



View from center stage. In addition to lifts for organ and orchestra, the stage has two elevators.

Robert Reilly Photos

# A Gift of Music

by Dorothy E. Elliott

**“Grandeur Returns to Movie Palace.”**

*This front-page headline in the Providence, Rhode Island, Journal on October 29, 1978, announced the re-opening of the largest theatre in the state.*

What a thrill this was for the many community-minded citizens who had worked so hard to save this magnificent theatre! However, there was one thing missing on that night, and many old-timers plus some not-so-old-timers remarked sadly that the organ was not there. But, wait! there is more to this story.

The old Loew's State Theatre opened on October 6, 1928, in the heart of downtown Providence, capital city of Rhode Island. Although Rhode Island is the smallest state, this 3200-seat theatre,

built by E. Marcus Loew, was truly a movie palace equal to many which were being constructed in much larger cities throughout the nation.

A 4/20 Robert-Morton was situated in a pit at the left of the stage, and was played by Joseph Stoves on opening night. It was Stoves' honor to play the opening performances of many of Loew's movie palaces. Several other organists were featured over the years, but the longest and last was Maurice Cook. Billed as "Maurice at the Organ," he was so popular that he continued to play in-

termissions until 1947 in spite of the advent of talkies.

Two hurricanes which flooded the downtown area hastened the demise of both the theatre and the organ. The Great Hurricane of '38 destroyed the console (which was later re-built); however, Hurricane Carole, in 1954, destroyed the console and did extensive damage to the theatre. In 1956 the organ pipes and undamaged parts were sold to Don Phipps, who later sold them to Mr. Patsey Fucci of Waltham, Massachusetts, where they are now installed with another console.

In the 1960s the theatre began to decline from a showplace to a sadly neglected cheap movie house. Extensive vandalism resulted in its closure in 1975, and it was slated for destruction. Concerned citizens succeeded in having it placed on the National Register of Historic Places, making it eligible for funds for its preservation, and in 1976 it reopened as a movie theatre. In 1978, after some restoration, it became the Ocean State Performing Arts Center, and today is operating successfully as the Providence Performing Arts Center. Special thanks must be given to Mr. and Mrs. B.A. Dario who not only spearheaded the drive to save the theatre but also invested considerable monies of their own for the restoration. More than three million dollars have been invested in this theatre.

In October of 1981, Dennis James came to Providence to accompany a silent film classic, *Napoleon*, and it was necessary to rent an electronic organ for the show. Mr. James mentioned at that time that there was a five-manual Wurlitzer which had recently been offered for sale and which would be ideal for this theatre. The idea of an organ installation was not new; however, two obstacles had always interfered — finding an organ of the right size and obtaining funding for the project.

This particular 5/21 Wurlitzer, one of only three of that size, was built in 1927 for the 5000-seat MarBro Theatre in Chicago. It had been purchased in the late 1950s by organ buff Byron Carlson and installed in his home in Minneapolis. Ted Stevens, then executive director of the theatre, and organist Lincoln Pratt traveled to Minneapolis and were so excited by their find that they telephoned the Mayor of Providence and played it while he listened on the phone. It worked! The organ was purchased for \$85,000, installed for an additional \$50,000. The City of Providence provided \$50,000 from its Office of Community Development, and a successful fund-drive raised the remainder of the funds.

The 28,000-pound organ, consisting of 1600 pipes, an ornate white and gold console, wires, and all other paraphernalia, was dismantled and placed in two moving vans under the direction of Bill Hansen and his crew. Work progressed smoothly, and the installation was completed in less than 90 days in spite of the fact that a major change had to be made to adapt an original three-chamber design to a two-chamber installation.

On June 5, 1982, Lincoln Pratt presented a three-hour organ recital for an audience of patrons whose contributions had helped to pay for the Wurlitzer. When the console rose from the pit, the cheers of the audience proved how popular and worthwhile this effort had been. A med-



View of the left chamber with Toy Counter.



Crew members (L to R) Ken Duffie, Richard Medeiros, Arthur Beauchemin and Dave Lee prepare the master Xylophone.

