

“Mighty Mo” at The Fox Theatre in Atlanta

August 2021





The Fox Theatre in Atlanta



The Fox Theatre, world-renowned as a concert and event venue like no other, began its story in a most unusual way. The Fox was originally conceived as a home for Atlanta's Shriners organization. To create a headquarters befitting the group's prominent social status, the Shriners looked to the ancient temples of the Far East to inspire a mosque-style structure befitting their stature. Storied architectural gems like the Alhambra in Spain and Egypt's Temple of Kharnak heavily influenced the building's elaborate and intensely ornate design. Bursting with soaring domes, minarets and sweeping archways, the exterior of the building gave way to stunning gold leaf details, sumptuous textiles and exquisite trompe l'oeil art (an art technique that uses realistic imagery to create optical illusions) inside.

Ultimately, the design was so fantastical, it became more of a financial burden than the Shriners could bear. Shortly before its completion, the Shriners leased their beautiful auditorium to William Fox, a movie mogul who had launched his empire by building theatres across the country to meet America's insatiable affec-

tion for the new moving pictures that were sweeping the nation. By the end of the 1920s, these aptly-named "movie palaces" were an integral part of nearly every community in the country, each one more gilded and exquisite than the next. Developers like Fox spared no expense, understanding all too well that these movie palaces were the gateway to a brave new world, transporting eager audiences to exotic, elegant settings they could only imagine.

With Fox's financial backing (the project cost more than \$3 million, the equivalent of nearly \$40 million today), the 250,000 square foot Fox Theatre was completed, with the crowning addition of "Mighty Mo," the 3,622-pipe Möller organ that remains the largest Möller theatre organ in the world even today. The Fox opened on Christmas Day in 1929 to a sold-out crowd, premiering *Steamboat Willie*, Disney's first cartoon starring Mickey Mouse.

Word about the magnificent new Fox Theatre quickly spread. Its striking red-carpeted entryway and ornate gilt work, soaring turreted ceilings and stained glass windows, all leading to a vast cobalt "sky" with a sea of twinkling

stars, were the perfect accent for the glamorous productions audiences lined up to see. Despite its popularity, Fox's grandeur couldn't save it from the far-reaching effects of the Great Depression.

In 1932, William Fox and the theatre were forced to declare bankruptcy, and Fox lost his namesake movie palace. The Fox was auctioned on courthouse steps and sold to a private company for a paltry \$75,000 during Mr. Fox's bankruptcy proceedings but remained a beloved destination for Atlanta's moviegoers. For the next three decades, the Fox remained in high demand, showing hundreds of acclaimed films, hosting live performances ranging from the Metropolitan Opera Company to pop legends like Nelson Eddy, and its Egyptian Ballroom reigning as the favorite dance hall in Atlanta as the craze for live Big Band and Swing music swept the nation.

For visitors curious about the colorful history of the unforgettable Fox, or just itching for a close-up look at the beautiful building, the Fox is pleased to offer tours of the theatre. These 60-minute tours are guided by dedicated Fox employees who relish the opportunity to provide intimate firsthand details about the theatre's remarkable story, and give guests an unprecedented look at Atlanta's favorite theatre.

Fox Organists

Iris Wilkins, Jimmy Beers,
Al Evans, Eddie Ford,
Cliff Cameron, Homer
Knowles, Graham Jackson,
Don Mathis, Dale Stone,
Stanley Malotte,
Bob Van Camp, Robert Irvin,
Walt Winn, Jay Mitchell,
Larry-Douglas Embury,
Rick McGee, Ken Double

The Refurbishing and Renovation of "Mighty Mo" ★ ★ ★

The Discussion that Started It All

In the Fall of 2017, following a meeting with the management of the Atlanta Fox Theatre, a decision was made that continued in the tradition of the Fox – with preservation at the forefront. This decision did not involve theatre seating, carpeting, plaster or lighting. This decision was focused on Mighty Mo, the great Möller pipe organ, and more specifically, its ornate console. Nearing 90-years-old and in need of restoration, the Fox leadership did what it so often does so well. Management decided it was time to invest in Mighty Mo. ~ Ken Double



A Special Place

I do not need to tell anyone how special the Fox Theater is. It is scary to think how close Atlanta came to losing this movie palace.

