

Back From The Brink!

by Jim Moe

In January 1984 the World almost came to an end.

It was not by fire and rolling thunder from the skies — as some would-be-prophets have suggested — but by plaster falling from its ceiling. And its fate was almost sealed not by a deity but by a building inspector.

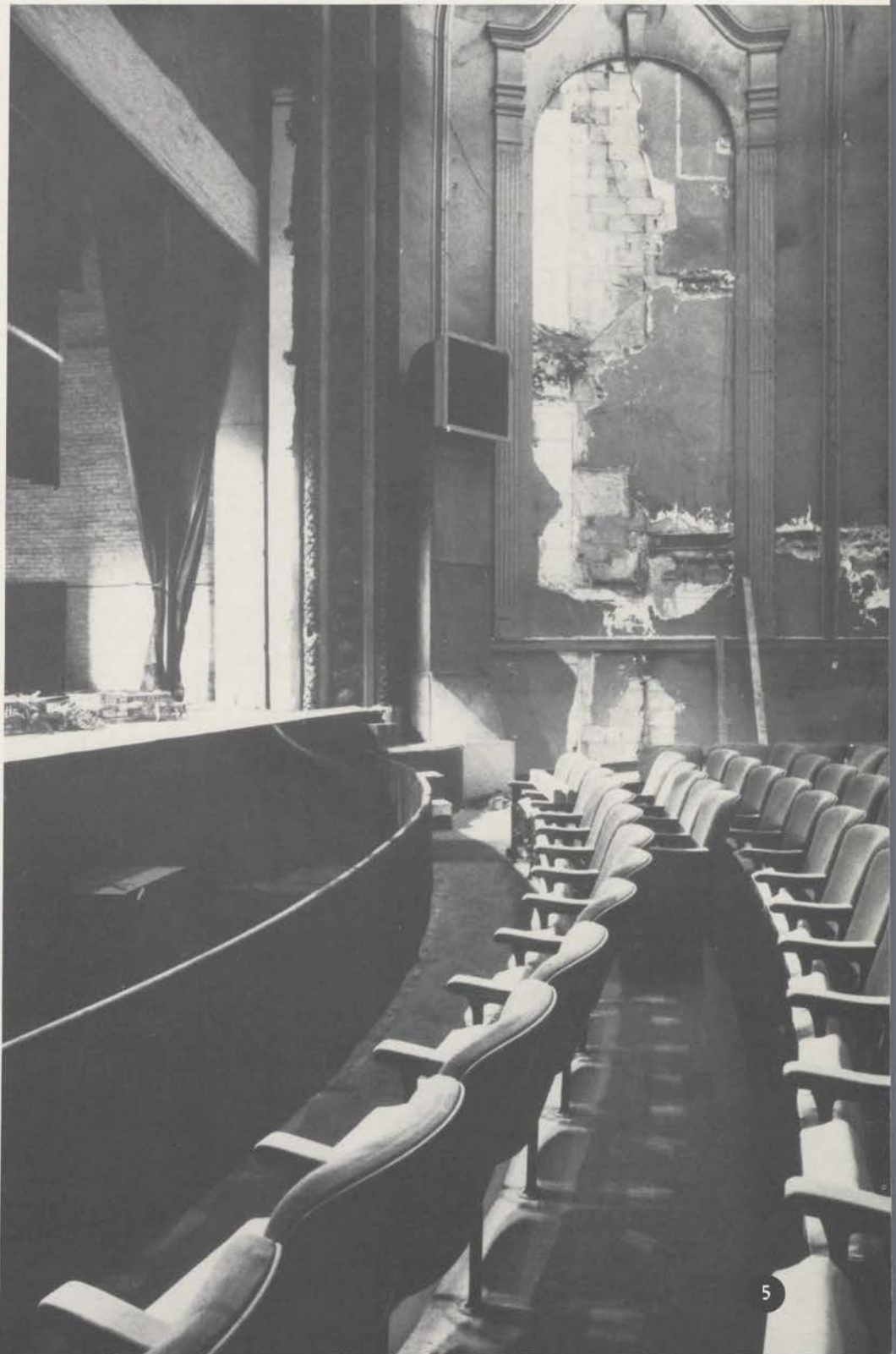
St. Paul's World Theater originally opened in August 1910 as the Sam S. Shubert Theater. It was one of the four memorial theatres built by the surviving two Shubert brothers after the death of their brother. To assure a fitting memorial, the firm of Marshall and Fox of Chicago was hired, and the theatre was patterned after the beautiful Maxine Elliot Theatre of New York.

