

Exemplary!

Renaissance for a Stately Queen

A Brief History of Shea's Buffalo

When Shea's Buffalo first opened its doors to the public on January 16, 1926, a new era of popular entertainment dawned for the people of Buffalo and Western New York. For Michael Shea, premier showman of the area, it marked the culmination of a theatrical career that had flourished since the 1880s. For the next 25 years, Shea's Buffalo remained the mecca for all — young and old alike — who sought the finest in stage and screen entertainment. Every type of talent known to show business graced the Buffalo's stage at one time or another. The list of greats is endless: George Burns and Gracie Allen, the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, Red Skelton, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, even Jack Dempsey. Virtually all the well-known theatre organists such as Jesse Crawford, Henry Murtagh and Lloyd Del Castillo have played the Mighty Wurlitzer at Shea's. The orchestras of Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, and Harry James have appeared there; magician Thurston the Great, crooners Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee are only a few of those who have played Mike Shea's lavish showplace.

Simultaneously, most of the great movie stars of that glamorous era were represented on the Buffalo's silver screen. Audiences laughed at Chaplin, swooned at Gable and Taylor, were left breathless by Garbo and were just plain thrilled by Astaire and Rogers. This glorious entertainment continued throughout the difficult years of the Great Depression and the trying times of WWII.

As a result of the United States Supreme Court's anti-trust decree of 1948, Shea's Buffalo became part of the Loew chain of theatres and was operated as a straight film house until 1964 when Leon Lawrence Sidell purchased the building and its contents and then leased it back to Loew's, who continued to operate it as a motion picture theatre until July 1973 when the Loew Corporation terminated its operation. Meanwhile, the City of Buffalo had foreclosed on the property for back taxes in December of 1974, and ownership passed to the city.

There was talk of demolishing the building until the Friends of the Buffalo Theatre be-

came involved. Led by L. Curt Mangel, III, the theatre's chief engineer, the Friends formed a non-profit organization to work toward restoration and maintenance of Buffalo's premier showplace as a viable perform-

ing arts center. During this period, substantial restoration was completed, thanks to more than \$750,000 in grants. Chandeliers were cleaned, the monumental task of restoring the Wurlitzer was begun and numerous electrical

Shea's Buffalo — Grand Lobby, 1926.

(Theatre Historical Society photo)





Patrons crowd lobby for Welcome Back Wurlitzer rededication program, April 1984. (Allen Miller photo)

and mechanical problems were corrected. Through the years, many of the paintings and marble statues had disappeared, but several graceful sculptures and original furnishings remain. A large painting at the head of the grand staircase, entitled "Mignon," was restored by a volunteer who painstakingly removed years of dirt using raw potato as the cleaning agent. A portrait of Michael Shea stands, flanked by two alabaster lamps, in the lobby. The entire theatre was reseated and recarpeted. The new carpet is a reproduction of

Shea's Buffalo, 1926.



(Theatre Historical Society)

the original 1926 design.

Through the efforts of the Friends, the theatre was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. In December of that year, the Common Council of the City of Buffalo voted unanimously to enter into negotiations with the Friends for a three-year use agreement to operate the theatre. In addition, the Friends returned live entertainment to the theatre's stage. Through the efforts of the Friends, the preservation of Shea's Buffalo has now become a community undertaking — a project with which every citizen of Buffalo can personally identify.

Shea's Buffalo Theatre

Shea's Buffalo was one of the most elaborate theatres produced and is regarded today as one of the finest intact movie palaces in the country. Designed by Chicago architects C. W. and George Rapp, it has Italian marble walls and Czechoslovakian crystal chandeliers and resembles a European opera house. Its architectural style is French Renaissance in the Louis XIV style with a modern American adaptation. The ceiling is covered with an infinite variety of interlacing woodwork designs on curving panels with many variations of the primary shades of golds, pinks and blues. The designs include shields, scrolls, conventional flowers and plaques. It has been said that the decor is so exquisite that the addition of one more bric-a-brac would have caused it to be "overdone." Indeed, the atmosphere is quietly stated elegance.

