

# Backstage at Radio City Music Hall

By Dean Irwin

As we slowly recover from the worst theatrical shut-down the city has ever known, how many of us will actually get off our couch and stop streaming video long enough to travel into post-Covid Midtown? Has the pandemic changed performance forever? When we reflect on theatrical history, one thing is clear. Midtown has always been transitioning and changing our idea of what entertainment is—with or without a pandemic.

I grew up backstage at Radio City Music Hall and got to see a few of those transitions firsthand. My backstage pass? Both my parents were members of Local 802.

My father Will Irwin, who joined Local 802 in 1924, was the musical director of more than 30 Broadway shows in the 1940's. He was musical director of Radio City in the 1960's and 70s. My mother Helen Irwin, who joined Local 802 in 1938, was a harpist for several Broadway shows, including *Oklahoma*, where she met my dad. She was also part of a harp quartet founded by Djina Ostrowska.

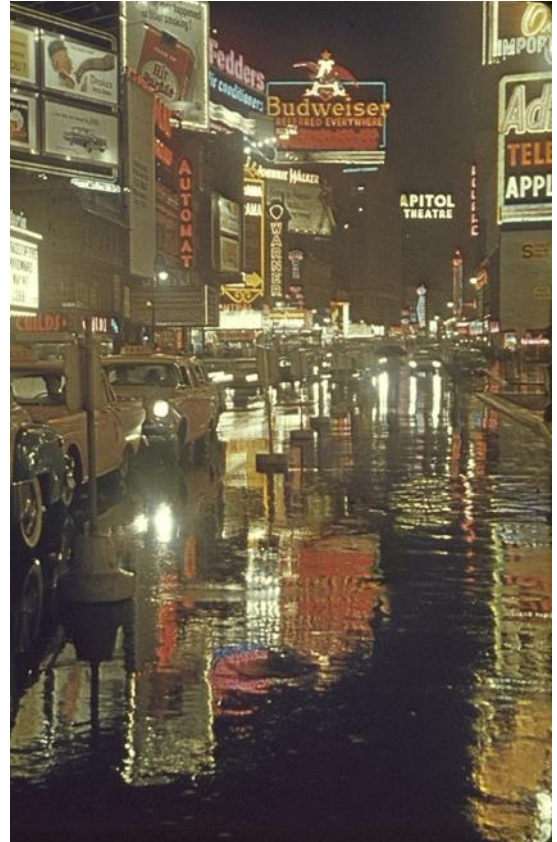


Some of us old enough to have been on the 1-B vaccination list can recall a New York City with theaters—such as Radio City, the Capitol and the Roxy—that offered a live stage show plus a movie several times a day. These huge showplaces employed a multitude of performers and were once considered the future of show business. Eventually, they served as bridges from live theater to cinema, just as video streaming today offers a bridge from stage performance to the comfort of our homes. But comfort and familiarity have always been a way to attract paying audiences.

A hundred years ago, the idea of shelling out a nickel to sit in a dark, shabby room, watching a silent, black-and-white image flicker on a wall struck many people as suspicious, even unhealthy. Why were the lights so low? You could barely see the person sitting next to you. Anything might happen.

The early cinema experience in a nickelodeon was a far cry from the glory of live theater. So, gifted entrepreneurs in the 1910's started renovating movie houses to offer what theater patrons expected: comfy seats, luxurious decor, better lighting, and a pipe organ to accompany silent films instead of a piano.

This soon went beyond equipping live Vaudeville theaters with movie projection; impresarios in major cities started building theatrical palaces designed to fold the silent film experience into a spectacular stage event, with a small army of singers, dancers and musicians. Known as Presentation Houses, they drew audiences by the thousands.



Nobody was better at this than a German-Jewish immigrant named Samuel L. Rothafel, known as Roxy. He rose from showing silent films in the backroom of a hotel in Forest City, Pennsylvania, to being the most sought-after movie presenter in New York City just six years later.