The St. Paul Shubert was a legitimate theatre and presented plays, musicals and performers which were on tour nationally for the extensive Shubert chain. Its design was elegant, though not as ornate as the movie palaces were soon to become. The balconies were tiered and grand opera boxes completed the simple, yet classic, auditorium. The seats were upholstered in deep burgundy plush to enhance the visual effect and assure that patrons were indulged.

The Shubert was the center of theatrical activity in St. Paul during its first decade, but by the early 1920s the movie houses were drawing the crowds. The Shubert became just another movie house, and was, of course, at a serious disadvantage since its original design had not provided chambers for a theatre organ.

Some revival attempts were made in the early 1930s, and the grand opera boxes were lost in one of the "modernizations." The Shubert became the World, a plaster shell replaced the elegant interior, and the theatre became just another of St. Paul's second-rate movie houses. This did, however, prove to be economically successful, and the World continued to run movies until the late 1970s.

The saga of the World and its Wurlitzer has several other main players, one of which is Minnesota Public Radio. MPR was founded at St. John's University near St. Cloud, Minnesota, in 1967 by William H. Kling, still its president and driving force. From humble beginnings and a single, low-power transmitter, MPR has grown to a 12-station network covering Minnesota, parts of Michigan and several adjacent states. Its 60,000 member-sup-



Interior of the World Theater before renovation.
(Photo courtesy World Theater)

porters and staff of over 200 make it the largest institution of its kind in the country. Many MPR programs, such as J. Michael Barone's *Pipedreams*, *St. Paul Sunday Morning* and others are distributed nationally by American Public Radio, itself spawned by MPR. The most widely known of MPR's programs, Garrison Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion* (APHC, as it is known to the staff), is the reason the World did not come to an end, but to a beginning, back in 1984.

APHC had outgrown its original home by 1978, and the movie business had left the World (as well as all the other downtown St. Paul theatres) in favor of the suburbs. Lumber to board up the theatre had already been purchased by the owner when MPR approached him for a possible lease. Fortunately, the owner wanted to see the theatre saved and agreed to a modest rental. From 1978 to January 1984, the World, though time-worn

and tired, was again lavished by attention from a dedicated APHC staff and by the constantly increasing numbers of APHC fans. During this time, the theatre building was purchased by MPR.

When the ceiling fell and the building was condemned for public use, APHC moved to the nearby Orpheum Theatre. It was at this point that MPR decided to rebuild the World. A four-year, \$3.5 million effort was launched and is just now being completed.

Other key players in our drama are the Minnesota Theatre Organ Association and the Land O'Lakes chapter of the ATOS.

The Minnesota Theatre Organ Association was founded in 1971 by George Hardenbergh, Clyde Olson and John Zetterstrom, who hoped to get an organ installed in the Twin Cities for concert and club use, as had been done by DTOC in Detroit. After a considerable search, a 3/19 Wurlitzer, Opus

1473, was located in Texas, purchased and moved to the Twin Cities. The original home of the organ was the San Antonio Famous Players Theatre (later the Texas Theatre) where it had been installed in 1926. By the late 1950s it had suffered deterioration and vandalism which had almost sealed its fate. Subsequent removal and storage outdoors under a tarp for many years had brought it to much the same condition as the World Theater before its restoration.

In the following years, the dedicated men of MTOA proceeded to work on the organ, to rebuild virtually destroyed chests, pipework and console. The organ, however, although badly damaged, was essentially complete. In addition to rebuilding the console, a Z-Tronics solid-state relay and a Trousdale microprocessor combination action were installed. Unification was increased to a total of 23 tabs, providing much more tonal flexibility. Tonal resources were also increased to 21 ranks with the addition of a second Vox and a Tibia as well as a piano.

