

Detroit Theater Organ Society

February 2011 Newsletter

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FROM THE PRESIDENT'S BENCH

Dick Leichtamer
President, Detroit Theater Organ Society

Hello everyone. I wish you all a very happy and prosperous 2011. All of us on the DTOS Board of Directors are looking forward to a GREAT year for DTOS as well!

For several years now, we have been working with a commercial real estate firm to find a buyer for the Senate and a new home for our magnificent Wurlitzer. While we have received a few well-intentioned offers for the theater, invariably the local economy has prevented any of them to come to fruition. More importantly, we have not been able to find a new facility that would meet our needs for location, size, cost and suitable acoustics. There really is no sense in selling the Senate if we have no place to go. Finally, the cost of disassembling the organ, packing it, moving it and reinstalling it in a new venue would seriously deplete our bank account, limiting our ability to function at a new location, and put us in "limbo" for another year or two during the move and reinstallation with no guarantee of restoring those funds afterward.

With these concerns in mind, at a special meeting on January 4th, your Board of Directors voted to respectfully decline a recent offer from the Christian Life Apostolic Ministries to purchase the Senate. Several options were discussed including a lease-back arrangement but, in the end, there would be little or no cost savings for us and the operational needs of the prospective owner would seriously hamper our ability to continue, let alone expand, our activities. At this time,

the Board also voted to withdraw the Senate from the real estate market for the time being and to resume our concerts and other activities at the Senate beginning with the May 15th Jelani Eddington concert. This doesn't mean that relocation is not an option in the future should we find a really compelling venue. But, for now, the Board felt that it was more important to focus on our core responsibilities of keeping our wonderful instrument in playing condition and promoting interest in theater pipe organs through the educational, cultural and musical development of our membership and the public.

For the short term, you can look forward to a spruced up Senate, improved security, continuation of the restoration of our Wurlitzer and new theater organ related educational and social activities in addition to a superb concert series. Of course we're always looking for new ideas (and volunteers). That's where you come in. We truly want to hear your ideas for new programs and activities, performers, publicity, fundraising and anything else you can think of that will help extend our legacy of the past five decades well into the 21st century. Come to our concerts, bring your friends, attend a Board meeting, learn to play the organ, take advantage of private practice time on the Wurlitzer, volunteer your time and talents – get involved! Our 50th Anniversary is coming up fast and, despite various rumors about our demise, we intend to put DTOS and our prized Wurlitzer back on the map "big-time"!

MEMBERSHIP

Gary Grzebienik
Membership Chairman

First, and most important, "THANK YOU!" for your continued membership, interest in and support of the Detroit Theater Organ Society and our magnificent Wurlitzer. While we always are looking for new friends to join our family of theater organ enthusiasts, many of you have been with us since the beginning. We value your loyalty and support and look forward to our continued friendship and association for many years to come.

Over 60% of DTOS members have renewed their mem-

bership for 2011. If you're not among them, please take a moment to give yourself another year of exciting theater organ music by renewing your membership in DTOS today. And feel free to take advantage of our convenient installment plan if that works best for you. The new year brings an expanded concert schedule, the return of private practice time on our Wurlitzer for playing members, the reopening of the Senate and several new surprises. We can't wait to share them with you in 2011! Don't let this newsletter disappear from your mailbox, renew your DTOS membership today!

ELECTIONS COMING SOON

Dave Calendine
Newsletter Editor

One very important task that all members have in the Detroit Theater Organ Society is the election of members to be on the Board of Directors. That time is rapidly approaching, and we are now starting to look for any members (playing members in good standing) to consider putting their name on the ballot for a chance to be on the Board.

With this year's election, there will be several board members that have their current term expiring. Many, if not all of them, will consider running for election again, however we need other people to step in and put their name on the ballot for consideration also. The following members of the Board will have their terms on the Board ending with these elections, and, as

stated earlier in this article, many of them may run again: Steven Ball, Dave Calendine, Jeff Cushing, Connie Masserant, Fr. Andrew Rogers. In addition to the five listed, there is one other position on the board that still remains vacant. In total we are looking for six names to be on the ballot. Would you consider being a part of the Board? It is crucial to the existence of the organization to have involvement from the members. One of the best ways to be involved is to be on the Board of Directors. If you would like to have your name on the ballot for the upcoming election, please contact Dick Leichtamer. Look for more information on the election in the next newsletter.

facebook

Thanks to member Paul Jacyk, we are now on Facebook! Look us up and "like" us and you will be reminded of everything that is going on with the Detroit Theater Organ Society!