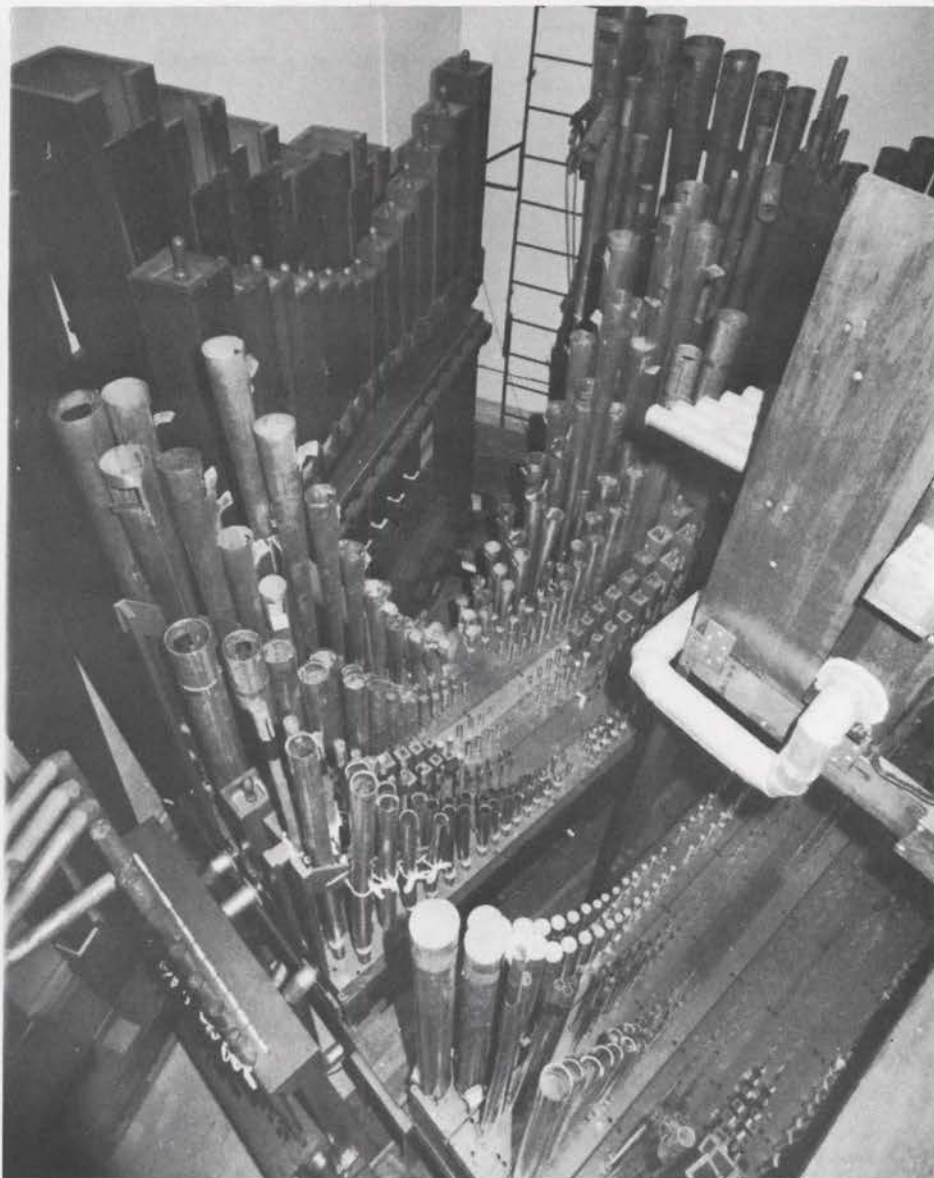


Organ crew moving console onto the organ lift.

ley of movie and Broadway show tunes, a sing-along, and musical accompaniment for two silent movies showed off the tremendous capabilities of this instrument. Guest organists Earl Rounds and Gary Hanson (Gary was Bill Hansen's partner in the installation) shared the spotlight. Work to get the organ ready for this concert was so intense that the pipes were first tuned just 24 hours earlier and fine-tuned while the guests were assembling in the lobby. The audience cheered and shouted so long and heartily after the final encore, that Ted Stevens came on stage and promised more of such nights.

The organ has been continually maintained and gradually restored by members of the Southeastern New England Organ Society. The voicings have been blended with the excellent acoustics of the theatre to make this one of the outstanding theatre organs in the East. Artists such as Ashley Miller, Ron Rhode and Lee Erwin, who have had a chance to play this instrument while in the area, have proclaimed it to be "exceptional." Walt Strony played a concert for the A.G.O. Convention in 1985 and "brought the house down!"

The organ is currently featured as pre-show entertainment for touring Broadway musical productions, and last spring a series of Brown Bag concerts called "Wednesday at the Wurlitzer" was presented by Providence area artists. The first audiences numbered around 200, but by the end of the series in June the number had increased to 1100. The overwhelming response of the community to these programs inspired the management to offer the series again this fall. From September 7 to November 9, organists Lincoln Pratt, John Cook, Earl Rounds, Alden Mitchell, John Hubert, and Dr. Alan Goodnow will have entertained during lunch hour for the citizens of Providence. Sponsors of this series include the Providence *Journal-Bulletin*, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the Shanklin Corporation.



View of left chamber containing eleven ranks.

*Rhode Island, the smallest state in the Union,  
is proud to add the largest theatre organ in New England  
to its list of cultural treasures.*

*We are proud, also, to offer this Gift of Music to the Community.*



**It's Music Time in '89  
See you in Detroit!!**

**JULY 2-8, 1989**