

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

by Tom Helms

“THIS MONUMENT IS DEDICATED
TO THE BEST IN MUSIC, PHOTOPLAY
AND THE THEATRICAL ARTS.”

— Julian Saenger

Sitting back, sinking into the sea-green plush of the theatre, with the orchestra striking the first notes of Broadway excitement, provided a special thrill for me. After fifteen years of dreaming, planning, working and sometimes agonizing, seeing the Saenger Theatre alive and well as a new performing arts center filled me with a heartwarming sense of paternal pride.

In 1971 the 46-year-old Pensacola Saenger, the second house built by the Saenger Amusement Company of New Orleans, was destined for the wrecker's ball. At the invitation of a friend, I toured the theatre and, for the first time, played the old Robert-Morton organ there. I knew that I had to let the people of the community know what a wonderful potential was asleep here in this giant facility which was on its last leg as a movie house. The American Broadcasting Company was trying to sell the theatre for its property value, and in the wings was a new parking lot. After gaining approval from the management, I started, in my spare time, to repair the moribund Morton. After several weekends of intense labor, respectable sounds were heard from the organ for the first time in years. The manager was so excited at this development that he asked me if I would play for intermissions on the weekends.

Months passed and work continued, aided by friends who were subsequently to form the Gulf Coast chapter of ATOS. By late 1974, the SAVE THE SAENGER project was well underway. I was able to present six free organ concerts to raise public interest in the old structure and its Robert-Morton, and as interest grew, the organ became the heartbeat of the whole Saenger project. The tattered the-

atre, with all of the problems that a downtown location could create, had a spark of life behind those elegant Spanish organ grills with which everyone fell in love.

After the success of the first Saenger Theatre (now the Strand) in Shreveport, Louisiana, with its 2/11 Robert-Morton, Julian Saenger started construction of a second the-

atre in Pensacola in early 1924. For what was a thriving boom-town in those days, Saenger planned a deluxe house of 2250 seats with an impressive organ. Incorporated into these plans by prominent New Orleans architect Emil Weil were the usable remains, such as the wrought iron balcony railing, of the old Pensacola Opera House which had burned a

Front of the Saenger Theatre in Pensacola which houses the Wonder Morton owned by Gulf Coast Chapter.





Ornate Spanish grillwork in front of pipe chamber in Saenger Theatre.

few months earlier.

During construction, the Pensacola Saenger suffered many setbacks. The 3500-seat flagship in New Orleans was developing into such a mammoth project that money was getting tight. The Pensacola budget of over one million was cut to \$500,000, less than half the original figure. Many of the proposed appointments and features, such as a completed arcade and lobby spaces, were deleted. Fortunately, though, these cost-cutting changes were implemented after the construction of the over-size stagehouse. When I found the original blueprints in the attic of the theatre, I could see the evidence of these deletions and, regretfully, learned that much of the planned organ and its elevator were never installed. What was to have been a much larger instrument was trimmed down to a lean 2/6 Robert-Morton. Incidentally, people often ask why

the Saenger theatres always used Robert-Morton organs. I was told that Julian Saenger owned a large block of stock in the Robert-Morton Company; thus, it was to his advantage to purchase and exhibit organs built by that firm. The tremendous instrument that Robert-Morton built for the flagship Saenger in New Orleans was used to demonstrate the tonal capabilities of Robert-Mortons to prospective clients. In Pensacola, preparations for a divided organ installation were made. Even the swell-shade framing was installed in both large chambers. But for economic reasons the six ranks were installed in the right chamber only. The small instrument, however, boasted a complete tuned-percussion section.

My dream was to enlarge the organ and use both of its chambers as had been originally planned. Convincing others that this would work, however, was not always easy, but dreams *can* come true if you believe in them long enough! After the SAVE THE SAENGER concert series, the dream began to materialize with the restoration of the old rehearsal grand piano and the addition of a player action, making it playable from the organ, a project which took thirteen months. By this time, Dr. B.D. Rhea had joined our efforts and, with his fully equipped workshop, progress on the organ became more encouraging. As publicity increased, a \$500,000 gift from the Florida Board of Regents to the newly formed Friends of the Saenger started the fund-raising drive for the complete restoration of the theatre. The architectural and engineering firm, Holobird and Root, of Chicago, was engaged to restore the old house. The massive first phase of this restoration necessitated the removal of the old Morton console and much of the pipework. The theatre had been flooded several times during hurricanes, and when the console was lifted for the first time in fifty years, it broke into pieces.

