



A HISTORY of the FOX THEATRE and its MÖLLER ORGAN

John Clark McCall, Jr.

Ahh...Mecca On Peachtree Street...Again!

*When I mused about Atlanta's Fox Theatre in **Theatre Organ** magazine prior to the American Theatre Organ Society's (ATOS) Fabulous Fox Organ Weekend in 2004, I reminded readers that a good deal of time had elapsed since I last wrote about this great theatre and its Möller organ.*

And, here we are in another decade; this mystic shrine of the arts beckons us with more delicious magnetism than ever before. In fact, it is one of the most fabled edifices in our nation.

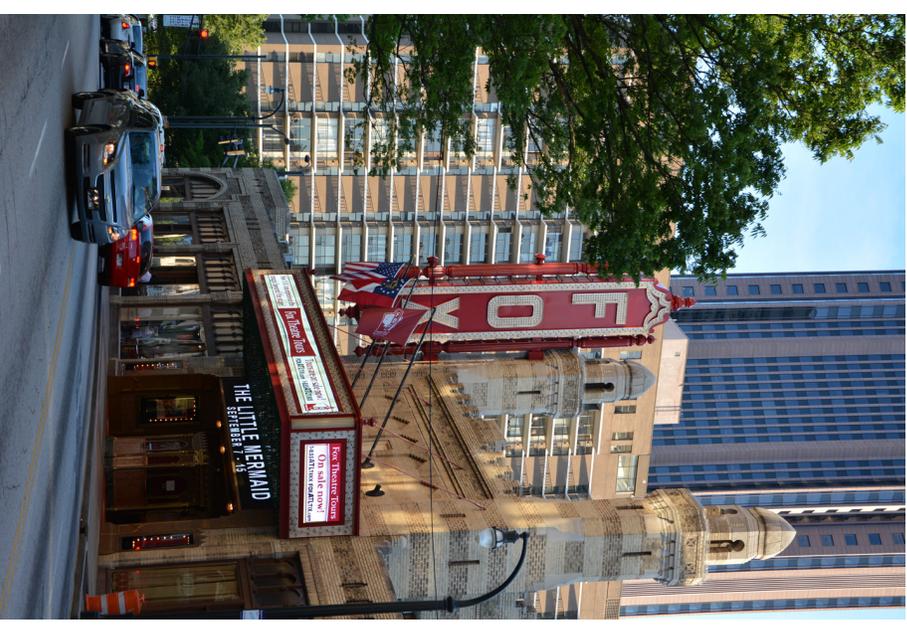
As Frank Sinatra once said when walking onto the stage at Radio City Music Hall, "What a room!" Please allow me to tell you a bit about this "room" that is the Fox - garnered from an endless bazaar of delights...

In the short, furious period of movie palace architecture...offspring of nearly two decades unique to Western Civilization...America saw a campaign of theatre construction that made gold leaf, ponderous chandeliers, and the Mighty Wurlitzer the rule and not the exception. The campaign left its imprint on America's large urban areas, as well as smaller towns. At best, only the scale was altered.

What, then, makes Atlanta's Fox Theatre more than just another movie palace, more than simply a relic testifying to the age in which it materialized, and most importantly, a structure that has the merit to stand indefinitely? The reasons are parallel to the history of the original Fox plans...plans that were not actually those of "Fox" at all!

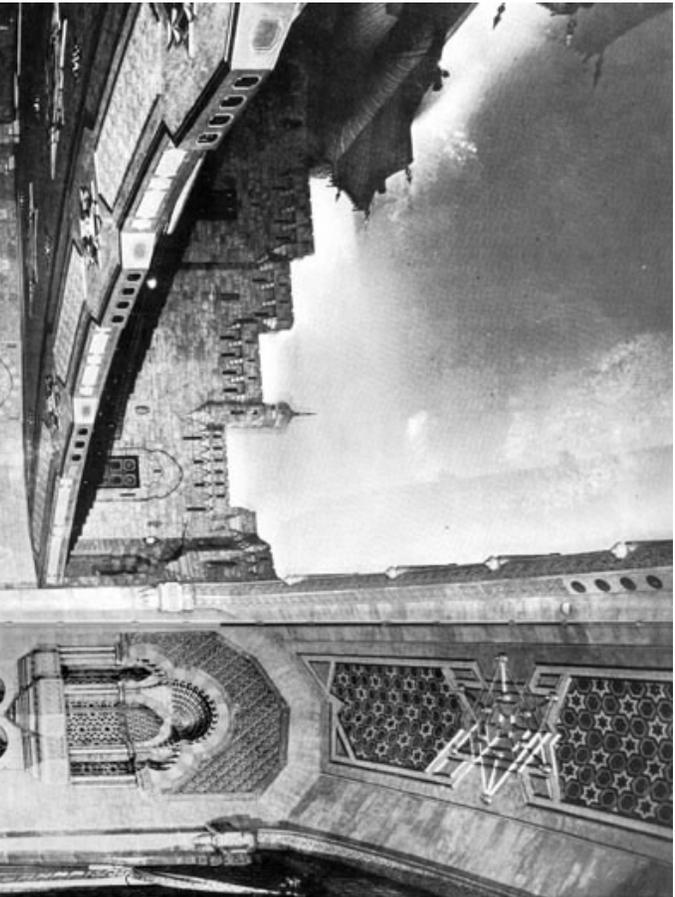
1928 saw a bustling Atlanta, with its own "Great White Way"—Peachtree Street, with the busy marquee lights of the Metropolitan, Paramount, Georgia, Capitol, Grand, and the new Erlanger. The Atlanta theatre scene was indeed precariously overgrown.

In addition to the large downtown houses, the smaller "grind" houses and community theatres appeared at most every cluster of suburban Spanish-tiled shops...including Atlanta's West End, Tenth Street area, East Atlanta, Inman Park, and at Georgia Avenue.



The Fox Marquee (May 2013)
Photo: R. B. Coulter

Early in 1928, when the Atlanta newspapers carried announcements of a new headquarters for the Yaraab Temple of the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (and this was *before* Ray Stevens!), plans for the Fox Theatre were yet to materialize. What existed on the drawing boards of Atlanta architects Marye, Alger, and Vinour was a 200 by 400-foot edifice of cream and buff-colored brick to house the Yaraab Temple. The style source was akin to that of the far-Eastern cultures, from a ballroom, offices, retail shops, to the mammoth temple auditorium designed to accommodate nearly 5,000 loyal followers.



Early Photo of The Fox Auditorium

Photo: The author's personal archive

The Fox Theatre Corporation secured a 21-year lease on the future Atlanta theatre, materializing in a \$3,000,000 aggregate rental fee, payable on "the installment plan" for the length of the lease period. The Shriners, in turn, gained construction money, executive offices, and the use of the auditorium for at least six times yearly for ceremonies, initiations, and special feast days.