TIME TO GET BUSY!

Connie Masserant
DTOS Board of Directors

I am one of the newer board members and am so excited to be part of the process of reopening the Senate Theater. With all of the work ahead, I am making myself available most anytime to receive workers who would like to come in for two hours or more.

There is plenty to do with a variety of tasks for the wide range of capabilities of our members. We encourage you to bring a friend, neighbor, relative, and anyone else who would be interested in helping. It will take everyone – no matter how much or how little you can contribute.

The jobs range from large to small with a wide range of skills needed.

- Cleaning, sweeping, dusting
- Prepping areas for painting which includes taping etc.
- Painting - walls, shelves – small jobs and large jobs; Ladder painting and non-ladder painting
- Plaster repair
- Removing wall paper
- Putting up new wall paper
- Lifting and carrying large items and small items to be put away and stored
- Shelving large and small items
- Framing pictures and posters
- Clean, polish, buff floor
- Clean carpets
- Small carpentry work
- Wiping down auditorium seats
- Cleaning and prepping concession area



So however you can help, we need to get started now. This is a perfect time for our group to revisit the camaraderie and interaction that I understand we once had.

Please give me a call or send me an email as to how and when I can reach you to get you on the calendar. We also may be setting up work nights at which time anyone can call me to find out more information about that. Secured parking is available in our lot on the east side of the building.

I am looking forward to meeting a lot of you and getting the opportunity to work together. Please put my contact information in a safe place for now and for later use.

Connie Masserant
734-379-6645
Email: cmasserant13@gmail.com



From the editor—the following article is just the first part of a whole series of articles being written by Scott Smith regarding our Wurlitzer organ. Each newsletter will have another installment of the series, which will help you understand more about the history of our one-of-a-kind Wurlitzer theater pipe organ. Enjoy!

FROM THE BENCH

Scott Smith
Unraveling A Mayan Mystery, Part One

If we could enter a time machine and go back to the opening night of the fabulous Fisher Theatre on November 11, 1928, it would be like a trip to southern Mexico or Central America. In addition to the visage of real banana trees, five talking macaws, turtles and exotic goldfish in tanks, not to mention the stunning Mayan Revival decor throughout, we would be given a beautifully printed color booklet commemorating the momentous occasion. Somewhere inside, we would discover a full page about the new Wurlitzer organ. In reading the copy, undoubtedly written by the advertising department of the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company, we would be told that: "The organ installed in the Fisher Theatre marks the first serious attempt to incorporate in one instrument, under control of one console, the varied elements necessary for both cinema and concert work." That's all well and fine, but just what is (or more like what was) a concert organ, and what is it doing smack in the middle of this new theatre organ? Who was responsible for the design of the organ? Why here and why now?

We can probably answer the "why here?" question most easily. In the 1920s, Detroit was the nation's fourth largest and fastest growing city. It ranked third in the nation in the number of major buildings constructed during that era, behind only Chicago and New York City. In terms of wealth, commerce, entertainment and sheer excitement, "The Paris of the Midwest" was surpassed only by New York, if that. Detroit was truly the place to be. It's hard to grasp those facts today.

Most historians appear to agree that the Roaring 20s didn't really start to roar until about midway through the decade. This would be reflected in the arrival of larger Wurlitzer organs in Detroit and other large cities

