

PIPES of P.A.T.O.S.

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IMPORTANT: PLEASE SEE ATTACHED MEMBERSHIP LETTER

By Rowan Belt

Dear PATOS member, please see the letter attached to the back of this document from our President, Dale Abraham. It concerns important pandemic-related decisions affecting membership and elections. Thank you. As always, if you have any questions regarding this letter, you can reach out to us at info@pittsburghtheatreorgan.com.

LINKS OF INTEREST

By Rowan Belt

Continuing our series of links to interesting audiovisual material online...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKWIX7LcV5Y>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIVjPsg6vsU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsfLdHcTefs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyPo2s63DAk>

The first three links are for a tour of the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ, the largest fully functional musical instrument in the world. The last link, for those who are more musically rather than technically inclined, is to a virtual concert at the "Mighty Mo"

Moller pipe organ of the Atlanta Fox Theatre, given last August by Ken Double, who we had the pleasure of hosting for a concert as well a few years ago.

PITTSBURGH SILENT FILM SOCIETY ESTABLISHES NATIONAL SILENT

MOVIE DAY

By Chad Hunter



Silent film stars Harold Lloyd and Mildred Davis, courtesy of Harold Lloyd Entertainment

Apr. 20, 2021 – Mt. Lebanon resident Chad Hunter has formed a small group with a passion for silent movies to establish September 29 as National Silent Movie Day – an annual day to celebrate silent film history and raise awareness about the race to preserve surviving silent films. With an official proclamation from National Day Archives naming the day, the inaugural National Silent Movie Day will be held on Wednesday, September 29, 2021.

Hunter, Executive Director of Video Trust and Director of the Pittsburgh Silent Film Society; along with Brandee B. Cox, a Senior Film Archivist at the Academy Film Archive and Steven K. Hill, Motion Picture Archivist at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, met virtually in January to discuss the need to raise greater awareness about silent film history. “It seems like there is a national day for almost everything – and we thought, why not silent movies? We were actually a bit surprised there wasn’t already one,” said Hunter.

Decades before the popularity of television and the age of computers, cell phones and Netflix, silent movies reigned supreme. For roughly 40 years between 1890 and 1930, going to see silent movies in theaters was the most popular form of entertainment in the world, and made global stars of Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, Greta Garbo, Paul Robeson, and Anna May Wong.

Yet tragically an estimated 80% of all American silent feature films are now considered “lost” forever. Films from the silent period were printed on flammable nitrocellulose film stock, and rather than risk deadly fires, theaters and studios often destroyed or reclaimed silver content from prints after their theatrical runs were completed. Nitrate film decays over time as well, and archives around the world are in a race with time to preserve the few silent films that still exist.

Suzanne Lloyd, granddaughter of the great silent film comedian and actor Harold Lloyd, has managed his legacy of romantic comedy films for 50 years and agrees that silent movies deserve a national day of celebration. “We at Harold Lloyd Entertainment are absolutely delighted to help announce – on Harold’s 128th birthday – the first annual National Silent Movie Day. Archives and theatres from around the world have championed preserving and screening important films, and in doing so, have kept the vibrant and

remarkable silent film tradition alive. This is a wonderful event that Harold would be so proud and honored to be a part of, and I am very happy to be able to represent Harold on National Silent Movie Day.”



Colleen Moore and Joyce Compton in *Sally* (1925); Image courtesy of Bruce Calvert

“Anyone can participate in National Silent Movie Day – you can ask your local art house cinema to show a silent movie with live music; you can host a virtual watch party; make a social media post about your favorite silent film or star; or organize a petition to help save a silent movie or silent movie landmark – the possibilities are endless,” said Cox. Hunter added that “the September 29 event in Pittsburgh is in development, and will be announced soon on the Pittsburgh Silent Film Society’s website.” In addition, the first annual Pittsburgh Silent Film Festival will be held in spring of 2022.

To find out more about National Silent Movie Day and how to participate, visit www.nationalsilentmovieday.org.

Press materials at:

<https://www.nationalsilentmovieday.org/press-materials>

HOLLYWOOD RODGERS ORGAN

STILL PLAYING!

