

Renaissance in Milwaukee

by Fred Wolfram and Gordon Schwacke

In the world of the theatre organ, the Riverside Theatre's Wurlitzer is in a happy minority. It has known only one home since those master organ builders in Tonawanda, New York, shipped it to Milwaukee some 58 years ago. True, in that location it has had its share of ups and downs — and we don't mean those supplied by its lift — but, unlike many theatre organs of its vintage, it has never experienced a period of being both down *and* out.

Life for this Wurlitzer began with a gala opening night on April 29, 1928. The *Milwaukee Journal* reported the next day: "The new Riverside theater, a monument to the bigger and better in vaudeville, was opened Sunday for the edification of a good part of the city's population. All day long the theater was filled to its capacity of 2900 seats and visitors apparently had a capital time with their looking and listening, mostly looking.

"Plenty to look at has been provided in the new house, but the general tone is conservative. Items such as a gold coffered ceiling in the outer lobby, black and gold marble walls, bronze doors, gold plated lighting fixtures,

marble floors, thick rugs, draperies and what not may be listed, but the effort has been to avoid the garish.

"The theatre has been provided with all manner of modern conveniences for the fussy variety fan and everything is agreeably ritzy. Slim young men in form-fitting blue uniforms are the ushers. They seem to know what it is all about and they certainly are decorative. They show customers to unusually comfortable seats. An elevator is available for the leg weary.

"Lighting in the auditorium is excellent and all seats, apparently, have a satisfactory view of the stage. The designers have been attentive to acoustics and the report of listeners is that the stage can keep no secrets. Old ivory and ormolu gold — the reporter is quoting now — make up the general color scheme, with touches of peacock blue.

"The stage is wide and deep and dressed up handsomely as to curtain and framing. A

massive organ is installed. It is possible, of course, that some detail has been overlooked, but if so the naked eye does not discern the oversight.

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"Harry Billings, who has been managing the Majestic these many years, continues as impresario of the new house, with Anthony Thenee as assistant. Franq J. Wenkel is the organist and William Benning conductor of the orchestra."

The theatre, whose style, some say, is based on French Baroque, was constructed as part of the Empire Building, a twelve-story office building with stores at street level. Kirchoff and Rose, a force in the Milwaukee architectural community of the 1920s, designed it, as well as the Palace Theatre in New York City and the Junior Orpheum (also called the Hennipen) Theatre in Minneapolis.

The Riverside occupied a prestigious and easily accessible downtown location on the west bank of the Milwaukee River with the entrance facing Gimbel's Department Store across the street on Wisconsin Avenue. It quickly became the showplace of Milwaukee. The combination of vaudeville, first-run silent movies, orchestra and theatre organ, all in a posh, 2500-seat (the *Journal* reviewer miscounted), air-conditioned house, had them lined up at the box office.

Perhaps the *Journal* reviewer was a bit too enthusiastic when he called the 3/13 Wurlitzer a "massive organ," but there is no denying that the instrument was well-chosen for its setting and purpose. It continued to hold audience interest long after the silent films, vaudeville, and orchestra fell victim to technology, changing times, and the Depression.

During the heydays of the 1930s and '40s, the Riverside was a mecca, first for fans of vaudeville, then for fans of big bands. Abbott and Costello worked there as relatively unknown comics; Olsen and Johnson's *Hellzapoppin* was born there; the big bands of Dick Jurgens, Wayne King, Horace Heidt, Orrin Tucker, Jimmie Dorsey and Tommy Dorsey

The new marquee and entrance.

(Milwaukee Journal Photo)





vied for Riverside attendance records. They drew people from afar, and not a few students played hooky when their favorites were booked. By the 1950s the theatre was almost exclusively a first-run movie house and downtown Milwaukee was *the* place to go to the movies.

In the late 1960s, downtown was no longer the shopping and entertainment center it had been a decade earlier. Shopping centers and multi-screened movie houses in suburban areas had taken a heavy toll. By the 1970s, the film fare at the Riverside had descended to *Kung Fu* level. The condition of the theatre matched its use — it had become sadly neglected and dirty. The only live shows were occasional rock concerts, which did not help the condition of the theatre. Things couldn't get much worse. The Wurlitzer? It was hidden under a thrust stage which had been built to protect it during the rock shows.

