

THE SHEA'S BUFFALO GRAND ORGAN

The Shea's Buffalo Mighty Wurlitzer is one of the finest theater organs in the country. Installed in December of 1925 at the then-stupendous cost of \$ 72,500, its replacement value today would be well over one million dollars. A four manual twenty-eight rank pipe organ, it was one of the largest instruments the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, N.Y. had built up to that time.

The Shea's organ is, in many ways, a unique instrument. It is a concert as well as an orchestral organ and, because of the close personal friendship between Fanny Wurlitzer, the head of the Company, and Michael Shea, the craftsmanship that went into this organ is of extremely high quality. The proximity of the factory to the theater (a distance of about fourteen miles) was another plus in the construction of this instrument. The original voicing of the organ was done personally by Joseph Carruthers and James Nuttall, the Company's two major voicers. Carruthers was the best diaphone man in the business while Nuttall was a top reed voicer. Both men were proteges of Robert Hope-Jones himself. Rarely did these two men leave the factory to go out into the field and voice the various organs themselves. Their assistants usually performed this task. The fact that Carruthers and Nuttall did the voicing themselves is one reason why this organ sounds so great; the other reason is that the instrument and the room seem to be perfectly matched.

Michael Shea loved strings and the Buffalo instrument contains seven ranks of them, quite a large number for an organ of this type. The pedal organ is one of the largest to be found anywhere with twelve ranks of its own. Among the exceptional ranks of pipes is a gorgeous-sounding sixteen foot tibia plena. The smallest pipe is no bigger than a pencil while the largest of the pedal pipes are ~~thirty-two-foot long~~ huge enough for a good-sized man to sit in. Virtually every instrument in a symphony orchestra is represented in this organ and when full organ is played it sounds very much like a complete orchestra. The massive instrument is located in six large chambers, three on each side of the theater.

It contains a complete set of percussion stops, commonly known as the "toy counter." Included in this section is a large xylophone, marimba, harp, chimes, cymbal, kettle, snare and bass drums, orchestra bells plus the usual array of sounds that were initially used to accompany silent films - auto horn, boat whistle, Chinese gong, bird whistle, etc. Sitting in the lower box on the right hand side of the stage is a large grand piano which is played from the organ console.

Some of the most famous theater organists of the day played the Shea's organ at one time or another including Lloyd Del Castillo who dedicated the instrument when the theater first opened in January of 1926; Harold Ramsay, a well-known Canadian organist; Henry Murtagh who played it for several years; the renowned Jesse Crawford who played it for two weeks during the theater's eleventh anniversary celebration in January of 1937 and a host of others. With the outbreak of World War II the organ ceased to be used on a regular basis, the last musician to have played it being Arthur Crosson, a well-known local organist.

During the War the organ fell into a state of extensive disrepair. In 1946 it was decided to refurbish the instrument with a view to using it again on a regular basis. Some modest repair work was begun at that time but in 1948, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that motion picture companies must divest themselves of their theaters, many of the Shea theaters, including Shea's Buffalo, were taken over by the Loew Corporation which had no interest in using the grand organ. And so the instrument sat there for some thirty years virtually rotting away. Massive leaks in the theater's roof during the 1960's caused severe water damage to the pipes and for a time there was serious thought of junking the instrument. Mushrooms had actually begun to grow in the chambers! The last time the organ was used professionally was in July of 1964 when the American Theater Organ Enthusiasts held their annual convention in Buffalo. Literally held together with baling wire and rubber bands, it was played by Pearl White, Gaylord

Carter and Lowell Ayars during this convention. There followed another ten years of neglect and deterioration.

When the city of Buffalo took over the theater in the mid-1970's and a group called "The Friends of the Buffalo Theater" was formed to save the building from demolition, a concerted effort was begun to rescue the "Mighty WurliTzer." Led by L. Curt Mangel III, the young stationary engineer who had almost single-handedly save the theater from extinction, an Organ Committee was formed to explore the possibility of restoring the instrument. Adequate funding was, of course, the major problem. During the next few years federal and state grants amounting to over \$ 100,000 were obtained to refurbish the organ while a group of local theater organ buffs and technicians volunteered their services to provide the necessary labor. In 1977 the work of restoration was finally begun. It proved to be an enormous, almost superhuman, task.

To supervise the restoration of the instrument the Organ Committee was fortunate to engage the services of Allen Miller, perhaps the leading organ technician in the country, whose training and experience qualified him perfectly for the task ahead. Under Allen's watchful eye contracts were let to re-build and re-finish the entire console, a modern solid state multiplex system was installed, missing pipes and ranks of pipes were replaced and the entire organ was re-leathered. In short, the instrument was completely re-built. But it took time, effort, dedication and thousands of man hours and it proved a real challenge to all who were involved. Finally, in the Fall of 1983, the organ was ready for the final step - the revoicing, a task made more difficult by the fact that all of the original voicers who had worked for WurliTzer had passed on. Armed with a generous grant from the Margaret Wendt Foundation in Buffalo, the Committee was once again able to retain the services of Allen Miller to complete the delicate task of re-voicing. And what a magnificent job Allen did while retaining most of the instrument's original voicing! Thanks to his efforts, together with those of a score of dedicated volunteer workers, the Shea's Buffalo Mighty WurliTzer was

re-dedicated in April of 1984 with Lyn Larsen at the console. Not only does the organ sound as it did in 1926 - it sounds even better. Once again its rich, lush tones enthral those who remember its original majesty and several new generations have thrilled to its gorgeous tones at the Sunday afternoon concerts that have been held virtually every year since the organ was restored. Just about every theater organist active today has played at least one concert on this magnificent instrument. It has been recorded several times and continues to astound its listeners. The Shea's organ today is known all over the United States - except in the city of Buffalo! In the two regional conventions that the American Theater Organ Society has held in Buffalo more than five hundred people from California alone have attended each of them. It is our hope that we can now make all Buffalonians aware of this magnificent instrument which was so very popular back in the 1920's and 1930's.

Charles W. Stein