After the news reports of the Fox-Shrine marriage, all Atlanta became curious as the estimated \$3,000,000 structure began to rise at the corner of Peachtree and Kimball Streets (Kimball later became an extension of Ponce de Leon Avenue), further out

P. Thorton Marye's charge from the Shrine's chief potentate, Tom Law, was to design a lasting monument that would *out-Baghdad Baghdad*. And the blueprints came close, but it was increasingly obvious that the first prayer tower would never be raised unless sufficient funds could be secured to finance construction. Fortunately, William K. Fox.. riding high on his theatre and motion picture empire... was in the midst of establishing six new super picture palaces throughout the country, including two Siamese/Burmese twins in St. Louis and Detroit. With the scheme of far-Eastern flavor lavished on these two theatres, the proposed Atlanta Yaraab Temple's architecture seemed right in step. In the architects' parlance, Fox's collective theatre empire would be balanced with the French Rococo image of the Brooklyn and San Francisco Fox theatres.

From a theatre organ perspective, all of these houses would feature auditorium organs manufactured by Wurlitzer, save the Atlanta Fox's Möller.

Atlanta's "White Way" than the Erlanger!

William Fox moved in, or rather his inventive wife Eve did, and began a campaign of furnishing the house, while saving the Fox Theatre Corporation untold decorators' fees. Just as the Atlanta Howard (later Paramount) had explored the Georgian and Elizabethan styles along with its main Palladian theme, the resourceful Eve Leo brought to the Fox's retiring rooms and loggias a sampling of the breadth of her tours in the far-East, to include the associated styles of the Turks and Egyptians. These various approaches alternated between lounges at the lower level, and those at balcony level.

But it was not Eve Fox's bazaar finds that made the Fox. Perhaps the sheer dimensions of the auditorium prompted the greatest visual excitement. The true-to-style treatment of the audience areas as a faux courtyard surrounded by structure, rather than a room whose interior was smothered with an assortment of ornamental devices and fabric, gives the theatre, even today, a look of timeless establishment and good taste. And taste and forethought often escaped the designer/craftsmen of the movie palace school. The architectural features that are *absent* have given the Atlanta Fox a timeless visage. Furthermore, the Atlanta Fox had a real rationale for its far-Eastern design (as a shrine), unlike most structures built strictly as theatres.

The Fox's exterior treatment should receive the first accolade. Few American theatres received a building site that would allow the architects' greatest talents to come to the forefront. Through lack of funds or space, the economies of stashing a theatre behind a hotel or office structure pervaded the theatre building boom of the Twenties and early Thirties. The Fox exterior is an exception, and its courses of cream and buff brick supplanted with sections of tile, tabby, and domed minarets give the theatre patron an expectation of the magic to be found inside. *There are just a few such theatres in the nation, where it is guaranteed that there will be new revelations of the building and its organ at every venue.*



Architects' Planned Front Entrance

Photo: R. B. Coulter

Originally, the Shrine's main entrance was to be the center of the Ponce de Leon Avenue frontage. Above the arabesque entrance was the largest of the Fox "onion" domes, adorned with a ribbed latticework. But with the intervention of William Fox, a Peachtree Street entrance was preferred, and this is where Fox patrons now make their entrance under the large vertical sign over the marquee.

Access to the theatre lobby is by a 140-foot-deep loggia lined with display windows (once linked to some of the retail shops, Shrine offices, and later offices for the Georgia Theatre Company). The main entrance to the Egyptian Ballroom may also be found here. Various textured plaster reliefs, fluted lamps, tile and terrazzo flooring-- all serve as a prelude for what is to come--and contribute to captivating and protecting the next show's patrons.

The Fox lobby is certainly the most understated in the Fox super-chain, but the rectangular area is a hub for access to all major arteries of the theatre, including a newly retrofitted extension of the original lobby for concessions and gathering space. (This remarkable area is almost indistinguishable from the original fabric of the theatre, but was done utilizing "plain Jane" retail space.)

From the lobby once can make a pilgrimage to the auditorium, backstage areas, Ponce de Leon Avenue exits, balconies, lounges, and ballroom. The lobby is flanked with two separate stairways leading to the balcony and dress circle. This access is augmented with elevators (with hand-tooled and painted leather interiors). A small atrium is situated at the front of the auditorium entrance, and opens to the second story balcony level. Featured are hand-painted murals draped with canvas awnings, and an atmospheric ceiling treatment. It is a special and hallowed place for this writer. I shook George Wright's hand here when he came to try out the Möller while he was in Atlanta for the National Association of Music Merchants convention in 1977.

The vast ambience afforded the auditorium proper (over 65,000 square feet of space) is not realized until midway at the orchestra level, at the underside of the balcony. Here lies an open view of the Fox's atmospheric ceiling treatment, a view of the immense depth of the balcony dress circle, and the proscenium arch. The sides of the auditorium are treated as castellated walls with dimly lit barred windows, minarets, and devices associated with a far-Eastern fortress. Overhead, the Fox's very believable "stars and moving clouds" attest to the architects' study of correct stellar groupings and atmospheric conditions. Flanking either side of the stage are the warmest and most ornamental features of the auditorium—pierced gold-finished organ grilles, visually "supported" by false balconettes at their base. Unlike many atmospheric houses, the Fox's sky area ends long before



The Entrance Loggia

Photo: From the author's personal archive



The Fox Auditorium
 Photo: Theatre Organ Magazine

such as traffic pattern design, sight lines, acoustics, and audience comfort. The architectural features contributing to **these** ends are the Fox's true wonders. And if a theatre organ ever profited from the planning that went into the "envelope"..the Fox Möller does!

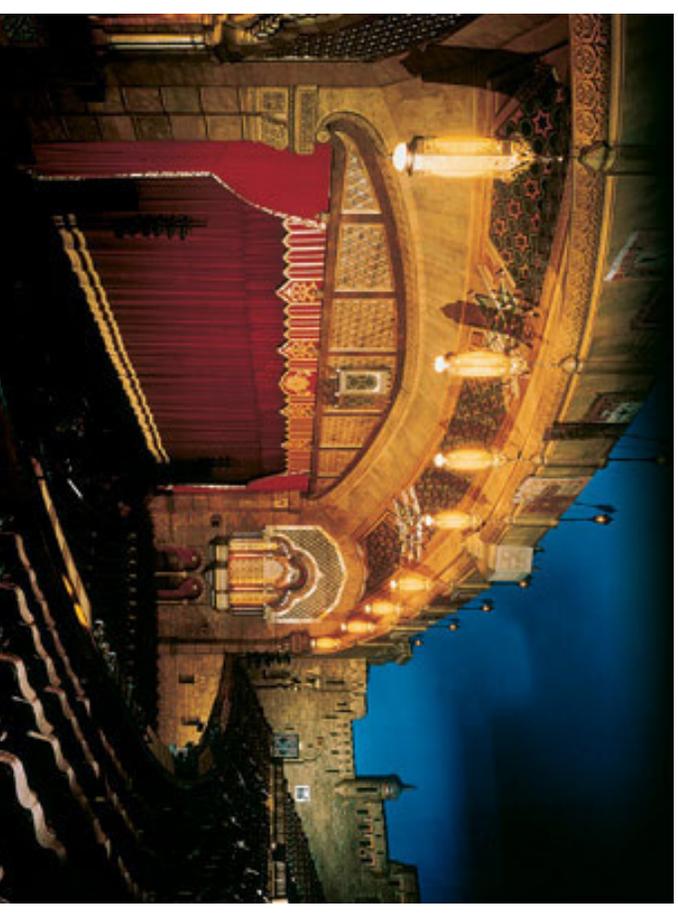
The auditorium's acoustics are among the finest of any music hall. The lack of heavy drapery (George Wright would not have needed to launch a midnight drapery removal, like he was constrained to

the stage opening at an arched bridge lined with lanterns (denoting a more European than far-Eastern flavor), and oriental rugs, presumably draped over the bridge's railing for market day.