Enter Conrad Walters, a retired office worker and theatre organist. In 1972 he became involved with the Riverside organ, and through the '70s he played the Wurlitzer several times a week before film showings in the late morning or early afternoon. Conrad often used his own funds for critical repairs to keep the organ playing. When not in use, he kept it under lock and key. Were it not for his interest and dedication, the organ would have been silent and, perhaps, beyond repair when Dairyland Theatre Organ Society, a chapter of ATOS, came on the scene in the summer of 1980. Dairyland had a singular purpose — to negotiate with Towne Realty, owners of the theatre and organ, and United Artists, operator of the theatre, an agreement to refurbish the faithful Wurlitzer. Towne Realty agreed to finance the needed materials, and United Artists gave Dairyland Chapter access to the organ. They also agreed to remove the thrust stage so the console could again see the light of day and be more accessible to the work crews. Conrad Walters had actually had to play it under the stage by the light of a single bare bulb hanging from a cord at the side of the console!

In October 1980, restoration work began in earnest. After lubrication, cleaning, rewinding of the brake coil, and new fuses, the console had its mechanical ups and downs again! However, extensive water damage from roof leaks had left only about half the ranks in the Main chamber playing. Work on the two four-rank chests and offsets included the re-leathering of secondaries, pallets and valves, and repacking top boards, bottom boards and wind trunks. Finally, the console combination action was re-leathered, and the organ was playable for a public concert.

Dairyland contacted a suburban Barbershop (SPEBSQSA) Chapter to co-sponsor and produce a program at the Riverside. And so it was that on April 26, 1981, the Meno-HAR-monee Chorus and a nationally ranked Barbershop quartet were on stage with Walt

Removing the RKO vertical sign on Sunday, March 5, 1967. The eight-ton sign was removed to "modernize" the theatre facade, and was done on a Sunday when traffic on Wisconsin Avenue was light.

(Milwaukee Journal Photo)

Stromy at the Mighty Wurlitzer. The show they presented was equally barbershop harmony and theatre pipe organ, and the most amazing part of all of this was the size of the audience — 1600 people came, saw, heard, and loved every minute of it! What those happy people did *not* know was what had been done to prepare the Riverside for their coming.

Dairyland volunteers had been at work on the house for weeks. Yes, the organ was ready, but when the switch was pulled backstage for the house lights, five crystal chandeliers remained dark. Volunteers went to the hoists above the ceiling and lowered the fixtures. Then came the long and tedious task of wiping off years of dust, replacing bulbs, checking circuits and winching the chandeliers back to their lofty positions. Then came the moment of truth. The switches were thrown, but still no light! Back to the drawing board. The trouble is finally found to be burned contactors in the switchgear. Parts are scavenged from the remaining light panel, and, at last, the big moment *does* arrive. The chandeliers are bright for the first time in years — only to highlight the sad condition of a house long neglected. What now?

Another project is the solution. The same volunteers pitch in and attack the accumulated grime from the basement restrooms to the top balcony and most everything in between. Later, some folks even repaint the main foyer. The Riverside still looks old and tired, but it is clean for the day of the Wurlitzer's second debut.

Meanwhile, exciting things were happening on Gimbel's side of Wisconsin Avenue. A plan to revitalize downtown Milwaukee was taking shape, and in August 1982 the Grand Avenue Retail Center opened. This 70-million-dollar jewel now includes 165 shops, boutiques, and dining spots in four blocks of beautifully restored buildings all connected by glass-enclosed areas with skywalks bridging the street crossings.

Ironically, however, this renewed vitality did not extend to the Riverside. In fact, it went dark on Labor Day 1982 when United Artists let their lease expire. The apparent hopelessness of the situation was expressed in a letter from a *Journal* reader some months later: "Not long ago, at the Grand Avenue Retail Center, there was a display of photographs of Milwaukee's movie palaces, past and present . . . Will someone send a photographer to the Riverside Theatre, too, so that we can lament its destruction after it's too late to save it?" The end seemed near and inevitable, not only to this reader, but also to much of the community as well.

