

**Still the Biggest
Still the Best . . .**

Radio City Music Hall

by
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Each issue of THEATRE ORGAN describes more and more organs that are making a comeback after years of neglect and disuse. There is one, however, which started playing in 1932 and hasn't stopped since. It's the biggest Wurlitzer of them all, the 4/58 at Radio City Music Hall in New York. A trip to the Music Hall in Rockefeller Center is a most memorable experience and one which has entertained more than 230 million people over the years. Who can forget the sight of the great ebony console sliding out of its niche on the left (it has a twin on the right, seldom used), the Symphony Orchestra rising, seemingly out of the bowels of the earth to stage level, the Rockettes, Ballet, and the specialty acts? But, in some ways, backstage at the Music Hall is even more remarkable than out front. Come with us as we watch a stage show from the wings to see how the efforts of 180 performers and backstage employees mesh into a lavish stage production.

After the stage doorman has OK'd our visit with the stage manager, we step into one of the four elevators (two on each side of the stage) which carry performers, stagehands, and visitors to the various levels. Let's take the elevator down to stage level. *Down?* Sure — the entrance to the theatre is at street level, but the 6200 seat auditorium is pitched downwards toward the stage. Hence, the stage has to be below street level.

As we walk across the empty stage, we hear the sound track of the current movie and the occasional sounds of laughter from the audience. Except for this, however, all is quiet. One stagehand is "minding the store", answering

an occasional telephone call and sometimes paging someone on the backstage P. A. system. The most spectacular item confronting us is a large board covered with switches, dials, lights, and indicators. No, this isn't the panel controlling the stage lighting — that is located out front, just in front of the orchestra pit. This backstage board controls the three elevator sections on the stage, the orchestra lift, turntable, contour curtain, and a host of other sources of stage magic.

The stage manager, Frank Hawkins, has now arrived. The stage manager, in contrast to the rest of the backstage crew, is always impeccably attired.

Occasionally he has to make a brief stage appearance (for example, when a large group has to exit to a fleet of charter buses), so he has to dress the part of a representative of the theatre's management.

Hawkins looks at the clock and leans toward the backstage intercom.

"Twenty minutes to stage show!"

Now we begin to see some activity. Stagehands have come upstairs from their quarters in the basement and have begun moving scenery on to the bare stage. Our visit is during the Easter season, so that the show begins with the "Glory of Easter," described in the theatre's ads as the "far-famed

(L to R) George Cort, Tom St. John and Frank Hawkins plan out the stage and curtain movements. The six dials at the top of the photo control the three elevator sections of the stage. The vertical channels between George and Tom control the movement of the contour curtain (some of the sliding positioners are visible). The dials near Frank's right hand control the orchestra lift, while the other buttons and switches below are for the turntable, footlights, steam curtain, etc.



cathedral pageant.” Indeed, the stage is now beginning to resemble just that. But somehow, it doesn’t look right — the altar is too close to stage level.

“Watch number two. Number two up!”

Number two is the second (or middle) section of the stage. Each of these three sections can be raised or lowered separately, as can the orchestra lift on which the musicians are brought to stage level. In this case, section two is raised a few feet to give the proper perspective to the scene. The man in charge of the previously mentioned board which controls these movements is Tom St. John. He explains that an indicator (it looks like a clock, with two hands which rotate)

can be set to the exact number of feet and inches of rise or fall desired. Then, at the push of a button, the stage moves up or down to the desired position. He also shows us the contour curtain controls. This great gold curtain, weighing about two tons, can frame the stage in hundreds of ways. It is operated by motors in thirteen positions above the stage, and controlled by twenty-six sliding positioners on the board. These positioners, thirteen for up moves and thirteen for down moves, are actually movable limit switches. They can be slid separately to form any desired shape. When a button is pushed, the contour curtain goes up (or down) until it assumes the shape for which it

At the stage manager’s signal “Number two up!,” Tom St. John presses the proper button and the stage rises to a preset height. The upper row of three dials shows the position of the stage sections; the lower three can be preset by hand to control the exact amount of rise or fall. The contour curtain positioners are visible above Tom’s forearm.



has been programmed.

“Ten minutes to stage show. Musicians to the pit, please!”

The organist for this performance has arrived and is putting on a monk’s costume over his regular jacket. The organ plays together with the orchestra during the eight-minute “Glory of Easter,” so the organist is appropriately clad to keep with the cathedral motif. By the way, the architects of the Music Hall did not make entrance to the console especially easy. Each console niche has a 30” wide by 53” high door leading to the pedal area. The organist must then crawl from the side over the pedals and up to the seat. If the auditorium is darkened, the organist slips unobtrusively on stage and to the console rather than using the small doorway mentioned above.

