

EXTRA!! EXTRA!!

Detroit's Fabulous Fox Has Been Rescued!

Curtain's Up at the



Yes — it may be reported that this headline is indeed true. Although the words Extra! Extra! are no longer shouted by newsboys on downtown streets, Detroit's newspapers, radio, and TV media are happily reporting the restoration of the fabulous Fox. This is indeed good news, especially for theatre historians and theatre organ devotees who all too often have witnessed the deterioration, demolition, abuse, and misuse of the theatres and theatre organs of the movie palace era.

In Detroit only three of the original nine major movie palaces have escaped the above described decimation. In addition to the Fox, the State Theatre (formerly the Palms), sans theatre organ, is being restored by Charles Forbes of Detroit, and the theatre is scheduled to be an important part of the newly developing theatre district. The Fisher, also without a theatre organ, exists in a somewhat different form within the shell of the original theatre. This theatre, housed beneath the famous golden tower of the Fisher Building, has been converted from the original spectacular Central American Indian style to a much smaller, legitimate theatre done in a modern-contemporary style. Many, however, fondly remember the original theatre's beauty, replete with sinister Aztec/Mayan moods so realistic that you almost expected to bump into Montezuma on the way to the restroom. Its theatre organ is now housed in the Senate Theatre, the home of the Detroit Theater Organ Club. This instrument, a 4/34 Wurlitzer, is no doubt the largest single artifact remaining of the theatre's original architecture.

The Downtown Theatre, known in its earlier days as the Oriental, has been demolished. The Adams Theatre had struggled without the benefit of restoration or significant improvements while showing a variety of films but has recently been closed. The United Artists, Grand Circus, and Madison Theatres are all vacant and in sad state of repair.

The Michigan Theatre suffers an even more humiliating fate. This theatre, also done in the grand style, was considered by most to have a "classic touch with an unparalleled dignity of place." Unfortunately, if you park your car in the structure at 238 Bagley Avenue, you will be startled to find yourself surrounded by a myriad of artistic domes, arches, and other decorative designs, for you are actually in none other than the former Michigan Theatre. Fortunately, its 5/28 Wurlitzer is now in the music room of a private residence in Racine, Wisconsin.

But let us push this litany of sadness aside and present to you the current success of the Fabulous Fox, the last palace to be built in downtown Detroit. Designed by C. Howard Crane, the Fox is ornately decorated in a Siamese/Byzantine style. Immense? Yes, 5,047 seats. Ornate? Yes, but perhaps best expressed by the storyline in the December 12, 1988 issue of *Newsweek*, "A splendidly vulgar theatre returns." *Newsweek* further suggests that our society worships mass culture, lavishing its most opulent architecture not on churches or palaces, but on theatres.

As you approach the Fox, you get the first hint of its opulence by the display of brass used on the front doors and the ticket booth. Then as you pass through the inner doors, you suddenly are transported in the fantasy of a huge main lobby, 80 x 125 feet in size and six stories high! Niches and shrines containing figures of Asian dieties are featured here and throughout the theatre. Ahead of you, your attention is drawn to the grand staircase, guarded by two huge lions lying commandingly at the foot of the staircase. As you focus on these forms, your peripheral vision is aware of the towering oxblood-colored pillars soaring upward on both sides of the lobby as a crown for the grand staircase. These are topped with jeweled friezes — canopied by huge extruding buttresses. Later you may want to explore the tiers of balconies which

“Responsible for taking on this remarkable restoration is Mike Ilitch, founder of Little Caesar International.”



Auditorium Grande Chandelier.

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surround the lobby on three sides affording a variety of views, each seemingly better than the last. Ray Shepardson, in charge of the Fox restoration, credits Eve Leo for the flamboyant, decorative styles adopted in the Fox Theatres. C. Howard Crane designed the theatres, but Eve Leo, married to William Fox, created the decorative themes. Shepardson indicated that Eve Leo had a marvelous sense of color and an eye for spectacle, and gave the audiences all sorts of opportunities to capitalize on the dramatic views afforded within the architecture of the building such as those around the Grand Lobby. For example, she designed “Peacock Alley,” a connecting balcony passage with openings which served as a balcony at the fourth floor level of the Grand Lobby, providing additional spectacular views.

Another of these balconies contains the lobby organ, a 3/12 Moller which may be played from the console or automatically by means of its “Artiste” player system. The organ speaks from chambers located on two floors above the console. As you might guess, the lobby organ was used both for entry music as well as entertainment while you waited for admittance to the auditorium. On your way into the auditorium you pass through the inner lobby dominated by a two-story court with a mirrored ceiling on the mezzanine level reflecting the high-lighting the ornate ballustrades, stencil work, and ornamental figureheads. Extending from this lobby area are the concourses connecting with the inner staircases that provide access to the loges and balcony. Throughout the promenades, lobbies, and concourses, the artistry of plaster, marble, brass, leather, wood, and stone are constantly with you. Look for the Samurai warriors, elephants, lions, peacocks, dolphins, dancing maidens, camels, sorcerers, monkeys, dragons, goddesses, and eagles.

