

METROLINA ORGAN QUARTERLY

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METROLINA THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

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NEXT MTOS MEETING

THURSDAY, MAY 25, 1995

CALVARY CHURCH

Highway 51 and Rea Road
Charlotte, N. C. 28205

7:00 p.m.

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FEATURED ARTIST

Scott Poppiano

Scott is a charter member of Metrolina. He formerly was an organist at the Fox Theatre, Detroit, and the Michigan Theatre, Ann Arbor. On June 17 at 2:00 p.m., he will play a program during the second Wanamaker Organ Day. Earlier this year his first CD, *Scott plays the Detroit Senate*, was released. He will also be performing at the 1995 ATOS convention in Detroit.

Plan to attend this program, which will show the "theatrical" personality of the 205-rank Möller. Take the opportunity to welcome home one of our own members who is helping to bring the organ to the youth of today. He has been on the board of Young Theatre Organ Enthusiasts.

By Charles Haymaker

Update on Duke Æolian

The refurbishing project is not yet completed, in spite of what we wrote in the last newsletter. In fact, a fine Tuba Mirabilis, on 25 inches of wind pressure is now speaking and was heard to good advantage on Easter morning in a solo against proper accompaniment. Apparently there are a few more items to finish before the project is done. But you wouldn't know it from the tremendous impact the organ — plus ten brass players and several percussionists — made during the Easter service. Several climaxes in the music were nothing short of shattering and thundering. When the choir was added to all this, the total effect was thrilling beyond comparison.

You will have to wait until next Easter to experience more music of the season, so make your plans now for the 9:00 a.m. service. The 11:00 a.m. service is packed to the walls with standees by 10:30.

There is a chance you can hear the Æolian this summer in a solo recital. Our understanding is that Dr. Arcus will schedule concerts once the work is complete. In the meantime, you can hear it played any Sunday morning.

If you think I might be exaggerating when I declare that language is inadequate to describe the sound of the Æolian in its setting, perhaps you would like to hear the testimony of Dan Miller, Calvary's organist. He told me of a recent instance of hearing Thomas Murray of Yale play upon it for one and a half hours. He was especially taken with the sound of pianissimos following decrescendos. The resulting whispers were achieved by the closed shutters in the recessed chambers. Dan was unable to express in words what he heard and felt. But you could read it in his face as he remembered his experience.

Tom Hazleton at Spoleto

On Friday, June 9, at 10:00 p.m., Tom Hazleton will accompany a showing of *The Ten Commandments*, as a part of the Spoleto Festival in Charleston. The program will be at First Scots Presbyterian Church, and there will be an admission charge.

First Scots is home to the largest organ in Charleston, built by the local firm of Ontko and Young. This is a well regarded organ builder, and it is one of the sponsors of *Pipe Dreams* on the South Carolina public radio network. Tom will certainly be able to bring out its theatrical capabilities.

5/17/95

Carolina Theater: Save my memories

In response to "Old Carolina Theater gets new attention" (May 9):

As a member of the Theater Historical Society, I can tell you that hundreds of theaters across the country have been saved or are being saved. I hope the Carolina becomes one of them.

When my family moved to Charlotte in 1934, there were seven theaters downtown: Carolina, State, Charlotte, Criterion, Tryon, Imperial and Broadway.

I remember seeing Fred Waring, Paul Whiteman and Phil Spitalny and his All Girl Orchestra on stage. I also saw Bob Hope sell war bonds from the stage of the Carolina.

The night I gave my wife her engagement ring in 1951 we had been to the Carolina.

ED NICKEL
Wingate

From Tom Mix to (pow!) vaudeville

Good story on the Carolina Theater. And you remembered the Imperial. But Charlotte used to have a lot of uptown movies.

The State had cowboys such as the intrepid Tom Mix and the flinty Tim McCoy. They were brave and owned intelligent horses.

The Broadway had touring vaudeville shows every week. That's how a lot of us "improved" our vocabulary and tried to tap dance. When it snowed, naughty urchins would take grocery bags full of snow into the Broadway and smack the entertainers with snowballs. It was a wicked thing to do, but darling and amusing in its way. Charlotte used to be darling and amusing and had a lot of movies.