throughout the nation. Up until then, most of the organs in major theatres in the city were rather poorly disguised church instruments, and the few Wurlitzers that did exist were relatively small and undistinguished. Aside from the 4/21 Barton at the Hollywood Theatre and the 3/13 Kimball at the downtown Oriental Theatre, the competition seemed content to stay mainly out in the neighborhood houses and the suburbs, where the population and the potential for new theatres was still growing. Assuming they went out evenings or weekends for their entertainment, the seven Fisher brothers and their families, like the rest of Detroit, would have experienced the oncoming excitement of these larger Wurlitzer organs being played well by some pretty fine organists, not to mention the arrival of other makes and types of pipe organs in the metropolitan area. Consider the following: in 1925, the four-manual Wurlitzer organs at the Capitol and State theatres were installed in Grand Circus Park within a few blocks of each other. Don Miller, who would later become closely associated with the Fisher organ played at both of them. Furthermore, four of the Fisher brothers bought virtually identical Estey pipe organs with roll players for their homes in that same year. In 1926, the following year, a Style 235 (3/11) Wurlitzer was installed in Highland Park at the RKO Uptown Theatre (later: 6 Mile Uptown, and even later, simply the 6 Mile where John Muri recorded in the early 70s). That theatre would have been not far up Woodward Avenue from the historic Arden Park-East Boston district where at least some of the brothers lived. Downtown, a five-manual Wurlitzer was installed at the Michigan Theatre the same year, and in late 1927, the glitzy new United Artists Theatre opened up with its three-manual Wurlitzer almost next door. In early 1928, another of the Fisher brothers took delivery of his own residence

pipe organ; an Aeolian, replete with roll player. If the Twenties wasn't roaring enough yet, it was about to roar even more, with the arrival of two very special, very different, and ultimately very famous four-manual Wurlitzers.

While other organbuilders were content to simply make as many sales as possible, those wily people at Wurlitzer apparently established a policy of "firsts" for their larger organs installed in theatres in the burgeoning city. The first two Publix #1 models delivered a mere month apart - stock 4/20s (Capitol Theatre and State Theatre, both 1925), the first and largest five-manual (5/28, Michigan Theatre, 1926), possibly the first "economy" 32' Diaphone, cleverly utilizing six pipe resonators to create twelve notes on a Style 260 Special (3/17, United Artists Theatre, 1927), the first Fox Special (4/36, Fox Theatre, 1928) after the prototype at the NYC Paramount just two years earlier, and the first-and-only so-called combination theatre/concert Wurlitzer organ (4/34, Fisher Theatre, 1928).

At the time of its construction, the Fisher Building, standing 444 feet in height, was the tallest in Detroit outside of the central business district. In fact, it was the fourth tallest building in the city, surpassed only by the Book Tower, Guardian Building and Penobscot Building, all downtown. In 1977, all four moved down one position when the 73-story Detroit Marriott Hotel at the Renaissance Center was built, which remains the tallest structure in the state at 727 feet. Since that time, other buildings have been constructed, currently diminishing the Fishers' "Cathedral To Commerce" to 11th place. Prior to the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, plans were drawn up for an even grander complex on the same site, with a 60-story tower in the center, flanked by two 30-story buildings; the easternmost of those two being the current Fisher Building. Had the economic hardships of the Thirties not come to be, and those plans come to reality, the center tower would still have been only the second tallest building in the city, as the Book brothers had plans to construct an 81-story tower across Washington Boulevard from their famous Book-Cadillac Hotel downtown; an area that had been transformed into a replica of New York's Fifth Avenue by those same brothers.

Built only 2,500 feet from the center of Detroit's population, the Fishers' plan was to create a second business district on Grand Boulevard. It was optimistically named the "New Center Area." The name stuck, but the plans fizzled. Detroit's famous commercial architect, Albert Kahn designed the Art Deco masterpiece of Maryland marble and Minnesota granite and it is considered to be his most significant building. He had previously designed Fisher Body Plant 21 on Piquette Street for the Fishers in 1919. Kahn won the Architectural League's Silver Medal designating the Fisher Building as the most beautiful commercial structure of the year. In fact, for many years following its construction, it was promoted as "the most beautiful building in the world," which was in essence the primary instruction the Fishers gave to Kahn as to what they wanted. Many architectural critics and historians consider the three most significant buildings of the Art Deco era built in the U.S. to be New York's Chrysler Building and Detroit's Fisher Building and Guardian Building. In 1978, a state historical marker was erected in honor of the building's 50th anniversary.

