

The Jewel of Fresno

by Tom DeLay

“To Fresno and the people of the San Joaquin Valley is this beautiful theatre dedicated. To you, dear public, is due credit for its achievement, made possible by your kind cooperation and sincere trust. To you and yours for many years to enjoy, I hereby dedicate and deliver the Pantages Theatre.”
Alexander Pantages, October 20, 1928



Spanish facade of the former Pantages Theatre. Now amid the city traffic lights.

These words, spoken by Alexander Pantages, marked the opening of his then newest motion picture palace, the Fresno Pantages Theatre. With Buss McClelland at the Robert-Morton organ, the eager first-night audience was treated to a long-forgotten *Lonesome* starring Glenn Tryonn and Barbara Kent, plus a complete stage production for the opening festivities. Attendees paid a whopping \$2.50 for seats on the lower floor and mezzanine with loge seats going for \$5.00

Like so many Pantages houses, this theatre featured a mish-mash of Baroque, rococo and Greek styles blended into a masterpiece as only Pantages' architect M.B. Priteca could do. Once a vaudeville house architect, Priteca stood by his opinion that "seeing is hearing." A magnificent, suspended dome occupies a good 80% of the ceiling. He imported many artisans from Europe, and one, Italian craftsman/artist Francis deFeudis, liked the area so much that, once the painting of the dome and ceiling was completed, he settled in Fresno. The dome acts as a superb acoustical reflector and, with modern overblown sound and amplification systems, has proven a major pitfall for sound-booth operators.

By the forties, the Pantages had been renamed Warner's, and later, a spelling variation, Warnors. By the late sixties time and dirt had taken their toll around the house. Cinerama moved in with its multiple main floor projection rooms. The wide screen swallowed the proscenium, and the plaster "grand drape" was destroyed to accommodate its height. A fire on the stage left the arch smoke-scarred; water damaged the stage and dripped through to the understage organ chambers. Still, the organ remained fairly playable and was broadcast over pioneer Fresno station KMJ with the late Arthur Mantor at the console of the 4/14 Robert-Morton.

Thus it was that, by the early 1970s, Priteca's Fresno masterpiece was more than slightly tired. Commercial theatre interests deemed the downtown house a losing proposition, and for a short period (which seemed forever), bids were placed on the venerable building with more of an eye to land value than as an office site or parking lot. A bid was accepted, and it was feared that the Pantages Theatre was finished. Indeed, it was, but Fresno has a human dynamo named Frank Caglia who took over the purchase from the original buyer.

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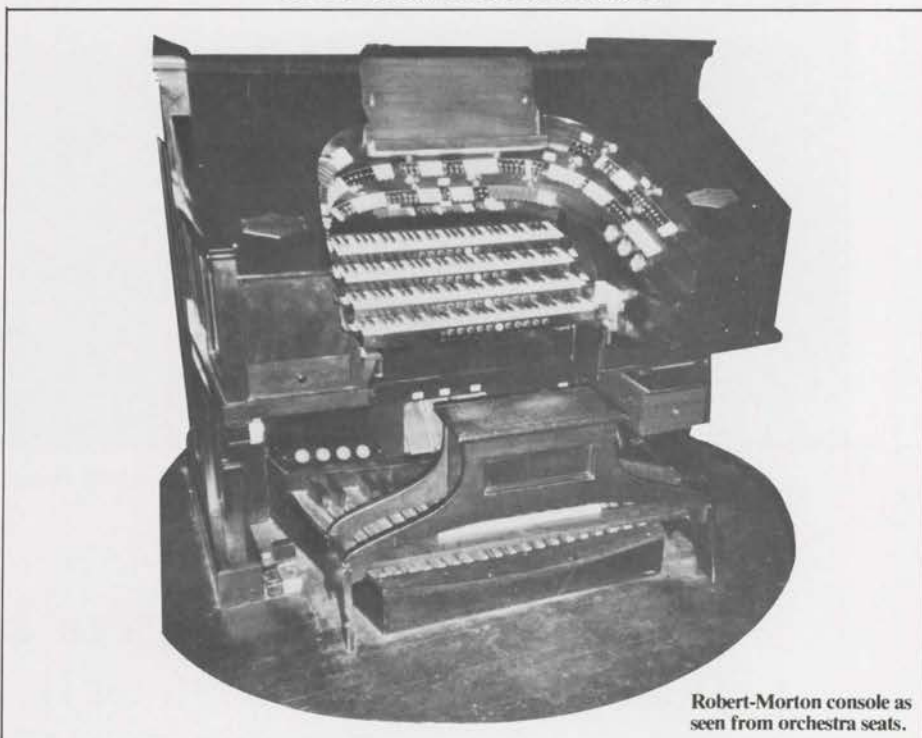
Restoration of the Theatre

