

Barton's Golden Voice Sings Again Sunday

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

In a way it will be déjà vu this Sunday afternoon February 10 when internationally recognized Dennis James plays the Ringling Theatre's Barton Organ. Déjà vu with July 15, 1928, that is, when the new Barton "Golden Voiced" organ was first played in the Theatre.

They turned away the crowds lined up that day after two full house performances on the amazing new organ just installed in the elegant Al. Ringling Theatre. Billed as having a golden voice, the organ was a magnificent addition to Baraboo's opulent and nationally recognized playhouse.

Dennis James Will Play

They ought to be turning away the crowd this coming Sunday afternoon (3 PM) like they did 85 years ago. The organ will sing as never before in the talented hands of maestro Dennis James. This noted keyboard artist will not only demonstrate the organ at its finest, but supply a vintage silent film and demonstrate how talented theatre musicians added life to the silent screen in the early days of cinematography.

James will accompany "The Cameraman," a silent film with Buster Keaton which probably showed in this theatre before the advent of talking pictures in 1929. Remarkably, John Ringling had approved installation of a new \$15,000 instrument in 1928. Remarkable because everyone knew we would have talking pictures in 1929 and an organ would not be necessary to add sound and expression to an otherwise soundless screen.

The Authentic Organ

The Barton is one of the very few features not original to the vintage Ringling theatre, though its 85 years should qualify it for authenticity. The organ today remains exactly as installed. It would be easy to add electronic voices strategically placed around the auditorium but the various owners of the theatre have all concluded that its charm and silent film vintage outweighs any changes.

Instead, the organ has been carefully maintained in good operating condition, and can be spectacular in its presentation. Besides being a pipe organ, it is equipped for sounds needed for the silent film era, and sports such additions as the bird calls, thunder, drums and cymbals, chimes, bells, wood block, tom tom, xylophone and other additions to be used at the will of the musician. He can also use several levels of volume.

Appropriately the organ will, at the bidding of the operator, rise some 5-6 feet out of the orchestra pit, spectacular as it has its own lighting system also. Everything about the organ and its operation is 1928 technology, producing an enviable experience alternative to the sometimes

responsive, however, to rapid musical passages if the organist is capable of the keyboard skill required.

Historical Notes

The new organ seemed overwhelming to the folks in 1928, even though they were aware of the theatre's slogan "Nothing is too Good for Baraboo". Its acquisition was announced on May 1 and carefully reported in the following months. The original Wurlitzer had served for 12 years, but inadequately, and would be sold to the Advent Christian Church.

Barton organs were an Oshkosh product, and owner Dan Barton, a former circus man, came to install it personally. It is said that Dan added some unusual effects not normally found in this organ series in respect for his old friend Al. Ringling.

Considerable changes to the orchestra pit were required to accommodate the large console, so a live orchestra was formed to take the place of organ music for a few weeks. These were peak times of the silent film era, with classic movies such as Ben Hur playing at the time. After installation, Frank Terbilcox Sr. was hired as the new full time organist.

Dan Barton's organ has served well for 85 years, and continues to enjoy regular use. Although smaller than many organs Dennis James plays, it is just right for the size of the Ringling, and James comes every couple years to check it out.

There are hardly half a dozen theatres with organs still in use in Wisconsin, and the Barton is probably the only one that still rises majestically out of the orchestra pit. As the slogan went, "Nothing is too Good for Baraboo".

The late Clark Wilkinson kept 38 scrapbooks about the theatre over the years, and they have been carefully cataloged by Inez Stewart. We thank them for making this article possible. I'm sure Dennis James thanks them also.