Many options for installing the organ were considered, but none seemed to be quite right until, in mid-1985, a discussion between flying enthusiasts Harry Jorgensen (associated with MTOA and Land O'Lakes Chapter) and Roger Gomol (of MPR on-air staff) revealed that MPR was interested in the possibility of an organ as part of the then-planned World restoration. In fact, an alternate design had been included by the architects which provided for chamber space over the to-be-replaced grand opera boxes.

Arrangements were made between MTOA and MPR for the installation and subsequent use of the Wurlitzer for World Theater functions and concerts as well as for Land O'Lakes Chapter/MTOA use. The organ chambers were included in the renovation along with many other structural and physical changes. One end of the orchestra pit was squared off to provide space for a console lift. As it turned out, this required breaking up bedrock which was revealed when excavation began.

Only after much planning and careful layout was it determined that the now 21-rank organ would actually fit. Chamber space is an absolute minimum. The good news, however, is that sound is brilliantly projected because of the shallow chambers which are located above the grand opera boxes on either side of the orchestra. Tuned percussions and toy counter are mounted outside the chambers and speak through a spot bay opening directly above the orchestra seats. Diaphones and 16' Bourdon had to be located high on the stage side wall, and the piano (also playable manually) is located in the orchestra pit. Terry Kleven of Century Pipe Organs is responsible for the final tonal finishing of the Wurlitzer.

Another special requirement for the installation has been the elimination of mechanical and wind noise. The World is often used as a broadcasting studio, and ambient noise is carefully controlled throughout the building. This required decking around the chests at walkboard level and extensive soundproofing for the blower.