By Dale Abraham

A bright spot for PATOS during this pandemic has been the fact that our Rodgers theatre organ at the Hollywood Theater in Dormont remains in active use.

The Hollywood Theater was closed for only a short period in late 2020 and has been one of the only theaters in operation from the beginning of 2021. Crowds were sparse at the beginning of this year, but people have lately become more comfortable going to a movie theater, even with social distancing and mask protocols still in place. Attendance has been up.

The PATOS Rodgers is heard every Friday night at the Hollywood for one half hour before the first evening movie screening, usually from 7:00 to 7:30 PM.

The theater also has a new manager. Jen James assumed that role in early April, and she has a good sense of what more aggressive promotional efforts can do for the Hollywood. Jen grew up in Dormont and has extensive experience with theater groups in Pittsburgh.

Although the Hollywood generally runs first-run releases, the theater will now be available for alternative programming on Tuesday evenings plus Saturday and Sunday matinees. This will present future opportunities to showcase our organ with more frequency.

So, it's a misnomer that theatre organ has been dormant in Pittsburgh for the past year! The Hollywood Rodgers is played regularly and keeps alive the sound of theatre organ for movie audiences.

MY FIRST BRUSH WITH THEATRE

ORGAN

By Dale Abraham

I once told this story to a young journalism student at Point Park University about 15 years ago. He was interviewing me about my early exposure to theatre organs. When I said

that the sound of the organ gave me goosepimples, he laughed convulsively because he never heard the word "goosepimples" before.

So, I'm opening up myself to more ridicule by writing this. Oh, well.

I first heard a theatre organ when I attended a Hector Olivera concert at the South Hills Theatre on West Liberty Avenue in the mid-1970s. I had taken up the organ around second grade, and we had a Gulbransen spinet in our living room. It was a pretty good instrument as far as home organs went, but nothing prepared me for what I heard at the South Hills Theatre that night.

Hector and the South Hills 2/6 Wurlitzer rose out of the pit with him playing "Bobsled," his traditional concert opener at the time. The hair on my arms stood on end. And I really did get goosepimples (there's that word again).

From that moment forward I fell in love with the sound of the theatre organ.

For several years thereafter, I made the mistake of only attending Hector Olivera theatre organ concerts, ignoring the many other organists that were presented by PATOS. I really should have taken in the talents of the other organists, but on the other hand, no one could thrill me like Hector could.

To this day, probably unfairly, I judge the organists that play for us by a comparison to the outright delight and mesmerizing awe that Hector Olivera provided at the very first theatre organ concert I ever heard.

I've gotten wiser as the years have gone by. Hector still remains the gold standard in my mind, but there have been an awful lot of theatre organists in subsequent years who turned out to be thrilling. Dan Bellomy was one of them, as were Clark Wilson, Robert Wolfe, Dick Smith and Pierre Fracalanza.

Nevertheless, with no disrespect intended to any other theatre organist,

Hector Olivera was “the bomb,” and he’s the reason I still maintain my love for theatre organ.

Hector was the hook who drew me into the glorious theatre organ world. If only I had heard Sidney Torch play live in the 1930s....

FOLLOW STORY ON PLAZA’S

MORTON

By Glenn Tunney

Preface and Epilogue by Jay Smith

PREFACE: The Spring issue of the PIPES of PATOS contained an article about the Robert Morton organ from Brownsville’s Plaza Theatre. It was the first of a series written by Glenn Tunney for his articles in the Uniontown Herald Standard. Reproduced below is the second article in that series. It was originally titled “Reader Input Sought to Resolve One Lingering Question About Plaza Organ”.

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Last week, we wrote about the efforts of Jay Smith, who with his father Louis restored the Robert Morton organ that was salvaged from the Plaza Theater. Jay came to Brownsville recently, driving here from his home in Baldwin to spend a sunny Saturday morning with Norma Ryan, director of the Flatiron Building Heritage Center, and me. Norma, Jay and I took a short walking tour of the north end of Brownsville's Neck, and Jay was naturally most interested in seeing the Plaza Theater.

