



Rudy Frey Photos

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## The Rebirth of The Stanford Theatre

by Robert M. Gilbert and Rudolph O. Frey

The Palo Alto Times, on June 8, 1925, was filled with articles describing the "New Stanford Theatre" and its Leathurby-Smith organ. The theatre opened on Tuesday, June 9, featuring an organ concert by Elmer Vincent, a "jazzphonic" program by the famous Allen White's Collegians, and Reginald Denny's latest comedy, *I'll Show You the Town*. The theatre was one of five owned by the Palo Alto Theatre Company, of which Ellis J. Arkush was president and E.A. Karsen, a New York attorney, was vice president.

On February 25, 1930, the Fox West Coast organization completed an agreement to take over the operation of the Arkush theatres. The Stanford's history as a movie house was like that of many others, years of success followed by gradual decline and finally barely surviving. The Smith organ was removed in the late 1950s and sold to the Simpson Bible College in San Francisco. (Later, the organ was purchased and removed from the college by Harvey Heck.)

In 1982, a "White Knight" appeared. Ryland Kelley, a local real estate broker, had a vision of making the Stanford into a community playhouse and purchased the theatre. It was operated for about a year with live stage productions, but was not successful. Kelley owned the theatre for five years, during which time consideration was given both to setting up a foundation to raise funds for operation, and to converting the building to a shopping center. Fortunately, the latter idea was dropped and the theatre was leased to Allen Michaan, who operated several Bay Area movie theatres.

In December 1984, the Avenue Theatre in San Francisco closed, after presenting silent movies with organ accompaniment every Friday night for 18 years. The owners of the organ wanted to move it to a new neighborhood, and the organ crew

was eager to rebuild the three-manual Wurlitzer, but another theatre suitable for installation of the 15-rank organ could not be found in San Francisco. Two members of the organ crew, Cliff Luscher and Dave Banks, decided to forsake San Francisco and widen the scope of the search for a suitable movie theatre. They eventually resolved to start an organ project independent of the original group.

From John Ferguson in Indianapolis, Cliff purchased the three-manual console from Graumann's Chinese Theatre, Hollywood (Opus 1541, a 3/17 Style 260 Special Wurlitzer originally installed December 20, 1926). Dave purchased a complete Wurlitzer, Opus 274, originally installed in a church in Martinez, and this instrument, plus a large mechanical relay obtained from Dick Loderhose, formed the nucleus of the organ. Additional chests, pipework, and percussions were purchased to support the specification of a 13-rank Wurlitzer.

In 1987 when the project first took shape, Cliff and Dave had begun negotiations with the Palo Alto Players, a local theatre group, which had recently been given the Redwood City Fox Theatre. It developed that the requirements of the two groups were not complementary and there was no possibility of installing a pipe organ in that theatre. The pair then approached Allen Michaan at the Stanford Theatre. A satisfactory contract was drawn up and signed, providing for the installation of the organ in the Stanford and for its use by the theatre. The large mechanical relay and 16-foot Tibia Clausa offset pipes were moved into storage backstage.

Ken Eaton, a member of the organ crew, had already begun inspection of the console at his Tip Top Piano Restoration shop, preparing for its complete rebuild, when the scope of the project changed.

David W. Packard, an avid cinemaphile, rented the theatre in July 1987 and produced a two-week festival of 27 Fred Astaire films which played to capacity audiences. Impressed with the theatre and the audience response, he bought the theatre in December 1987. A second ten-day festival featuring classic films was presented in February 1988, once again with great patronage. Bob Vaughn played during this festival on an electronic piano. The theatre was then closed for complete restoration. The Stanford Theatre Foundation was established in November 1988, and now operates the Stanford as a repertory theatre dedicated to the preservation and presentation of classic films produced prior to 1960.