Access to the Main chamber is quite direct,

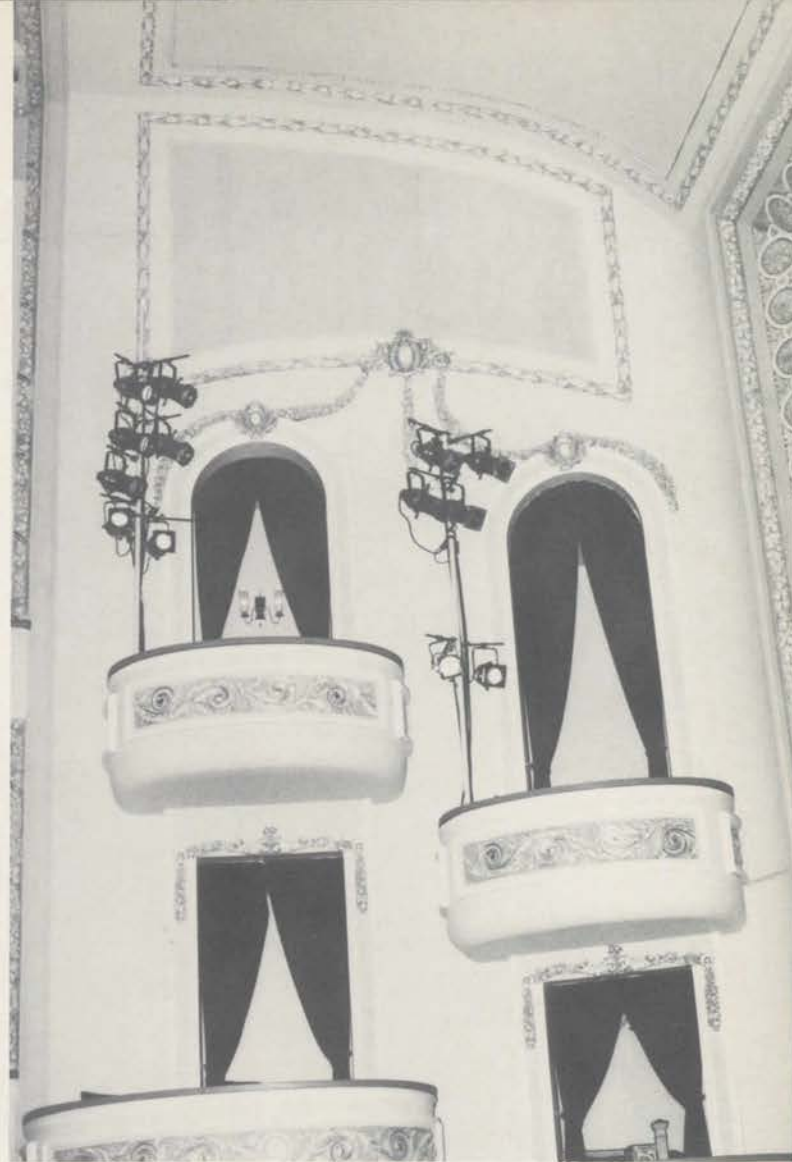
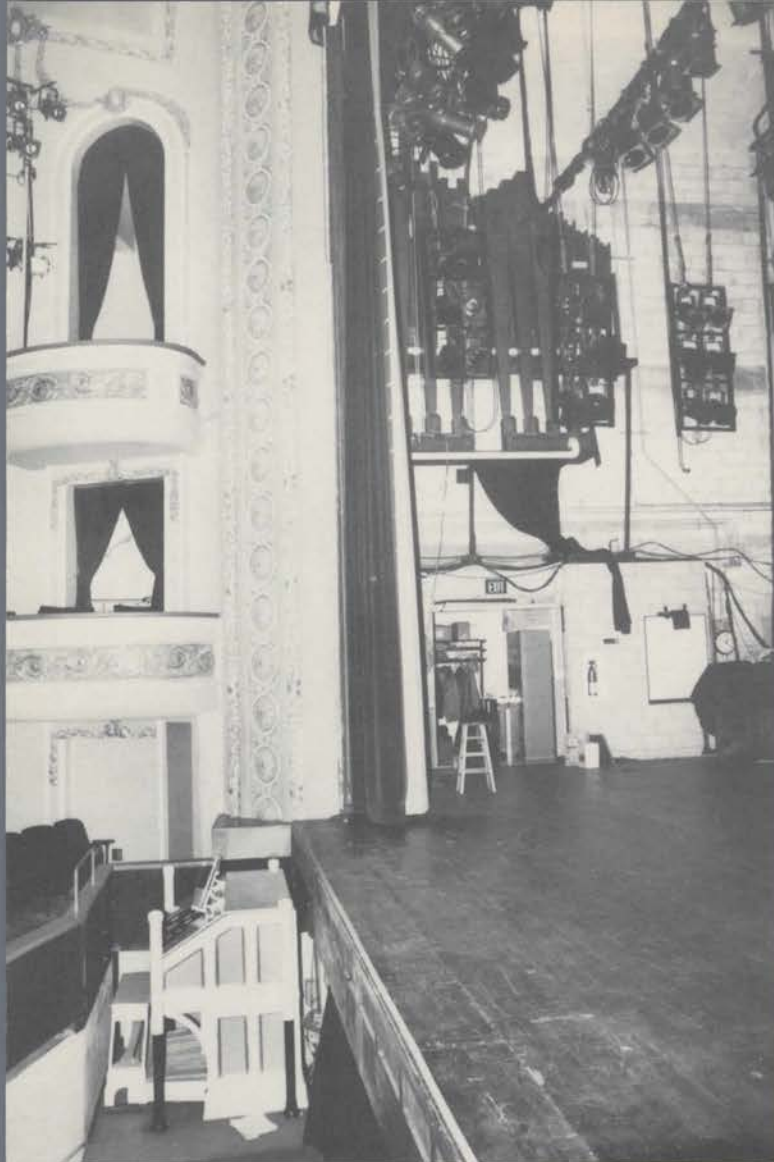


Interior of the World Theater after renovation.