Finally, the huge space of the auditorium will literally overwhelm you as you gaze upward 100 feet to the open sky framed by a jeweled and tasseled tent-like ceiling, supported by huge spears. Again, as was the case in the main lobby, you are impressed by the huge scagliola columns 4½ feet in diameter and 35 feet high, the main elements surrounding this cavernous space. The centerpiece is a chandelier 13 feet in diameter weighing two tons which never fails to grasp the attention of patrons and the media. Its frame is made of gilded pot metal and art glass, enhanced by 210 light bulbs and 1,244 pieces of Italian leaded glass. The ornate organ grilles on each side of the stage speak from the fifth to seventh floor levels of the auditorium, and it is safe to say that when the organ speaks into the auditorium the sounds are as

rich and vibrant as the decor. When the organ lift rises, it reveals a huge gold-toned console with gold decorative trim across its top and side panels. A 4/36 Wurlitzer-Fox Special, it is one of five nearly identical instruments created by the company for the largest Fox Theatres in the country with the prototype installed in the New York Paramount Theatre.

The Detroit Fox Wurlitzer is completely original. It is powered by twin 50 hp Spencer blowers located in a room in the lower of two basements. It fills seven chambers, plus rooms for the blowers and relay. The foundation, main, and diaphone chambers are to the left of the proscenium; the orchestral, solo, and two percussion chambers are to the right. Distributed among all of the chambers are two Marimbas, two sets of Cathedral Chimes, three Xylophones, two Chrysoglotts, Piano, tuned Sleigh Bells, Glockenspiel, tuned Tympanis and many drums, traps, and effects. The pipework includes three Diapasons, three Flutes, three Tibia Clausa ranks, four Vox Humana ranks, eight sets of Strings, Dulciana, Quintadena, Kinura, Krumet, Musette, Saxophone, Clarinet, Orchestral Oboe, Oboe Horn, French Horn, Tuba Mirabilis, two brass Trumpets, Tuba Horn, and an English Post Horn. Eleven ranks are extended to 16' pitch and the Diaphonic Diapason is extended even further to 32' pitch. These lowest twelve pipes are housed in a special room. Four of the major ranks are voiced on 25 inches of wind along with the 32-foot Diaphones.

The words which heretofore have been used to describe the Fox have been glowing, and rightfully so. With the restoration, however, we now realize that in retrospect we had been favorably viewing the beauty of the theatre despite the unpleasant veil of dust, grime, and soot which had accumulated over the past sixty years, not to mention the musty odors heavy in nicotine which permeated the fabrics and the grimy surface of the theatre. Although the eyes do not lie, it is possible that we in the past have allowed the eyes to forgive because we had related this negative state of beauty to its original luster sixty years ago — replete with orchestras, theatre pipe organs, big bands, the choreography of Fanchon and Marco and the quiet, polite department of cadres of resplendently attired ushers.

With the restoration a reality, history has repeated and we may once again experience the full richness of the color, imagery and ambience that existed in 1928.

Frequently, during the restoration, rumors began to surface indicating that some of the Fox's original design elements had been uncovered. What the workers were experiencing, however,



Worker restoring base of column.

