NEWS USITT LETTER

U. S. INSTITUTE FOR THEATRE TECHNOLOGY, INC. • 245 WEST 52nd STREET • NEW YORK, N. Y. 10019

JAY B. KEENE, Editor Volume VI, No. 1 February 1, 1966

CONTENTS

USITT CELEBRATES 5TH ANNIVERSARY

During the November meeting of the Executive Committee, a birthday cake was brought out to celebrate the founding of the Institute five years ago. A black-out of the wax luminaires was subsequently achieved by the two past presidents of the Institute, Dr. Joel E. Rubin and Mr. Thomas De Gaetani, with the assistance of Dr. Donald Swinney, President. A citation was presented to Dr. Rubin which reads as follows:

Citation of the USITT
To Dr. Joel E. Rubin
President of USITT 1963-1965
Technical Secretary of USITT 1960-1963

Who was indispensible in the formation and development of the USITT as a "national non-profit organization representing architectural presentational and operational experience in the living theatre on the academic, community and professional theatre level."

And who, in the service as its President from 1963 to 1965, substantially contributed, by his dedication, to the establishment of USITT as a research organization both national and international in scope.

And who, during his tenure as President, by his moral and material support, saw realized a long standing aim of the USITT: "Theatre Design and Technology- the Journal of the USITT."

We, the Board of Directors, hereby recognize his imaginative leadership, energetic spirit, and dedication to the aims and purpose of the Institute.

The Board of Directors
May 2nd, 1965
Bloomington, Indiana

NOLAN'S SCENIC STUDIO

In a former riding academy in Brooklyn, Mr. Robin Lacy, Chairman of the USITT Committee on Engineering met with a group of interested members to tour the studio and to discuss with Mr. Bernard Weiss, Mr. Charles Benddr, and Mr. Frank Meottel some aspects of set shifting techniques used by the Broadway theatre.

Mr. Weiss started the tour with a description of the usual procedure in building a show for Broadway. The entire show is redrafted and detailed from the original drawings by the designer to a much larger scale by the shop draftsman, who also figures out all the engineering of the mechanics of the shifting, storage, and the "breaking" of the wings for easy handling and shipping. After the units are built from these drawings, they are assembled in a trial setup area in the studio. This area even includes a complete flyfloor. After the set is fitted together properly, it is disassembled for flameproofing and covering, then it is sent to the painting area to be finished by the scenic artists.

The greatest part of the evening was spent discussing the "false stage" which is a portable floor, placed on top of the stage deck, made of 2" x 3" or 2" x 4" joists on two foot centers and covered with a double layer of 3/4" plywood. This might be further covered with 1/8" masonite or vinyl tile. Slots are provided in the false floor for steel shoes or "boats" to slide between. The "boats" slide on the permanent stage floor underneath the false floor and are actuated by 1/4" flexible steel cables which by means of floor sheaves are guided offstage to a winch. The boat has a slot which allows for the engagement of various pin devices from the wagons which rest on the top surface of the false floor, thereby allowing the wagons to be pulled when needed, but disengaged when not wanted. A similar system is used with turntables except that the turntable rests on the permanent floor with the remaining stage area built up to the same level as the revolve.

Because of the need for special hardware, Nolan's maintains a well-equipped metal shop on its premises where such devices can be developed. In addition, an entire line of winch systems are built around a standardized set of component parts which allow for the use of different speed ratios and cable lengths. An endless flexible steel cable called a Grommet is entwined between several V-grooved sheaves of the winch in a figure-8 pattern to achieve friction and the cable is then guided by sheaves along the floor to the aforementioned connecting devices.

Nolan's has also developed highly sophisticated winch systems which allow for the presetting of the speed and the position of the turntables during the running of the show. By using Selsyn motors at the revolve as well as the winch motor control, the exact position of the table is determined, and then started or stopped by a series of microswitches and relays. The most elaborate system allowed for a total of ten preset positions activated by the mere touch of a button.

- * -

USITT GENERAL MEETING: THE SARATOGA PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

About 25 interested spectators attended the presentation of the Saratoga Center for the Performing Arts in the offices of Vollmer Associates. Mr. C. Ray Smith, Chairman of the USITT Committee on Architecture introduced Mr. Arnold H. Vollmer, and Robert L. Rotner, partners-in-charge of the project, as well as the Consultants Robert Brannigan-Technical, Ben Schlanger - Seating and sightlines, and Paul S. Veneklasen - acoustics. A large working model of the structure and many plans, elevations and details were on hand for viewing. Photographs of the work in progress showed how the excavation and steel work looked at the present time.