(Photo courtesy of World Theater)

Front of remodeled World Theater in downtown St. Paul. Glass doors (nearly invisible in the photo) enclose the area under the canopy. (Jim Moe photo)





Console lift in down position in orchestra pit. Portion of main chamber opening can be seen above boxes. Diaphone and Bourdon pipes are mounted on stage wall, upper right. (Jim Moe photo)

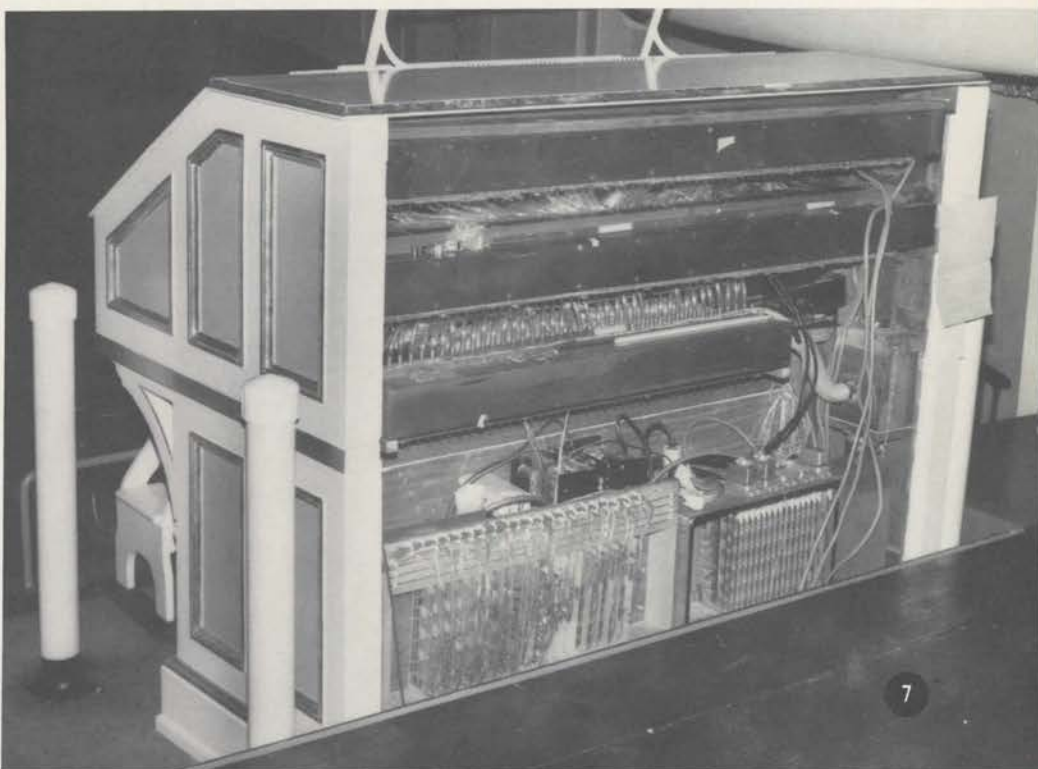
Main Chamber tone opening, just above the boxes. Perforated grille is 88% sound-transparent. (Jim Moe photo)

although all material must be brought up some 40' by hoist in the stage house. Access to the Solo chamber is quite another story. All material must go to the Main chamber entrance and then over stairs, narrow catwalks and ladders some 20' up and 150' across, above the ceiling. Manual chests, reservoirs, 16' Tibia pipes and chests had to be brought in through the tone opening (40' above the floor) while construction was going on.

The theatre renovation has also included complete restoration of the original ornate plasterwork. The original deluxe seats have been rebuilt and reupholstered in the same wine plush. The lobby was gutted and the entrance moved from a side street to a tasteful new glass-fronted entrance. Because of bookings for broadcasts, chamber music, solo performers, corporate meetings, plays, films, etc., the behind-the-scene systems were also totally renewed or replaced. This includes a 32-line, fully rigged stage and a movable acoustical stage shell for orchestras, chamber groups and soloists. The projection booth is equipped for both 35mm and 16mm films as well as slides.

Electronics, as might be expected for a sometimes broadcast studio, are complete. A

The panel in the lower left corner of the console is part of the Z-tronics relay; the one to the right of it is the Trousdale capture combination action. Each player has a cassette which registers one's own combination on each of 48 general, second touch pistons. (Jim Moe photo)



34-line mixer board with extensive patch network provides program feed for recording or live broadcasting to the MPR building (and satellite uplink) a block away. A superb house sound-system is also provided for folk and contemporary groups or for movie sound. Stage and house lighting are electronically controlled and utilize both a microprocessor preset controller and solid-state dimmers.

