

# The Byrd Theatre

America's Most Beautiful Neighborhood Movie Palace

by Miles J. Rudisill, Jr.

Even as Richmond's Byrd Theatre swung open its 28 magnificent brass doors to the public on Christmas Eve 1928, the silent films the organ was designed to accompany were fast taking a back seat to the "talkies." This beautiful theatre, however, remains today as a monument to the past and a hope for the future, as it is one of the last surviving movie palaces still in operation as a commercial enterprise. Ten years ago the Byrd was recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia as being the last of its kind in the state, and it is now a Virginia Historic Landmark and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. It is recognized as probably America's best-preserved example of a neighborhood movie palace. Designed in the manner of an opera house by architect and contractor Fred Bishop, a native Richmonder, the theatre was decorated by Brounet Studios of New York in a basic color scheme of red and gold in the French Baroque style of the Napoleonic period.

The theatre operated continuously for nearly 55 years, but was closed after its last performance of *Giant* on May 15, 1983. The Neighborhood Theatre chain had operated this jewel of a movie palace for 45 years; however, the changing customs of booking arrangements and movie-going habits, accounting for mounting losses by the chain, caused the final decision. But the magnificent house refused to die, even though its future remained uncertain for a period of months until the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Warren of Arlington, Virginia, decided to re-open the theatre under independent management.

Duane Nelson, who had managed the theatre for the Neighborhood chain, was appointed General Manager, and it was under his guidance that needed restoration was un-

dertaken. Because most of the original fixtures remained and were in working condition, much of the restoration involved painting and cleaning.

The lobby was painted, sponged to be exact, and was done over three times before the desired effect was achieved. Rag painting was too coarse in texture, so paint was applied by hand, using a sponge dipped in the paint. Three colors were blended by sponge to give the look that was so popular in the '20s. All the brass doors were removed, cleaned, re-

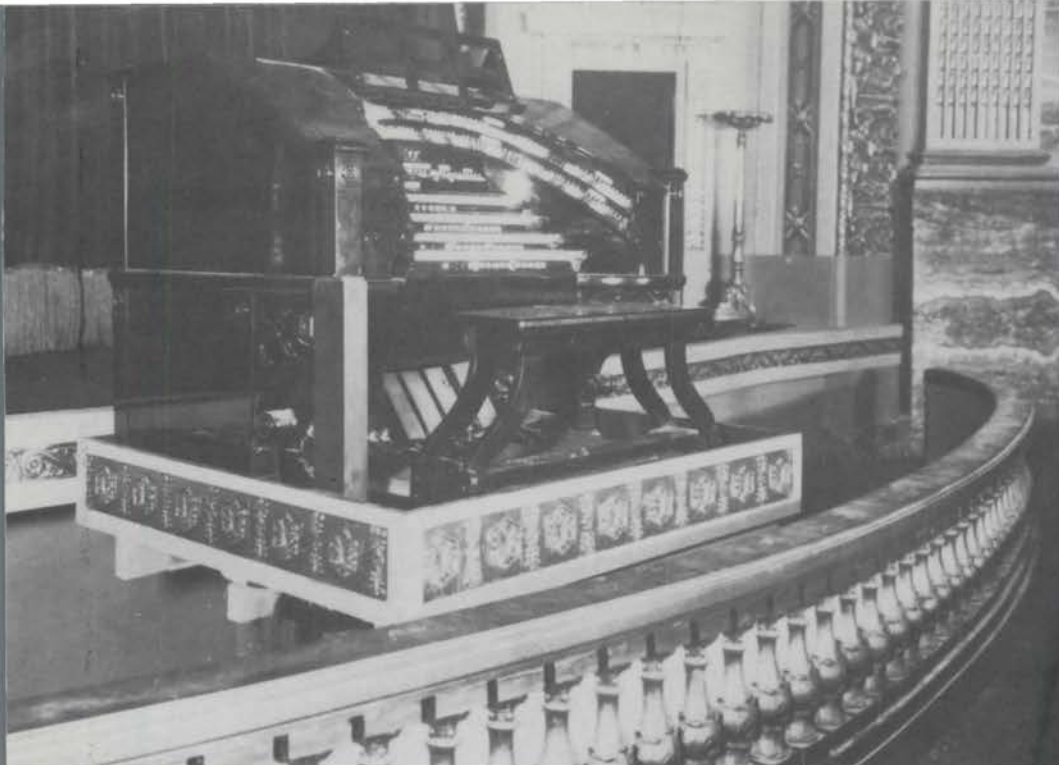
stalled and polished. The brass light fixtures were removed and cleaned; missing fixtures were copied and replaced. Chrome was removed from restroom fixtures, revealing solid brass pipes and fittings.

The foyer remains intact except for the "new" concession counter. It was originally installed in an old bakery in New York, and when it was placed in the Byrd, even the competing movie houses found reason to send their executives by to "check it out." The display case with the back mirror and counter is a

Front view of the Byrd Theatre, taken shortly after its opening.







A 1928 photo showing the organ console before it had ever been played. When the stage was extended over the orchestra pit it covered the elaborate fender around the top of the lift on which the console sits. It is still in place but hidden from view.

valuable antique and enhances the elaborate foyer.

All that the auditorium needed was a good cleaning and relamping. A section of the balcony ceiling had to be restored because of previous water damage. Plaster casts were made from existing decorations to replace the damaged plaster. The final touch was replacing the old carpet, which was installed in 1971, with a wine red carpet to match the seats and stage curtains.