After much discussion, it was decided to enlarge the organ to its originally planned size. I had played the beautiful Wonder Morton at Loew's Palace Theatre in Manhattan



Tom Helms at the console of the 4/23 Robert-Morton at the dedication program, 1985. (Bob Rogers photo)

and felt that this particular style of console would be perfect for the Pensacola Theatre. To build such a console, however, is an unbelievably difficult challenge, but Dr. Rhea agreed to undertake the construction in his shop. (Documentation of his project is covered elsewhere in this issue.)

As our project accelerated, a nationwide search produced necessary components for the new Saenger organ. The long-silent Morton in Loew's State Theatre in New Orleans provided several additions, as did the Morton originally installed in Loew's Pitkin Theatre in Brooklyn, New York. A 25hp Spencer blower was found in West Texas and relocated to the Saenger. Some pipes and chests from his home installation were donated by member Curt Goldhill. Trivo Company was engaged to build hard-to-find color ranks, such as the Saxophone. The Kinura and Posthorn were fabricated by myself. All of the additions were selected and scaled to ensure a cohesive ensemble for the Pensacola Saenger.

Winding of these high-pressure unit orchestras was a problem that no builder of the era always got right. After years of studying the most successful installations and winding schemes, the best of all combined practices was applied to this installation. Lyn Larsen offered many helpful suggestions. To aid in the recording of the instrument, much attention was given to providing an installation free of the wind noise and leaks so characteristic of high-pressure organs. A special muffler was constructed to fit in the tight space over the blower to attenuate any turbine noises, and the tremulants were located in the rooms above each chamber.

During those years, we became quite familiar with setbacks. For example, after repairs were completed, the large 16' Tubas, Diaphones and Tibias were hoisted into the new Main chamber and strategically placed for

View of proscenium and organ from the balcony of the Saenger Theatre.



safe storage. I stopped by the Saenger, after a long trip, to check on the restoration and found that everything stored in the Main chamber had been destroyed. All of the pipes had to be hoisted back down, re-rolled, resoldered and repaired another time.

However, seeing the theatre restoration progress gave us renewed energy to continue our work. This work was being done during a period when inflation was at its peak, and none of the money allotted for the organ project by the theatre restoration board was ever received by our chapter. Without this support, the dream of having a solid state relay and combination action seemed to be more impossible than ever. As a result of the impressive console construction and other work, however, several large financial gifts were pledged, and these were matched by the Monsanto Corporation of St. Louis which brought us over our financial hurdle. Peterson Electro-Musical Products built both the relay and combination action, and the long-awaited purchase of these parts made it possible to complete the project.

Our last impasse was the elevator. Since the original was deleted from the plans in 1924, a new hydraulic system had to be found. During the theatre's restoration, which was complete by this time, the orchestra pit floor had been raised by filling it with concrete which had to be removed along with the 60-year-old concrete wall which formed the back wall of the pit. Crews were scheduled, and the sounds of jackhammers filled the theatre for weeks. All this had to be done during the theatre's idle summer months. The pit was covered with plastic to prevent concrete dust from filling the newly restored house. After six exhausting weeks of very hard labor, this job was completed, and the pit was ready to receive its new lift. Wonder Morton consoles are very impressive and very large and are too big to live in a pit. A new "garage" was constructed behind the pit to house the console. The platform rides on steel rails both in the "garage" and on the elevator and can be easily rolled into place by one person.