Frank Caglia has long been a booster of Fresno, and through the years had become increasingly upset by the destruction of local landmarks. One by one, nearly all the downtown theatres had been destroyed: the Kinema and its five-manual Robert-Morton, the Sequoia/State, and the White are now only history. However, Frank was able to accomplish what few others have been able to do — purchase a beloved building simply to save it from destruction. He says, “I bought a pipe organ . . . there happened to be a theatre around it.” Amen! In a *Fresno Bee* interview, his response to a reporter’s query: “How could I stand to see it torn down? I proposed to my wife in that theatre!”

Frank Caglia saw to it that the building was re-wired to restore the beautiful lighting effects in the dome and plaster shells high up on the walls of the auditorium. The destroyed plaster grand drape was restored as an art project at Fresno State University using photos of the original. The Cinerama booths were removed from the main floor and seating restored to capacity. Although the mezzanine and lobby foyer had been “painted out” in white, the auditorium had managed to escape the typical “Peptodismal-pink” wall treatment which had been so prevalent in the 1950s, for example, the San Francisco Orpheum which was the 1925 sister house of the Fresno Pantages. A thorough cleaning of both the exterior and interior was accomplished. Even the elaborate stenciling on the exterior of the auditorium walls is being restored.

After Frank purchased the theatre in 1973, his daughter, Rose, saw to it that the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places under its original name, The Pantages. Thankfully, this should protect the house from being needlessly altered or demolished. Once restoration is complete, the original intricate stencil work and contrasting colors will again give life to the painted-out surface. If 1987 Convention attendees will recall the spectacular ceiling in the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel, they will have an idea of how the Warnors lobby ceiling will look when it is restored.

The Robert-Morton



Robert-Morton console as seen from orchestra seats.

Of greatest interest to theatre organ enthusiasts is the Warnors’ one-of-a-kind, 4/14 Robert-Morton. With its console on a lift that was once known as the “Fastest lift in the West,” it literally sits at the feet of those in the front orchestra seats. The understage chambers were a peculiarity of Alexander Pantages’ theatres. Like S.L. Rothafel, he wanted the organ sound to come from the same location as the pit orchestra did in the New York Roxy. However, the orchestra pit was not on an elevator and could not bury the organ sound when elevated to stage level as it did in the Roxy. And woe be unto the poor musicians seated in the pit before the organ solo!

The organ is voiced on rather high pressure for its large-scale pipework. Manual chest pipework is voiced on 15” except for the 8” pressure Vox Humana. All offset chests are voiced on 15” except the 16’ offsets of the English Horn, Ophiclide and Major Diaphone which play on 20 inches. Although its offset is voiced on only 15” pressure, the tremendous scale of the 16’ Tibia requires chest primaries, secondaries and a tertiary sys-

tem to fire double valves beneath each of the lower ten pipes. The 16’ English Horn produces enough “clang-tone” to create a most “delicate and beautiful sound,” rather like a chainsaw cutting through a stack of sheet metal.

The fourteen ranks of this instrument are very well unified. Including couplers, traps and tremulants, it has a total of 201 stops. As seemingly complete as it was, however, at no manual location did a Tibia stop appear above 2 $\frac{2}{3}$. A Tibia Piccolo and Tierce have been added to the Orchestral manual. The English Horn was moved from the right Solo Tremulant and placed on its own untremmed supply. In progress is a separate supply and tremolo to the non-orchestral reeds. The big Spencer Orgoblo provides a rather low 22” static pressure with its 15 hp motor. The dc power is still supplied by the original generator. Frank Caglia is the owner of his own electric motor repair service and has all the facilities to keep the old relic in perfect operating condition. The theatre architect also provided acoustically isolated tremulant spaces, keeping these noisy things out of the chambers.