While the decaying building is locked and its interior cannot be viewed, Jay is particularly interested in finding out if any area resident can remember where the pipes of the Plaza organ would have been located inside the auditorium of the theater. The reason for his curiosity is that he is trying to determine whether the organ that is now installed in his father's basement is the same organ that was originally installed in the

Plaza Theater when it first opened for business around 1921, or whether it was a replacement for the original organ.

Theater organs had a number of special features and sound effects, all created by ingenious use of the organ's pipes. These special effects were designed for an era when the organ's music and its sound effects were a vital part of viewing a silent movie. But when “talking” movies came along in 1927, the major organ companies stopped building these special theater organs forever. Therefore it is a logical assumption that the theater organ now sitting in the home of Jay's father, an organ which was removed from the Plaza Theater in the 1950's, is the same organ that was in the Plaza the day it opened in 1921. But there is one problem with making that assumption.

On April 6, 1931, an \$85,000 fire severely damaged much of the Plaza Theater. Jay's question is whether the organ was in a part of the theater that was not as badly damaged by fire and water. That would explain how it could have survived to the present day.

“If the original Plaza organ or its pipes had been destroyed in the fire,” Jay mused, “it is unlikely that a new organ would have been installed to replace it, since by 1931 theater organs were no longer being produced, and with talking movies, the Plaza would have little need for a theater organ anyway.”

That makes it plausible that the organ in the home of Jay's father is in fact the original organ, and that it did somehow survive the fire. But Jay would like to find some corroborating evidence.

A 1931 Brownsville Telegraph article described the portions of the theater that were most affected by the fire or damaged by water, while mentioning other parts that were spared. “Hundreds of gallons of water,” said the Telegraph, were showered upon the building's interior by the theater's automatic sprinkler system, and large

quantities of water were also played on the fire by the firefighters.

“If only we knew where the organ's pipes were located within the auditorium,” said Jay, “we could speculate on whether they could have survived the fire and water. The pipes were probably located along either the left wall or the right wall. Since the Plaza organ is not a large one, there would not have been organ pipes on both walls.”

“Would the organ pipes have been visible to the audience?” I asked Jay.

“There would probably have been some type of screen disguising most of them,” he replied. “But if any of your readers can remember where those pipes were located prior to their removal from the Plaza around the late 1950's, it would be a clue in our mystery of whether the organ could have survived the fire, thereby increasing the likelihood that my dad's organ is the theater's original organ.”

How about it, readers? We may be looking for a needle in a haystack, but we are hoping that one or more of our readers may remember the location of the organ's console (keyboard) or of the organ's pipes within the Plaza auditorium. If you can be of any help, Jay and I would very much appreciate hearing from you.

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EPILOGUE: Well folks, I hate to leave you hanging like that – so here's a little spoiler for the next issue of the PIPES of PATOS. Glenn Tunney DID receive some feedback from his readers from someone in the state of California who not only remembered the Plaza's organ, but even knew where it was and shared the information. Reproducing the next of Glenn Tunney's articles in the Uniontown Herald Standard will continue the saga in our next issue.



PIPES of PATOS

A Journal of the Pittsburgh Area Theatre Organ Society

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Masthead

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Many thanks go out to our contributing writers!

Comments, questions, article submissions?

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April 30, 2021

Dear PATOS member,

About a year ago, I wrote a letter to you about the status of PATOS at the onset of the pandemic. Here it is one year later, and we must address the issue again. Who knew?

For the second year in a row, we will be extending your membership at no charge for one year. That means you will remain a member of PATOS through June 2022.

It is still uncertain at this time whether the Keystone Oaks School District will allow us to have Fall 2021 events, therefore I can't in good conscience require you to pony up money for dues when we still can't predict what we can offer you in return.

Similarly, our usual schedule would require us to hold elections in June 2021 for seats on the Board of Directors. We reached out to membership in the last newsletter asking for candidates for the Board election, but we received no response from anyone. Therefore, I am forced to once again delay the election process until June 2022. This will be implemented by extending the terms of Board members currently up for election by one year.

Thank you for your continuing support of PATOS. It's even more appreciated in times like these. And I look forward to seeing you at our next program. We absolutely will be back, but the timeline remains in flux.

Truly yours,

Dale Abraham, President
Pittsburgh Area Theatre Organ Society