The financing of the construction of the Fisher Building was achieved primarily through the final sale of Fisher Body Company to General Motors in 1926, in which they gained the remaining 40% they did not already own. The reported purchase price was \$208 million. Initially, the brothers wanted to build downtown, but could not locate a suitable parcel that was large enough, and so, in August of 1927, ground was broken for the monolithic structure across Grand Boulevard from the General Motors Building (now Cadillac Place), and it was complete in just fifteen months. The intended \$35 million three-phase Fisher development would rival or exceed the planned Rockefeller Center in New York City. That \$35 million would be roughly equal to one-half billion 2011 dollars. While the Fishers reportedly told architect Albert Kahn not to concern himself with the overall cost, he prided himself on his ability to bring projects to completion on a budget, and this commission offered up a serious challenge. The cost and the visage of rare and expensive materials was and still is breathtaking. A reported one-quarter ton of gold was used to embellish the ceiling of the central arcade as one enters, with some 430 tons of bronze used for or-

namentation. In addition, there are forty different varieties of marble represented from around the world. No wonder we call it "Detroit's Largest Art Object" today. The final tally came to \$10 million. In total, the Fisher Building offers about 500,000 square feet of office space and 99,000 square feet of retail space. Intended truly as being for mixed use, it initially contained offices, art galleries, an eleven-story parking garage, a restaurant and the fabulous Fisher Theatre. Truly the best of everything, including the finest custom Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ that money could buy.

In keeping with the "New Center" concept, tunnels adjoining the Fisher Building to the General Motors Building across Grand Boulevard and to the Hotel St. Regis across Second Avenue were dug as a part of the original plan. One could come to the city on automotive business, check into the hotel, and never have to go outdoors for anything. Everything you'd need for your stay, from shopping to entertainment to restaurants to lodging would be available between the three structures.

The gilded tower was lit for the first time to mark the opening night of the Fisher Theatre. The Detroit Times predicted that the "Golden Tower of the Fisher Building" would be to Detroit "what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris." Unfortunately, the gold was peeled off and replaced with green terra cotta during World War II, fearing that it might be an attractive target to enemy bombers. Since the war, the tower has been lit with golden lighting at night, simulating the original effect of the real gold. In those early days, visitors to the building were treated with lavish attention. Cars were parked by men dressed in white uniforms, and shoppers enjoyed free babysitting services in a skylit fourth floor nursery replete with carousel, mosaic game-tiled floor and nurses to watch over the children. Lunch could be had in the then-famous Huyler's L'Aiglon Room, later renamed Al Green's Celebrity Room. There were even gold faucets in the ladies room of the theatre.

Arriving two months after the Fox, the Fisher became, by default, the city's last large movie palace. It was expertly designed by the architectural firm of Graven & Mayger, who lasted but a mere fifteen months during the years of 1927 and 1928. Detroit architect Charles N.

Agree claimed credit for putting the two together to help him design Detroit's Hollywood Theatre, which stood at the corner of Fort and Ferdinand in an area that never developed as hoped. Up to that point, Agree had only designed a number of large apartment buildings, the first and most famous of which was the Whittier (1921), which still stands across the street from Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian Church, at the foot of Indian Village. The Hollywood job had been thrust into Agree's hands, and having no experience in the design of a movie palace, approached the famous architectural firm of Rapp & Rapp of Chicago, known for their lavish theatrical designs to help him with the project. Wanting the job solely for themselves, they turned Agree down flatly. Anker Sveere Graven and Arthur Guy Mayger, both employees of Rapp & Rapp, made their wishes known to Agree via a third party that they wanted to move on and start an architectural firm of their own. Agree reportedly told them they could do what they wanted after they helped him with the Hollywood, if they would simply come to Detroit for the duration of the project to assist him. In a 1983 interview taken late in his life by former Free Press writer Greg Piazza, Agree stated clearly that the two gifted architects were "drunkards" who were simply "no good," and that is what ended their brief, but brilliant collaboration. One needs to consider here that Prohibition was still the law of the land until 1933, and their liquid enjoyment had to come from speakeasys or other private (read: illegal) suppliers. The short, but memorable list of theatres designed by the duo included the RKO Palace Theatre (Rochester, New York), Tennessee Theatre (Knoxville, Tennessee), Alabama Theatre (Birmingham, Alabama) and the Minnesota Theatre (Minneapolis, Minnesota). In the metropolitan Detroit area, they designed the 2,975-seat Fisher Theatre (1928 - present; resealed to 2,089, 1961), the 1,972-seat Avalon Theatre (1928 - 1967, razed 1972) on Linwood at Davison, and were associate architects on the 3,436-seat Hollywood Theatre (1927 - 1958, razed 1962), and the 3,200-seat Uptown Theatre (1927 - 1980?, razed late 80s) in Highland Park, on Woodward near McNichols. Architectural historians all seem to agree that the Fisher Theatre was their masterpiece. Aside from a few projects where they were associated in some way, only eight theatres designed in all, in addition to a few Chicago area office

buildings, but what a list it was. By the mid-Thirties, both men were divorced and never distinguished themselves in architecture again. Considering the volume of theatres going up all over the country at that time, it is more than likely that the firm of Graven & Mayger was chosen to design the Fisher Theatre not only because their work was known, but simply because they were available at the time of need. In other words: chance.