And the Wurlitzer? Dairyland Chapter events and open consoles were held through the dark days until one disastrous night in December 1983 when the sprinkler pipes froze and burst, flooding the theatre's basement. The dc organ lift motor was soaked, but miraculously, once dried out and lubed, the 58-year old veteran ran just fine. Perhaps it presaged the soon-to-be-demonstrated fact that dawn can come to a darkened theatre!

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Inside the Riverside in 1931. Note top of console in orchestra pit at left.

(Albert Kuhli Photo)

Milwaukee's downtown resurgence became graphic in the financial success of the Retail Center, and in the spring of 1984, the owners of the Riverside, Towne Realty, made a momentous decision — they would refurbish the theatre! Renovation would include re-upholstering all of the seats, replacing the carpeting, restoring the ornate plaster work, adding refreshment areas, and painting the entire theatre in a handsome rose and burgundy color scheme. Dressing rooms, rest rooms and the office were to be entirely remodeled, and the air-conditioning, plumbing and electrical systems were to be repaired. After thousands of hours of work and a \$1.5 million investment, the theatre opened to its new era on November 2, 1984.

Improvements not visually evident to the layman were also included. Acoustical scrim material was installed in front of the organ chambers. Plans to carpet the entire floor, rather than just the aisles, were dropped when the designers were convinced that this would have a negative effect. Hard-wall surfaces

were retained in all areas, and an acoustically excellent house became even better! We can "modestly" say that Dairyland has an enjoyable example of these acoustics in a cassette album, "Down by the Riverside," recorded by Walt Stromy at the Wurlitzer in April 1986, in which no electronic sound enhancement techniques of any kind were employed.

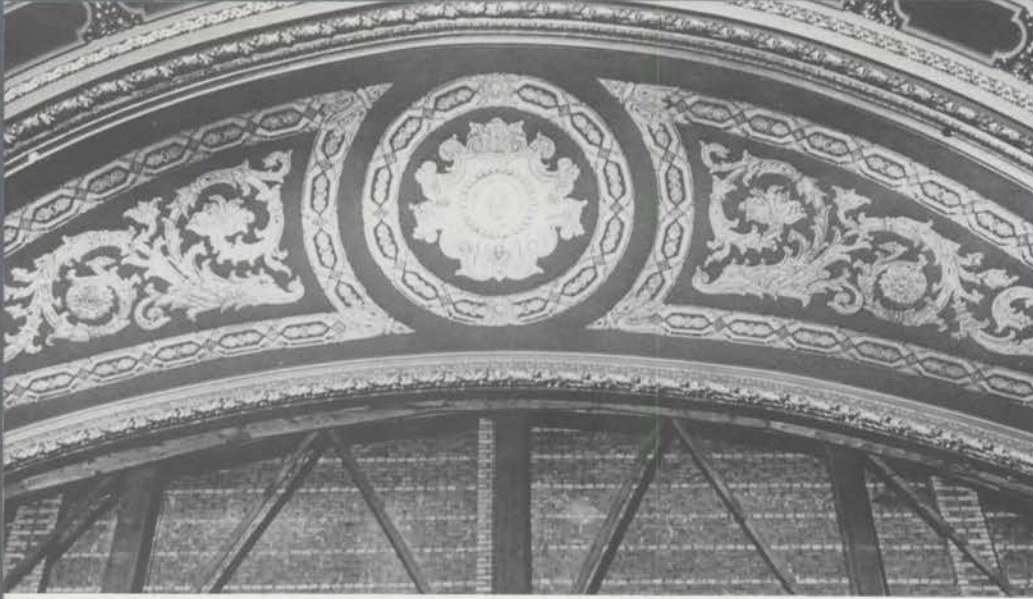
Refurbishing of the theatre was entirely without public subsidy. It was undertaken and completed by Towne Realty. Since its renaissance, it has been operated by a private corporation, and the entertainment booked there ranges from ballet to pop and rock and, periodically, there is an organ concert sponsored by Dairyland.

Early in 1985, there was another upgrading of the organ. Its specifications were completely reworked, resulting in a more unified stop-list. A Post Horn and 16' Tibia were added as was a relay and switchstack. Solid-state lies somewhere in the future. The organ's restoration was "quarterbacked" by Gary Han-

Reopening night, November 2, 1984. Swagging was missing from top of wall arches in balcony, but was installed some weeks later.