Finally, we see some of the performers. The ballet girls and Rockettes, costumed as nuns, pick up their sprays of Easter lilies. The singing ensemble lines up, candles in hand. The movie is ending.

“Contour down. Orchestra up.”

Tom St. John punches the proper buttons, and we can see the indicators move as the contour curtain falls, and the fifty musicians travel the twenty-seven feet up to begin the performance. The singers file out in procession and the show is on.

The action now shifts to the stage. Backstage, there is little to do except to listen to the strains of “Kammenoi-Ostrow” and watch the cathedral pageant unfold. We can hear the organ as the music builds to a crescendo. The scene ends with the dancers forming a cross of Easter lilies.

“Contour down. Work light on.”

Because of the massive scenery requirements for this scene (the same is true of the Nativity pageant at Christmas) several minutes must be allowed for the scene change. A circular screen is lowered, and on it a mini-movie consisting of scenes from Walt Disney’s *Bambi* is shown with an offstage narration and orchestral accompaniment. The organist takes off his monk’s robes to be ready for his next appearance. The ballet girls have made a quick change and are positioned on the turntable (the center section of the stage can be revolved. This can be used for a theatrical effect, or simply for a scene change.)

“Fast revolve — right. Contour up!”

Again, we can relax while the

action shifts to the stage. The stagehands in the flies who have raised and lowered backdrops and other pieces of scenery sit back to wait for the scene to end. After the ballet is over, a river bank and foliage backdrop descends, and the stage is transformed into a picnic grove. The vocal ensemble, now in casual clothes, begins to sing. But where are the microphones?

Interestingly, the singers are on tape, and only mouth the words they have previously recorded. The orchestra, however, is live, so Paul Lavalle or one of the associate conductors have to synchronize the orchestra with the tape. Pretaping is used when microphones would interfere with the movements of the cast on stage.

In the meantime the stage hands have set up a puppet stage behind the picnic backdrop. When the singers have finished, the drop is raised and the puppeteers take over. The Rockettes are on next, but they will make their entrance in a distinctly Music Hall way. As the puppet show ends, Frank Hawkins give orders to take the orchestra and stage section 1 to the sub-basement. Meanwhile, the organ takes over to accompany a vocal number. Stage hands electrically move the "band-car" which holds the orchestra on to the lowered stage section, and the Rockettes take their positions where the orchestra had been. Then, Tom St. John presses the buttons which bring the orchestra and the Rockettes to stage level. The Rockette routine leads to a typical Music Hall finale which includes a field of 600 artificial tulips "planted" by the entire cast and three windmills, all arriving on stage from the flies and wings. One final "Contour down, orchestra down" from Frank Hawkins, the ebony console slides out of the wall to play the intermission, and another show is over.

Backstage, however, more work remains. Six hundred tulips have to be picked up and replaced in baskets by the stagehands, who also have to remove the windmills and other scenery of the finale. The band car has to be taken to the sub-basement and moved to its regular position on the pit elevator. The screen must be lowered and then the contour curtain raised at a signal from the projection room. As their jobs are finished, people disappear to various backstage areas. Finally, all is quiet on the great bare stage — except for the sound of the movie and the laughter of the audi-



Frank Hawkins gives two dancers a pep talk before the "Glory of Easter." The ropes visible behind the girls are used by the flymen on upper floors to raise and lower backdrops. In the background are Tom St. John and vocal soloist Kathryn Carter.

One of the stage sections has been raised about five feet to give the audience a better look at this year's Bunny Frolics. Frank Hawkins keeps an eye on the proceedings.

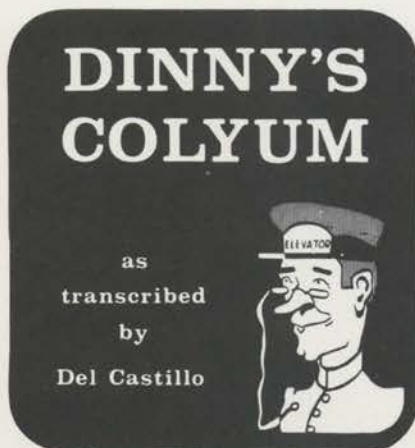


ence. A lone stagehand answers an occasional telephone call.

What makes this operation even more remarkable is that, unlike Broadway, rehearsals for the next show go on even while the current show is in progress. Then, on a certain Wednesday after the last show about 9 P.M., the sets are dismantled and moved out, the new sets are installed, light cues are worked out, and all is made ready for the 8 A.M. dress rehearsal of the new show. Needless to say, nobody gets much sleep that night.