Mr. Packard discovered the Wurlitzer relay stored backstage while on a tour of the premises. Inquiring about its origin, he was told about the agreement between Luscher, Banks and Michaan. The appropriateness of a Wurlitzer to the historical presentation of silent films was clear, but the enthusiasm of Mac Wurtsbaugh, the theatre projectionist, may have helped Packard to decide to expedite and expand the project. The theatre foundation bought the organ components from Banks and Luscher, and additional chests, pipework and a 25-hp blower were obtained. A large shop space and erection room was leased in a building in San Francisco. All the organ parts were moved there, and restoration began in earnest on a seven-days-a-week basis with additional help added to the crew. Ken Eaton redesigned the console to accommodate the extra ranks. Carl Pinnow was retained to assist with mill work, fabricating console parts and the design and fabrication of structural members. Kevin King made all the metal wind conductors. Dave Banks replaced all wiring in the console and wired the entire organ. Cliff Luscher, his wife Judy, John



Jonson, Mike Riggs and Al Sefl also worked on the restoration. The Main chamber was erected first, and then the Solo. Each chamber was set up, winded, wired and played in San Francisco, before being disassembled and moved to Palo Alto for erection in the theatre, just as Wurlitzer would have done it. Members of NorCal Chapter's Berkeley organ crew contributed their help in the installation work. The whole organ project took nearly two years to complete.

David Packard, a son of the co-founder of the famous electronics firm, the Hewlett-Packard Company, undertook as a personal challenge the design and construction of a computer relay system for the organ.

When the Stanford Theatre opened in 1925 there was a 3/10 Leathurby-Smith pipe organ installed, which spoke through shutter openings six feet square in each chamber. The theatre restoration contractor was instructed to increase the opening in the Main chamber to 12 feet square. Four frames of shutters were installed, two on top of two. The opening in the Solo chamber was enlarged to accommodate double frames of eight-foot shutters. The specification at the time of publication is as follows:

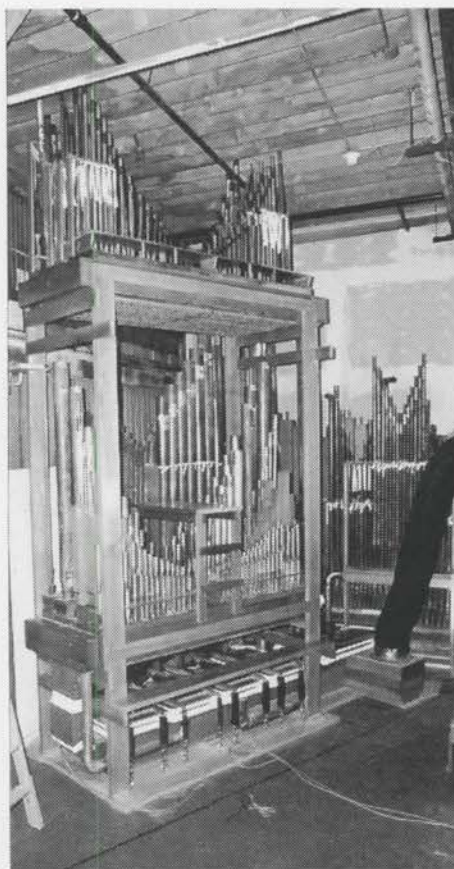
**MAIN CHAMBER:**

16'	Diaphone/Diapason	10"
16'	Bourdon/Concert Flute	10"
8'	Trumpet	10"
8'	Horn Diapason	10"
8'	Clarinet	10"
8'	Salicional	10"
8'	Salicional Celeste	10"
8'	Viol d'Orchestre	10"
8'	VDO Celeste	10"
8'	Concert Flute Celeste	10"
8'	Vox Humana	6"
	Chrysoglott	

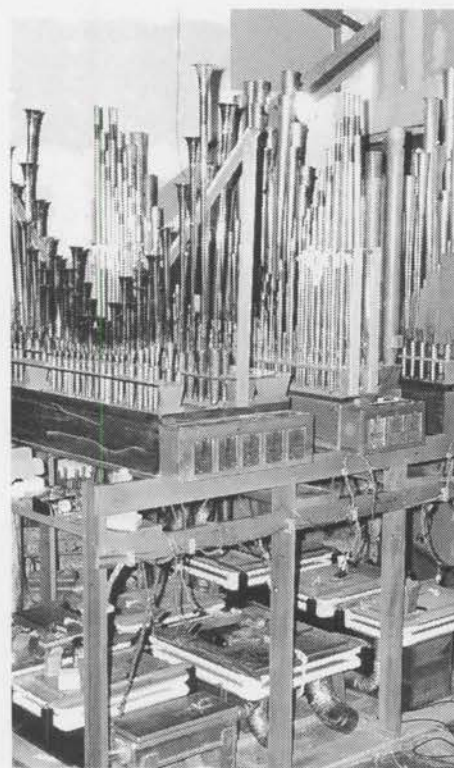
**SOLO CHAMBER:**

16'	Tuba Horn	15"
16'	Tibia Clausa	15"
8'	English (Post) Horn	15"
8'	Brass Trumpet	10"
8'	Brass Saxophone	10"
8'	Solo String	10"
8'	Solo String Celeste	10"
8'	Kinura	10"
8'	Orchestral Oboe	10"
8'	Quintadena	10"
	Glockenspiel, Marimba, Xylophone, Sleigh Bells, Chimes	