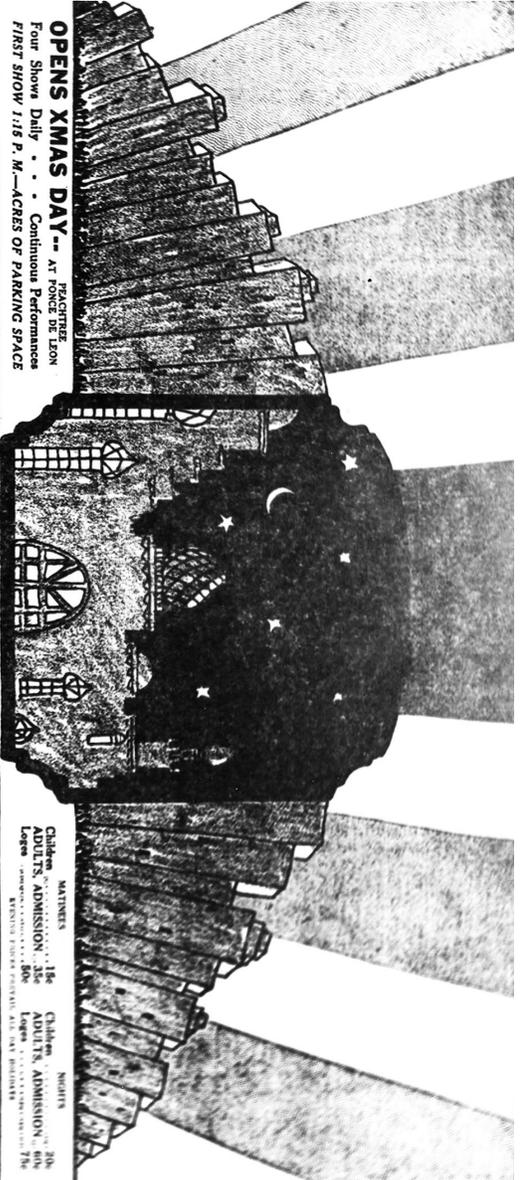
Underneath the organ grilles, at orchestra level, are arched exits, which the stage area and orchestra pit nearly span. At the center of the proscenium arch is a projecting casement, resembling an organ chamber for a fanfare division. In reality, the casement originally housed a stationary Vitaphone speaker.

Obviously, much of the Fox' intrigue rests with its infinite detail, and its endless features of innovation and design. But, overall, it possesses a strong, unified appearance. Readers will not be burdened here with the usual variety of "wonder" claims that were delegated to movie palaces including the Fox, from the boasts of energy produced by its power plants, to certain features being the "largest in the world", etc.

What is important is the Fox's general design statement, in not only an ornamental sense, but in a technical sense: elements



The Proscenium
 Photo: Theatre Organ Magazine



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 The Amp-Navy football game . . . Harde room life . . . dris . . . ples . . . hanga . . . heart
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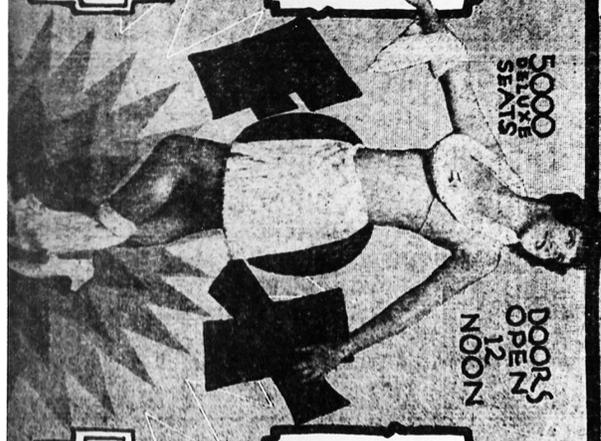


FOX MOVIE-TONE NEWS
 "If Speeches For Inghil"—and show's on what's doing toward the world.
 Also
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In Sound
 That'll Make You Laugh Out Loud

5000
 SLUXXE
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ON THE LIVING STAGE
Fanchon & Marco's "BEACH NIGHTS" IDEA
 With THE KITAROS, ART HADLEY, DAVIS & LA RUE and the Sunks! Beauties . . . Forty-two people augmented by a dance chorus of twelve pretty Atlanta girls.
 The first of the Fanchon & Marco "ideas." A new one every week. Songs and Dances . . . Mirth and Merriment . . . Forty minutes of Fun and Froth! . . . You'll enjoy them immensely!!

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 —offering symphonic overtures with choral accompaniment. During opening week, "The Merry Widow" and "Circumstances" will be played and sung. Arrangement by Mr. Leide. Lyrics by Ernest Rogers.



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 Let this program guide you to better entertainment every week in the year . . .
"There's a Fine Show at the Fox"
 A complete change of program every Monday with new pictures, new stage acts, new music, new dances, new songs . . . and extra attractions to attract the best.
ATTEND REGULARLY!

Newspaper Announcement for the Opening of the FOX

From: The author's personal archive

do with accomplice June Melendy at the San Francisco Fox) and the generally smooth finish of the plaster treatments within make the Fox a very reflective and “live” house for sound—be it from the stage, the four-manual Möller organ, orchestra pit, or the audio system. At the rear of the balcony, situated overhead, is a “canvas” tent catapulted over metal spear supports. This tent, realistically detailed down to the painted “mildew”, is actually of plaster construction. Its design has not only “baffled” more than one fire marshal, but is serves as was planned...as an acoustic reflector which collects and rebounds sound waves emanating from the performance area of the auditorium. The Fox balcony is cantilevered and, at full capacity, is designed to give some three inches.

Instead of preoccupation with plaster embellishment in the decorative sense (as in New York’s Capitol and Roxy Theatres), the Fox’s detail has a structural source...from rough mud plaster treatments to scored blocks and quoins simulating limestone. The battlements bordering the “sky” are most believable, and are arranged in a tiered fashion.

The Fox’s integrated design is such that later modern-day additions like video broadcasts, stereophonic and Dolby sound, CinemaScope, and computer-assisted controls were easily adapted.

Ancillary areas to the Fox’s auditorium include up to seven levels above stage, and four areas below—including over thirty dressing rooms with showers; workshops, greenrooms, and the various areas supporting live stage and musical production. The Fox’s mechanical assets are endless, and include a central vacuum system, and an elaborate configuration of stage elevators with separate lifts for the organ, orchestra, and solo instruments (where the Fox’s Baldwin grand piano was installed circa 1963; this piano was originally from Chicago’s Piccadilly Theatre and its Kilgen organ).

