

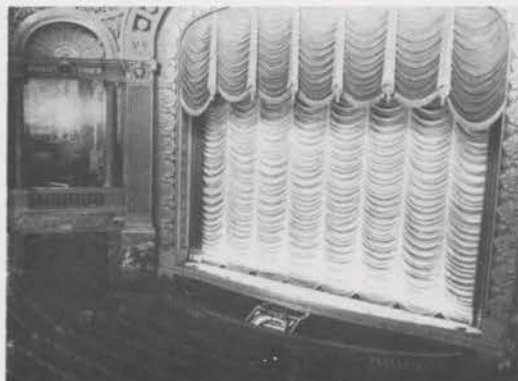
Christmas At The Byrd



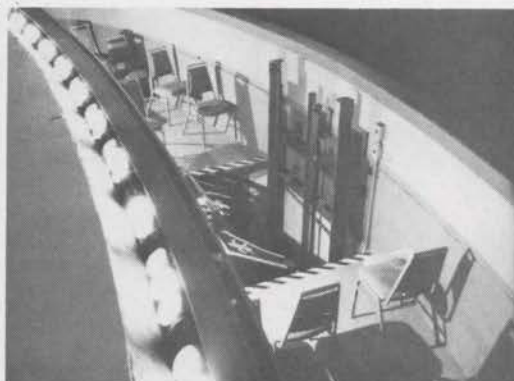
At left: Miles Rudisill, "unofficial curator" of the Byrd Theatre. *Richmond Times-Dispatch photo*

At Right: The Byrd Orchestra and organ play from the newly restored pit. *Thanh Cao photo*

Below: James Hughes plays for Christmas Celebration sing-along. *Thanh Cao photo*



Proscenium view of Byrd Theatre as patrons see it. At Right: The Byrd Chorallers with James Hughes at the Wurlitzer. *Thanh Cao photo*



It has been 57 years since this view has been seen.

During the 1988 Christmas season, the two-week run of the third annual Christmas Celebration at the Byrd Theatre in Richmond, Virginia, played to capacity houses. The organ was featured prominently in the stage production, and this year, for the first time since 1933, the Wurlitzer rose in all its glory in the newly restored orchestra pit.

This production is similar to the one created by ATOS member Allen Mills at the Schenectady Proctor's Theatre, but on a larger scale in that it included a full orchestra with the organ and a much larger budget. The new look at the Byrd prompted *Richmond News Leader* Arts Editor Roy Proctor to write: "Not only did this full-length entertainment sparkle, but it did so on a reclaimed stage that most Richmonders didn't know existed."

Responsibility for this reclaimed stage must be credited to the "unofficial curator" of the Byrd, Miles Rudisill who, with the help of theatre employee Ben Fogery, recast the front portion of the footlight trough with 200 pounds of concrete and

300 pounds of plaster of paris. Sixty-two pieces of decoration were ordered from Chicago Decorators Supply to match the Byrd's decor. This was done to provide greater space on the stage for the performers, but it also served to advance the dream of Rudisill for a completely restored theatre.

The success of the Christmas show was accomplished by the combined efforts of manager Duane "Roxy" Nelson, the TV and news media in Richmond, the director and cast, and the conscientious stage and organ maintenance crews. The reasonable admission prices also contributed to the show's popularity; the cost was \$1.50.

Part one of the production featured two grand staircases and a revolving stage. Colors were white, silver and black. Costuming was vividly impressive. The organ opened the show and, for the first time, organist James Hughes did not have to walk off the stage to take a bow — he remained on the lift at all times (now, the only way off is when the lift is at the bottom of the pit).

Richmond News Leader columnist Proctor wrote enthusiastically about the changes at the Byrd: "It's a wonder the Byrd Theatre has always been (as well) preserved as it has. It's a wonder it continues to function as a movie house — and profitably — in an age when most other vintage American movie palaces have either been razed, abandoned or, as in the case of Loew's Richmond, converted to a performing arts center. The Byrd's present staging achievement and continuing potential are, simply put, incomparable resources for Richmond theatre."

What the Byrd in Richmond and Proctor's in Schenectady have accomplished can be duplicated by others. The prime requisite is to find the one person, the driving force who can excite others to efforts beyond the "call of duty" and who can delegate responsibility to those individuals knowing that they will bring to fruition their assignments.