

The Mosque

by Miles J. Rudisill, Jr.

The Shriners are probably best known for the many benevolent functions they perform through their burn centers and hospitals for crippled children. And, of course, most of us have seen them perform in parades with their bands, small vehicle patrols and zany clowns. However, one thing the Shriners have done for all of us who are theatre organ enthusiasts was to build magnificent theatre complexes in major cities across the country. Today they stand as monuments to the architect's skills and the decorator's imagination.

The Richmond Mosque is such a building. Built at a cost of \$2,000,000 in the 1920s, it is considered by many to be one of the finest examples of Mohammedan architecture in the United States. When the building opened it contained a 50-room hotel across the front, a 50 × 25-foot swimming pool, a gymnasium, a bowling alley, a ballroom seating 1000, the awesome auditorium seating 5000, and seven floors of dressing rooms. On the second level were three lounges surrounding the front and both sides of the auditorium. The architect of this Arabian jewel was Marcellus Wright, who also designed Richmond's Hotel John Marshall. The Mosque's hotel rooms are now city offices and classrooms for Virginia Commonwealth University; the pool is used for

life-saving classes by the police academy, and the bowling alleys are a pistol range, also used by the police academy. The ballroom is intact and is used regularly. The section of the main floor that originally was a small restaurant is now part of the extended lobby.

The Mosque had a gala opening on Friday evening, October 28, 1927. According to Douglas Gordon, staff reporter for *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, it was a night of

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nights. Richmond had never seen anything like it. The Mosque's minarets, ten stories high, were brightly lighted by floodlights at their bases, providing a wonderful ambience enchanting the park across from the building as thousands made their way to this huge edifice.

Inside, the proscenium opening was large enough to swallow every other theatre in town and high enough to house a cyclopanorama

portraying all the heavens. Every seat was filled. It was a brilliant occasion — people could not believe they were in Richmond. Mme. Ernestine Schumann-Heinck, internationally-famed opera star, sang a farewell concert; Thomas Cannon conducted the Mosque concert orchestra; Prof. Charles J. Possa of New York was at the console of the \$60,000 Wurlitzer pipe organ (Possa had recently returned from a European concert tour where he performed before the king and queen of Spain, and his appearance in Richmond was considered a musical event). The next night, October 29, was the night the Mosque set the pace that was to last less than two years.

There were nine units to the show, beginning with an organ solo by Mr. Possa and ending with the Universal silent movie, *Out All Night*. Between were the Mosque Symphony Orchestra, Mosque Magazine (something like a newsreel), the Mosque Collegians, Mosque Tours, and then the Mosque Presentations which was a series of vaudeville acts. This formula of films and live stage shows started at 1 p.m. each day and repeated itself every three hours until closing. The big silents, *Ben Hur*, *Wings*, *What Price Glory*, and many others, were screened at the Mosque.

But for a relatively small city of 150,000, all of this proved to be too much; after little more than a year the Mosque went dark and back into the hands of Metropolitan Life, the New York insurance company that had financed it. Many reasons were given for its closing in addition to the fact that the bottom had fallen out of the economy. Among them were its refusal to convert to sound (the owners thought it was only a fad); its lack of air conditioning which made it unbearable in the summer months; the Shriner's right to close it down on short notice for their own ceremonies; and the fact that there were other movie houses in the city offering the same type of entertainment: the National, Loew's, and the Byrd had recently opened.

When the Mosque did re-open, it never again attempted a movie-vaudeville policy. A Mr. Corley was employed by Metropolitan Life as resident manager, and it was the beginning of a new life for the building. A concert by Kirsten Flagstad drew so many people that street cars could not get by the building. In 1930 and for several years thereafter, The

The Mosque.





Console of the 3/17 Wurlitzer at the Mosque.

Metropolitan Opera visited Richmond regularly. Their stay was four days with four performances, and their coming to town was like Ringling Brothers setting up. People turned out just to see the trains arrive with all the stars and scenery. The San Carlo Opera Company and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo played the Mosque year after year until World War II put a stop to all this.

In 1940 the government of the City of Richmond finally bought the huge complex for \$200,000 and only then did it officially become Richmond's civic auditorium. In 1943 it was taken over by the Department of the Army and served as the nerve center for the anti-aircraft command for all the troops of America. Here the work of the "Blitz Busters," embracing 15 training centers, was supervised by General Joseph E. Green.