If you would like a glimpse of some of what has been described above, the Rockefeller Center Guided Tour now includes a brief trip backstage, in addition to the buildings, roof gardens, and Observation Roof of the Rockefeller Center complex. And, need one add, no trip to New York is complete without seeing the Music Hall's current show.

See you there! □



Mr. Geo. Thompson who tells me what to rite about got the ATOS to pay for my fair to Detroit to the Nashional Convention of the ATOS and I never see such a noisy bunch of people in my life. They was over 1100 of them which is a lot of organ players in any mans langwidge, and as nearly as I could figure they was all talkin at once. I got there late on acct. I first was goin to go by bicicle but then I got to thinkin about them mountins between Los Angeles and Detroit and its a good thing the ATOS offered to pay my fair or I never would of made it.

So like I says the first time I heard all them organ players jabberin at oncet was when they got together for there big banqwet on Sunday evenin

and they was a good organ player name of Rick Shindell pumpin out toons and I would like to of heard him but everybody was makin such a racket I had to give up. Mr. Thompson he put me at the Presstable on acct. I rite this colyum for him so I was glad I was dressed up because it was a pretty fancy gatherin on acct. there was Geo. and Vi Thompson and Mr. Lloyd Klos and Mr. Stew Green and Mr. Bill Lamb the photographer and Mr. Len Clarke who is always tryin to get me to put an ad in the paper but what would I put an ad in about, I give up runnin Elyvaters years ago and they is a feller rote into the paper awhile back and he criterized my spellin so I dont think they is any use my puttin in a ad as a riter, and I never got no further in organ playin than to play Long Long Ago with one finger.

But pretty soon Mr. Judd Walton who was runnin the show from the Speakers Table he ast all of us riters to stand up and then he re-appointed Mr. Geo. Thompson and Mr. Klos and Mr. Green to run the paper another year so I guess I am in for some more colyums unless they is too many readers who think I dont spell good enough. Mr. Walton he run a tite ship as they use to say when I was in the Navy and he kept things hummin rite along because they was announcin all the new officers for next year but I wont give there names on acct Mr. Klos will probily do all that when he rites up an account of the Convenshun. I guess I was most inarested in Mr. Klos gettin elected Honorary Member for the Year, and then they was five organ players got elected to the Hall of Fame and they was Mr. Al Melgard and Mr. Jack Ward who just died last year and Dick Leibert who he and Mr. Ward both played at the Music Hall in New York City, and then from Canada they was Miss Kathleen Stokes and from England they was Mr. Reginald Dixon.

Mr. Walton he told about how the ATOS has shot up from 165 to over 5000 members and like he says it is now Big Business with a budget of \$100,000. Figures like that dont mean nothin to me. When you get to over \$10,000 that about as far up as I can unnertsand it. Then they give out good lookin wall placks to all the ex-Presidents, and after that they ask people to stand up who own different kinds of pipe organs in there homes, and I never noo they was so many different kinds of pipe organs. They

had makes I never heard of, and by the time they got through they must of mentioned 20 or 30 different makes. I suppose it stands to reason that they been makin pipe organs for hunderds and hunderds of years, but they been makin plug-in organs for only less than fifty years so they would probily be a lot more makers of pipe organs than plug-in organs. Of course some of them like the Kimball organ and the Wurlitzer organ and some others they have made both kinds.

The only thing that didnt work out good was when Mr. Walton he thunk up the brite idea of havin one person from each table get up and announce somebody he just met at the table, but they wasnt any microfone for them to speak into, so you couldnt hear them even if all the people had quit jabberin which they didnt. They was a lot of busses to take everybody to all the different theayters where the organists was playin but I think what I got the biggest kick out of was when Dr. John Landon who is a pefesser of Filosofia but he is also a Organ Nut as they say nowadays and he has been bonin up on Jesse Crawford and he has been givin lectures about Jesse and is publishin a book about it. So like we are both riters as you might say I went up and ast him about Jesse and his wife Helen and his Daughter Jessica. I never knew about Jessica before but she was a pretty cute baby and I noticed that she had a kind of a wide face like Jesse when I use to go hear him at the Paramount Theatre in New York and Helen would be on a second organ on the other side of the orchestry pit and they turned out some mighty smart duets, I guess you would call them duets. Dr. Landon he had a lot of pictures on slides rite from Jesse as a baby until he died in Los Angeles a few years ago, and then he played a lot of the old Jesse Crawford records that he had on tape and I wish I could get some but when I went into the record stores they give me the horse laff and it seems they dont carry them no more.

Well by that time I seen and heard most of the organ players and I stayed up until 3 A.M. atalkin and adrinkin until they put us out so by that time I was pretty tired and I just want to thank the ATOS and everybody for invitin me and payin my way and I hope they will do the same thing again next year when they have there Convenshun in San Francisco. □