The theatre was built in exactly one year at a cost close to \$2 million. The entrance rises to an impressive 100 feet, and the lobby is 80 × 30 feet with a foyer which is 22 × 90 feet. Inside the auditorium, the ceiling dome measures 56 × 70 feet and is 89 feet above the orchestra floor, suspended from the roof which

is yet another 15 feet above. This distance equals the height of an average seven-story building.

The interior, with its painted ceilings and gilded moldings, was designed by Tiffany Studios of New York. The theatre was built for maximum comfort with seating for 4000 patrons, according to Better Theatres Supplement of *Exhibitors Herald* which ran a major article about Shea's Buffalo when it opened. Today, the seating has been rearranged for 3150. Elevators were provided for both the 50-piece orchestra and the organ console. The eye notes the elaborately decorated proscenium arch which has a height of 50 feet. The 100-foot-wide stage has an opening of 66 feet and is 28 feet deep. The stage has 50 lines from which lights, curtains or scenery are hung. The original grand drape, weighing almost 1200 pounds, is still in use and can be raised and lowered by one man through the use of counterweights. Shea's has the capability of showing 70mm as well as films on its 30 × 60 foot screen.

Shea's Buffalo Wurlitzer

The Shea's Buffalo Wurlitzer was one of the largest and finest in the country and reflected the close relationship Michael Shea had with Fanny Wurlitzer. It is known that the Buffalo was greatly influenced by Michael Shea's visit to the Uptown Theatre in Chicago when it was first built. Shea, upon hearing the Uptown Wurlitzer, is said to have told Fanny that he wanted the same organ — with lots of strings. The Buffalo organ did, in fact, turn out to be an identical sister to the Uptown organ. Not only were the ranks the same, the original chest layouts were also identical. While both were called Style 285s, they were quite different from the normal 285 in that neither had an Echo Division. The organ contained three Tibias, seven ranks of strings and ten ranks extended to 16' pitch. The Solo Vox Humana was of unusually large scale with domed tops and was voiced on 10" wind.

Many of the traps and effects were either large scale or very unusual. The bass drum is so large it would not pass through the chamber door. In addition to the usual snare drum, a larger field drum was also included as a second snare drum. Special effects included wind, a special aeroplane effect and a real, swinging locomotive bell.

The proximity of the Wurlitzer factory, just 20 miles to the north, and the fact that this was to be the largest organ in the area and would be available for demonstration to prospective customers, led Wurlitzer to expend extra care in its construction and installation. Best of all, it was tonally finished by Wurlitzer's two top voicers, Joseph Carruthers and James Nuttall, who normally did not go into the field for final voicing. In fact, Wurlitzer rarely tonally finished their organs! This extra care, plus the shape of the organ chambers, the generous tone openings, the contours of the auditorium, and the fact that the organ was almost too big for the room, gave the Buffalo Wurlitzer its unique character and its rich, overwhelming sound. J. Meakin Jones, sales manager for Wurlitzer in the theatre or-



Shea's Buffalo lobby.



(Dan Wilke photo) Rotunda in auditorium of Shea's Buffalo Theatre.

(Dan Wilke photo)

gan days, said that Wurlitzer considered the Buffalo organ to be, tonally, one of the three finest instruments they ever created.

The instrument is located in six large chambers — three on each side of the theatre behind sculpted arches to the left and right of the stage. The arches are framed in open lattices bathed in mood-lighting. Centered in these arches are small balconies which support large flower pots containing porcelain floral arrangements flanked by spiral columns which support ornate crowns containing mood-lighting for the flowers. The area behind the arches is completely open, giving the organ unimpeded tonal egress.

Unfortunately, as was the case with most theatre organs, the Buffalo Wurlitzer had a relatively short life. With the advent of sound motion pictures the use of the organ was drastically reduced. Also, the use of coal to heat the theatre resulted in the chambers and pipes becoming encased in coal dust. Massive leaks in the roof's drainage system caused tons of water to cascade through the chambers undetected.

In 1946, Wurlitzer was looking for work, and Farny Wurlitzer convinced the theatre management to replace the damaged pneu-

Shea's Buffalo from the stage, 1926.

(Theatre Historical Society photo)





16' English Horn (Post Horn) during reinstallation in Brass Chamber. (Allen Miller photo)

matics and get the organ playing again. The project was monumental and costly and was never finished.