Other adjoining facilities offer a section of street-front shops (now including the Fox’s executive offices), the Egyptian Ballroom (originally the Shriners’ banquet hall, complete with kitchen facilities), a 5,000 square-foot area originally intended as a Shrine Band practice area, a broadcast studio, infirmary, and a rehearsal/screening room with projection booth.

“Although the building (the Fox) is in no way a copy of any one Oriental structure, it tries to embody the entire scope of Moham-medan art,” architect Marye told the *Atlanta Journal Magazine* in 1930. Marye, who with partner Ollivier J. Vinour spearheaded the Fox’s design for the firm, compared the Fox “stylistically” to a capsule pilgrimage to Mecca. The hypothetical traveler, then, would encounter all of the far-Eastern devices, whether traveling east, north, south, or west. This eclectic approach is actually successful variations on a single theme, and the Fox is unquestionably a standing testament to the results of good planning, be it aesthetic or technical. To quote an early advertising slogan firmly planted in the middle of the “O” of the Fox logo...the Fox

is “the last word.”

No theatre historian has been able to match the excitement of the late author and ATOS member Ben Hall’s written and verbal accounts of American theatre openings. His treatise on the Atlanta Fox is no exception. In jacket notes for the Fox’s first commercial organ recording, *Here With the Wind* featuring Bob Van Camp (Concert Recordings, CR-0023), Hall wrote:

“The opening night audience [the first show was at 1:30 that afternoon] surged up the block-long outer lobby, past the illuminated goldfish pools, and into the great foyer where carpeting grew lush underfoot. Some paused to admire the two huge urns, each large enough to hide several of Ali Babas’ thieves, that flanked the staircase to the lounges below... It had been drizzling and cold outside the theatre, and the damp and chilled first-nighters were not prepared for the surprise that waited for them as they entered the auditorium, and walked out beneath the swooping shelter of the balcony. They found themselves in a vast Oriental courtyard, open to the skies of a balmy June night...

Promptly at 8:30, the show began. The evening’s next spectacular surprise was revealed as, out of the depths of the orchestra pit, rose the biggest, goldest, and most colorful pipe organ console anyone had ever seen. Almost swallowed by the enormous maw of colored stop tablets and gleaming ivory keyboards was the tiny figure of a woman, Iris Vining Wilkins by name, who launched into a ‘Medley of hits of the day at the console of the \$80,000 Mammoth Möller Pipe Organ...’

The rest of the program was dazzling. Enrico Leide and the Fox Grand Orchestra soared into view on *their* lift to play *This Shrine of Beauty* [adapted from *Pomp and Circumstance, March No. 1*] by Sir Edward Elgar (according to the program notes by Ernest Rogers, of Atlanta Station WSB). This was followed by a sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* which film buffs will recognize as being the first Walt Disney-Mickey Mouse collaboration. Then out on the stage came Don Wilkins, Iris’s husband, the Master Of Ceremonies; and together they led 5,000 happy Atlantans in a songfest [Ralph T. Jones of the *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed it to be the first really successful theatre sing-a-long in the city]. The glittering silver and black curtains then opened on the stage show... featuring the Sunkist Beauties of fragrant memory. Fox Movietone News came next, and finally, almost an anticlimax, the feature picture flashed on the screen... a long-forgotten opus called *Salute*, starring George O’Brien, Helen Chandler, and Stepin Fetchit.”

No doubt from Mr. Hall’s descriptions, the combination of the Fox structure and its creative human resources gave Atlantans quite a Christmas package at 15 to 75-cents admission.



Fanchon and Marco Dancers

Photo: From the author's personal archive

The Atlanta Constitution described Fanchon and Marco's Sunkist Beauties as, "two carloads of feminine pulchritude." In addition to the "Beauties", inaugural performers...perhaps a hasty tribute to the dying era of Vaudeville, included the Kitaros, a Japanese acrobatic trio; Davis and LaRue, a comedy team; Art Hadley, musical cartoonist; Ray Bradley and Evian, a dance team; Maxine Doyle, a musical comedy artist; and Jean and Jeanette, billed as the "singing sisters."

In retrospect, excepting the "Sunkist Beauties", Atlanta's beloved Enrico Leide, and the show-stealing Moller organ, the Fox opener was a rather usual and unimportant beginning. The film, vaudeville teams, and alas, even Iris Wilkins, have been long forgotten. There were no outstanding "name" personalities, but for the Fox's first-day audiences, the show was, nevertheless, a highlight in Atlanta's public entertainment history. The intended target was the masses...those who could adopt the Fox as a temporary escape from the everyday...and the system worked, at least for a brief, glorious period.

The utopian outlook of that December day was to quickly fade. In fact, the groundwork was well under way even as Harold B. Franklin of Fox West Coast Theatres, read the Fox statement of entertainment policy from the theatre's stage. The great stock market crash of 1929 had preceded the theatre opening, and made the Fox's promise of weekly all-new shows featuring Fanchon and Marco productions, virtually an impossibility. And no amount of congratulatory notes (as sent by Clara Bow and William Powell) would help problems that were, in reality, a simple game of economics.

The Fox Theatre Corporation was soon in over its head. Loew's Theatres was a fatter cat at the time, though by no means on

solid ground. When the help plea came from the Atlanta Fox, Loew's stepped in and set up a joint operation with the Fox interests in late August, 1930. This deal would make the Atlanta Grand (a Loew operation since 1916, and the first Loew house in the South) a second-run outlet, with the Fox as Loew's flagship operation. The Capitol, operated jointly by Loew's and Universal since opening in 1927, passed entirely to the control of the latter organization.

Carter Baron, former manager of Atlanta Loew's Capitol, was brought to the Fox as manager. Baron vowed to continue the Fanchon and Marco productions (joint difficulties of Loew management and Fanchon and Marco themselves left the Fox without its "beauties" on a regular basis after 1932, though they reappeared at Atlanta's Rialto Theatre in 1934). During this seesaw period, organists Jimmy Beers and Al Evans soldiered on at the Fox Möller.

On August 1, 1932, Loew's officially ceased management operations of the Fox (the theatre actually closed in June of that year). In announcing the change in policy, Co. E.A. Shiller as vice-president for Loew's in New York, touted plans for an all-new Atlanta Grand. The Grand, in reality, became only a remodeling job by architect Thomas Lamb and within the shell of the original 1898 theatre which began as DeGives's Opera House.

With the Loew management bowing out, the Yaraab Temple Building Committee had defaulted on its heavy obligations, and a receivership to protect the bondholders followed. With the Fox Theatre Corporation bankrupt, who would pay the rent on the original 21-year lease? The Shriners held a meeting in the Fox on June 17, 1932; it was one of the last assemblies in their headquarters which had quickly turned into a "white elephant."

