

San Francisco Bids Farewell to The Fox

by Allen White

Hedda Hopper proclaimed from the stage, "I just cannot understand why this is happening!" Local columnist Herb Caen wrote, "It's a wonder they didn't tear it down sooner." With these two statements as guideposts, the Foolish and Fabulous Fox closed its brass doors as the "Showplace of the West" on Saturday, February 16, 1963.

Ben Hall mentioned that the Roxy Theatre in New York closed quietly and simply. The Fox management - in particular, Mr. Bob Apple - must be given credit for engineering four "farewells" that together encompassed every adjective from "wild, spectacular, breathtaking," to "beautiful, nostalgic, heart-breaking." For this spectator, they were not at all quiet and simple, but just plain fantastic!

It all started Friday night, February 8, at midnight. The theatre, jammed to its 4600 seat capacity, witnessed one organist, George Wright, and one theatre pipe organ console, the 36-rank Crawford Special Mighty WurliTzer Fox Organ arising slowly out of the pit. The Friday night crowd was composed of many persons unable to purchase tickets for the Saturday night affair, sold out two weeks in advance. On Friday, the program included an added Wright element - a subtle touch of progressive jazz. As is the case at most G. W. concerts, the audience was his to command from the first note.

Saturday evening was George Wright's final "Farewell to the Fox". It appeared that George was inviting his audience to relive a lifetime of his experiences and memories. "Honky-Tonk Train," Jerome Kern's "Showboat," "The Burning of Rome," "Fascination," "Indian Love Call" were just a few selections. Midway through the second half of the program Wright removed his tie and coat, re-creating the many nights when he played alone in the theatre after closing time. Then the end came. With the playing of "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," and "San Francisco," the organ and the artist slowly descended into the orchestra pit, with both organist and audience realizing that the combination of "George Wright at the Fox Mighty WurliTzer Theatre Pipe Organ" was gone forever.

The following Saturday evening, February 16, was the last night that this, William Fox's "greatest theatre in the world," would open as an entertainment cathedral. If you were fortunate enough to obtain tickets, you arrived to see a spotlight shining into the sky. Upon entering the lobby, theatre organ-prone ears picked up the sound of the lobby Moller organ emitting sounds produced from rolls. Many rolls would not track correctly, but the organ was playing "live" in the lobby. Who could demand

more? How could you help but notice the magnificent gold-leafed ceiling, rich tapestries and antiques that surrounded you? There was NO popcorn for sale this night. Many who were to sit in the balcony rode the elevators to the top. As the elevator doors opened, you heard Everett Nourse, seated at the console of the Fox WurliTzer located almost one block away. You were then directed to your seat by one of the ushers. Many of these ushers were on duty on the theatre's opening night in 1929. You thought the organ never sounded better. It was true. Under the many hours work of Judd Walton, Bob Jacobus and Bud Perry the instrument was in absolutely perfect condition.

The lights started to dim. The organ descended into the pit. Following a short introduction by Vaughn Meader, with "vigor", the television production, "Hollywood - The Fabulous Era," was shown minus commercials. As the movie ended, M.C. Paul Gilbert appeared on stage and announced that the overture was to begin.

Slowly out of the orchestra pit arose Ray Hackett and the Fox Symphony Orchestra, the Kaiser Koristers and Everett Nourse at the organ. This was a sight that sent a chill up your spine. The final note of the overture was orchestrated to include full orchestra and organ together. To many people, "That's all, folks" could have been said then, and most would have been satisfied. But there was more, much more.

A stage show followed, featuring vaudeville "greats" such as Joaquin Garay and Eddie Peabody. And there were motion picture and recording stars by the carload: Kay Starr, Jane Russell, Richard Egan, Lois Moran, Jane Wyman, Hedda Hopper, and - as they say - a host of others. Under the direction of Herman Kersken, the first manager of the Fox, the show was exceptionally well produced.

When the curtain went up for the finale, the entire cast was on stage. There was no set. You saw the back wall. As members of the cast sang "Auld Lang Syne," they slowly disappeared off stage, leaving only one work light burning. With stage bare, the orchestra and organ at the bottom of the orchestra pit, one lone stagehand entered onto the stage, put out his cigarette, then turned off the work light. Thus ended the San Francisco Fox Theatre.

After the show, Ray Hackett and his orchestra played for dancing on the stage. During the break before the dancing the organ was played, the final time the public would hear this organ while in the theatre. It's pretty sure that a few tears were shed.

Sunday, February 17, 1963. The candy and popcorn have been removed. There

are no ushers. The projectors are still. The candy and popcorn are replaced by salesbooks. Guards have replaced ushers. Tickets have been replaced by sales tags. Everything is for sale, except memories. A bronze door is sold for \$250.00. A diamond horseshoe seat for \$2.50. Ashtrays, 90 for \$25.00. The sale started at 9:00 a.m. and continued until 5:00. FM radio's "Farewell to the Fox" then followed.

The program presented by local station KPEN-FM in multiplex stereo began at 8:00. The first half-hour consisted of interviews with many persons involved in the theatre's history. At 8:30, James Gabbert announced that this would be the first time in history that a theatre pipe organ would be broadcast "live" in stereo, the last time the Fox WurliTzer would be heard. Everett Nourse and "Tiny" James shared the bill for one hour. This was agreed by many to be the finest pickup of theatre organ ever heard. The fidelity was excellent. The musicianship of "Tiny" James and Everett Nourse was flawless. Their styles are quite different, yet this was the personification of "the theatre organ sound." Everett Nourse finalized the evening with "San Francisco." This was truly the end of an era.

The organ is now silent. California Assemblyman Frank Lanterman has purchased it for installation in his home. Possibly the finest epitaph was spoken by the last manager of the Fox, Mr. Bob Apple:

THE FOX IS DEAD

Born: June 28, 1929

Died: February 16, 1963

Only 34 years old.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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was not large, but was capable of producing some of the most enjoyable music I have ever heard.

Pearl Dyer played the Morton and I never missed an opportunity to be in the studio to hear it (radio transmission of organ music was far from hi-fi in those days). Local theatres had ceased to use their organs except on rare occasions, so that was the only place where a theatre organ could be heard.

Later, station WKY installed the 4/14 Kilgen which was listed by you recently, but their studios were moved several years ago and the Kilgen was sold to our city government and installed in the Municipal Auditorium. It has not been adequately maintained since that time and is in need of repair and tuning. The Auditorium is to be rebuilt into a music hall next year and it is hoped that the organ will be rebuilt and possibly enlarged at that time.

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