The idea for a performing arts center in Saratoga originated with the Saratoga Springs Commission who wanted a center that would be an extension of a recreation area which already includes swimming pools, bath houses, and tennis courts. Vollmer Associates, architects and planners for the other facilities on the site of the state-owned Saratoga Springs Reservation, prepared a feasibility study for a "summer home for a ballet and orchestra company." Before money could be raised, however, it was necessary to have guaranteed tenants, so the New York City Ballet and the Philadelphia Orchestra were signed up.

Although the 5200 seat pavilion is being built on State property, the money for the theatre is mostly private. Of the three million dollars total, one million dollars is alloted for site development, the remaining money going to the building and associated equipment. To accomplish so much for so little the architects designed the three part structure around a framework of structural steel which for the most part will be open to view. The stagehouse has a corrugated sheeting exterior while the auditorium area has large redwood panels enclosing the balcony. The roof is concrete plank set on six huge steel trusses spanning the entire 126 foot length of the auditorium. A sound reflecting cement-stucco canopy projecting 35 feet over the audience will conceal part of the roof.

The stagehouse is a simple rectangular structure 100 feet high with the grid floor at 90 feet. The 100-foot wide and 60-foot deep stage has no traps and there is no asbestos curtain separating it from the auditorium. In fact, the top of the proscenium arch was made transonant--a mask which allows sound to pass through, which in effect couples the stage house with the auditorium acoustically in such a way as to improve the reverberation characteristics. The only mechanical equipment for the stage is the counterweight fly system which includes 104 sets of lines, some of which will be assigned to raise and lower the orchestra shell. Surrounding the stagehouse is a low structure which provides space for dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms and workshops. This backstage area is heated and airconditioned so that it can be used year round by the local community.

The center sits in a tree surrounded valley so that the large scale of the building is not readily apparent. This valley provided the beginnings of the gently sloped bowl that extends the seating capacity of the amphitheatre another 7000 to make a total of 12,200 seats. This outside seating area has sound reinforcement provided so that the orchestra can be adequately heard.

GARDEN STATE ARTS CENTER

Culture on the grass is rapidly growing. In addition to the Saratoga amphitheatre described above, a similar sized project is being planned by the New Jersey Parkway Authority. Edward Durell Stone's amphitheatre will become the cultural heart of the new $2.5 million Garden State Arts Center. The circular concrete structure will be set among the wooded slopes of Telegraph Hill Park, Monmouth County, just west of the Garden State Parkway which owns the tract.

The theatre, to accommodate nearly 10,000 persons, will have graduated seating, with space for 4800 under the overhanging roof and the remainder on the lawn. In addition to the amphitheatre, the project will include an art exhibition mall, nature trails and free parking.

-*-

ZOO STORY

The magic wand of the Muses is turning many a white elephant into a buck these days, all it takes is a dogged determination to keep the wolves away and a lot of crowing to secure the dough. A few morsels will be found in the lines below.

PROVIDENCE SAVES OLD VAUDEVILLE HOUSE

The 47-year old Albee Theatre, once a vaudeville house, has become Providence's new performing arts center, bringing top-flight entertainment to a city in the cultural doldrums. When the R.K.O. chain recently announced that the 2,200-seat Albee would be closed immediately as an unprofitable venture, a group of businessmen and the Rhode Island Fine Arts Council started a search for a possible way to secure it. To the rescue came Mr. B. A. Dario, President and Treasurer of Lincoln Downs Race Track, who promptly signed a $350,000 mortgage and purchased the theatre fixtures from R.K.O. for $1. Mrs. John C. A. Watkins, wife of the publisher of the Providence Journal-Bulletin, quickly organized an arts festival which included such stars as John Raitt and Arthur Fiedler to open the newly acquired municipal center. Since then, many local groups have performed there including The Rhode Island Symphony, the Trinity Square Playhouse and the State Ballet of Rhode Island.