After the war the theatre reverted to its use of providing entertainment for the people. The Mosque stage has hosted every type of act, from Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra to circuses and ice shows. When *Hello Dolly!* played the Mosque during the early '60s, Carol Channing slept in her dressing room on a rented hospital bed because she could not stay in a suite at the Hotel Jefferson as it had just been painted. Every major musical came to Richmond as soon as its run in New York was over — *My Fair Lady*, *Oklahoma!*, *Man of La Mancha*, *The Sound of Music*, *Peter Pan*, and many more; these were all the "heavies," not to mention the bus-and-truck companies we have become accustomed to today.

In 1971 the Mosque was closed for almost a year when the city decided it had to either remodel the place or board it up. About the only thing left today of the Rambusch Studio's

decorations are the large murals across the top of the proscenium. (Rambusch also decorated the world-famous Roxy Theatre in New York.) The theatre has undergone many changes, and today looks rather barren after the removal of most decorations, the painting over of the detail which was so typical of Islamic art, and the removal of all colored house lighting.

Over the years the City of Richmond has spent at least \$4,000,000 on the building, including new concert-style chairs, air conditioning, new lighting system, new stage rigging, modern sound system, and new carpet

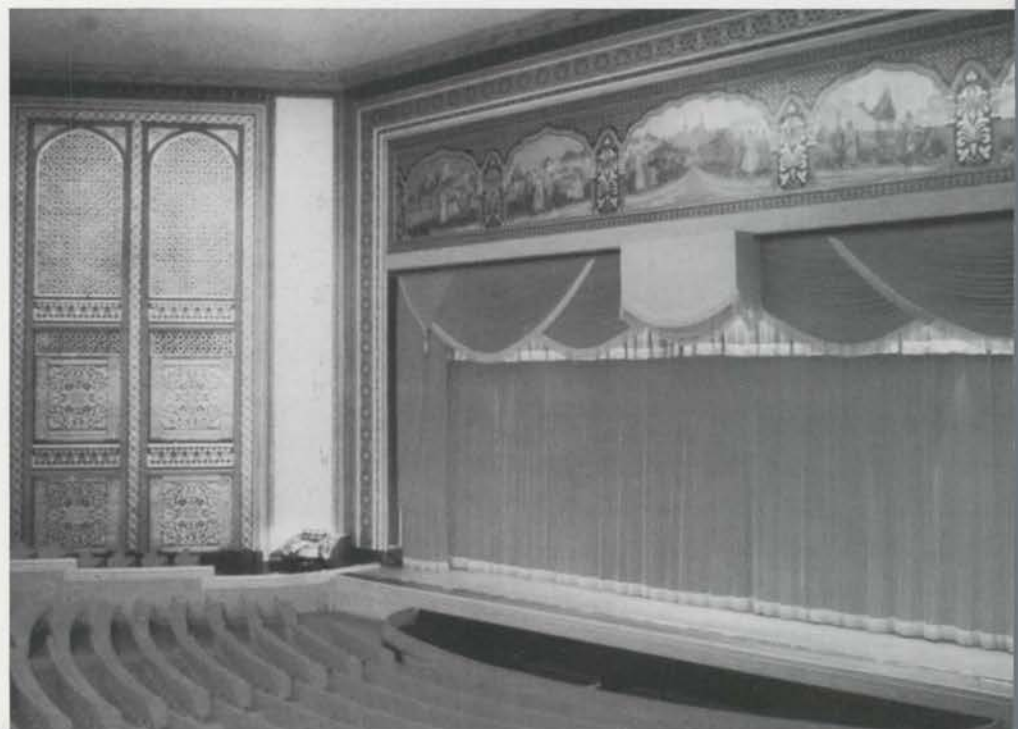
and paint throughout. These renovations were quite an undertaking because of the mammoth size of the facility.

Although the Mosque Wurlitzer is not among the largest of the instruments built by the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company, certainly it is the most famous. The 3/17 Style 260 Special remains intact mainly because of the protection it has received over the years from former ATOS President Tommy Landrum. He and the late Harold Warner, Jr., restored the instrument in 1953 and received recognition from a grateful city council for doing so. Today, the Virginia Theatre Organ Society maintains this organ along with Mr. Landrum.

This organ is believed by many to have been the most important in promoting the theatre organ revival of the mid-1950s. Soon after Warner and Landrum restored the organ, Reginald Foort made several recordings on the instrument for the Cook Laboratories label. These recordings were immensely successful and are now collectors' items. Foort, one of the most famous British radio and theatre organists of all time, was then working as a sales representative for Standaart, a Danish classic organ builder, and residing in Norfolk, Virginia. Emory Cook was an entrepreneur whose early spectacular binaural recordings were used extensively to demonstrate the marvels of the then-revolutionary "stereophonic" sound systems. To hear Reginald Foort play "In A Persian Market" on the Mosque organ is like seeing *Aida* performed at the base of the Pyramids.