Under the direction of N. Edward Beck, formerly of the Atlanta Paramount and Georgia, the Fox was reopened around August 7, 1932. Beck announced an "all sound" motion picture policy, with stage shows to follow in the fall. In October of that year, Enrico Leide, conductor of the original Fox Grand Orchestra and of all other prominent Atlanta theatre orchestras (he was brought from the New York Capitol to Atlanta's Howard in 1920) became manager of the Fox. Jimmy Beers replaced Al Evans at the organ (Evans repaired to the Paramount's Wurlitzer) and a 20-piece stage band was featured with Dave Love conducting. Stan Portopovitch organized a stage unit, feebly trying his best to match the Fanchon and Marco productions of happier days. In December, 1932, the mortgage was foreclosed and the theatre was auctioned off for \$75,000 to the Theatre Holding Company, owned by the Yaraab Temple officers.

After Beck's attempt and the collapse of the Theatre Holding Company, control of the Fox moved to the city fathers for non-payment of taxes. Movies were supplanted by occasional concerts by the Atlanta Symphony, a community concert series, and

programs sponsored by the Atlanta Music Club.

On Saturday, September 2, 1933, Robert B. Wilby took out a lease on the Fox Theatre (this date probably initiated an agreement with the City of Atlanta whereby the movie house would be vacated for city functions or bookings upon 45 days notice). Wilby also picked up the Publix houses, the Atlanta Paramount, Georgia (later Roxy), and Capitol Theatre. Jimmy Beers was featured at the Fox again and the newspaper spots asserted that the organist was "back from his study with Jesse Crawford."

After a year of fruitless operations under Wilby, control of the Fox...along with the Paramount, Georgia and Capitol Theatres passed to the Lucas and Jenkins/Atlanta Enterprises organization. Lucas and Jenkins had been strictly a community theatres company in Atlanta, and the move, in the fall of 1934, was the first venture of the firm to the large downtown and uptown houses. Announcement of a five-year lease renewal for the Fox was made in July, 1935, at an annual rate of \$30,000.

Actual ownership of the building was secured in the spring of 1935 by Mosque, Inc.—reflecting the three-way partnership of Arthur Lucas, William Jenkins, and Paramount Pictures. Under the stipulations of Mosque Incorporated's lease to Lucas and Jenkins, the City of Atlanta would get continued use of the theatre as a municipal auditorium.

Arthur M. Lucas and William K. Jenkins managed to bring the first stability to the Fox since its opening day. Possibly not through talent but through shrewd cost cutting, the Fox survived under the Lucas and Jenkins banner (with generally an all-screen policy). In 1946, the company also commissioned plans for the remodeling of the entrance loggia, foyer and shop front-ages by Hal Pereira, a prominent theatre architect. Pereira's plans were never undertaken, however.

Due to the "consent agreement" reached by Paramount/Publix Theatres, from charges filed in 1940, policy dictated that a theatre owner could not represent a film distributor as operator of a theatre. The Lucas and Jenkins operation (Atlanta Enterprises, Georgia Theatre Company) allied with Paramount/Publix, was finally forced to divest itself of the Fox.

On January 1, 1951, management of the theatre returned to the Wilby interests, in partnership with Herbert F. Kincey, and became known as the Wilby-Kinsey Service Corporation. The Wilby organization had grown and prospered in the years following its initial and futile efforts with the Fox in 1933. City Manager Noble K. Arnold was brought from its Durham, North Carolina circuit to take the Fox helm, and to also preside as Atlanta City Manager over the Roxy and Paramount Theatres (the Capitol had succumbed to an addition of Davison-Paxon Company's Department Store; its Robert-Morton organ was donated to Georgia's LaGrange College).

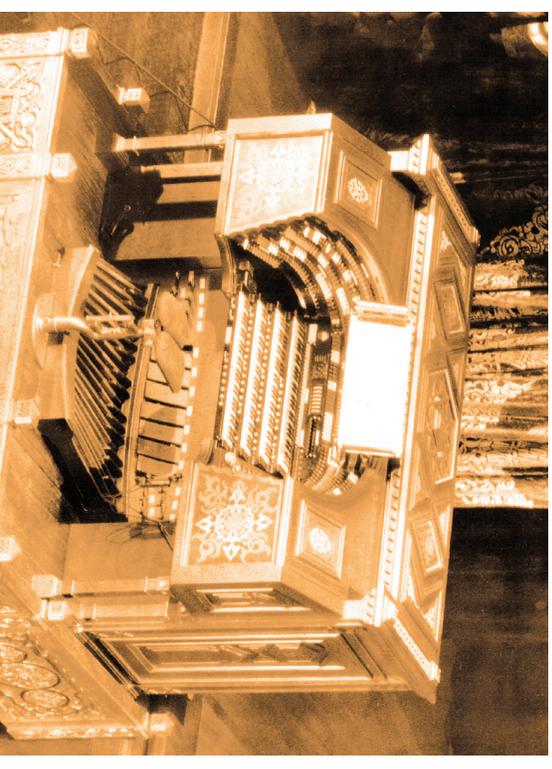
Under the iron hand of the new Fox "Potentate", the theatre experienced its most prosperous years as a motion picture theatre, despite the fact that Arnold's arrival at the Fox coincided with the final gasp of deluxe movie house entertainment. As Terry Kay put it, writing for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, by the time he (Arnold) moved to the Fox Theatre... movies dominated, vaudeville was a word that tricked kids in spelling matches, touring companies had slowed to an occasional booking, World War II had taken a deep breath and was about to become the Korean Conflict, and the second half of the century was beginning."

Though the Atlanta Fox would swallow previous theatres Arnold managed, this dictator was an experienced veteran, beginning in 1927 as an assistant at Macon, Georgia's Loew's Grand (built in 1884 as the Academy of Music).

Arnold's wife, Elizabeth, who was once organist in a Wilby-Kincey theatre in Selma, Alabama, made for a good introduction for Arnold to Robert Wilby. Arnold arranged an appointment at Wilby's home in Atlanta's fashionable Druid Hills, and left with a job. Professing to know little about show business, Arnold's candor had won him a position earlier in 1927 in a Wilby-Kincey house in Raleigh, North Carolina. A number of live acts and musicians trod the stages of Noble's theatres, and he invested in each experience.

Upon coming to the Fox in 1951, Arnold turned immediately to the Fox's 4/42 Möller languishing in the pit. A hasty restoration was made, and organist Eddie Ford was signed as staff artist. No systematic upkeep was employed for the instrument however, and as Ari Southerland related, "by 1954... the organ was again in drastic need of repair... it was becoming increasingly taxing upon the organist's resources to find a selection, a key, and a registration in which he could get through a number without a series of awkward silent periods."

Southerland states that the organ was last heard publicly in 1954. The period immediately following was indeed a lean one for all theatre organs on the continent, and it would be nearly ten years before the instrument would be heard again on a scheduled basis.



