

Eberson's Loew's Richmond Is Reborn

by Sharolyn Heatwole

Architect John Eberson has remained largely unknown except to a small number of trade people and those of us who appreciate fine theatres. However, during the 50-odd years of his professional life, he designed over 500 theatres from Paris to Richmond, and became known as the "Father of the Atmospheric Theatre."

Eberson's fame came as a result of the mood of the 1920s and the meteoric rise of the motion picture. Sociologists generally describe the social mood of the '20s as a time of disillusionment, when people felt bored with their lives and desired to escape these feelings. One form of escape was hero worship, as evidenced by the public's fascination with such figures as Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey and

Charles Lindbergh. The other most popular form of escape was through the motion picture.

The film industry responded to the public's need to escape by providing not only films with themes of idealism and flights from reality, but also theatres in which the buildings themselves were incorporated into the overall escape aura. The theatre became more than just a place for viewing motion pictures — it became the vehicle through which the escape was achieved. Architects responded to this by rushing to build dozens of theatres, each more opulent than the previous one. The point of excess was reached and surpassed. The theatres became boring to the public and increasingly unpopular with theatre owners who had

to finance and maintain the gilt and glitter. There was a need for a new kind of theatre and a new kind of escape, and John Eberson became the architect who provided that change.

Eberson had been involved in various aspects of theatre construction and design since his emigration to the United States from Austria in 1901. He worked for a St. Louis electrical contracting firm and through a project involving the design and installation of an electrical stage apparatus in a theatre in Mississippi, he met George Johnson, a St. Louis contractor-architect, scenic designer and theatre promoter. Soon Eberson was preparing plans and specifications for theatres and supervising their construction.

By 1910 he was in business for himself in Chicago. He traveled throughout the South and Midwest designing and selling opera houses (vaudeville theatres). He soon expanded his business to include movie theatres. The Orpheum Theatre and Office Building in Wichita, Kansas, was his first large commission. It was an ordinary design by current standards — his last theatre to be so. As Eberson stated: "I want to create theatres where pictures can be enjoyed in restful and beautiful surroundings rather than one that would be a mere flaunt of lavishness . . . I don't want my theatres, lobbies and ornament to look at you and say 'Look what I cost.'"

Eberson's first "atmospheric" theatre opened in 1923 in Houston, Texas. The seemingly nonexistent ceiling revealed twinkling "stars" and floating clouds. Sitting in the theatre was like sitting in a classical garden, complete with pergola-topped, vine-covered walls.

This type of theatre gained rapid success and many were built throughout the rest of the '20s. To reduce costs, Eberson opened Michaelangelo Studios, a company that specialized in designing and mass producing his special effects. Various elements were used

Loew's Richmond, photographed soon after opening.





Interior of Loew's Richmond at the time of the opening.

and reused in theatre after theatre — Richmond's proscenium arch also appeared in Detroit.

In addition to small town theatres with "stock" designs, Ebersson also did highly original designs for the large theatre chains. The Loew's chain had Ebersson design a number of theatres for them, including one in Richmond. For Richmond Ebersson designed a theatre on a corner lot with street level shops. Appointed in a manner suggestive of a Spanish castle, it presented a panoply of texture, patterns and color. The Mediterranean upper and lower lobbies contained what appeared to be priceless antiques and ornamentation as well as greenery and six parrots (a Loew's trademark) — four stuffed, two live. The auditorium itself was a Spanish garden.

Not only were there the stars and clouds, but statuary, greenery and doves which flew in and out of the side alcoves.

Ebersson also gave special attention to the paint job in this magic environment. He not only specified each of the over 40 colors, but demanded that the paint be applied in a technique known as "sponge painting," whereby the artisans dipped small pieces of cloth in the paint and painstakingly patted the colors on, inch by inch. The process was responsible for the textured, multi-layered look that was obtained. The stage curtain (which was removed when wide screen productions became popular) was also hand-painted.

Even the carpet received Ebersson's attention — he created it to be as colorful and ornate as the rest of the building. Another Eber-

The lobby of Loew's Richmond as photographed at the theatre's opening.



son touch was the specially designed color scheme used in the theatre's lighting system. Over 300 soft amber lights are used throughout the building, the color of which is still known today as "Ebersson amber."

When Loew's opened in Richmond on April 9, 1928, it was a magical event for the city. Even though it was raining, people waited in line for the grand event, which, by the way, cost 50 cents for admission! Not only could one sit in the Spanish garden and watch the clouds and stars, one was seated there by ushers "dressed in the splendor of Bulgarian generals." "Wild Oscar" played the organ and one could see the silent movie *West Point*.