As a member of the family that owns Schlueter Pipe Organ Company, I wanted to share a brief story. When I (Arthur Schlueter, III) was seven years old I was taken to the Fox Theater by my mother and father (Arthur E. Schlueter Jr.). We met Joe Patten and were given a tour and I saw my first movie there. I saw the minarets, the stars in its sky and importantly, heard Mighty

Mo. I was enraptured by the place. I remember as a very young child being aghast that there would be any thought to razing this structure. If anything, it resulted in what was a seven year old version of rage.

I remember well that there was a large jar for donations for the *Save The Fox* campaign. I like to tell people that I did not know what an allowance was but I knew it involved money. I begged \$1 dollar from my parents and put it in that jar. It was my first act of philanthropy and one that I am very proud of because \$1 of the Fox is mine!

In later years whenever our family would mention that we were in the organ business the first question asked was, "Do you work on the organ at the Fox?" There is no more apropos indication of the place the general public holds the Fox organ than its standing as THE example of a pipe organ in this region. With the completion of our restoration of the Mighty Mo console we graciously have welcomed the chance to be able to answer "Yes!" when asked, "Do you work on the organ at the Fox?"

It was our sincere desire to celebrate this historic instrument by

being able to share its voice with so many who love this instrument. Accordingly, a CD was funded by the A. E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company led under the able direction of Arthur E. Schlueter, Jr.

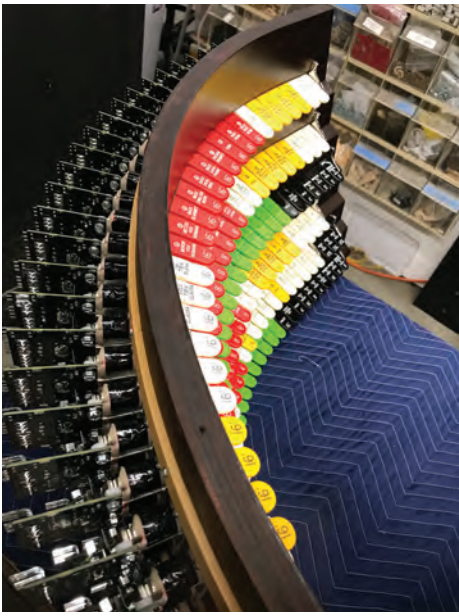
Schlueter's Work on Mighty Mo

When our firm was approached to consider a bid for work at the Fox Theater in Atlanta there were a number of differing plans being considered. We proposed a plan for rebuilding the present console with new interior workings. Our work was designed to retain the Mighty Mo console shell and Moller interior controls and rebuild it with new internal parts and workings. We would carefully strip the paint, tracery, and patina of age to reveal its original paint and artwork. This allowed us to restore the look of the organ console as it was originally created.

With input from top organists, it had been recommended to add some changes to the unification and stop duplexes to facilitate its use in theater organ repertoire. This having been said, no changes occurred to the pipework of the organ and no electronic or synthetic voices were



Studies for patterns/historic finishes for Mo front panels.



Horseshoe rail, tabs, and SAM units.

added to the organ. The pipes and actions in the organ chamber remain unchanged and unsullied.

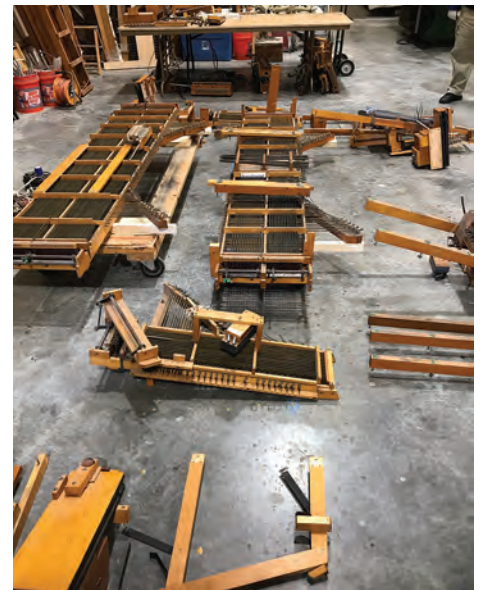
We zealously documented the organ to assure in the rebuilding of the console that the expression shades work in the same manner, the toys and effects would work in the same manner and even the original crescendo was documented so it could be duplicated.