In the 1960s, efforts were begun to get the organ playing again. Some water-damaged tremulants were replaced with church organ tremulants and a number of patchwork repairs were made, enough that the organ was played at the 1964 ATOE Convention. The theatre showed signs of neglect at that point; the organ was without an operating combination action and there were runs in the cable, but the instrument sounded glorious! Performances by Gaylord Carter, Lowell Ayars, Tom Sheen and Pearl White (who played the daylight out of the Buffalo organ), led to recordings which served to convince people ten years later that the organ was worth saving.

The restoration project, however, was simply too much for a volunteer crew with no funds and little encouragement from Loew's, and the work was eventually abandoned. Since it was thought that the organ would probably never play again, some parts were removed and were incorporated into other organ projects. Numerous pipes were stolen, including the Brass Trumpet, a rare set that was voiced on 12" wind.

Abandoned again, the organ sustained further, even more devastating damage from water pouring in through defective roof drains. Virtually every bit of water which fell on the theatre's immense roof poured through the organ chambers. Chamber ceilings fell in, crushing pipes and filling them with wet plaster which eventually hardened again. Wood pipes, including 16' Bombardes, came unglued. Chests and percussions were badly damaged. Steel screws holding brass weights onto the reed tongues rusted

through and the weights were lost; magnets and armatures rusted as did most of the wood screws.

By the time the Friends of the Buffalo began to think about restoring the organ, the damage was so bad that there were even mushrooms growing in the Solo chamber, and it looked hopeless. There was serious thought given to junking the organ and starting over with another instrument, but the original organ still had too much going for it.

The Restoration

Since it was obvious that the restoration project was going to be extensive, a number of technicians and organists were contacted for advice. It quickly became evident that the job was going to require a professional, skilled in all phases of theatre organ restoration, to oversee the entire project. Allen Miller was hired as organ restoration consultant.

A modernized stoplist was drawn up to utilize the original ranks in the most versatile manner. This required enlarging the stoprails to the maximum number of stoptabs possible. It was decided that the console would be professionally rebuilt and that a new relay system would be installed. Beyond the restoration of the regulators, the chamber work would be done locally. With the help of more than 50 volunteers, restoration was begun.

Just before it was to be removed, a large Voice-of-the-Theatre speaker enclosure fell from a scaffold tower onto the top of the console, breaking the entire horseshoe in two. Glue-joints cracked open, and the console literally had to be taken to Dave Junchen's shop in Woodstock, Illinois, in small pieces. At this time, Junchen-Collins became a part of Barringer Studios, and the entire operation moved to Pasadena, California. When Barringer Studios discontinued all organ work, the Buffalo console was left with contracted

work unfinished. In the meantime, the console case had been re-veneered and refinished in the Chicago area; however, the finish was deemed unacceptable, and the console was then stripped and sent to Gorsuch Enterprises where it was given an oiled finish which also was unacceptable. At this point, the console was sent to Ken Crome who completed its rebuilding along the original plans. It was refinished two more times because of problems with the new finishes adhering to the oil finish. Finally, in December of 1982, the console arrived back in Buffalo, a fitting Christmas present to the organ crew, and an incentive to complete the project.

To save on the cost of console rebuilding, the organ crew wired most of the console devices under the direction of Allen Miller, who wired and assembled the console electronics for the Z-Tronics Multiplex relay system. A two-memory combination action system, built by Neil Shaw of Ontario, Canada, was selected on the basis of its sound design and the proximity of the company should major service ever be required.

Because of the extent of the water damage, the crew decided to replace all magnets, pallet guide pins and primary spool assemblies and to re-cover all pneumatics, pallet valves and gasketing. Where warpage was encountered, the chests were completely stripped and disassembled, planed flat and reassembled. To accomplish this efficiently, a workshop was established in what was once a rehearsal room on the seventh floor above the dressing rooms. Each chamber was disassembled and chests, pipes and other parts were taken to the workshop for rebuilding, then later reinstalled. Regulators were re-covered by Organ Supply Industries and Eric Brugger of Erie, Pennsylvania. Mr. Brugger's outstanding work returned the regulators to their original condition, even to the use of double gussets.