Fox Theatre's Möller 4/42
Photo: From *Theatre Organ Magazine*

But Noble Arnold had other responsibilities. One was seeing that New York's Metropolitan Opera Company was accommodated in its annual spring season in Atlanta. Staging opera at the Fox was begun in 1947, with Lucas and Jenkins' cooperation. With the advent of Arnold, a precise and efficient relationship with the Met, its stars, its trucks of scenery and costumes, and its musicians continued until 1968, after which Atlanta's ponderous acoustical and aesthetic disappointment, the Civic Center, swallowed up the City's opera-goers with a boast of more seats (shades of the San Francisco Fox debacle?). The Fox's catcomb-like under-stage areas bewildered many a contralto and mezzo, necessitating the names of New York city streets, oriented with the Metropolitan Opera House, to be scrawled on walls at appropriate points in the building. Traces of these signs existed long after the Met departed... reminders of the Opera's glittering triumphs in the house, and a few productions that even featured the Möller. One of the more unique performances at the Fox was an edition of *Carmen*, in which the entire Metropolitan unit appeared in street clothes due to a complication in the delivery of costumes and scenery.

Ben Hall summed up Grand Opera at the Fox, and the feeling of most of Atlanta's operagoers and the opera stars themselves, when he proclaimed, "Until you have heard *Aida*... and seen it... amidst the Oriental splendor of the Fox, you ain't heard nothing."

The Fox has enjoyed a legacy of great performers throughout its history. It welcomed Fritz Kreisler, and later the National Symphony under Hans Kindler, both in 1935. Ruth Slenczynski, pianist; Nelson Eddy and Helen Jepson, Grace Moore, Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a production of *The Great Waltz* (staged by Max Gordon and written by Moss Hart—direct from its engagement at New York City's Center Theatre)... all appearing in 1936; Rosa Ponselle, Yehudi Menuhin, and Sergei Rachmaninoff in 1937; and in 1938, Nelson Eddy followed by Kirsten Flagstad. In later years, the Fox featured Jerry Lewis (whose behavior over a demand for a certain stage prop gave Arnold cause to forbid booking Lewis at the Fox ever again), Jack Benny in a benefit for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 1965, the Atlanta Pops Orchestra, and Ben Hall listed appearances by Lawrence Tibbet, Paderewski, Doctor I.Q., and Elvis Presley.

Then there were the big movies: *The Robe* (one of the Fox's biggest grossers), *Gypsy*, *Giant*, *Guns of Navarone*, *Auntie Mame*, *Peyton Place*, and *Shane* (one of the first releases to demonstrate the Fox's then state-of-the-art 26-speaker stereophonic loud-speaker complement).

In addition to sound movies, Arnold's regime saw the first silent movie to ever be shown in the theatre, *The Eagle*, with Lee Erwin at the organ in 1969. ATOS member Ben Hall hosted the show from the Fox stage—a source of wonderment since his Atlanta childhood days at the matinee. Erwin silent film engagements continued after Arnold's retirement: *Wings*, May 6, 1971;

Phantom of the Opera, May 18, 1972; *The Son of the Sheik* (for the Sixth Annual Atlanta Film Festival) September 13, 1973; and *The General*, October 4, 1973. Lee's brilliantly conceived presentations paved the way for other silent film artists in later years, including Dennis James and Clark Wilson.

The restoration of the Fox Möller organ had begun after a meeting with Noble Arnold and the American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts' president, "Tiny" James and regional vice-president Erwin Young in December, 1962. In 1963, a small group of Southeastern Chapter (now Atlanta Chapter) ATOE (now ATOS) volunteers, under the direction of Joe G. Patten, began a thorough cleaning and restoration program on the instrument. (Since that time the organ has received attention from some of the finest pipe organ technicians...but none more dedicated, able, or caring than ATOS Lifetime Member, Joe Patten.)

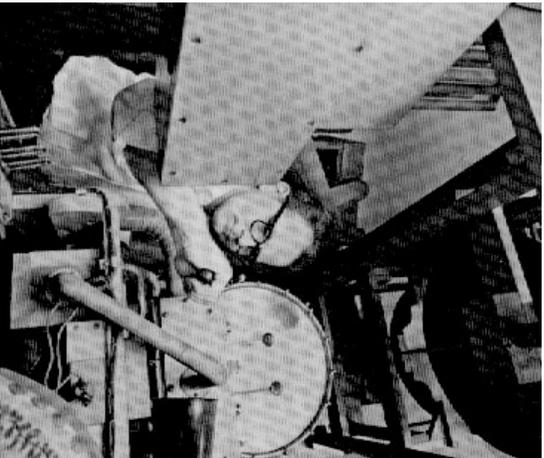
On November 22, 1963, the organ was set for its rise to glory, with organist and ATOS member Bob Van Camp to do the honors. The newspaper ads proudly proclaimed, "The Mighty Fox Organ Speaks Again" but the event was hastily cancelled when the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas broke. On Thanksgiving Day, November 28, the Fox Möller *did* rise to glory, with Bob Van Camp playing *Georgia On My Mind*.

During Noble Arnold's later regime at the Fox, the theatre had made a gradual changeover to family fare movies as a rule, paralleling the policy of New York City's Radio City Music Hall. The Fox was hopeful that these films, with their special appeal to families, would fill the theatre. In many instances, the plan worked. This policy continued under a host of later managers, none of which could settle themselves before ABC Theatres (the parent corporation under Wilby-Kinney) would transfer them elsewhere.

"Rocking the boat" raised an ogre, and the old "Arnold gleam" soon became a lackluster indifference...seemingly the admission of a losing battle, reflected by each successive management.

The real break in traditional Fox policy came in 1973 when the theatre adopted a policy of exhibiting mainly low-budget exploitation films. The Fox's clientele changed, and moreover, attendance continued to decline...and the writing was on every plaster wall.

Their were a few premieres, a film festival, and some rock venues that almost destroyed some of the Fox's finest interior fittings...but through it all, ***the Möller organ held sway***.



Joe Patten renovating Mighty Mo
Photo: From the author's personal archive

This organ, even in the eyes of the general public, remained unchallenged as the Fox's single greatest asset. Ralph T. Jones, once writing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, related how Iris Wilkins got a first shot at the Fox's patrons as she put the giant Möller through its paces before the first show. He added, "...as the console rose out of the depths of the orchestra pit, with Iris working arms and legs and shoulders, she made the organ do tricks that amazed. At one moment it chirruped like a lazy canary, and a couple of seconds later it boomed out diapasons that stunned the eardrums and rolled their reverberations down into your being until your entire system quivered."

...And the Fox organ still does it. With four manuals and 42 ranks of pipes in five chambers, it reigned for three years (1929-1932) as the largest theatre organ in the world. The Wuriltzer in New York City's Radio City Music Hall received the trophy after opening its doors on December 27, 1932. And, as most enthusiasts know, we have now set new records for the size of theatre organs if the universe includes installations outside of public theatres!

Excepting a few mechanical modifications, new console coachwork (that now replicates the original console design in all its gold-leafed splendor), the addition of the grand piano from Chicago's Picadilly Theatre, and adding a 32' pedal complement to the specifications, the Fox organ remains as one of the most original installations in the world. In a fitting tribute, ATOS has named it to the *National Registry of Significant Instruments*.