We wanted to assure that the console looked and “felt” like the way it

was built. The keyboards and tab units were designed to have the tactile feel of the 1929 Moller. As part of our work, we rebuilt and retained items such as the mechanical expression indicators and the unique shade selector controls. The wooden expression shoes were retained with new mechanisms behind them and their engraved surfaces recut and refinished. To allow a control location for the needs of a modern combination system, we remanufactured the plate for the unused call box to the right of the keyboards and “hid” these controls and displays within the 1929 brass plate. Even lighting and elevator controls were restored to their original appearance. The result is a console that feels like it has seamlessly passed through time with its original look.

Stand-In Console

Mighty Mo has continued to function in large part because it has been in constant use almost all of its life. This constant exercise has been part of its longevity. To assure it continued its performance role, we knew that somehow Mighty Mo needed to be able to be played during the major work to the con-



Obsolete Mo console components before being crated and returned to the Fox.

sole. Our unique solution was to build a temporary console that in theatre parlance we referred to as the “stand-in console,” which would be built of the same stature as the original console. This “Faux Mo” would be installed and allow the organ to continue to play while the original console was being rebuilt. This is the path we recommended and which was accepted by the Fox management.





Leigh Burns and the Schlueter team discuss removable console panel design.

Preservation

We wanted to make sure that the work we were doing created the least harm for any future restorer or archivist. We dutifully worked with the Fox Institute's Director, Leigh Burns, to detail our work throughout the restoration. All of the internal parts and actions of the original organ console that were not reused were retained. These parts were documented when they were taken apart and packed into individual crates for safekeeping. The original relays remain in the organ chambers with only the output wires removed to the organ windchests. If someone wanted to "undo" the present body of work, all parts and documentation are available. We considered this the most responsible way we could affect the changes we were called upon to make to the organ while still allowing a path of reversion if ever desired.

More Details Online

Due to space limitations, we have posted more details online, including the full organ specification and additional photos of the renovation process, which you may view at:

www.pipe-organ.com/fox-theatre/

Gratias Tibi Ago (Thank You!)

This project could not have been completed without the help of so many. We want to thank the Fox Theatre Board of Directors and Management.

The Fox Theatre Board of Directors includes: Edward L. (Woody) White - Chairman, Mark C. Adams, Latanza Adjei, Clara Axam, Robyn Barkin, Keith O. Cowan, Renee Dye, Ryan Halpern, Larry Hanson, John R. Holder, Doug Hooker, Walt Huntley, Jr., Ed Hutchison, Craig B. Jones, Rich Kannwischer, Lauren A. Koontz, Sonjui Kumar, Jay Myers, Glen J. Romm, Howard Smith, Scott Taylor.

The Fox Theatre Management team includes: Allan Vella (President/CEO), Jamie Vosmeier (Vice President of Sales and Marketing), Scott Christopher (Director of Op-

erations), Aly Grubb (Director of Marketing), and Amy Smith (Director of Production).

Very special thanks to The Fox Theatre Institute: Leigh Burns (Director Fox Theatre Institute), Michele Schuff (Consulting Archivist), and John Busby (Architect and Board Member Emeritis).

We especially appreciate the richly talented organists at the Fox Theater Ken Double and Rick McGee, who were so helpful throughout this project. And a special "thank you" to Ken for inclusion of a Schlueter favorite from *The New Moon* on the "Mighty Mo" CD. We also appreciate the contributions from Jonas Nordwall, acclaimed organist, who has played Mo many times, for his input in creating the new stoplist.

Our staff and others who formed the team that ably contributed their special talents and skills in the rebuilding of the Mighty Mo console includes: Arthur E. Schlueter, Jr., Arthur E. Schlueter, III, John Tanner, Marc Conley, Patrick Hodges, Jeremiah Hodges, Peter Duys, Marshall Foxworthy, Kerry Bunn, Al Schroer, Bob Weaver, Michael DeSimone, Dallas Wood, Josey Davis, Preston Wilson, Clifton Frierson, Kelvin Cheatham, Ruth Lopez, Sara Cruz, Ruth Gomez, Yolanda Sandoval, Shan Dalton-Bowen, Nancy Livengood, Larry Donaldson, Greg Daniel, Restoration Craftsmen, and Uniflex.