The new Organ Supply high pressure mag-

Solo: (Front to rear) Saxophone, Gamba, Quintadena, Gamba Celeste, Oboe Horn, Trumpet, Tibia, Solo String, Vox Humana. (Dan Wilke photo)



nets were found to be unreliable on pressures over 10 inches. The organ has pressures up to 35 inches, so tooling was designed to modify every magnet to exact Wurlitzer operating specifications. The modified magnets work perfectly, and have the advantage of ease-of-cleaning armatures and no tendency to hiss. In addition, we have found that a small bit of dirt in the magnet tends to cause the note to go dead rather than to cipher.

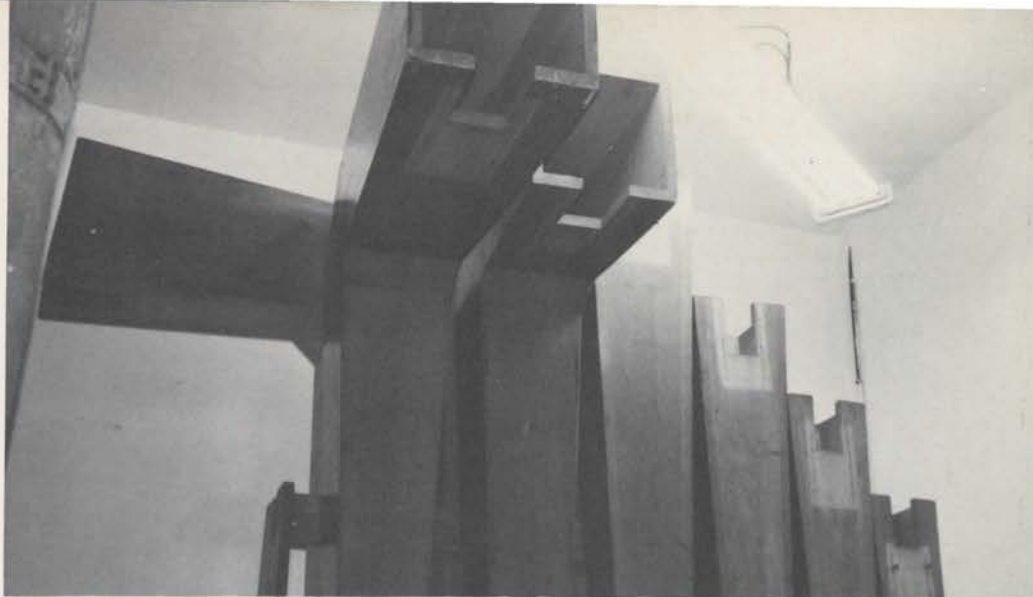
Because the windlines were removed during the chest and regulator rebuilding, it was possible to place bass offsets on separate untremmed wind, add five more regulators and tremulants and correct some original wind problems where tremulants had never worked properly. The added tremulants were built by the organ crew and are exact copies of the originals.

Some of the work was purely mechanical, such as gluing the 16' Bombarde wood resonators back together. Other work was more demanding; for example, the Master Xylophone bars were stolen during the rebuilding operation and every percussion company contacted was unable to supply a set of bars of this scale. However, crew member Walter Martin ordered Brazilian rosewood and manufactured new bars by using drawings made from an original set. The bars were tuned by cutting and sanding the undersides and ends and testing them against a strobe tuner. This process took over a week.

During the chest rebuilding phase, the smashed, broken, battered and stolen pipework was repaired or replaced by Allen Miller Associates, who also built a new Trumpet. Standard pipe metal construction was used with scaling and voicing to match the brass trumpet sound. This not only saved the extra cost of brass resonators, but also reduced the possibility of another strike by the midnight brass-snatchers!

The entire organ was rewired with telephone cable, incorporating a short cable with a connector at each bottom board. Now, when any chest problems occur, the entire bottom board may be unplugged and taken to the shop for inspection and maintenance. The Z-Tronics driver boards are installed in cabinets, one on either side of the theatre, for ease of maintenance. The local telephone company provided the labor and the materials for this undertaking.