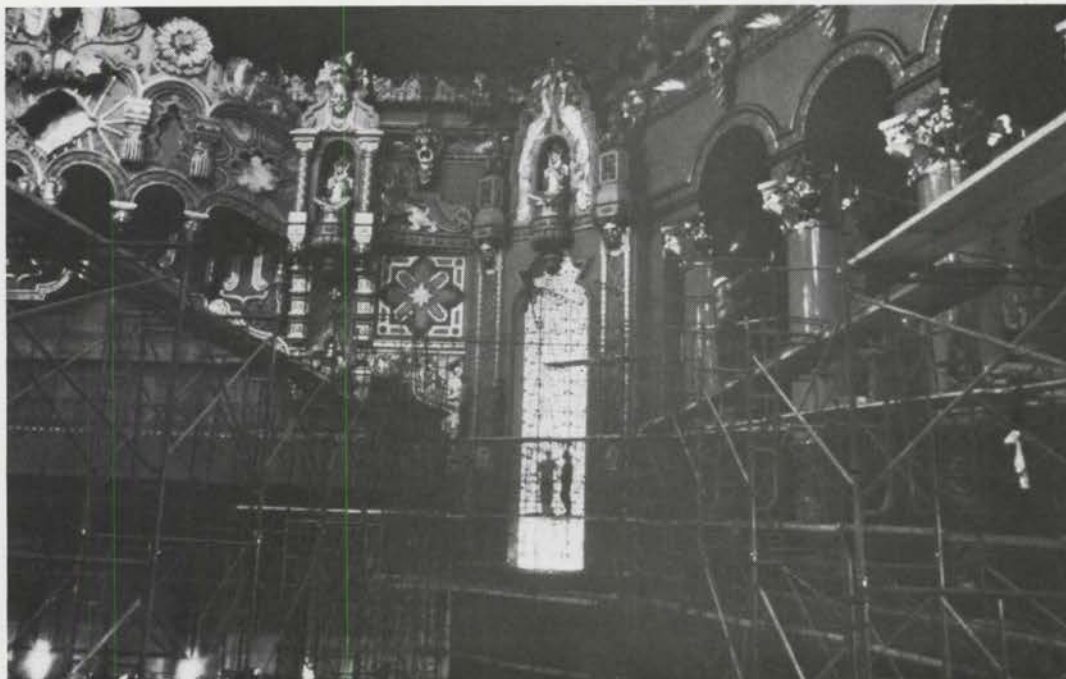
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was a completely new revelation of colors and brilliance as they peeled away the layers of dust, grime, and soot, thereby "uncovering" new treasures of existing beauty. Both workers and visitors were repeatedly startled as each uncovering took place.

Responsible for taking on this remarkable restoration is Mike Ilitch, founder of Little Caesar International. The Ilitch empire consists of 2,160 pizza restaurants and carry-out stores throughout the United States and Europe. He is also owner of Detroit's professional hockey team, the Red Wings.

Mr. Ilitch's decision two years ago to locate his corporate headquarters in Detroit's Fox Office Building and to completely restore that structure and its the-

atre are extremely important to the revitalization of the Woodward-Grand Circus Park area. Ilitch, now teamed with Charles Forbes, owner of the adjacent State Theatre, is directing a vast redevelopment of this area. Mr. Ilitch has also constructed an 1,100-car parking structure adjacent to the Fox, and recently announced his intention to restore two large, historically significant buildings in the area for mixed commercial-residential use. Several other buildings in the district owned by these two gentlemen have already been rehabilitated or are in the process of being restored as is the case of Mr. Forbes' Gem Theatre located across from the Fox. A plaza is being developed in the area between the Fox and the State in order to provide a proper setting for the theatres.



Scaffolding in auditorium.

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*“A timetable of one year was set
for this \$7,000,000 effort.”*

Although Detroit is enthusiastic about these developments, the focus of media attention has been on the Fox. This restoration is obviously not a cosmetic undertaking for there has been a careful eye for detail and a pursuit of quality. Ray Shepardson estimated that they were able to save 80% of the original finishes and indicated that they were fortunate that aluminum leaf had been used rather than Dutch Metal which has to be replaced after 30 years. Shepardson indicated that 10% of the finishes needing to be restored with aluminum leaf were finished to look like gold: “It’s a tricky process that involved shellacking and sizing plaster before we put down 250,000 sheets of the leaf. Then we used yellow gold varnish with a glaze to get the effect of gold.”

A local artistic sculptor, Oscar Graves, was retained to remold, as necessary, all of the decorative but decaying plaster ornamentation of the theatre. His was an extremely challenging task including recreating broken plaster moldings, remodeling Hindu statuary, and replacing decorative column bases. Similarly a stained glass expert was retained to restore over 330 light fixtures and chandeliers.

A timetable of one year was set for this \$7,000,000 effort. The general consensus was that this time frame was not realistic. Mr. Ilitch, however, put a management team together which kept this

restoration effort on schedule. The task began in November of 1987, when 5,000 seats were sent to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for restoration. On January 8, 1988, six stories of scaffolding was assembled in the Grand Lobby and the cleaning activities, plaster repair, and painting began. Shepardson indicated that washing the accumulation of dirt presented a major challenge. “It’s much easier to paint than wash; you get 20 different washers and you get 20 different effects. If they rub too hard, they rub off glaze or leaf. If they don’t rub hard enough they don’t get it clean. We had 40 different washers and we used one million gallons of water.”

