

Fort Wayne, Ind., Hears Theatre Organ at Midnight

By Robert J. Ort

Theatre organ enthusiasts of the Midwest were treated to a delightful "midnight snack" at midnight on Saturday, March 16, when Buddy Nolan, presiding at the console of the Page Theater Pipe Organ in the Embassy Theater, Fort Wayne, Indiana, presented a program appropriately entitled "Theater Organ at Midnight."

Doors opened at 11:45 p.m., but more than 600 organ fans had jammed the sidewalk area immediately in front of the theater box office long before that time. The program, a first attempt at stirring area interest in the theater pipe organ, was considered a tremendous success for Nolan in terms of the large attendance. Even the skeptics became believers (and organ fans) by 2 a.m.

Shortly after midnight the house lights dimmed, signaling the start of the program. Buddy Nolan played his own theme as the newly refinished white and gold console rose up out of the pit. A blazing light spotlighted console and organist while a color slide of a pipe organ console was being projected on the closed stage curtain, producing a very theatrical effect for the introduction to the first half of the program.

Nolan's first selection was "Another Opening, Another Show," after which he gave the audience some of the history of the Embassy's 4 manual, 15 rank organ. (The Page organ was built in the nearby city of Lima, Ohio. Only three 4 manual Page organs were built by the company.)

Nolan gave credit to the two men who had assisted him in the restoration of this magnificent instrument, Al Buzby, a veteran in pipe organ tuning and maintenance with more than 50 years of experience, and Bob Nickerson, a newcomer in the field of organ work. Bob gets the credit for being the one person most responsible for the many months of loving labor spent in restoring the Page to its former condition. An expert in matters electrical and electronic, Bob solved the technical problems that existed before or developed during the restoration work.

Buddy next explained to the audience the various voices of the organ and demonstrated the sounds produced by the various stop tabs as he identified and described them.

Following that brief but very informative lesson in organ sounds, Bud rendered a group of top show tunes from the best of Broadway which seemed to be the favorites of most in his very attentive audience, judging from the applause following the medley.

"Ebb Tide" was next on his program. Nolan then explained that he fully realized how common it is to find the sounds of the sea, usually the sounds of sea gulls, dubbed in on recordings of that tune and apologized for not having any sea gull sounds available. However, he maintained that he did have at his disposal some Indiana sea gulls which had consented to assist him. As he began to play a very "theatrical" chorus of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm", the theater's sound system burst forth with tape recorded authentic barnyard sounds of chickens and sundry farm fowl, lending a humorous note to the program.

Rounding out the first half of the program were some of Nolan's all-time favorite organ selections, e.g., "Just the Way You Look Tonight", "Monterey", etc. These popular standards proved to be favorites of his audience, too, as many of them could be heard humming or singing the melodies as Nolan played them.

Before raising the organ lift to stage level for intermission, Bud thanked members of the audience for their interest in organ, their attendance, their attention and especially those who had come from distant points in nearby states to be present for the concert. Special mention was made of the groups from Detroit and Chicago. To musically salute these two groups, Nolan played "In My Merry Oldsmobile" with the organ's sound effects for traffic, and dedicated it to the Motor City delegation. For the Windy City representatives he did a rendition of "Chicago" complete with fire alarm and siren sounds so reminiscent of the Prohibition-like cops-and-robber chases of both old movies and new television shows. The audience seemed thoroughly delighted to hear the organ effects for the silent movie accompaniment used in those numbers.

The organ lift was run up to stage level as the crowd indicated its approval of what had just been heard and its desire for more of the same kind of en-

tertainment. Buddy Nolan made his exit. During the intermission, the King of Instruments stood with all its regal gold and white splendor glittering in a beam of white light directed from a spotlight high overhead in the ceiling of the theater. Needless to say, many came to pay homage to His Majesty!

To open the second half of the program, Bud gave his interpretation of the overture to the Broadway hit, "Gypsy," followed by an assortment of tunes from the 1920's, including "Charleston", "Black Bottom", "Varsity Drag", "Ain't We Got Fun" etc., done to a turn in the style of the flapper decade.

A surprise during the second half of the concert had been promised the crowd earlier and it materialized when Nolan announced that the time had come to relive a bit of the past glory of the theater organ era. Excitement ran through the audience when song slides were projected from the booth to the house screen. These slides were the real McCoy, salvaged from a bygone (and probably demolished) movie house. The audience showed its approval instantly by launching into the songs, singing heartily most of the oldies, including "Shine On Harvest Moon", "For Me and My Gal", "Bye Bye Blackbird" and others. Humorous slides were inserted occasionally, adding to the merriment. Time did indeed roll back for many in the crowd as they remembered the sing-along sessions of yesteryear.

His audience grew reverently quiet when Buddy told them that it would be fitting to play a tribute to the late great Poet of the Organ, Jesse Crawford. The tribute, selections made famous by Crawford and played in the rich theater style, opened with "When the Organ Played At Twilight," and included such famous Crawford gems as "Sonny Boy," closing with "The Song Is Ended." There were younger and youngster Crawford fans after that medley!

Since the hour was rapidly nearing 2 a.m. point, and Sunday morning church services were getting closer by the minute, Buddy Nolan announced that his last number would be the ever-popular "Over the Rainbow." Most of the Page's ranks were put to work during the closing measures of that beautiful tune as Buddy drew the richest of theater organ sounds from the organ.

The organ lift started to descend as the song came to its ending. The spotlights dimmed and faded out.

The song was ended, but the melody lingers on.

Buddy Nolan, a native of Philadelphia, lives and plays organ in the West and the Midwest, dividing his time between the Southern California area and the Northern Indiana region. Buddy, who was featured at the 1962 ATOE National Convention in Los Angeles both at the Wilern in the "Cavalcade of Organists" program and at the Coffman-Field Wur-litzer in a Woodcarver Shop recital, has promised the Fort Wayne area organ fans another program in the near future. They all agree that the very near future is not soon enough.