LOUISVILLE SAVES OLD RAILROAD STATION

The Actors Theatre of Louisville has set up shop in the Illinois Central Railroad station and will make it its home for the next three years. The station was converted into an intimate 257-seat playhouse at a cost of $50,000. The station's main waiting room, 60 by 40 feet and 30 feet high, serves as the auditorium. The stage is set at one corner of the room

with the audience surrounding it in a 90-degree sweep. The theatre's lobby occupies the station's lobby and part of the auxiliary waiting room, which is almost as large as the auditorium. The station's ticket booths are being utilized. Eventually they plan to add a balcony with a seating capacity of 125. The remainder of the building will be used for rehearsal and dressing rooms, scene shops and storage space. Jasper Ward, Louisville architect, designed the theatre. He said he hoped he had succeeded in preserving the elegant feeling of the building while creating a dramatic effect.

NEW YORK SAVES OLD ASTOR LIBRARY

The large, ornate building at 425 Lafayette Street that opened 112 years ago as the Astor Library will become the first permanent home of the New York Shakespeare Festival. The Astor Library was New York's most celebrated cultural and architectural monument when it was constructed in the 1850's. A century of urban change turned it into one of the city's more notable white elephants, fated to go the way of Penn Station, but the delaying action made possible by the legal machinery of landmark designation held off demolition long enough to seek arrangements for the building's preservation and re-use.

The building, the first to be saved under the city's Landmark Preservation Law, will open with a five-play season in October, when a 200-seat theatre, the smaller of two planned for the building, is expected to be ready. As a landmark, the exterior must be preserved, although the interior may, and will be altered. Mr. Papp, the Festival's founder and producer, said that the festival would spend $1.8 million to renovate the building. It will include the first-floor 200-seat theatre; another on the second floor with 800 seats; a children's stage, rehearsal rooms, shops, classrooms, offices and an airconditioning plant. Mr. Papp is looking for a donor who will pay the entire cost in return for having his name given to the building.

WARSAW SAVES OLD COLONNADE

An elegant audience attended the gala opening of Warsaw's rebuilt Teatr Wialki. The Teatr Wialki (Grand Theatre) has been rebuilt on the site of the old opera house, which was shelled, bombed, and finally dynamited by the Germans in World War II. Only the front colonnade remains of that building. The theatre, which seats 1,905, has individual bathrooms for performers, closed circuit television for latecomers and 800 crystal chandeliers hanging from vividly decorated ceilings. It took 15 years to rebuild at a cost of millions and combines an opera house, theatre and ballet school, as well as gigantic stores, workshops and the first museum of theatre in Poland.

According to Wladyslaw Jotkiewicz, the chief engineer, the opera house is a big factory. Five stages can be moved within one or two minutes to replace the main stage by hydraulic pumps. More than 100 large decorations can be moved quickly onto the stage. Some local critics have

condemned the building as a white elephant, but others regard it as a shrine of national art.

-*-

THE BEAUMONT AGAIN

The Vivian Beaumont Theatre was recently honored by the Concrete Industry Board of New York as the best concrete structure erected in New York this year. The citation, made at an awards dinner in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, gave the theatre highest honors "in conception, originality and application of concrete both in design and construction." The board had good reason to celebrate the design, for its use of concrete is among the most massive in New York.

Pairs of concrete columns, five feet square and thirty feet high, support five giant concrete trusses that are more than eighteen feet deep, each with five large openings for passageways. The trusses are made in the shape of giant I-beams with nine-foot wide flanges. The upper flange, two and a half feet thick, is incorporated into the roof, while the bottom flange, is nearly 200 feet long, with clear spans between the columns of 150 feet and a 25 foot cantilevered overhang at each end. The concrete trusses and floors put a load up to 3.3 million pounds on each column.

-*-

BROADWAY MOVES TO LOS ANGELES

Plans to construct a 2600 seat legitimate theatre in Los Angeles to house hit Broadway musicals concurrent with their New York runs were recently disclosed by a group of prominent show business personalities. Under the plan, options would be taken on as many as 10 Broadway shows each season. If they proved to be successful in New York their producers and directors will be invited to form a West Coast company using Hollywood talent.

The theatre will be an integral part of a 24-story office building designed by Welton Becket and Associates, the concern that designed the new Los Angeles Music Center. The theatre will have a proscenium stage and seating with side entrances only. The orchestra will seat 1100 and the balcony and mezzanine 1500. There will also be a separate rehearsal stage so that new shows can be prepared without interrupting the regular program. The theatre can be reduced to a house seating 1800 for intimate plays. Robert Brannigan is Technical consultant.

