



The New York Paramount Wichita Wurlitzer

It's been known down through the years as "The Dowager Empress" and for good reason. Fanny Wurlitzer said simply, "It was our masterpiece." And it, or she, was.

In 1926, their busiest production year ever, the Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York created organ number 1458 for Adolph Zukor's magnificent new Times Square Paramount Theatre. Amidst a huge number of other large and prestigious instruments produced that year, this one would come to be the yardstick by which all others have since been measured - even in the present day.

Designated as a "Special," the organ was to be of 4 manuals and 36 ranks, the magnum enlargement of the very successful "285" organs which were Wurlitzer's largest models to date. Included in the vast array of pipes and instruments installed in the Paramount's six organ chambers were double percussions, large-scale traps and effects, an octave of tuned Tympani, a major-scale 32' Diaphone, four Vox Humana and three Tibia Clausa sets, rare Musette and French Horn stops, and four ranks on 25" wind pressure. The chambers in the theatre were shallow and proved ideal for projecting and focusing the ensemble into the narrow and acoustically excellent auditorium. Audiences would later exclaim at the magnitude of the sound and, for those overcome by it all, "trained nurses were stationed in the aisles when Mr. and Mrs. Crawford at the consoles of the great organ joined the Paramount Orchestra and John Phillips Sousa's Band for their rendition of **The Stars and Stripes** Forever."

To properly showcase this unique jewel, the most famous theatre organist in America, Jesse Crawford, was engaged to the principal staff position. Well known for his solo performances, recordings, and interpretations of the music of the day, Crawford made several suggestions to Wurlitzer on particular features that he wished to have included in the organ and he took a hand in the all-important tonal finishing in the theatre. It was this last step that would eventually be perhaps the most critical in elevating the organ to a "magical" status. Dan Papp, another tonal genius and part-time master technician to the Wurlitzer Company, was charged with the permanent care of the instrument and, between Crawford and Papp, she underwent a rigorous refining process which lasted for months. Papp was often heard to remark that Crawford was difficult, but that "what he wanted was good." And it showed. There were four other identical Specials that followed from North Tonawanda, (built for the Detroit Fox, St. Louis Fox, San Francisco Fox, and the Brooklyn Fox theatres); none ever quite measured up to the Paramount's.

Eventually, the Dowager Empress took on a reputation of which the well-heeled still speak in hushed tones. While it appears that nothing terribly special was done during the finishing (other than extra softening of some of the ranks), the same ensemble has yet to be reproduced.

The Paramount Wurlitzer enjoyed a long and glorious career in the theatre under the hands of some of the finest and most famous organists of all time: Reginald Foort, George Wright, and Don Baker among them, until the house was shuttered and gutted in 1964. At that time, Richard Simonton purchased and removed the organ to California with the intention of reinstalling it in a theatre in the Los Angeles area. The project was never to come to fruition, and rumors of the breaking of the instrument for parts ran rampant.

In 1966, a brighter chapter in the organ's saga began when Simonton was approached by a fledgling group from Wichita, Kansas. Wichita Theatre Organ, Inc. (WTO) had the idea that the Wurlitzer should find its second permanent home in the new Century II Civic Center in that city. The deal was struck, millions of details were ironed out, and the ambitious plan became a reality, but not before a tremendous setback occurred. In February of 1968, an arson fire in the cavernous basement of Century II consumed the original console, two pianos, and six bass pipes of the organ. While the instruments were replaceable, the loss of the console was a monstrous historic one. Fortunately, however, the bulk of the pipework was not yet on hand and was spared damage in the incident. Daunted but not defeated, WTO commissioned Balcom and Vaughn of Seattle to reproduce the keydesk, and the installation at Century II progressed.

Throughout all of this, the omnipresent question was whether the organ would still retain her signature sound after so much moving, a certain amount of battering and bruising in the process, and the relocation into a new acoustical environment. The eventual answer to that question was a glorious and resounding YES! The one-of-a-kind Paramount sound remains intact to thrill those who will listen. Organists speak of the uncanny, almost spiritual experience of playing this particular Wurlitzer, and there exists an unexplained "something" that speaks to us from somewhere beyond the present and the tangible.

In the organ's new home, a "who's who" of present day musicians have presented her to tremendous musical audiences, and acclaim has come from far and wide. She is seen after by caring technicians who are fully respectful, as is WTO, of what they have in their care. The proof is ongoing here of Fanny Wurlitzer's genius, and Crawford's and Papp's foresight of more than seventy years ago in producing an instrument that is as valid and fresh at the turn of the millennium as it was in 1926. The Paramount Wurlitzer Organ is powerful testimony to a powerful legacy. The Magic continues!

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