In February, roof construction and repairs were underway. In March, 2,500 frames of scaffolding filled the auditorium and the 13-foot round chandelier was lowered for cleaning and repair while the Grand Lobby scaffolding was dismantled. In April construction of the 1,100-car parking structure began. In May-June the cleaning of the decorative auditorium ceiling started along with the rebuilding of the orchestra pit, restoration of the ladies’ and mens’ lounges, and marble-work repair in the outer “storm” lobby. June found the workers restoring the gold leaf and painted surfaces of the first five levels of the Grand Lobby, and painters recreated the stencilled design on the canvas tent that outlines the auditorium dome. Outside, TV cameras

whirred as the famous old yellow Fox marquee was dismantled. Work in August and early October became extremely busy; outside, street and sidewalk construction began, and the auditorium scaffolding was dismantled. The stage was completely re-equipped with state-of-the-art sound, lighting, and stage technology. Later in October the Grand Lobby terrazzo floor and the stage were repaired, a new air-conditioning system installed, and six 12-foot lobby chandeliers were reinstalled. Construction also started on the eleven private loges on the Grand Promenade, formerly the mezzanine. What got the attention? The polishing of the brass doors!

With the November 19 opening looming ahead, the laying began of 7,500 yards of carpeting milled to match the original elephant pattern, and the restored seats began to arrive for installation. Elevator work began as well as the restoration of all 21 dressing rooms located on eight floors, and all restored light fixtures and chandeliers were installed. A week before the opening this writer would have taken any bet that it would not be possible to complete the work before the doors were opened. Interior work was frenetic, and on the exterior a full block of decorative brick street paving remained to be laid, and the lower portion of the marquee had only its steel framing in place.



Opening night crowd.

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I was wrong. The opening was spectacular. Stretch limos curb to curb and patrons wall to wall at every level, emphatically proved that this was indeed the time and the place.

Inside, the crowd enjoyed the music of the Count Basie Orchestra; Daryl Hall and John Oates; Harry Blackstone, Jr., did a magic show; and Smokey Robinson vocalized until after midnight. Also featured was a film on the history of the Fox narrated by Bob Hope and produced by Sue Marx and Pam Conn, Detroit based 1988 Oscar winners for best documentary.

Outside the auditorium the crowd imbibed the ample supply of food and beverages and milled about inspecting the restoration. There seemed to be only one topic of conversation — the Fox.



The Michigan Theatre today.

Nick Tapler Photo

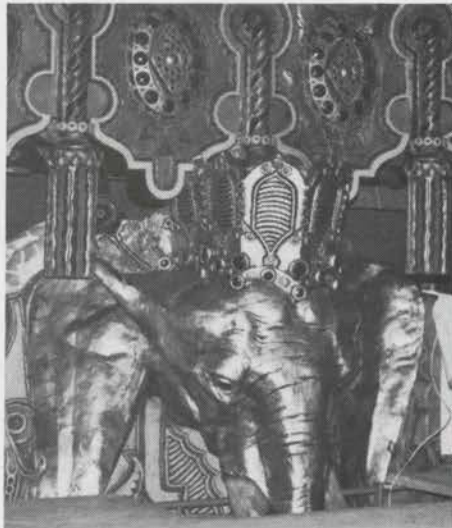
With the opening now history, the staff is settling down to operating the theatre. They are happy that their planning and hard work not only has been accomplished on time, but everything works. For example, the quality of the sound system is such that visiting shows are using the house system rather than their own. Nonetheless, the fury of the final push to finish the job is gone and many miss the excitement of the chase. Some workers were heard to grumble nostalgically about being denied the custom they developed of petting the elephant which watched them on the top level of scaffolding as work on the auditorium progressed. Now the elephant looks down from his lofty perch as the centerpiece of the proscenium as a new procession of show business stars entertain the thousands that once again are enjoying the Fox. Liza Minnelli, Frank Sinatra, and Sammy Davis finished a five-day run to sell-out crowds. Inasmuch as this was the only movie palace they would perform in on their tour, one of the shows was filmed as a TV production. Hometown Stevie Wonder followed with his highly acclaimed show after notifying Detroiters that he intends to run for mayor of this town one of these days. Kenny Rogers then did his Christmas show.

The New Year was launched with a gala affair highlighted by Kenney G and his band. Currently, a subscription series is being promoted that includes Bob Hope, Steve Lawrence & Edie Gorme, Tony Bennett, Paul Anka, Mitzie Gaynor, and Wayne Newton. The stage production *Fiddler on the Roof* is also causing excitement at the box office.

So there you have it — the story of the Fox. We hope you have found this story interesting. Please be tolerant with the writer — he may have approached his assignment with an over-abundance of enthusiasm. We in Detroit are indeed very excited about the Fox — so much so that one interesting item has been omitted. The organ will have its own lift at the center of the huge orchestra lift. Workmen are currently building the platform for the console.

We hope that when you visit the Fox in July you will wave at the elephant; it will be appreciated, and the elephant will never forget it!

Harold Bellamy



Proscenium elephant.

Tom Hurst Photo

Motor City Chapter especially appreciates the participation of Santa Fabio in providing the spectacular photographs used both on the cover and in this article on the Fox Theatre.