

# "An Acre of Seats in a Palace of Splendor"

## CASTRO THEATRE

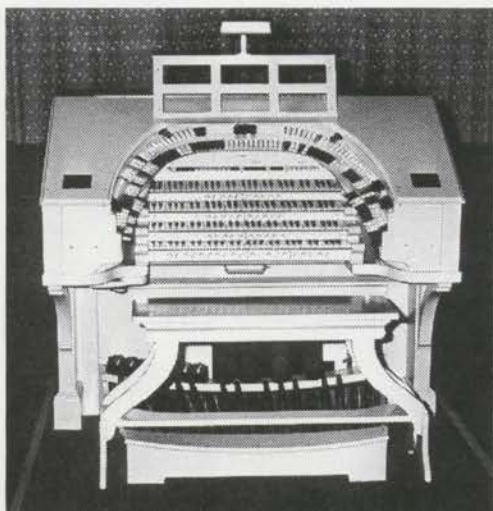
San Francisco, California

Architect: Timothy L. Pflueger

June 22, 1922

Organ: Robert-Morton 2/11  
removed c. 1960

Wurlitzer 4/21 1979-present



The discouraging attrition of significant movie palaces since the 1950s has been tempered in recent years by the dozens revived as performing arts centers, plus those still able to survive as movie houses in an exhibition world vastly different from the one that made them possible. A star among the latter is the Castro, San Francisco's least-altered movie theatre and home of the City's only regularly played theatre organ.

The Nasser Brothers had been operating theatres in the Eureka Valley district for 15 years when they built the Castro, which established them firmly as major neighborhood exhibitors. Pflueger, who had never before designed a theatre, came recommended by the Humboldt Bank, financiers of the project. Features of his design included tapestry-like sgraffito panels on the sidewalls, a spectacular tented ceiling, and a permanent stage set, concealed in the 1950s by the CinemaScope screen. So pleased were the Nassers that they subsequently retained Pflueger to design or re-design all their houses most notably the Alhambra (1926), and the Alameda (1932).

Leased in 1976 to art-film maven Mel Novikoff, the Castro was successfully shifted from third run to a revival-art policy perfectly suited to its character and location. Since Novikoff's recent death, the house has been operated along similar lines by Blumenfeld Theatres, another local family circuit.

The installation of the present organ began in 1979 under the direction of Richard Taylor and Ed Stout. Assembled around the Publix-I console and relay from the Palms-State, Detroit, the all-Wurlitzer instrument will ultimately number 26 ranks, of which 21 are now in service. It is used every evening for intermissions and whenever silent films appear on the Castro schedule. These occasional programs often sell out the theatre's 1600 seats. A big part of what makes the Castro so special, the Wurlitzer will be featured at the 1991 ATOS Convention.

*Auditorium: In this just-before-opening view, the drummer can be seen setting up his gear while organist Lloyd Carmichael practices with his hat on. The chamber floors are set high, leaving open spaces behind the little balconies. Percussions now fill these spaces. The original proscenium and stage set survive behind the present screen, though the area is jammed with loudspeakers and organ pedal. The sgraffito panels are out of the picture. Console: The Morton console sat fixed a bit right of center; the Wurlitzer sits dead-center on a new lift. Finished in authentic ivory, not stark white, the Wurlitzer looks factory-fresh.*

Richard Taylor Photo

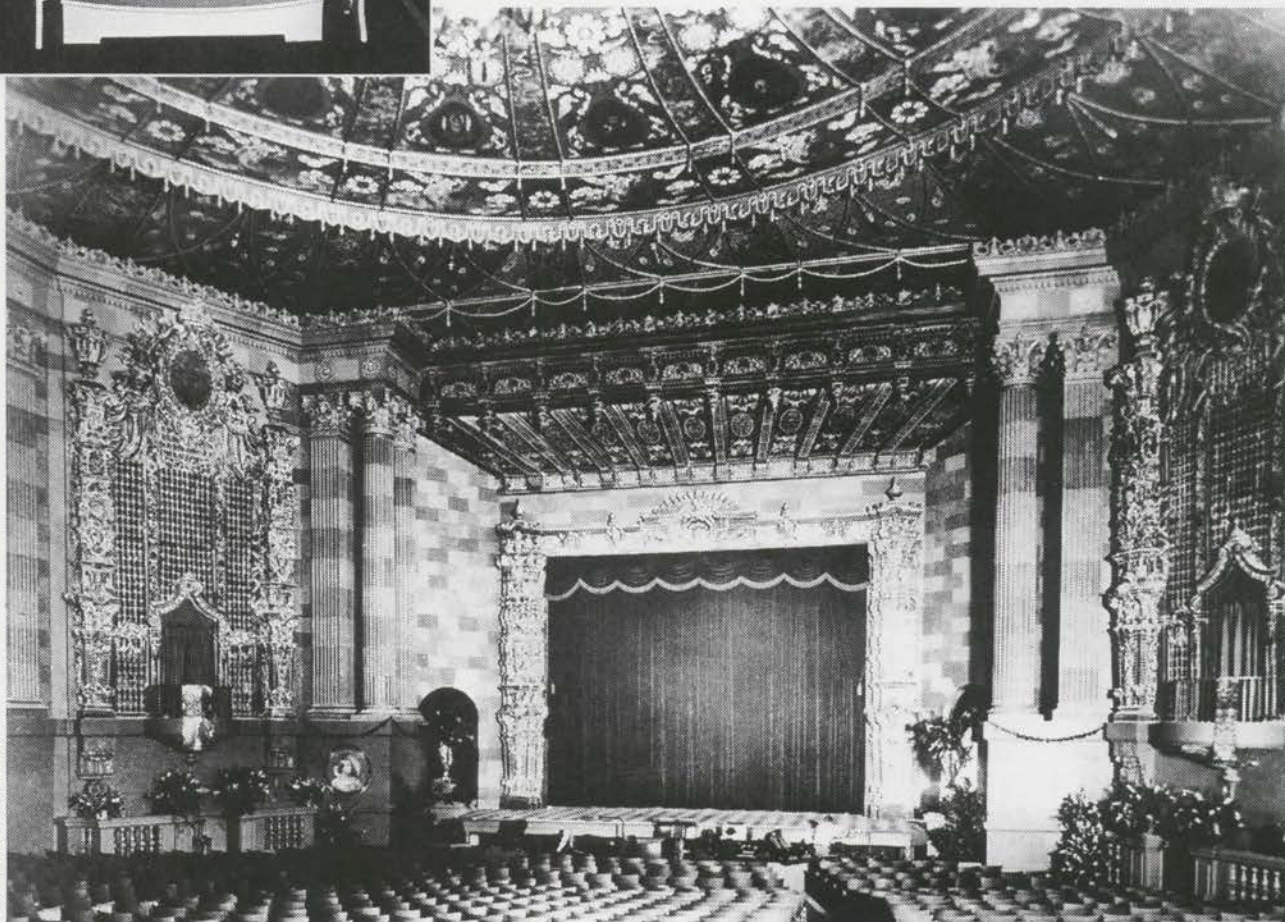


Photo: Steve Levin Collection