The Mosque Wurlitzer has a sound all its own. The 1600 pipes, tuned percussions, and sound effects are located behind grilles at the balcony level to the left and right of the Mosque stage, and the organ speaks forth into the reverberant acoustic environment of the auditorium with a beautiful, crystalline voice. In the rear of the balcony and over the projection booth is a third chamber initially intended to house an Echo division, which

View of the stage, left organ grille and console in the Mosque.





View of the auditorium from the stage, taken soon after renovations to the auditorium in 1968.

was never installed. The console with its three keyboards and pedalboard originally was located on the left side of the orchestra pit, but in 1930 it was placed in its present position in a box to the left of the stage. Designed as a classic instrument for accompanying Shrine functions as well as other shows, this beautiful example of Wurlitzer's art has thrilled millions throughout its lifetime.

The Mosque has had a brilliant past and has a promising future. When it opened in 1927, it was the second largest theatre in the United States. Today, in 1986, it is still one of the five largest in the East. It continues to serve a growing metropolitan area in a variety of capacities.

The Mosque has been Richmond's concert hall for nearly 60 years and is still going

strong. Because the Mosque seats nearly twice as many people, the Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts sponsors its largest shows at the Mosque. *Sugar Babies*, starring Anne Miller and Mickey Rooney, played the Mosque in the fall of 1985. A great spring season is already in the making headed by the smash musical, *La Cage aux Folles*.

With the City of Richmond experiencing a revitalization and rebirth of the downtown area, and the surrounding counties experiencing rapid commercial and residential growth, this monument to the city's past enjoys great promise for her future. We look forward to sharing with you our pride in this building and its original-installation Wurlitzer in July when Richmond will host the ATOS National Convention. On to Richmond, a great place to visit since 1607! □

Carter's Busy 'Canning'

Regular canning season normally gets underway following summer harvest — that is, fruits and vegetables are preserved in tins and quick-frozen packages. But for Gaylord Carter, one of, if not *the* leading national exponent of musical canning, his season extends well beyond late summer. He has already completed getting two items in the can (or perhaps we should say, cassette), and has at least five more in the works for Paramount Pictures Corporation Home Video Division. Each one is a famous Paramount silent photoplay.

Gaylord's first, which has already racked up a successful sales record, was the aviation classic, *Wings*. Carter played his score, accompanying the feature, on the three-manual Wurlitzer installed in the Sargent/Stark mansion in Hollywood.

Studio execs were so pleased with the production they leased the Wilshire Ebell Theatre, Los Angeles, hauled in large projection equipment and had Carter play the film for the trade, all media contacts and publicity people. The organ, a 3/12 Barton, was recently installed in the theatre by the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society.

Public acceptance of the *Wings* cassette

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was swift; Paramount executive reaction equally so. Without dilly-dallying, Carter was signed to compose a score and play it on the Sargent/Stark Wurlitzer for the seafaring classic, *Old Ironsides*. This one has been "canned," but a release date has not been set.

After completing *Old Ironsides*, Paramount people whipped out several other contracts for his inking. Two of these, *The Last Command*, starring Emil Jannings and *Docks of New York*, with George Bancroft, were recorded early in February on the Sargent/Stark organ. It is a point of interest to note that Carter played the premiere of *The Last Command* at Grauman's Million Dollar Theatre, Los Angeles, in 1927. Both features were directed by Joseph Von Sternberg.

Upon completing these two photoplays, Carter will start work on scores for W. C. Fields' *Running Wild*, Eric Von Stroheim's *The Wedding March*, and Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*.

These projects are sandwiched in between Carter's Flicker Fingers tours which take him to all parts of the country. One was his show on January 25 at the Oakland Paramount Theatre. Paramount General Manager Peter Botto informed the famed organist that his show was completely sold out two weeks in advance of his appearance. This had established a record for Carter — the "Standing Room Only" sign was posted a week earlier this year than for his show last year.

Carter also got a chuckle reading a local reviewer's column in which it was stated: "A 60-year-old picture and an 80-year-old organist were the hottest things in town this week!" □

Richard Purvis To Head Judges For Young Organist Competition

Richard Purvis, organist emeritus of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, has kindly consented to be our special judge for the Young Organist Competition this year. He is known world-wide as a concert organist, composer and master teacher, and those of us who attended the convention in Indianapolis were privileged to hear him perform on the 5/88 Skinner organ in the Scottish Rite Cathedral.

Our youthful contestants can indeed feel honored to have such an artist grade their talents. Four other most capable adjudicators will join him in judging the entrants, and we thank them all in advance for lending their time to such a worthy cause. These youngsters are worth it! □

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Richard Purvis (Claude Neuffer photo)