For the next 50 years, Loew's continued to operate at the corner of Sixth and Grace Streets in downtown Richmond. Gradually over the years, its elegant interior suffered redecoration that erased its colorful character. The Loew's that closed in 1979 was no longer an Ebersson theatre.

The Richmond Symphony Orchestra, finding the structure to be sound and learning that with renovations the hall could be made acoustically suitable for its programs, purchased the building in 1979. Unfortunately, the cost of renovation far exceeded the Symphony's resources, and in 1980, the Center for the Performing Arts was created and the building was purchased again. A fund drive was launched to renovate the theatre and restore it to its original elegance. By the time it opened its doors again to the public in 1983, over \$5.5 million had been raised.

During the renovation the architects, contractors and consultants made the changes the directors felt necessary to suit the hall for a variety of performing arts presentations. Provisions were made for handicapped patrons, including a system for use by the hearing impaired. The carpet you see today was intended to recreate the original and was especially made for the theatre based on laboratory analysis of a tattered piece of original carpet found backstage. The sponge-painting process was also used in the renovation in an attempt to make the color scheme as authentic as possible. The Center uses the original two "scenic projectors" (cloud projectors) built in 1927 and still functioning today to create the magical effect of floating clouds. The stars, set in the ceiling to recreate the January sky over Richmond, still twinkle through their ports in the domed ceiling.

During the early 1970s, the original 3/13 Wurlitzer theatre organ was donated by Loew's to the American Film Institute, to be installed in their theatre at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The organ was taken to Washington, but because of a change in plans for the AFI theatre, was never installed but sold. Its current whereabouts is unknown.

The new organ is the only example of a "transplant" to a Richmond theatre. Based upon traditional Wurlitzer layouts, this mostly-Wurlitzer organ was previously installed in the Surf City Hotel in New Jersey and at 21 ranks, is the largest theatre organ in Richmond. As work began on renovations, an



Console of the 3/21 mostly Wurlitzer now installed in the Carpenter Center (Loew's Richmond).

organ for the theatre had been ruled out and work had begun to convert one chamber into an office and the other into a storage room. It was at this point that Bill Floyd became involved. Bill had exchanged letters with Hank Crane, owner of the Surf City Hotel regarding the 3/16 Wurlitzer there which was hardly playable. Crane agreed to donate the organ, Bill arranged with the Center to accept it, and Bill and his two sons moved the organ from Surf City to a warehouse in Richmond.

Examination of the organ revealed that

View toward the Solo chamber. Heavy velour stifled original organ; new gold mesh is tonally transparent. Lighting bays in the "sky" are hydraulically closed when not in use.



every component of the instrument needed rebuilding, as did the additional five ranks that had been obtained. As the contractors concluded the building renovations, the organ crew began to expand. Fred Berger and others from C. & P. Telephone Company of Virginia took on the task of wiring the "new" three-manual console and solid-state relay. Klann of Waynesboro, Virginia, who had provided the manuals and pedalboard while the organ was still at Surf City, re-conditioned these and installed new Kimber-Allen contact

rails, and a new solid-state combination system which provides two channels with eight general pistons, six pistons on the Solo, eight on the Great and Accompaniment, and four for the pedals; there is a sforzando reversible, and a general cancel; Syndine actions were used with new stop keys by Hesco. The console also features a transposer. New swell frames and shades by Klann are operated by Peterson electronic motors.

Others who have become involved in the organ project include Tom Landrum, who has done pipework repairs, and who, along with Dick Barlow did much other work, including releathering all regulators. Over the past three years many have given time and talent to the effort: Nick Pitt, Paul Harris, the technical trade students from Tuckahoe Middle School, and many others. Bill remarked, "I am blessed with a wonderful crew who have made this truly a civic project . . ."

In 1985 the theatre was renamed Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts upon receipt of a \$1.5 million memorial gift from the trustees of the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. Listed on the State and Federal historic landmark registries, it looks today much as it did when it opened its doors in 1928. It is a cultural anchor for the plans the city is implementing to revitalize the downtown area — an acoustically superior, multiple purpose, 2000-seat theatre for the performing arts in the center of Richmond. Because of the generosity of the citizens who love it, Richmond has been able to preserve this historic gem for its current and future generations to enjoy. We look forward to meeting you there in July.

The following sources were used in the preparation of this document:

1. Elroy E. Quenroe, "Movie House Architecture, Twenties Style," *Arts in Virginia*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Richmond, Va.: Virginia Museum), pp.22-34.

Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts, *Reach for the Stars*. Advertising booklet, 1985-86 season.

Special thanks to Bill Floyd for his history of the "new" organ and its rebuilding and installation.

Lance Johnson's Troubleshooting Guide Quiz Question

You have a dead middle E on the Trumpet 8' on the Solo manual. You find that this same note will still play on the Great. Where would you look first?

Answer on page 55.

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. □