Ceiling decorations beneath balcony are all 100% restored.

“A magnificent, suspended dome occupies a good 80% of the ceiling.”

Richard Villemin

If any single person, other than Frank Caglia, can be credited with “saving” the organ, it is Dick Villemin. He had, for years, protected the organ from the unscrupulous and kept it intact. Prior to a 1958 concert by George Wright, Dick did a major amount of work correcting some problems that had existed since the Robert-Morton was first installed. So when Mr. Caglia acquired the theatre, Richard Villemin was the obvious choice to restore the organ, and we who maintain it today have our jobs made much easier because of his demanding mechanical perfection.

Following the George Wright program, the scribe for *THEATRE ORGAN* (Spring 1959) wrote: “To have heard the organ in 1953 and then to have heard it played by Wright in 1958 was to reveal a difference in the instrument that was almost impossible to describe. Under the command of George Wright, the organ was breathtakingly beautiful. It was ob-

vious to the experienced listener, however, more had transpired than met the ear. The organ which before sounded loud and raucous, unrefined and coarse, even in perfect tune, was now smoothly beautiful. Responsible for the transformation was Dick Villemin of Porterville, California. Many hours of exacting work had been put in on the organ by Villemin, re-voicing, refining and tuning. Changes were made in the Tibia tremolo hookup so that the right adjustment and depth were now possible . . .”

The Robert-Morton Today

At some later date, however, some person or persons unknown got into the organ and opened the toes of the four ranks of strings, making them so hideously unmusical that they could scarcely be used in full-organ combinations. With similar idiocy, the Tibia pipes had their toes shut down to the power of a stopped flute. The entire organ has now been carefully

and fully tonally restored, and one is left only with the question as to why anyone would want to make Robert-Morton strings even louder — they are already close to the loudest theatre strings ever made.

The typically large Morton console sits in a deep well at the center of the orchestra pit. From the balcony, the console almost appears to rise from the orchestra seats. Although on an elevator, it does not rotate as we used to see on the San Francisco Orpheum Morton prior to its revolting “toss out” in 1977.

The Warnors Theatre has superb acoustics, and the organ sound rolls out from the pit to reflect for mixing in the dome. This mixing, in natural “reverb,” is not so excessive that the sound develops into a big, mid-range mush. The organ has clarity all about the house, although the volume is, of course, diminished underneath the balcony. Mr. Caglia is installing an elaborate sound system in the house that will enhance the natural room presence.

Organists at Warnors

House organists who have piloted the Robert-Morton have been opening-night artist Buss McClelland, Charlie Bryan, Ted Graham, Arthur Mantor and Richard Cencibaugh. In addition to the 1958 concert by George Wright, Ann Leaf performed for a Nor-Cal/Los Angeles meeting in 1964. Larry Vannucci played for a similar meeting in 1966. Programs have also been performed by Tom Hazleton, Bob Vaughn and Gaylord Carter. Radio organist Paul Carson made a recording on the Robert-Morton which was released in 1958. During the 1983 and 1984 "Fresno Organ Bashes," Dan Bellomy was featured playing that wild brand of pipe organ jazz that only he can do. The Morton kept up with his every lick and never missed a beat.

The theatre is now used mainly for performing arts, although not for any one group in particular. It has done well as a center for live shows, small conventions, rock concerts and occasional public organ/silent movie programs. Sequoia Chapter ATOS is most fortunate to have the use of this organ as its major instrument, and Frank Caglia was made an honorary member of the chapter in 1986 as a token of appreciation for all he does and gives to the group.

The interest of Frank Caglia and his family in the restoration of both the organ and the magnificent Warnors Theatre, and his superb cooperation with theatre organ enthusiasts, which enables this organ to be seen and heard, deserves a most heartfelt "Thank you!" from theatre and organ lovers alike.



Eight-foot Salicional offset of 12 pipes, mounted on ceiling.

Top Right: Maze of webbing used to lift cables as console ascends. Top to bottom, console rises about 12 feet. Middle: Large scale 49-note Harp. Notice the longest resonators have been mitered. Bottom: Understage chambers with shutters which open into the orchestra pit.

