



# Pipes & Personalities

## Report From Union County Arts Center, Rahway, New Jersey

by Bob Balfour

On March 29, at 8:00 p.m. the re-enactment of a historic event took place on Irving Street (named after Washington Irving, who once lived there) in Downtown Rahway. After sixty years, the Rahway Theatre, now the Union County Arts Center, once again became "The Brightest Spot in Town" (an original logo from opening day) with the dedication and dramatic lighting of its new \$85,000 marquee. The new unit, designed by the Marquee Committee of Bruce Conway, Bob Balfour and architect Charles Gifford of Meyer, Yowell and Gifford in New York City, is a more elaborate unit than the original. It features nine different lighting circuits, including an original 1920s chaser circuit and a custom color montage in the corner tubulars, designed and built by tech committee chairman Bob Balfour and projection chairman Harry Randel. The new sign replaces a time-ravaged unit that saw four revisions and which had 2500 lights in it. The new marquee was custom-built by LaFayette Sign Company of Jersey City.

A master switch was thrown by three past-presidents, Bob Balfour, founder, Sandy Sweeney and Eric Rickes, along with Rahway Mayor Dan Martin, Union County Freeholder Chairman Brian Layhey, and Community Development Officer Tom Connel, who arranged for the grant for the new unit. As the switch was thrown, the lights on the podium dimmed and, to the theme music of *2001*, the various circuits were lit, each cheered on by a crowd of several hundred people. TV crews and press photographers covered the event.

The theatre is currently closed and under restoration. A new roof is being installed; new plumbing and bathrooms,



New marquee on old Rahway Theatre.

Paul Szaboosk photo

At right: Dr. John Fenstermaker. Dr. Ed Mullins photo

asbestos abatement, new sidewalks and some new stage rigging are also being added. This summer and fall the main auditorium and seats are scheduled to be done by Conrad Schmitt Studios.

The former vaudeville and silent movie neighborhood movie palace, originally seating 1600, is a stadium-style house in Adam-style rococo. Designed by New York architect David Oltarsh, it opened in October 1928 with a Style E-X Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ, still in excellent form today. NBC organist Chet Kinsbury was at the console, assisted by a young Rex Koury (age 14). The theatre was purchased by Rahway Landmarks in 1983. This is a non-profit group established in 1979 at the theatre's 50th Anniversary Show, which saw Rex Koury return to the very same organ bench that began his illustrious career as RKO's youngest professional organist, later Musical Director of all three major networks on the coast, and composer of "Gunsmoke."

The theatre will re-open in December with *The Nutcracker* for the holidays, and will close in successive summers for restoration to continue as funding permits.

## Music For Silent Films (1894-1929): A Guide

is a new book which serves as a finding aid for scores and musical cue sheets made for films of the silent era. It was compiled by Gillian Anderson, a music specialist in the music division of the Library of Congress. The 182-page cloth-bound book, which is illustrated with film stills, sheet music covers and other photographs, is available from the U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402 (cite title and stock number 030-000-00199-1 when ordering). The price of \$27 includes postage and handling.



John Fenstermaker returned to the bench of the Oakland, California Paramount Theatre 4/27 Wurlitzer March 11 after a two year hiatus. He last accompanied *The General* there March 15, 1987. Playing Jacques Lemmens' "Fanfare" as a console raiser, three light classical pieces followed: "Triumphal March, Opus 68" by Dudley Buck; "Irish Air" from County Derry, arranged by Edwin H. Lemare, and Claude Balbastre's "Variations on La Marseillaise" with a cannon effect.

Announcing his program from the orchestra lift, Fenstermaker said, "Backstage before the concert Bob Vaughn told me that my program isn't what you would hear at most American Theatre Organ Society recitals. (Laughter) But he said the Ketelbey would pass. So, I'm glad I'm now moving into the mainstream." After a few descriptive words, he played Albert W. Ketelbey's "In a Persian Market."

He concluded his concert with "Finale from Symphony No. 1 for Organ," by Louis Vierne, who was organist at Notre Dame de Paris cathedral. Vierne collapsed and died at the console in 1937, and John hoped that history wouldn't repeat itself that night. Notre Dame is in one of the sequences of the silent classic thriller *Phantom of the Opera*. Dr. Fenstermaker's accompaniment of this film was in a very classical manner, using his prepared score. He is organist and choir-master at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral.

Dr. Edward J. Mullins