The magnificent two-ton Czechoslovakian chandelier hanging in the main dome is equal-

ly as famous as the organ. It contains over 5000 crystals and there are 400 light bulbs in four colors in this massive fixture. It can be lowered for cleaning and lamping. There are a dozen smaller chandeliers throughout the building and 30 crystal wall sconces. Today the Byrd is more colorful than ever and better lit than when it opened. With its seating capacity of 1390, it is by no means one of the largest theatres in the country, but it is certainly one of the most beautiful. William Byrd, founder of Richmond, would be pleased with his namesake.

Taken just prior to opening night, this photo shows the massive dome and chandelier, as well as the original inner proscenium which was covered in the 1950s with a Cinemascope screen.



The Byrd's 4/17 Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra is one of the finest examples of an original in-theatre instrument that can be found. The instrument has been played regularly since opening night, except for a few years during World War II. Opus 1948 shipped from the Wurlitzer factory in 1928, the instrument is totally original except for a Post Horn rank added in the summer of 1985.

The huge mahogany console rises majestically from the center of the stage on its original Peter Clark lift. The Main and Solo pipe chambers are directly above the center of the stage behind a golden grille. A Grand Piano and Marimba Harp in boxes to the left and right of the stage are played from the organ console.

This organ is known throughout the world for its richness of sound; the organ's many voices literally cascade from above the heads of the audience. By present-day standards, the organ is probably heard by a paying audience more than any other in-theatre instrument remaining. It is played every Friday, Saturday and Sunday for two shows each night by current staff organist Lin Lunde. The organ is in excellent condition because of a dedicated crew and its being played almost every day, either for practice or performance.

Many recordings have been made on the organ, but those made by Westminster featuring Dick Leibert are the best-known. Leibert was organist at Radio City Music Hall at the time and was brought to Richmond for two weeks to make a series of recordings.

When the theatre opened the house organist was Carl Rhond, assisted by Velma Beck and Winston Neville, who was brought from the Colonial Theatre in Richmond. Eddie Weaver played at the Byrd for many years before its temporary closing. He became a very popular Richmond institution with his concerts featuring sing-alongs and "trips through the organ" to illustrate its many voices. Eddie was enthusiastically received by a virtually full house when he returned to the Byrd in October 1985 for his first Richmond concert in several years.

Current staff organist, Richmond's own Lin Lunde, is again making the Byrd organ known in the Richmond area. Lin has accompanied four silent pictures in the last 18 months, including *Waxworks* with four showings; *Wings*, which had six showings; *The General*, which ran a week with two matinees; and *The Eagle*, which had one showing. Walt Strony accompanied *The Son of the Sheik* for one showing. Concerts have been presented by Walt Strony, Ron Rhode, Lowell Ayars and Ty Woodward, as well as by Eddie Weaver. Lin Lunde continues the Byrd tradition of educating new theatre organists — he now has a student who is learning to play the mighty Wurlitzer, just as Lin learned to play it as a pupil of Eddie Weaver.

Today the Byrd is a successful repertory theatre presenting the best the studios have to offer. Duane Nelson is the young man responsible for every aspect of managing this huge undertaking, from the selection of the films to the selection of the French pastries and gourmet popcorn. He runs a tight ship,





The Byrd lobby, showing the original fountain, which contained fish. It was removed to make room for the "new" concession counter.

and is eagerly waiting to greet you at the Byrd.

Going to the Byrd is more than going to the movies — it is a "happening"! A handsome doorman in black tie and tails greets each guest. Pretty young women dressed as flappers right out of the "roarin' '20s" dish up the popcorn, French pastries, sodas and coffee. The show starts promptly with a color cartoon or old newsreel after Lin has entertained the audience on the Mighty Wurlitzer complete with a spectacular light show.

The present owners are to be commended for keeping such a valuable bit of Americana open to the public so that people today, who have been reared on the idea that movies are either shown on the television screen or in a cinder-block building, can actually be a part of the great experience of going to the movies "'20s style"! □

### Lance Johnson's Troubleshooting Guide Quiz Question

One of the stop keys is dead at the console. Where would you look for the source of the trouble?

Answer on page 42.

#### Questions and Answers

Lance Johnson will answer readers' technical questions by telephone. He can be reached at 701/237-0477 from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Central Time Monday through Friday, or in the evening from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. at 218/287-2671. □

# AN ENGINEERING BREAKTHROUGH!

The famous TROUSDALE digital tape player can now be attached to *any* organ! Thanks to this new development, anyone can now enjoy the musical sophistication previously available only to Trousdale system owners such as George Wright, Sandy Fleet, Jasper Sanfilippo, etc.

Noted organ enthusiast Paul Van Der Molen, one of the first owners of the new Trousdale compatible digital player, says, "This player has doubled the enjoyment of my 3/18 Robert-Morton. You were a pleasure to do business with and your service is second to none."



- Records *anything* organists can play with *no limitations*: every key, stop change and swell shade movement is recorded with incredible precision, up to 120 times per second.
- Recordings may be played back exactly as recorded . . . or at half the original speed . . . or at *double* the original speed . . . opening a world of possibilities limited only by your imagination.
- Over-dubbing or multiple-track recording is a standard feature at no extra cost. Make your own multi-handed arrangements with no loss of fidelity, thanks to the magic of digital precision.

For further information, contact  
Dave Junchen  
280 E. Del Mar Blvd.  
Suite 311  
Pasadena, CA 91101  
818-795-2898