CRAWFORD FERGUSON
Charlotte

Old Carolina Theater gets new attention

5/9/95

Groups work together to try to save building

By **DAVID PERLMUTT**
Staff Writer

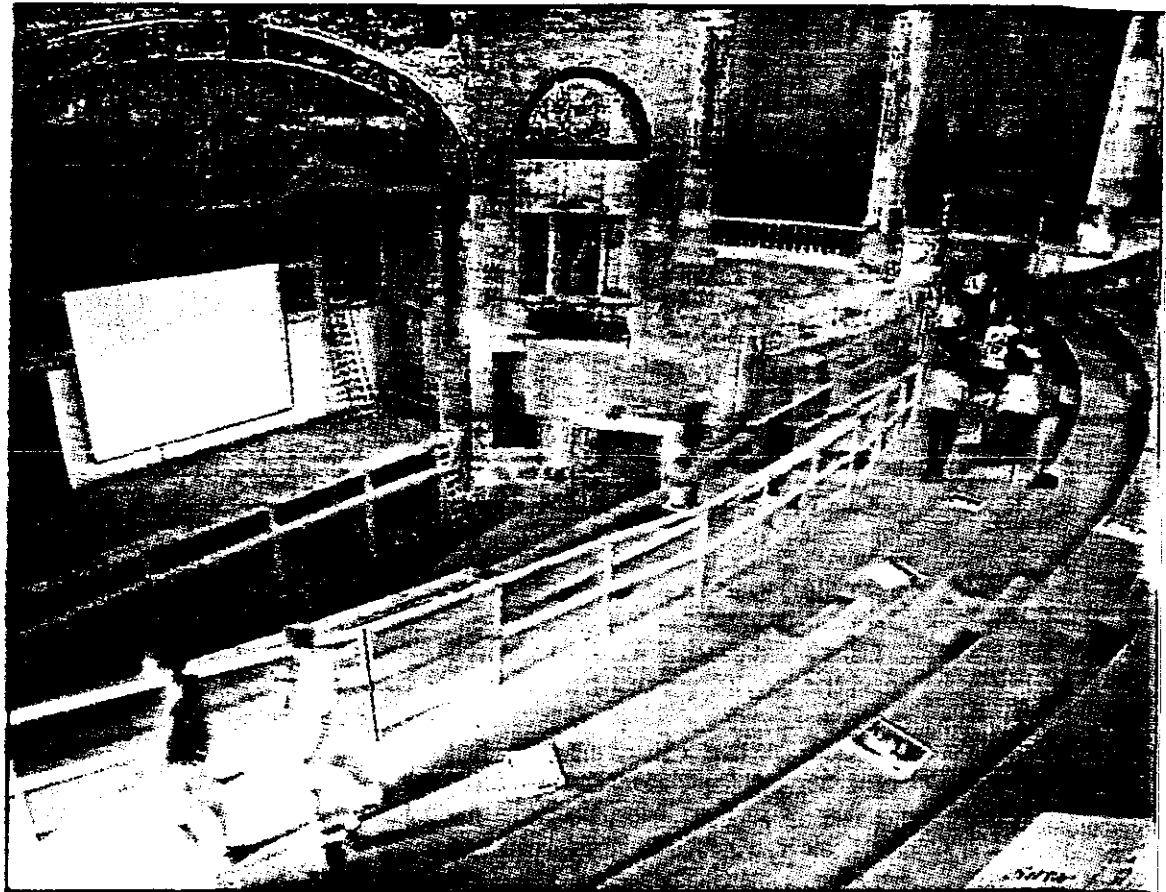
It used to be one of America's grand movie palaces, in its day the Carolinas' grandest, standing distinguished yet opulent at North Tryon and 6th streets.

On its screen played the Carolinas' premiere of "Gone With the Wind" and thousands of other movies. On its stage performed Hope, Lombardo, Armstrong. And Elvis.

Many longtime Charlotteans thought it was long-gone.