Neighborhood theatres with 1200 seats seldom had chambers large enough for an organ such as the one now installed in the Stanford, which is twice the size of the original Smith instrument. The Solo chamber at the Stanford was adequate for the new organ, but the Main chamber was too small. However, its 17-foot ceiling height made it possible to stack the chests.



*Main chamber components in the erection room, temporarily winded through the black flexible duct on the right. Five Wurlitzer regulators under the stacked chests are mounted on a custom-built Wurlitzer-style wind trunk.*



*Solo chamber components set up in erection room. Chest bottoms are about five feet above the floor.*

Custom chest bearers were designed and built by Ken Eaton and Carl Pinnow. The lower chest containing the Vox, Concert Flute, VDO Celeste, Diaphonic Diapason and Trumpet is installed at the normal height with the bottom of the chest 48 inches above the floor. The upper chest containing the rest of the ranks is installed ten feet above the floor.

The Stanford Theatre had no organ lift, so a double scissor lift was installed to raise the console from the basement to stage level. The Smith organ had its blower installed on one side of the stage, with a wind line running over the proscenium to the opposite chamber. In the present installation, the larger blower is located in a room under the stage directly behind the console, with equal wind lines to the chambers.

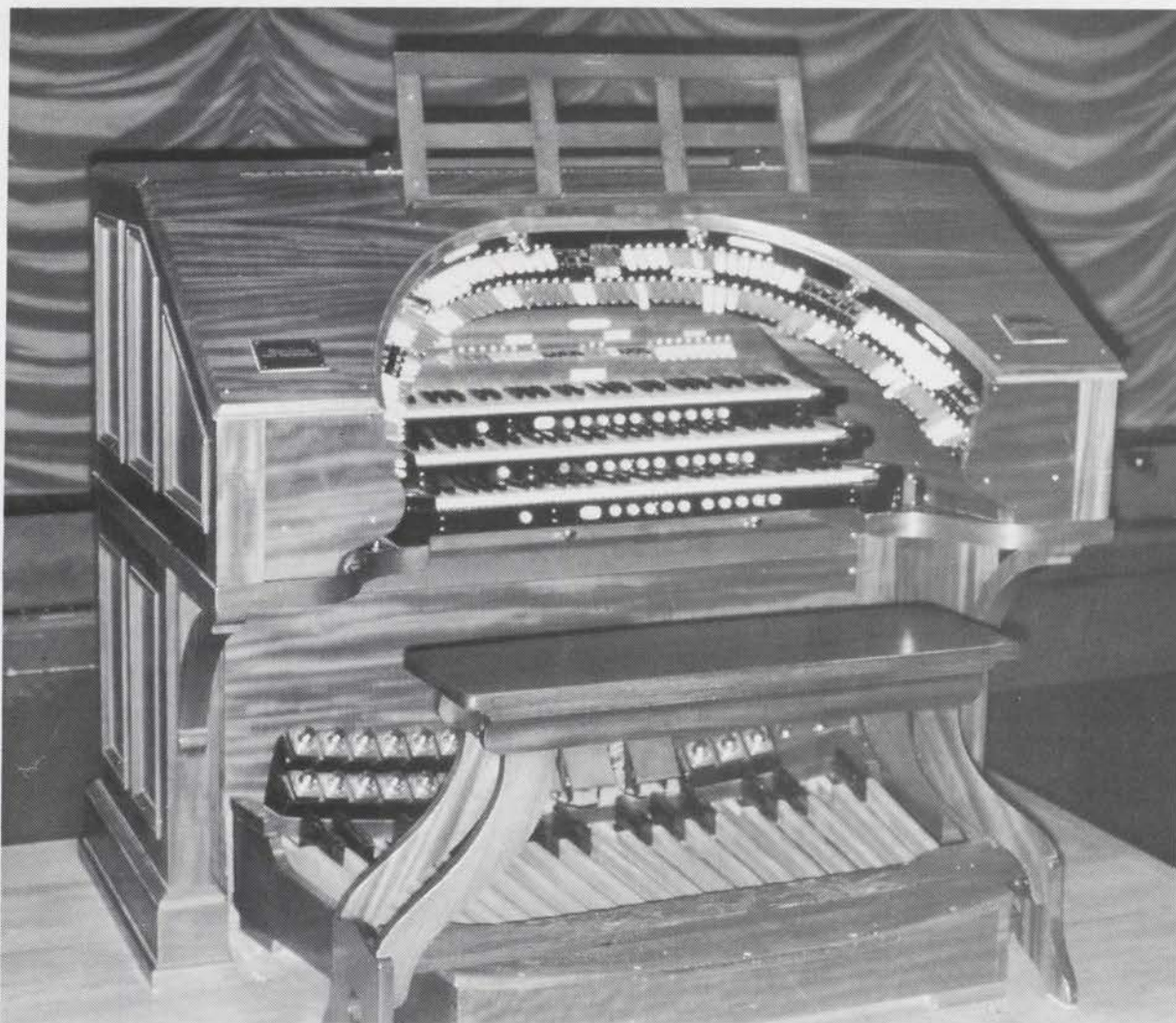
The goal of the restoration project was to return the theatre, as nearly as possible, to its appearance on opening night in 1925. The work cost some \$6 million and took nearly two years. A major part of the task involved seismic upgrading of the building, as required by the very stringent Palo Alto and California building codes. Packard chose to exceed the code requirements. More than 1000 tons of concrete and 250 tons of steel were added to the structure, and none of it can be seen inside the theatre. Packard was inside the building at the time of the Loma Prieta quake on October 17, 1989, and found absolutely no evidence of damage.

