Andy Williams have appeared at the theatre.

The 4/21 Golden-Voiced Barton Grande pipe organ is located on the right side of the theatre. The organ chambers, two on each side, have decorative, hand wrought ornamental iron fronts depicting vines and flowers in prismatic colors. The console was originally painted all gold with gold highlights, but has been changed to white with gold leaf highlights to better accept the modern lighting. JATOE has updated the Barton with a computerized combination action. The computer gives the ability to have four different settings per number instead of one. Work is continuing on the second touch springs and relay, which haven’t worked in many years. The club has recently purchased three ranks of pipes with the help of the Will County Metropolitan Exposition and Auditorium Authority and the Cultural Arts Council. Missing ranks purchased were a Saxophone and a Kinura, and the Trumpet was replaced. The organ club has also replaced the missing pipes to fill the “holes” in many of the ranks. The organ will sound as it hasn’t in many years.

When you enter the Rialto Square Theatre, you will definitely know why the theatre is known to the people of the area as the “JEWEL OF JOLIET.” □

Rialto Square Theatre 4/21 Barton.



The original 1926 console of the 4/21 Grande Barton organ in the Rialto Theatre, Joliet, Illinois.

