

Review, courtesy of The Sunday Bulletin, Philadelphia

RECITAL IN A CLOSED THEATRE

MOVIE ORGAN STIRS GHOSTS

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An organ is for playing as well as saving. Organist, Donald Kinnier, shown here is helping to do both in the case of the Sedgwick Theatre, Philadelphia. (Photo, courtesy of The Evening Bulletin, Philadelphia.)



THE FRONT of the old movie house was boarded up. Some of the seats had been removed. There was no projector, no silver screen to shield the gray concrete block rear wall of the stage.

Yet, Rudolph Valentino was there, streaking across the desert on his white Arabian steed, his shiek's robes rippling in the windstream.

And so were Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart — those great stars of the silent screen.

You saw them — ghost-like, but you saw them nonetheless — as desert music and chase music and tender embrace music floated from the organ yesterday in the Sedgwick Theater at 7137 Germantown Ave., Mt. Airy.

Don Kinnier, too young to remember any of this, was at the keyboards of the gold-trimmed white console of the Grand Moller organ, playing it for the last time in the dimly-lit shell which once had been a movie palace. A palace, 1920s vintage, with a lobby area larger than many of today's art film houses.

But Kinnier is a specialist at playing movie organs, a hybrid type, created to interpret musically the moods of the silent pictures. Talking movies doomed them, but

Horace Proctor, shown here examining pipework in Sedgwick Theatre Moller, prior to removal. (Photo, courtesy of The Evening Bulletin, Philadelphia.)



Kinnier, like the organists of that bygone era, knows how to make the bird chirp, the doorbell ring, the cymbals crash, the tambourine tinkle and the drums roll. They built all those sound effects, and more, into movie organs.

That's what some 300 paid \$2 each to hear at the Sedgwick. Those sounds and the crescendos air-blown from several thousand unseen pipes screened from audience view by still-bright gold leaf grills flanking the bare stage. It was genuine stereo sound, only in the 1920s nobody called it that.

Many of the ladies, forewarned of the closed theater's shabby state, brought along dust rags to whisk off the seats. But the gloomy atmosphere was quickly forgotten as Kinnier cleared the organ's throat with a mighty test chord.

The organ had been restored—given back its voice, said one of the buffs—by members of the local chapter of the American Theater Organ Enthusiasts. They discovered it five years ago, a fine specimen but in an unplayable state, and spent uncounted hours repairing it. Last year, when the theater closed and was sold to Crossman Van & Storage Co. for a warehouse, the hobbyists bought the organ with their own money. The newcomer let them keep it there until now.

Yesterday's concert was to raise funds toward the estimated \$10,000 it will cost to dismantle and move the organ. Still to be found is a permanent new home for it.

Kinnier, who donated his fee to the moving fund, chose selections to show off the organ's versatility—pieces that lent themselves to the embellishments, musical and otherwise, which such an instrument can produce.

He brought down what remains of the house with typical silent-movie music. There was "Caravan," as much a part of silent film desert adventure epics as the action it accompanied. And the movie pit version of Rossini's "Neapolitan Tarantella," more commonly dubbed "The Chase," just as indispensable to chase sequences as those near-misses at grade crossings.

Not quite in context with anything presented at the Saturday matinee in those days was a number Kinnier described as "The Stripper and Her Sister." By whatever title, it's the most familiar of the bump-and-grind burlesque house melodies.

Predictably, Kinnier offered "The Organ Plays at Twilight," with the sentimental chords gurgling.

And appropriately, he wound up with an all-stops-out "Auld Lang Syne." Had there been a chandelier left in the Sedgwick, the vibrations surely would have shaken it loose.