The A.E. Schlueter installation team with Mighty Mo console.

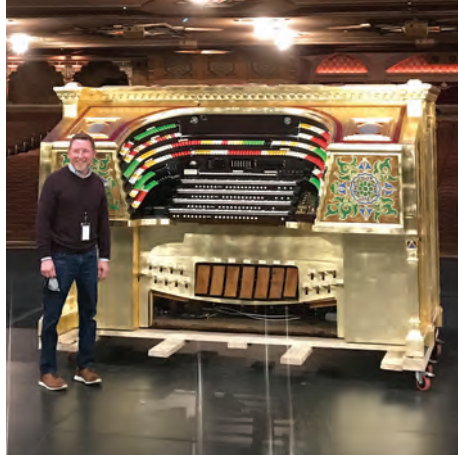


The Fox Theatre Institute



The Fox Theatre Institute (FTI) is a dynamic outreach program offering historic preservation and operations expertise, consultation, and education to performing arts venues in Georgia and the region. Founded in 2008, FTI pays it forward, helping other cultural institutions renew, reinvigorate, and restore artistic vitality in their respective communities. In keeping environmental and economic impact top of mind, FTI offers the financial assistance, restoration support, and operations mentoring needed to leverage scarce resources and stimulate local economies.

FTI was founded in response to a statewide need for assistance with the restoration and operation of Georgia's historic theatres. Since that time, the Fox Theatre has granted



Fox President and CEO Allan Vella and Fox staff celebrates with a "welcome home" party.



more than \$2.2 million in financial grant support to theatres throughout Georgia and the Southeast. FTI provides historic preservation grants and guidance, offers professional development through seminars and

strategic planning, and manages a statewide booking consortium, which encourages collaboration among arts presenters in Georgia and the region. Learn more about the Fox Theatre Institute at www.foxtheatre.org.



A Word from Organist Ken Double



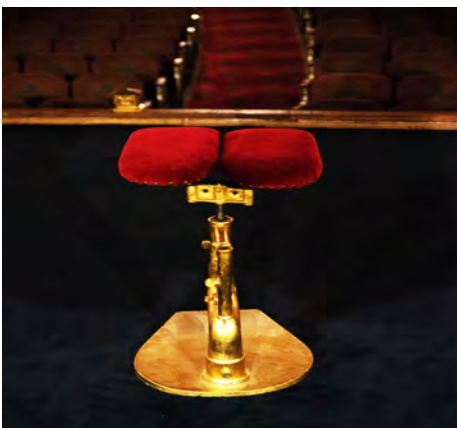
Those of us privileged to play these great pipe organs are tasked with creating music on a most distinctive musical instrument. No two theatre pipe organs are the same. There is none more distinctive than Mighty Mo.

What the A.E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Company has accomplished in creating the refurbished console for Mighty Mo is to allow the musician to access every bit of

what this great organ can create. From the most subtle voices in the Ethereal Chamber high up on the right side; to the thundering 32' Diaphones and the unique voices of the French Horn, the English Horn, and those gorgeous three Tibias, and 13 sets of strings, those of us who play "conductor-to-this-orchestra" can now unleash tonal subtleties and full-throated roar, allowing Mighty Mo to be heard like never before.

Congratulations to Art and Arthur Schlueter, John Tanner, Marc Conley and the entire staff for their spectacular work on one of the great pipe organs in the world. And, thanks, as well, to Allan Vella, Woody White and the Board of Directors, and the management of Atlanta's landmark Fox Theatre for their vision and commitment to presenting this one-of-a-kind pipe organ to the

public. We are blessed by that vision. ~ Ken Double



For a copy of the CD *Magnificent Melodies on "Mighty Mo"* featuring Ken Double, please send us a request on our website www.pipe-organ.com, or visit Ken Double's website at www.kendoubleproductions.com