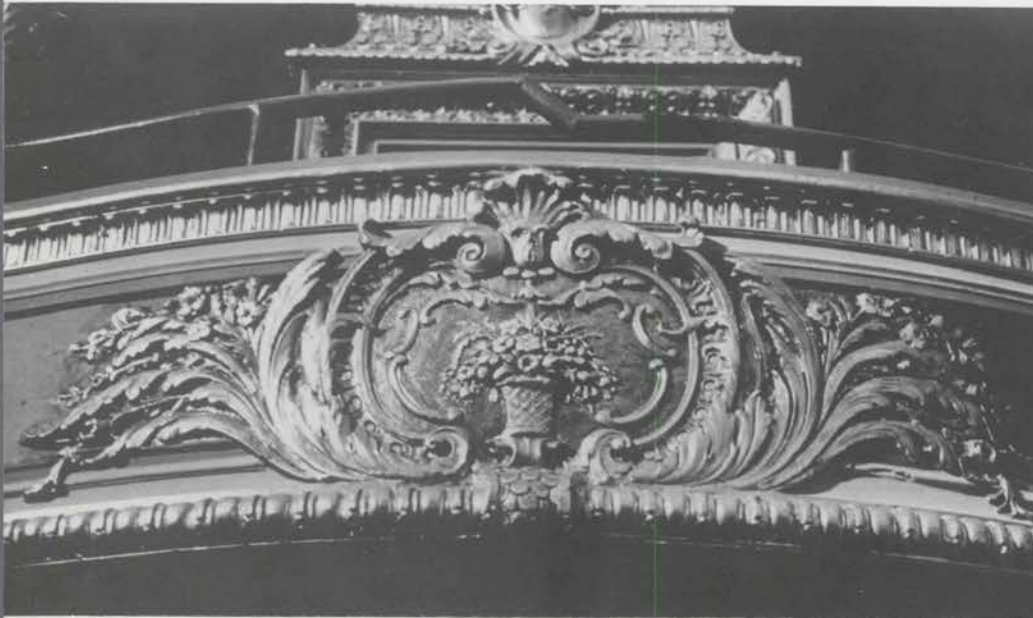
(Milwaukee Journal Photo)





Closeup of proscenium detail after refurbishing, but before new valance was hung.

(Milwaukee Journal Photo)



Detail of plasterwork on front of box-seat balcony.

(Milwaukee Journal Photo)

View of dome above scaffold floor during renovation.

(Milwaukee Journal Photo)



son, with valuable technical assistance from Bill Hansen and Clark Wilson. The efforts of many other Dairyland members and friends were essential to the success of the entire project. Also, we have been pleased to present some fine artists on the renewed Wurlitzer — these include Tom Hazleton, Jonas Nordwall, Lyn Larsen, Dennis James, Rex Koury and two concerts by Walt Strony.

If Wurlitzers have feelings, certainly this one is enjoying its new-found fame, as last October 13 it was heard on a network of 260 PBS radio stations across the nation when it was played as part of the famous *A Prairie Home Companion* broadcast starring Garrison Keillor. Gary Hanson was at the console that evening. The Wurlitzer probably had more listeners than in its entire history! Who knows what exciting adventures are still waiting in the wings. We only wish that those master organ builders of 1928 could hear their Wurlitzer now . . . but perhaps they can.

Were the dreams and thousands of volunteer hours that went into the organ and the theatre renewal a good investment? You bet! Milwaukee now has a gem of a theatre and what many judge to be the Midwest's best-sounding theatre organ still in its original home. The efforts of all are rewarded each time that very special Wurlitzer speaks. And maybe, just maybe, the Dairyland Theatre Organ Society's efforts in those days when the Riverside Theatre and its Wurlitzer were down (but not out), helped to motivate the owners to this exciting renaissance, a significant contribution to Milwaukee's future as well as to that of the theatre organ. □

Solo swell shades (just above plastic-wrapped chandelier) before acoustical scrim was hung.

(Milwaukee Journal Photo)