But the Carolina Theater still stands, a glimpse of its former opulence, its inwards gutted, the ornamentation stripped, its seats and lobby gone, the soundboard murals — once bright and mood-altering — fading and rain-stained.

That could change. After thousands went through what's left of the 68-year-old building next to CityFair during SpringFest two weekends ago, a senti-



GARY O'BRIEN/Staff

Still impressive: Though now gutted and dingy, the Carolina Theater once had clouds and stars projected on the ceiling and gold-leafed detailing

Please see **Theater**/page 7A

Theater

Grand old movie palace gutted, but still standing

Continued from page 1A

ment has surfaced to save it from the fate of most of uptown's older buildings — the bulldozer.

"It's irreplaceable architecture," said Charlotte native Mark Huffstetter, who worked on his own time to bring the theater up to building code so the city would allow people inside. "It is the one building in Charlotte that has the greatest shared history. Most anybody who lived here from the 1920s to the '70s had a relationship with it. There are beautiful homes in Charlotte and beautiful buildings. But this one is different. "We intend to do anything we can to save and restore it."

Until about a year ago, Huffstetter, the Mint Museum's assistant special events coordinator, had worked alone for four years to try to save the theater. Lately, other groups have joined him, including a theater organ group and one called Save the Carolina Theater, headed by Michael Vance of Vance Theatrical Organization. Huffstetter and Vance want to bring more life to uptown.

At SpringFest, they opened the theater to visitors to spread the word that the building is still standing and to gather support. More than 7,000 people signed petitions to save the building.

The two independently are trying to find someone with the financial backing to rescue the building and restore it.

It was designed in Spanish Colonial Revival style by C.C. Hook, the Charlotte architect who designed many of the region's most distinctive buildings, and New York City theater architect Robert Hall. It was an atmospheric theater with floating clouds and twinkling stars projected on the ceiling. The walls were supported by large columns. There were colonnades of graceful arches and balconies that made the Carolina seem like an outdoor theater. Much of the detail — now gone — was gold-leafed.

In its heyday, the theater showed blockbuster movies, and staged vaudeville shows and concerts. It was one of the first buildings in Charlotte with "manufactured weather" — air-conditioning.

By the time the Carolina closed in 1978, uptown life was declining as shoppers fled for the malls and suburban theaters.

But once city-living in Charlotte was more confined. A great Saturday was to go uptown early to shop, then eat at one of the many restaurants — perhaps an orange drink and hot dog at Tanners

across Tryon from the theater — and afterward take in a movie at the Carolina, or the Imperial on Tryon or The Center on Morehead.

The efforts by Huffstetter and Vance are bolstered by what other Carolinas cities have done.

Once there were a number of Carolina theaters, owned or leased by the Hollywood-based Paramount Studios, and incorporated as Paramount Publix Theaters. Charlotte's theater, built in 1927 by John Cutter of Charlotte the year sound came to movies, was the chain's flagship.

Now it is the only one of the Carolina theaters that hasn't been refurbished, or torn down.

Several have been restored

Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Chapel Hill and Durham all restored their Carolina theaters. The first two cities turned their theaters into performing arts centers. The Chapel Hill Carolina shows movies. And the one in Durham shows movies and hosts concerts and conventions.

Vance estimates the restoration at \$12 million, about what Winston-Salem and Greensboro paid.

"What people discovered across the country in cities where there were wonderful old theaters that could be saved, the restorations have literally brought new life into downtown," said Pepper Fluke, who helped spearhead the Durham project. "We see it happening in Durham.

"We had a huge number of volunteers for our project. An old theater can get people to do things that no other building could."

Because of its location, the Charlotte theater has two major problems that have kept it under constant threat of demolition.

Its seating capacity (1,450 seats) is between Spirit Square (750) and the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center (2,100), and some officials don't want competition. Vance and Huffstetter say it could be used for activities that wouldn't compete, such as bringing movies back uptown.