As the organ became functional again in the fall of 1983, Allen Miller began the final tonal finishing and regulating. John Shafer was hired to assist with this task and, in the process, learned the special skills which would enable the organ to be maintained in top form. Every pipe was completely cleaned and re-shellacked, its stoppers and lips releathered and then it was revoiced as necessary to its original condition. The speech of each pipe was checked and corrected. It was found that some pipes had been experimented upon previously, and some, such as the 16' English Horn and 16' Clarinet, required complete revoicing. The Saxophone, which was an early, very loud set, was revoiced to the softer, gurgling sound desired today. New upper extensions to the top of 2' pitch were made for the



Restored 16' Bombarde in Brass Chamber. Extensive water damage had caused pipe glue-joints to fail so wood pieces fell to the floor along with the ceiling. (Allen Miller photo)

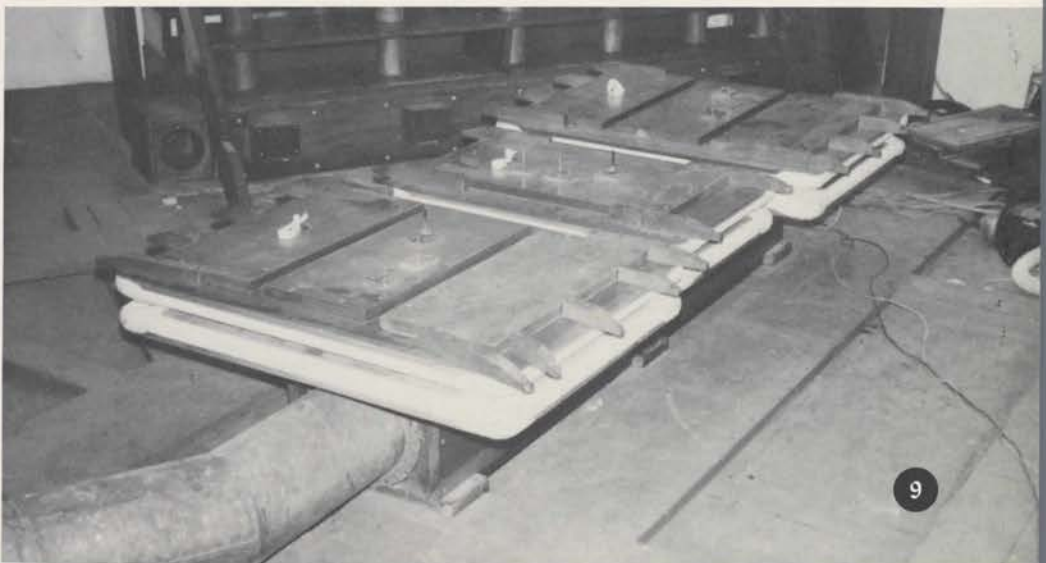


Tremulant shows water damage, an example of the condition of the entire organ before restoration.

(Allen Miller photo)

Restored Brass Chamber regulators during reinstallation. Organ was removed and rebuilt one chamber at a time.

(Allen Miller photo)



Tibia Clausas and Concert Flute. The setting of balances between octaves and ranks was done from the center of the balcony using a note-playing device which interfaces with the Z-Tronics relay. Tonal finishing was thus accomplished from the "ideal" seat in the auditorium.

After eight months of extensive work, the organ was ready for the public and was officially rededicated on April 27, 1984, with Lyn Larsen at the console and Jack Bethards and the Shea's Buffalo Orchestra on stage. Since that night, the organ has been used for performance intermissions, as live music for a ten-week run of the "Niagara Follies," and for solo performances by Rob Calcaterra, Walt Strony, Tom Hazleton, Dennis James, Robert Wolfe, Father James Miller, Ron Rhode, Carlo Annibale, Tim Schramm, Lance Luce, Lou Hurvitz and Chris Elliott. Lyn Larsen made a digital audio recording on the organ following his return engagement in September of 1986. This recording is expected to be released as a cassette tape in the near future.

