

“An Acre of Seats in a Palace of Splendor”

CAPITOL THEATRE, NEW YORK CITY

Architect: Thomas Lamb • Opened: October 24, 1919

Organ: Estey 4/45 (with later additions by builder)

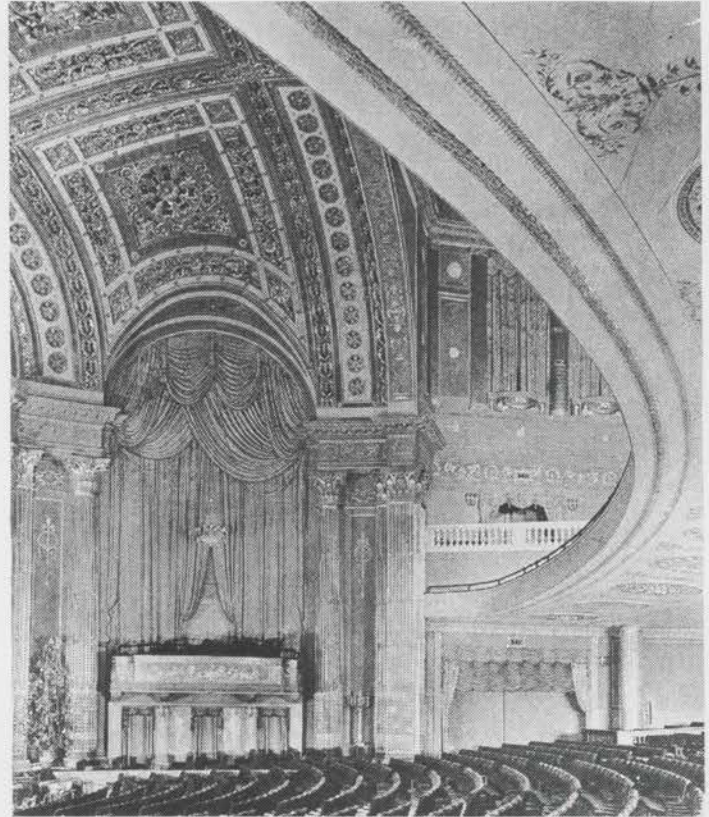


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As the nickel-and-dime movie trade grew into big business in the 'teens, Broadway filmgoers were treated to a succession of ever-finer new theatres — the Strand (1914), Rialto (1916), Rivoli (1917) and Capitol — all designed by Lamb, the decade's premier movie house architect, and all managed, at one time or another, by Roxy (Samuel L. Rothafel).

With an astounding 5230 seats, (only the Roxy's 5920 and Radio City's 6240 would ever top it) the Capitol demonstrated just how big the movies had become, but it took Roxy's special brand of showmanship to fill all those chairs, at "popular" prices, after the original hard-ticket policy failed miserably within a few months. The Great Man came aboard in mid-1920 as part of the Capitol's new affiliation with Goldwyn Pictures and presided five years before resigning to promote and develop the Roxy. Meanwhile, Marcus Loew had assembled Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, bringing the Capitol into his growing empire. For decades the house would flourish as the MGM flagship.

In the late 'teens, the movies' newly gained respectability found itself reflected in many of the theatres put up then. The

stately Capitol was the quintessence, its classical elegance bracketed by the small-scale exuberance of the nickelodeon era and the boundless opulence to come later. In Lamb's case, much later: he and/or his clients, Keith-Albee and Loew's mainly, clung to this sort of theatre long after the competition had moved on to more flamboyant places.

Despite Broadway's dominance of American show business, Wurlitzer-type organs initially enjoyed notably less acceptance there than they did almost everywhere else. Of the early film houses, only the Criterion/Vitagraph had a Wurlitzer; most has Austins. Not until the Paramount (1926) would New York have a Wurlitzer of the first water, although by that time some of the inappropriate early organs had been replaced, the Capitol's not among them.

Predictably church-like, the Capitol Estey, the builder's largest theatre installation, was twice enlarged to make it more "theatrical," each time receiving a new console. The original had stop keys, the second (1923) lighted push buttons, the third (1927) a combination of both systems worked into a graceless horseshoe. The entire assortment can be seen on pages

114-115 of *Junchen Vol. I*. Whatever its tonal shortcomings, the Estey had volume enough to fill the cavernous Capitol: Jay Quinby recalled that orchestra leaders developed a keen dislike of its potential to overwhelm the band. (They must have been happier with the Roxy's underpowered Kimball; what they made of the Paramount's "Big Mother" is unrecorded.)

The Capitol was subjected to more than its share of redecorations and modifications, including a Cinerama screen. By the time it closed in 1968, little of its original character remained. What survived of the Estey was removed just ahead of demolition.

Steve Levin

Editor's note: As the 'teens passed into history, conservative models like the Capitol gave way to something more elaborate and flamboyant. The new era would be heralded and defined by a pair of Chicago theatres opened in 1921. Watch this space for a special double feature devoted to the Tivoli and Chicago Theatres in the next issue.

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