AND TO THE VILLAGE

The Village Theatre at Second Avenue and Sixth Street, formerly known as the Commodore Theatre, has been sold by Loew's Theatres, Inc., to Roger Euster, an investor, for cash above a first mortgage of $400,000. The theatre was built in 1926 as a vaudeville house but for many years has been a motion picture theatre. It now shows Yiddish vaudeville on

weekends. Mr. Euster plans to develop the 2715-seat theatre into "a prime showcase for Broadway productions," according to the brokers in the transaction.

-*-

NEW BROCHURES AVAILABLE.

Skirpan Electronics, Inc., 41-43 24th Street, Long Island City, N.Y. 11101, announces that literature on its complete line of solid state electronic dimmers, including technical specifications, characteristic curves and prices, may be obtained from the factory upon request.

Theatre Sound, Inc., Bethany Wood Road, Bethany, Connecticut, has a brochure available upon request describing its equipment as currently used in several theatres. Mr. Erwin Steward, President of the firm, presented a paper to the USITT Engineering Committee this past November describing the aims as well as the specifications of his systems.

Educational Facilities Laboratories, Inc., a nonprofit corporation established by the Ford Foundation to help American schools and colleges with their physical problems by the encouragement of research and experimentation and the dissemination of information about educational facilities, has recently published a thirty-six page booklet entitled "fine arts facilities: past, present, future." The booklet examines the "big planning questions" of multipurpose theatre-auditoriums versus decentralized facilities and follows with a detailed, illustrated report on new arts facilities at Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Webster College, Webster Groves, Missouri, which represent widely divergent architectural solutions. Free copies of the Newsletter No. 6 are available from EFL, 477 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N.Y.

-*-

DARING ARCHITECT DIES

Frederick J. Kiesler, sculptor and architect, died of a heart attack December 28, 1965. He was 75 years old. A visionary poet of space and form, Mr. Kiesler sought to revolutionize construction design. Perhaps his most daring concept was his "endless house," a free-form circular home that was more sculpture than building.

Mr. Kiesler was born in Vienna in 1890. He entered the Academy of Plastic Art at the age of 15, supporting himself by working odd hours in architects' offices. In 1920, Mr. Kiesler began his architectural career with Adolf Loos, working on a slum clearance project in Vienna. But in 1923 he became involved with the problems of theatre construction, and designed the first version of his endless house as a theatre. After designing a "space stage" for a Berlin production of Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones," with sets in continuous motion coordinated with the play and

lighting, he designed the first theatre in the round while he was the architect and director of the Vienna Theatre Festival.

In 1926 Mr. Kiesler came to the United States at the invitation of the Theatre Guild to participate in an exhibition of international theatre Technique. From 1933 to 1957, Mr. Kiesler was the scenic director for the Juilliard School of Music, turning out imaginative sets at little cost. For much of his life he was almost unknown outside of his profession. His stage designs were highly praised by reviewers, particularly the single room constructed for Jean Paul Sartre's "No Exit." "The Universal an urban theater center" was one of the eight concepts of the Ideal Theater sponsored by the Ford Foundation Program for Theater Design. Uniquely, Mr. Kieslers' project was the only one credited to an individual. His last major work, the Shrine of the Book, houses the collection of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Israeli sector of Jerusalem.

BROADWAY SAVES OLD PALACE THEATRE

January saw the 1720-seat Palace Theatre officially become Broadway's second largest legitimate theatre (the largest is the Broadway with 1785 seats) when Gwen Verdun kicked up her heels in "Sweet Charity." The Theatre was purchased last August by the Nederlander Theatrical Corporation of Detroit for $1.4-million from RKO Theatres, Inc. The purchaser has since spent $500,000 to refurbish the theatre, under the direction of scenic designer, Ralph Alswang, who has tried to warm up a bit the baroque of the original and at the same time make the volume of the space seem more intimate. Red is the dominant color inside the theatre. The seats are of red velour, there is red baroque paneling on the ceiling and the carpeting is red, black and burgundy with a grecian design woven in. The walls are gold and cream.

-*-

This Newsletter is made possible by the Following Sustaining Members:

Architects and Engineers

Harrison & Abramovitz
Ebner-Schmidt Associates

Manufacturers

Century Lighting, Inc.
J. R. Clancy, Inc.
Janson Industries
Kleigl Brothers Lighting
Lighting and Electronics
Little Stage Lighting Co.
Major Equipment Co.
Stage Decoration and Supply
Tiffin Scenic Studies, Inc.
Ward Leonard Electric Co.