Who has made it to the list of artists at the console? Fox organists of the "golden era" included Iris Vining Wilkins (1929), Jimmy Beers (1931-33), Eddie Ford (1951), Cliff Cameron (1941), "Smilin" Al Evans (1930-32), Arthur Goebel, Don Mathis (1944), "organace" Dwight Brown, Homer Knowles (1943), Stanleigh Malotte, and Graham Jackson. The *Renaissance* for theatre organ in the early 1960's brought us Bob Van Camp, Lee Erwin, Billy Nalle, and paved the way for later impresarios like Lyn Larsen, Hector Olivera, John Seng, and Virgil Fox. In 2004, ATOS and the Atlanta Chapter presented the *Fabulous Fox Organ Weekend* fetching the talents of Simon Gledhill, Richard Hills, Lyn Larsen, Walt Strony, and Clark Wilson. And, of course, the great George Wright did actually play the organ in a private session.

ATOS member, organ technician extraordinaire, and historian John Tanner offers some interesting compilations as well (please note these lists are not inclusive):

Organists Engaged as Staff Organists Since 1963

Bob Van Camp
Robbie Irwin

Walt Winn
Jay Mitchell

Jerry Myers
Larry Douglas Embury

Organists Substituting for Staff Organists Since 1963

Ken Double

John Muri

Ron Carter

Rick McGee

Organists Featured in Chapter Programs

"Tiny" James
Dolton McAlpin

Linda Kent
Tom Helms

Carlo Curley
David Wickerham

Organists Featured in a Public Concert as a Solo Artist or as Part of a Program

Virgil Fox
Lee Erwin
Dennis James
John Seng

Hector Olivera
Lyn Larsen
Trevor Bolshaw
Ron Rice

Bob Van Camp
Greg Colson
Tom Hazleton
Jonas Nordwall

Larry Douglas Embury
The Philadelphia Organ Quartet

Organists Featured at the 1978 ATOS National Convention

Lee Erwin
Ron Rhode

Walt Strongy
Helen Dell

Tom Helms
Trevor Bolshaw

Tom Kotner
Lyn Larsen

Hector Olivera

And most importantly, there are scores of others who have been allowed to climb onto that mighty instrument of gold...including this author.

Now on to the Fox's dark days...and the great light that followed...

On January 2, 1975, the Atlanta Fox Theatre formally ended its career as a motion picture house. After the 9:25 pm showing of The Klansman, the Fox's last movie patrons listened to a brief narrative from manager Mike Spiritous, and took the last public tours to be conducted in the house before



Bob Van-Camp at the Möller 4/42
Photo: From the author's personal archive

the padlocks were placed on the doors.



The Fox Closes it's Doors
Photo: From the author's personal archive

But an organization had already been formed prior to the Fox's closure that would ultimately be responsible for saving "Mecca" from the wrecker's ball. In the summer of 1974, under the leadership of Arnall T. "Pat" Connell and three ATOS members, Joe Patten, Bob Van Camp, and attorney Robert Foreman, Jr., Atlanta Landmarks, Inc. was formed. Connell, a professor of architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology, was chosen as president. The organization's formation came after an interesting and rapid chain of events: lists of names petitioning to save the Fox began to multiply, and Helen Hayes, Mizzi Gaynor, Liberace, and hosts of other notables in the entertainment world came forth with pleas for saving the theatre. Liberace (a Welte theatre organ owner himself) posed with Bob Van Camp at the console of the Fox Möller for publicity purposes—forever instilling in the minds of Atlantans that another keyboard musician had now made a significant and profound statement about the worth of the great Fox organ.

An audience of over 2,500 assembled at the Fox on Monday morning, July 29, 1974 for probably the largest hearing ever conducted by a Georgia legislative committee up to that time (the Georgia Senate Tourism Committee). Official announcement of Atlanta Landmarks' formation was made at the meeting. Thought the Fox was named as the immediate target of the organization's efforts, Atlanta Landmarks was not chartered exclusively to save the Fox, but "to preserve, restore and maintain landmarks, buildings, and other structures in the City of Atlanta or elsewhere in the State of Georgia, which have historical or cultural value..."

In early August, 1974, Atlanta Landmarks assisted in securing approximately \$11,000 in state funds to underwrite a feasibility study for the Department of Natural Resources Historic Preservation Section on the Fox. The report would be placed in the hands of interested corporate heads and private citizens. On September 4, 1974, a prominent economic consulting firm was retained with a projected date of early December, 1974, for completion of an exhaustive report on the Fox's re-use potential. Joe Tanner, Georgia Department of Natural Resources Commissioner and Joe Patten, chairman of the Fox Theatre Advisory Committee received the completed 129-page report around December 10.

The report concluded, "The proposed re-use of the Fox Theatre would serve as a hallmark for Atlanta...a symbol of Atlanta's recognition of its past to complement its growth and spirit as a national and international city." Within the report an extensive survey of existing auditoria was made, and a detailed proposed "operating model" including financial statistics was graphed...underscoring the need for the Fox and its feasibility for re-use as a live entertainment center. With a background of data from other movie palaces that have been made over as live entertainment centers, the report showed how the Fox's rental revenue from live events could cover its operating expenses. Thus, the Fox would be financially self-sustaining. The building's purchase price, and other debt service costs, however, would have to be raised from public contributions. Rental revenue could not be expected to cover those costs, too.

Following Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company's securing an option to buy the Fox and adjoining properties to construct an office complex, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson and parties to the option announced an eight-month moratorium on the issuance of a demolition permit. The purpose of the moratorium, announced September 10, 1974, was to allow time for any interested party who could produce the \$4,250,000 purchase price of the Fox and who had a viable plan of saving it to come forward and take Southern Bell's (now BellSouth) place in the deal. The Fox's owners, Mosque, Inc., and Southern Bell, saw this as a gracious way of disengaging from the situation, now fueled by a loud public outcry; they encouraged the moratorium.

The final arrangements involving lengthy and complex negotiations, permitted Atlanta Landmarks, Inc., to acquire ownership of the Fox, and Southern Bell to acquire the balance of the land on the block for its future building needs. First, Landmarks persuaded Southern Bell to separate the Fox itself from the larger land package, which included some adjacent parking lots. The price for the Fox alone was \$1,800,000. Then Landmarks, working through a major realty firm, and using money loaned from the five major Atlanta banks, acquired the rest of the land on the "Fox Block" which Southern Bell had not itself acquired. Landmarks was then able to swap this land for the Fox. The banks agreed to lend Landmarks the money for these transactions provided that the shareholders of Mosque, Inc., would guarantee the loan. The exchange of property was consummated June



Mitzi Gaynor Visiting the Fox
Photo: From author's personal archive

25, 1975, and Atlanta Landmarks became the new owner of the Fox.



Fox Theatre's Möller 4/42

Photo: From *Theatre Organ* Magazine

ing members of the Southeastern (later re-chartered as "Atlanta") Chapter of ATOS.