The Shea's Buffalo Wurlitzer has received the highest possible praise from visiting organists. Lyn Larsen said, "The organ is a crisp, clean jewel." Walt Strony called it "the finest playing original Wurlitzer (in a theatre) in the entire country — honest!" From Dennis James, "One of the great ones is back — indeed it is." Father Miller observed, "This is 'The Wurlitzer.' Let all those who wish to return to 'new' come, hear, and let this organ be the 'standard.'" Tom Hazleton called it the "Queen of Wurlitzers — the sound of the San Francisco Fox with the volume turned up — this is the definitive Wurlitzer." Ron Rhode exalted, "My expectations have been met and surpassed, to my great delight. We organists owe a debt of gratitude to each person who has dedicated so much time to achieve this end result."

These accolades are well-deserved by the organ crew, which continues to refine the organ and is still restoring and replacing some of the percussions, traps and effects, including the tuned tympani, sleighbells, drums, cymbals and the locomotive bell. It is hoped that a grand piano can be found and installed in one of the side boxes to replace the original piano which no longer exists.

While more than 50 individuals contributed considerable time and effort to the project, special thanks must go to L. Curt Mangel, who convinced us that it could be done, to Charlie Koester, Gordon and Thelma Gillette, John Shafer, Warren Miller, Walter Martin and Maureen Wilke who took on the most repetitive tasks and acted as the "glue" that held the crew together, and to Allen Miller for his continuing guidance and expertise.

Shea's Buffalo Theatre is now operating "in the black" as a first class performing arts house and is the focal point of the renovation of downtown Buffalo's Theatre District. The rebuilding of the organ marks the realization of a dream and the beginning of a new era for Shea's and the Mighty Wurlitzer. □

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PIPE LOCATION BY CHAMBER

Shea's Buffalo Theatre Wurlitzer

All are on 10" wind except as noted.

MAIN CHAMBER (Lower left side):

- 16' - 8' Tuba Profunda (15" wind)
- 16' - 4' Horn Diapason (16' octave in diaphonic, metal resonators)
- 16' - 8' Clarinet
- 16' - 2' Concert Flute (16' Bourdon — stopped wood pipes)
- 8' - 2' Viol d'Orchestre
- 8' - 4' Viol Celeste
- 8' Open Diapason
- 8' Salicional
- 8' Krumet
- 8' - 4' Dulciana
- Chrysoglott

FOUNDATION CHAMBER (Upper left side):

- 32' - 8' Diaphonic Diapason
(32' octave unenclosed, on 35" wind; 32' C through low F in 8' are diaphonic with wood resonators on 25" wind; 16' - 8' in foundation)
- 16' - 4' Tibia Plena (open wood pipes, leathered lips, on 15" wind)
- 16' - 2' Tibia Clausa (stopped wood pipes, leathered lips, 15" wind)
- 8' Vox Humana (6" wind)
- 4' Harmonic Flute
(open metal pipes pierced with small hole midway up the length of the resonator, 15" wind)

BRASS CHAMBER (Upper right side):

- 16' - 4' Tuba Mirabilis
(16' C through 8' F are reeds with wooden resonators; 25" wind)
- 16' - 8' English Horn (15" wind)
- Xylophone (Master scale)
- Tympani (12 tuned Kettle Drums)
- Train Whistle (3 calliope-type pipes on about 35" pressure)
- Train Bell (real locomotive bell, pneumatical tipped)

SOLO CHAMBER (Lower right side):

- 16' - 8' Solo String (15" wind)
- 8' Trumpet (12" wind, new Allen Miller Associates)
- 8' Brass Saxophone
- 8' - 4' Tibia Clausa (stopped pipes, leathered lips, 15" wind)
- 8' - 4' Gamba
- 8' - 4' Gamba Celeste
- 8' Orchestral Oboe (12" wind)
- 8' Oboe Horn
- 8' Quintadena
- 8' Kinura
- 8' - 4' Vox Humana (large scale, 10" wind)
- Marimba-Harp
- Orchestra Bells-Glockenspiel
- Cathedral Chimes
- Tuned Sleigh Bells
- Extra-large Bass Drum, Chinese Gong
- Snare Drum, Field Drum
- Cymbal and Crash Cymbal
- Tambourine, Castanets, Chinese Block
- Sand Block, Tom-Tom
- Triangle, 2 Birds, Doorbell, Horse, Boat Whistle, Surf, Auto,
2 Wind Whistles, Police Whistle