

“An Acre of Seats in a Palace of Splendor”

Roxy Theatre New York City

Architect: Walter W. Ahlschlager

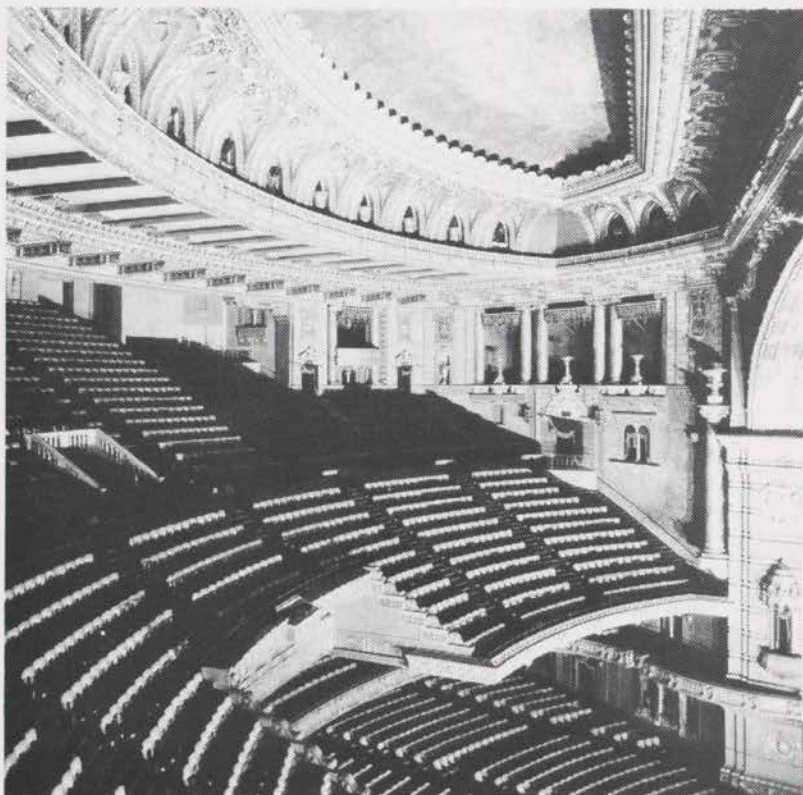
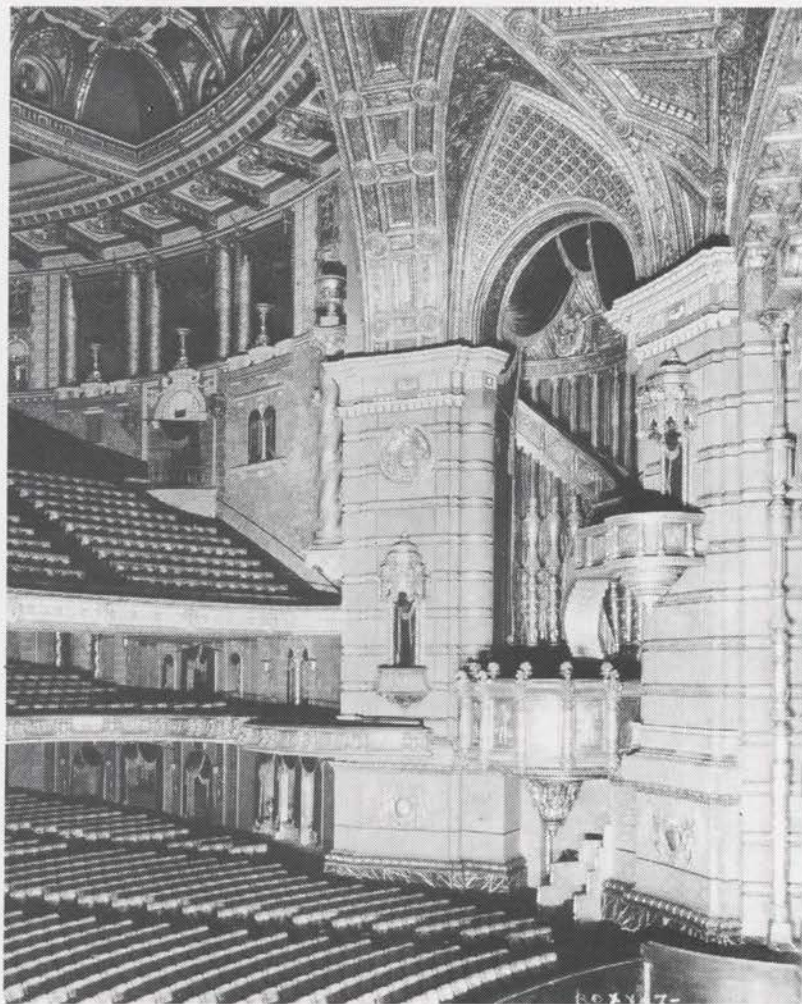
Opened: March 11, 1926

Organ: Kimball 5-3-3/34

After five years in charge of the Capitol (See THEATRE ORGAN, May/June 1991), Samuel L. Rothafel (Roxy) was lured away by promoter Herbert Lubin to take control of a theatre about to be built a short block away at 7th Avenue and West 50th Street. The great showman was to receive a piece of the action, near-absolute authority over construction and operation and his potent name on the marquee.

Roxy made no small plans. His theatre would offer more of everything the public had come to expect in its movie palaces, and them some: 5920 seats, an orchestra of 110, choristers, dancers and ushers beyond counting and an organ so apparently vast that three operators would be required to make it function. Roxy's extravagant dreams did not come cheap: the project ran millions over budget and was rescued just before opening by William Fox, who had been planning to build a Broadway house of his own.

Audiences entered the Roxy through a modest outer lobby tucked into a corner of the Hotel Manger (later Taft). A low "Reception Hall" diverted balcony ticket holders to a broad staircase on the left and funneled orchestra and loge patrons through another set of doors into the Rotunda. Expansive and lofty, awash with sunlight from huge windows along 50th Street, and reverberating with the sounds of 3/14 Kimball installed above the entry, this impressive hall was the theatre's only significant public space.



Set diagonally, the auditorium was as wide as it was deep and required eight aisles to access all those seats. Ornamental stairways curved down what should have been organ grilles to various church-like platforms used by performers. The balcony front sported a peculiar notch to accommodate a projection booth built into the balcony structure. Rich gold decorations from Rambusch and crimson drapery set a tone of satisfying extravagance.

Only the organ failed to meet this standard. Three handsome consoles gave it a mighty face, but with most of the pipework installed beneath the stage, it fell far short. (Even installed in the usual place, 34-ranks hardly seem adequate for so vast a space.) In 1932, a stage extension bottled the organ up; later on, the main console was moved into the left side box and the chambers were miked. An ice floor installed in 1954 did the equipment below no good whatever.

Roxy left his theatre in 1931, enticed by the even grander scale of what was to become Radio City Music Hall, where his tenure lasted barely past the over-produced opening. Under a number of successor managements, the Roxy itself suffered a series of destructive alterations before its demise on March 29, 1960. Neither the main organ, the lobby organ nor the 2/8 in a broadcasting studio survived intact.

Steve Levin

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