The result of all this? The World didn't come to an end, nor did the Texas Theatre

CHAMBER ANALYSIS

MAIN (Left)

Concert Flute (to 8')	Tuba
Solo String	Viol d'Orchestre
Flute Celeste (formerly Dulciana)	Diaphonic Diapason (flues)
Solo String Celeste	Viol Celeste
Vox Humana	Clarinet
	Tibia (added)

SOLO (Right)

Saxophone (brass)	Oboe Horn
English Post Horn	Quintadena
Tibia	Orchestral Oboe
Trumpet (brass)	Kinura
Krumet	
	Vox Humana (added)
	Marimba, Tuned Sleigh Bells, Chimes

CEILING CENTER (Unenclosed)

Chrysoglott	Xylophone
Glockenspiel	Toy Counter

STAGE SIDE WALL

16' Flute (Bourdon) Diaphones

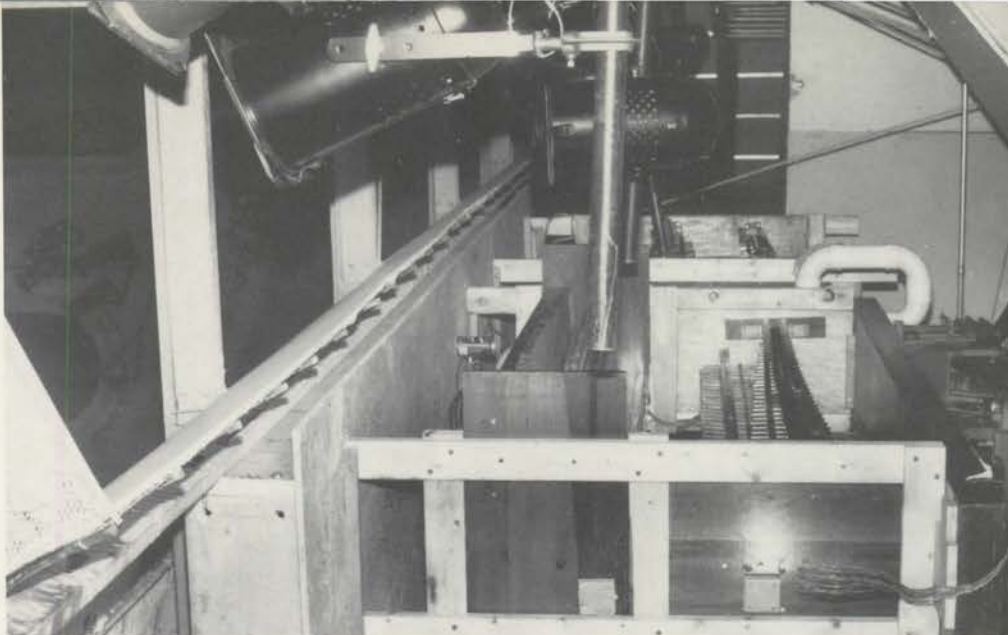
ORCHESTRA PIT

Upright Piano

Wurlitzer. Thanks to foresight, dedicated effort and financial commitment by many individuals and by MPR, a near finale became instead a new beginning. The Twin Cities have both a fine new theatre and, for the first time in many years, an organ in a theatre.

As you have, no doubt, heard, APHC will come to an end on June 13. However, many of you have, by now, heard the World Wurlitzer on the radio or seen it on TV. Plans are developing which should assure that the organ will be heard nationwide in future MPR programming — still another new beginning for the venerable World and its new/old Wurlitzer. □

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Percussions (except for the Marimba) are above the ceiling of the theatre speaking through this spotlight slot. They can be heard very well. *(Jim Moe photo)*

The Barton screw lift was completely rebuilt. It was widened, and the amount of lift was increased to about 60 inches. *(Jim Moe photo)*