In the spring of 1985, the organ was given its long-awaited tonal finishing and then, after fifteen years, was ready for its dedication. Seven years had passed since it was last heard in public, and this concert was planned to demonstrate the many tonal capabilities of the new Morton. The program included organ solos, a slide tour of the interior of the organ, a sing-along, a short Harold Lloyd silent, and many surprises, including an orchestra. A professional advertising agency had so successfully promoted the concert that a capacity crowd was there and was treated to the new (old) sounds of the sixth Wonder Morton in a Saenger theatre. Friends and ATOS chapters were represented from all over the country and toasted our success at an elegant champagne reception on the stage after the show. Now, perhaps, you can understand how seeing such a dream become reality would evoke a feeling of paternal pride. The Pensacola Theatre is *not* a parking lot today — it is a beautiful, functioning tribute to the "best in music, photoplay, and the theatrical arts!" □

We Did It!

by Dorothy Standley

An old radio show came on the air with the words: "The house lights dim; a hush comes over the audience, and the curtain rises on the first act of . . ." So it was at the dedication of our new 4/23 Robert-Morton theatre organ in the recently restored Saenger Theatre in Pensacola, Florida. Our story begins.

From the time he brought the first sheet of plywood home on the top of his car to the finishing of the gold leafing on the console, Barclay Donaldson Rhea, M.D., master organ builder, started and completed a labor of love. In between were miles and miles of wire, thousands of pipes, windlines, chests, regulators, etc., that most of you who have ever tackled a pipe organ know all too well.

Dr. Rhea, a practicing radiologist, a Major in the Army Medical Corps during WWII, a kinsman to the wife of President Andrew Jackson and quintessential southern gentleman, had never built an organ console, but master-builder he is. His workmanship is of a generation gone, characterized by meticulous detail, careful planning, exquisite execution, an unflinching eye for beauty and infinite patience. We are so very fortunate that he did this work for us, on his own time and at his own expense. When he undertook this project, he wrote the fateful words, "What A Fool Am I," as a parody of the song, in the margin of his shop notes.

It was more than ten years ago that we found our long-neglected, puny, original-to-theatre 2/6 Robert-Morton. We named it "Lola," worked on it, maintained it, repaired it, restored it and played it with love. Gulf Coast Chapter gave several concerts during this time to raise money to "Save The Saenger." Our capable resident organist, Mr. Thomas F. Helms, had a dream of a large, magnificent instrument, of impeccable tonal balance, that would fill the restored theatre with organ music second to none. He encouraged our group to aim for this. With his skill, and after consultations with Lyn Larsen, Tom produced a tonal design to fill this dream. His motivation and enthusiasm kept us pushing on, and his expertise and personal skill as a craftsman contributed greatly to the completion of this project.

Before Dr. Rhea started work on the console, he undertook the gargantuan task of completely restoring the Brambach baby grand piano stored backstage at the theatre under a pile of old, dusty stage props and scenery. We were told that this was the original rehearsal piano used at the Saenger in its early days. Dr. Rhea modified an Aeolian player-piano action to enable it to be used in the Brambach to make it playable from the organ console — no easy task! The finished piano sits grandly now, for all to see and hear, in the box seats immediately below the new chamber opening stage right.

Then came the time when we all felt that we could give "Lola" the attention she wanted. First, we scouted for the necessary Robert-Morton parts, then we mounted a campaign for funds. Our men, some "shanghied" volunteers and Tom Helms rented a truck and drove hundreds of miles to bring these parts home. What days! We faced, too, the problem of storing the thousands of pieces until we could refinish, repair, re-leather and install them. Some pipes were in such terrible shape they looked like refugees from a war disaster area. Eventually, all were put into first class condition by Dr. Rhea and Tom. At first, all these parts were stored under the balcony in the theatre, but we had to empty that space when restoration was in full swing. Parts were "farmed out" to every conceivable bit of space, including private homes and the top of the case of an antique Wurlitzer in a local historical church.

We made several trips to Fort Worth, Texas, during this time to measure, photograph and copy parts of the Wonder Morton owned by North Texas Chapter. Their cooperation was invaluable since one can't find a Wonder Morton at just any local supermarket. Only five of these instruments were produced, so having an original to copy was a bonanza.

Tom heard of a blower for sale at McMurray College in Abilene, Texas, and we made a trip there to buy this behemoth from the college. Naturally, the thing was still completely assembled in the basement of the college auditorium, and our task was to disassemble and move the tons of equipment upstairs and into