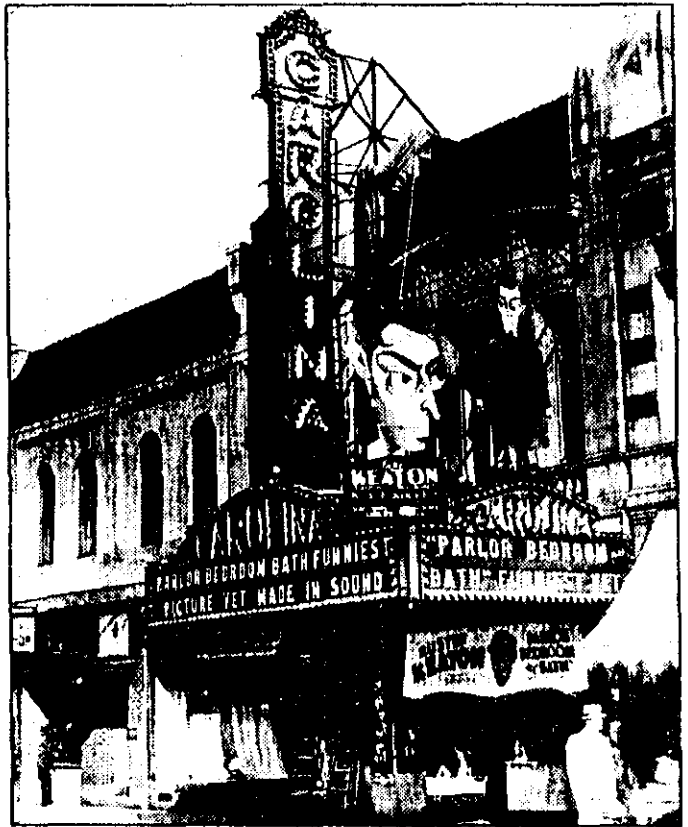
"If I want to reserve Owens Auditorium now, it has to be a year and a half in advance," said Vance.

The theater also sits on valuable uptown turf, its greatest threat. It is owned by the city, but CityFair's owner, The Keith Corp., has an option to buy the property.

Chairman Graeme Keith, who saw movies at the Carolina as a Davidson College student in the 1950s, said there are no plans for the theater — either for using it or tearing it down.

"We've had some preliminary conversations with some possible future tenants," Keith said. "We have not considered tearing it down and we have explored the best possible use of tying it into CityFair as we look at the long-

Carolina Theater



In its heyday, the Carolina Theater showed blockbuster movies and staged vaudeville shows and concerts.

- **Opened:** March 7, 1927.
- **First movie:** "A Kiss in a Taxi" starring Bebe Daniels.
- **Location:** 224-232 N. Tryon St.
- **Architects:** Architects Robert Hall of New York City and C.C. Hook of Charlotte.
- **Details:** Wrought-iron chandeliers, terra cotta roof tiles, draperies from France, floor tiles from Italy. Spanish and Italian furniture, pottery, terra cotta jars and brass

and copper jugs furnished the lobbies.

■ **Biggest blockbuster:** From March 31, 1965, to Oct. 4, 1966, "The Sound of Music" played to 398,201 people, making the Carolina the country's only theater to show the movie to more people than lived in the community.

■ **Last movie:** "The Fist" starring Bruce Lee.

■ **Closed:** Nov. 27, 1978.

term future of that block."

Fond memories

During Springfest, Vance and Huffstetter asked visitors to write comments. They got pages. One included this comment from a teenager: "This place is sooooo smooth! Please, please, please keep it open. I'm only 14 and I'd like to bring my children here."

Many visitors wrote that they saw their first movies at the Carolina, had their first date there or met their spouses there. Some sat and gazed at the gutted structure, and remembered. Some smiled and told stories. Some cried.

One man who walked through was Harold Quinn. He was an usher in 1950.

From Central High School on Elizabeth Avenue, he'd walk to the theater and change into his uniform: a black waist coat, white shirt and black bow tie.

Part of the time, he worked the balcony, where he could keep a watch on the lovebirds necking in the back-row corners. There are still signs of those corners, with scribbles on walls proclaiming undying love.

"There's a lot of history in that old building," Quinn said. "I'd like to see it saved. I think they ought to save all the old buildings. But I'd really hate to see this one torn down for a parking lot.

"It's too special to an awful lot of people."