On May 17, 1974, the Fox was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Fox's election to the Register accorded immense status and recognition to the theatre (structures less than 50-years-old are not normally considered except under

Although newspaper headlines and announcements by other media tended to depict the situation as fully resolved, the Fox was not saved yet. If Atlanta Landmarks was to default on any payment, the property would return to Mosque, Inc., which held a contract for demolishing the theatre. Additionally, the basic \$1,800,000 purchase price did not include closing expenses, interest on the loan over a three-year period, or funds for a systematic renovation/restoration program for the theatre. To really save the Fox, a total of \$2,400,000 had to be raised. The Fox's salvation call fell squarely at the feet of Atlanta's citizens, and this city whose very symbol shows a Phoenix rising from the ashes, "resurged", and Mecca was saved! At the forefront of this citizenry were hard-work-

certain conditions—one of these being the Fox qualifier: “outstanding architectural merit”.

Suddenly the Fox’s original foe, Southern Bell, was becoming its best friend. With the land swap the new Southern Bell Building would offer parking for 1,600 automobiles, and a MARTA rail station would be located adjacently.

The Atlanta Fox represented a bargain to Atlanta and the Southeast, costing roughly nine dollars a square foot (based on 200,000-square feet of usable space). As the Fox approaches 40 years of ownership by the original Atlanta Landmarks (later dissolved) and The Fox Theatre, Inc., established as the new sole owner in 2013, the theatre’s success story has been nothing short of remarkable. The Fox has shown a profit in most every year and a systematic, professional restoration program of every aspect of the theatre proper and its ancillary spaces has been conducted—with well over \$20,000,000 committed.

This outlay of capital includes significant funding for the Möller—which has made a full-scale restoration of the organ’s console to its original “coachwork” (a Ben Hall term) in resplendent gold leaf, and the completion of a 32’ rank in the pedal division which now allows “Mighty Mo” to thunder away with the best of them—adding great versatility, especially for classical and serious music.

Atlanta Landmarks, and now The Fox Theatre, Inc. has become a model operation, often studied and copied by other cities having significant theatres and other structures. In 1978, Landmarks paid off the original mortgage six months early. In 1979, the Fox’s three-month run of *A Chorus Line* broke national records with over \$one million at the box office. 1985 brought discretely installed state-of-the-art systems for improved sound and lighting, leading to a second major fund raising campaign in 1987 which netted \$4.2 million to bring further restoration and improvements to the Fox. In 1988, the Fox Theatre was named the number one grossing theatre in the 3,000 to 5,000-seat segment of the entertainment industry in the United States.

The Fox now boasts many outreach programs, including the Fox Theatre Institute which has assisted other theatres in Georgia, including the Rylander in Americus; and the Grand in Fitzgerald. Looking back to those dark days when the Atlanta ATOS Chapter thought that a December concert by Lyn Larsen might be the grand finale, these facts and figures seem almost surreal.

The irrevocable status of the Fox as a jewel in the crown of movie palaces has also insured that the Fox Möller will always be one of its most important features. Few instruments have ever had better name recognition with the general public than “Mighty Mo”.

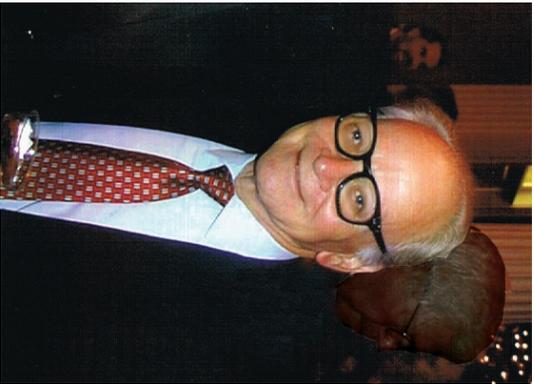
Offered here are a few facts about the instrument:

- 1963: The organ's traveler cable from the console to the junction board at the bottom of the orchestra pit was rewired.
- 1965: A 6'3" Baldwin Grand Piano originally from the Picadilly Theatre, Chicago Kilgen installation was added on a dedicated lift in the orchestra pit. The original Kilgen-built relay for the pressure action system was re-leathered (and again in 2001). This addition to the Fox Möller debuted with Bob Van Camp's Concert Recording LP, *Here With the Wind* [CR 0023] c. 1967.
- 1980: A new reservoir for the Post Horn chest was installed...without tremulant attachment...to enable the other ranks that formerly shared this tremulant the ability to "shake" without affecting the Post Horn.
- 1985: Twelve notes of the 32' Diaphone were added in unenclosed spaces originally prepared for these pipes. These locations are in front of the chamber enclosures on either side of the theatre. The pipes speak directly into the auditorium from the inside of each familiar chamber grille flanking the Fox stage. Also at this time a systematic program was initiated lasting for over two years to re-leather the entire organ, including percussions, relay pneumatics, chest pneumatics, and swell shutter pneumatics.
- 1986: A new 75-horsepower Spencer blower was installed to replace the original 30-horsepower kinetic blower, which was wearing out. The blower was undersized from the inception of the Möller's installation, producing only 15" of static wind pressure (the new blower produces 35" of static wind). Also, a second motor generator was added to correct a voltage deficiency, which prevented the pipes in the Ethereal Organ Division to be played properly due to a lack of sufficient wind. (For the first 57 years of the Möller's life, the organ had operated not only without enough wind, but it was without enough current to open all the magnets for the keys and stops that were depressed by the artist. In a way, this was a safety system—albeit by default—since the blower could not supply enough wind, and there wasn't sufficient power to open enough valves, the blower was never overtaxed!)
- And 1986 also saw a complete system of air conditioning/heating and humidity controls separate from the auditorium proper was installed in all five chambers. The initial \$48,700.00 cost soon proved to be a wise investment, as maintenance and tuning costs have been very low since its installation. In the same year, all key coverings were completely replaced with new ivory.
- 1993: Damage from water and resulting fallen plaster in the 16' Diaphones was repaired, and all five chambers were thoroughly cleaned and repainted.
- 1995: A Peterson-built relay and new Syndyne stop actions were installed on the "Tremulants", "Couplers", and "Second Touch" stop tabs to enable them to be ganged on the organ's combination action for the first time. Formerly, they had to be operated manually, but they did have mechanical "cancels" for each section. However, the "cancels" were not selective (in other words, it was "all or none".)

- 2002: In addition to the re-leathering of the piano relay action for a second time, the Fox's mammoth console was completely refinished in gold leaf and polychrome decoration consistent with the organ's original motif.
- 2013: Tremulants in the organ were totally rebuilt and reconfigured to regain the wonderful theatrical shake despite increased static wind from the newer blower.

Note: The information of the specifics of this historic instrument were gathered by ATOS member James Thrower and were checked for accuracy by the "Phantom of the Fox" himself, Joe Patten. The author also acknowledges the assistance of ATOS member John Tanner for his contributions to the history of the theatre.

Thank You, Joe



Mr. Joe Patten

Photo: From the author's personal archive

There would be no Möller—in fact, there would be no Atlanta Fox without ATOS Honorary Member Joe G. Patten... the *Phantom of the Fox*. Patten's uncompromising and constant caring for the Fox Möller from 1963 to 1974 on a part-time basis, and on a full-time basis until just recently will be readily apparent to the Here With the Wind audience. But moreover, that famous "room" he helped save from the wreckers, and from fire, and from doubting Thomases will beguile and transport you as if on a magic carpet to a land where fantasy and great music become one grande crescendo.

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