Restoring the theatre's interior decoration presented a challenge, because the original work had been painted over many years before. A black-and-white photograph of the interior, taken in 1925, was the best evidence available at the start. It showed the painted designs on the ceiling, the chandeliers, the small balconies below the organ grilles, and the ornate lambrequin across the proscenium above the main curtain, but, of course, did not show the colors.

A suggestion that Tony Heinsbergen's father might have been involved in the decoration of the interior proved to be the answer. A search of the files at A.T. Heinsbergen and Company turned up some watercolor studies for the interior. Tony's father, A.B. Heinsbergen, had designed the Stanford interior, as he did for over 750 other theatres. Two of Tony's nephews, David and Jerry, worked on site during the redecoration. The ornamentation throughout the theatre uses Assyrian and Greek patterns.

The elaborate designs on the ceiling were originally stenciled directly on the plaster. For the restoration, however, they were painted on canvas, which was then glued to the ceiling. A plaster proscenium





*The former Graumann's Chinese Theatre console, modified to handle 21 ranks.*

arch had been installed at some time, as had a false ceiling in the entrance lobby. Both were removed. New ceramic floor tiles had to be made for the entrance lobby. Six new chandeliers were custom-made to the original design. The 1956-vintage seats were overhauled and reupholstered in red mohair. Air conditioning was added, and the heating plant improved.

Many of the old silent films are only available on flammable nitrate film. In order to show them, it was necessary to reconstruct the walls of the projection booth and add an escape corridor for the projectionist, to comply with the fire code. The projectors are 1951 carbon-arc machines which were overhauled and installed by Mac Wurtsbaugh. He also modified the drives for variable speed, to better suit the silent films.

To an observant person who was familiar with the Stanford as it was originally, there are three things in the restored theatre which might be noticed. In the entrance lobby is a candy counter (there was none in 1925) which was designed and built to

match the decor of the lobby. The lambrequin has been shortened to give greater height to the stage opening, without obvious changes in its design. Third, the main drape is now an Austrian fold type which lifts, rather than the original draw drape. If the observant person is a woman, she will also find more stalls in the women's restroom.

The Stanford Theatre had a gala re-opening on December 8, 1989. An elegantly-dressed audience packed the house to see *The Wizard of Oz* and to hear Tom Hazleton at the Wurlitzer. The theatre has been open every night since then, with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays. A printed schedule covering a six-week period is distributed as an insert in a local weekly newspaper, and is available at the theatre. Films are usually organized as festivals honoring a particular star or director. The Wurlitzer is played every night, and among the organists are Chris Elliott, Kevin King, Jim Riggs, Dennis Scott, John Seng, Bill Taylor, Larry Vannucci and Bob Vaughn.



*The men behind the Stanford Theatre organ project. (L to R) Cliff Luscher, Dave Banks, David Packard.*