Graven & Mayger wisely did not rely totally on their own egos or imaginations in their creation of the Fisher Theatre. The firm designed the house as a Mayan temple, and utilized actual historic designs from such places as Quirigua in central Guatemala, Chichen Itza on the Yucatan Peninsula, Copan in western Honduras and southeastern Mexico. Sylvanus G. Morley, an Associate in American Archaeology at the Carnegie Institute in Washington, D.C. helped to authenticate the designs and even wrote an article about the Mayans for the opening day program. "Vay" Morley was not only one of the leading Mesoamerican archaeologists of his day, but also an epigrapher and Mayan scholar who made significant contributions toward the study of pre-Columbian Mayan civilization in the early 20th century. It is possible that Morley's well-publicized excavation and reconstruction efforts at Chichen Itza, beginning in 1924 and continuing for several years was the spark that lit the collective imaginations of the Fishers for the heavily Mayan-inspired theatre. Let us consider this: beginning in February, 1922, again in January, 1925 and yet again in November, 1926, three major articles about the recent unearthing of Mayan archaeological finds in southern Mexico and Central America were featured in the pages of the National Geographic Magazine. The latter two articles were penned by none other than Sylvanus Morley, replete with illustrations and photographs. It is not much of a stretch of the imagination to believe that at least one, if not all of the Fisher brothers subscribed to this very popular magazine; that the content of same may well have fueled the imaginations of the family to the point of wanting to recreate something as unique and mysterious as a Mayan temple in their own building. Let us remember that this was all at a time when people actually read, and when commercial radio, while still in its infancy was the most powerful communication medium going, aside from the

movies. Assuming this to be true, it is just as likely that the Fishers directed Graven & Mayger to Morley.

Heywood-Wakefield, which would become later famous for their their solid birch "streamline" furniture of the 40s and 50s was commissioned by the architectural duo to design the seats and upholstery for the Fisher; the only such project ever taken on by H-W for theatre seats.

Local architectural historians believe that many of the Mayan temple block molds used in decorating the interior of the Vanity Ballroom (1929) on East Jefferson Avenue were those also used at the Fisher, as it shared a remarkably similar Mayan decor. Having initiated the partnership between Graven & Mayger, many believe that Charles Agree made a deal with them to buy the molds or at least copies of the working drawings from the Fisher when the firm broke up. Some even believe that the relationship between Graven & Mayger and Agree remained close to the end, and that the duo may have been unnamed, but associate architects of both the Vanity and Grande ballrooms, where Agree's name appears as the architect of record. According to some, the Moorish elements of two of their previous theatrical designs (Tennessee Theatre, Knoxville, Tennessee and Alabama Theatre, Birmingham, Alabama) appear to have strongly influenced the Grande Ballroom (1928).

In an interesting twist of fate, the firm of Rapp & Rapp, who also designed Detroit's Michigan Theatre in 1926, got the last laugh on Graven & Mayger, as it was they who were hired to design the 1960s Modern redo of the Fisher Theatre interior that completely eradicated the Mayan decor. This was Rapp & Rapp's last major work, long after the passing of the two brothers whose names adorned the name of one of the largest architectural firms in the country for decades.

Next month: Who is the "Aztec Gentleman," and what is a concert organ?



The Detroit Theater Organ Society

Senate Theater

6424 Michigan Avenue

Detroit, MI 48210-2957

Telephone: (313) 894-0850

Concert Hotline: (313) 894-4100

Website: www.dtos.org

Look for us on Facebook!

2011 Concert Series

AT THE REDFORD THEATRE

March 13—Ron Reeseigh

April 10—Donnie Rankin

AT THE SENATE THEATER

May 15—Jelani Eddington

June 12—John Lauter

July (TBA) - Open Console

September 11—Members Concert

October 9—David Wickerham

November 20—Tony O'Brien

December 11—Dave Calendine