Roxy had a showman's gift for getting people to line up for this new type of theatrical experience. Recalling his humble childhood, part of Roxy's mission was to offer a truck driver the same cultural experience as an opera fan, "A college degree for the price of a movie ticket."

There were cut-down versions of classical pieces for the orchestra, patriotic songs, live pageants during holidays. Above all, it was good for business.

Roxy's financial backers were impressed and put him in charge of a series of New York City theaters, each outdoing its predecessor in grandeur. The Strand at 47<sup>th</sup> and Broadway was upstaged in 1916 by the Rialto at

42<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway. Then a year later, Roxy took over Broadway's new Rivoli between 49<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup>, followed by the big Capitol theater just north of Times Square in 1920. Each had its own company of artists that delivered live stage presentations in between movie showings, sometimes performing as the film was projected.

It was during his management of the Capitol that Roxy began to use the brand-new medium of commercial radio to broadcast his stage shows. Even more ingenious was his idea to go backstage with a group of performers sitting around a microphone, letting his radio audience eavesdrop behind the curtain. By 1923, millions of Americans who had purchased radio sets stayed home on Friday nights, listening to a live theatrical broadcast from the Capitol and hearing Roxy and his Gang talk about it. They were the streaming equivalent of their day.



As Ross Melnick points out in his fine biography of Rothafel, *American Showman*, at a time when many producers worried that Radio would destroy live theater, Roxy figured out that radio actually attracted thousands of new fans who would travel to New York City just to see his famous theater.

In 1927, a group of financiers built a movie palace even grander than the Capitol at the corner of Seventh Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> street with the latest in film projectors, an orchestra of 110 musicians, a choir of 110 singers, three pipe organs, and an all-women precision dance troupe imported from St. Louis called The Roxyettes. In fact, the theater itself was named the Roxy, not simply to honor Rothafel's success, but because Roxy had become a star who could draw big audiences. "It's the Roxy and I'm Roxy," he said when his theater was compared to the Roman Coliseum, "I'd rather be Roxy than John D. Rockefeller or Henry Ford." It was the peak of his career.

A generation later, when my mother and I emerged from the subway at that same corner on Seventh Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> street in the summer of 1960, the Roxy theater had just been



torn down to make room for a drab office building, one of many turning Midtown into a series of glass and steel boxes. Roxy himself had died of a weak heart in 1936 when he was just 53. He'd had a warning four years earlier in the form of a heart attack on opening night of the last grand theater built just for him—Radio City Music Hall.

But Roxy had made the mistake of switching the successful formula of a movie and a show into an endless stage spectacle that seemed to go on forever. The critics were not kind and by the time Roxy recovered his health, he had lost his influence at the Radio City Music Hall. Management quickly restored the stage show/movie format and, staffed by many of the talented people Roxy brought with him, it became a success.

One talent Roxy brought to Radio City was Russell Markert, the choreographer who had created the St. Louis Rockets who became the Roxyettes—but changed their name again to the Rockettes now that they were installed in the new Rockefeller Center. He enlarged the troupe to 36, enough dancers to fill the length of the Music Hall's enormous stage, a block long. The tallest women were put in the center, to strengthen the illusion of a straight line, and each could kick higher than her head, in perfect unison.

There was Erno Rapee, the orchestral conductor who partnered with Roxy to create custom scores for the silent films that played in his theaters and on the radio. He took over as the first musical director of Radio City Music Hall. And Leon Leonidoff, the Romanian dancer who started as Roxy's assistant, became the Music Hall's longtime senior producer, taking his old boss's pageants and spectacles and making them even bigger.

Then, 28 years after opening night, Radio City added one more talented theater professional as their new choral director, my father, which is why my mother and I were on our way to visit him that day in 1960.

My dad, Will Irwin, had won a scholarship to Juilliard, trained in piano and classical composition but ended up falling in love with Broadway. Befriended by Vernon Duke and George Gershwin, my father dreamed of becoming a songwriter, and Gershwin couldn't have been kinder to him. He would invite my dad to his penthouse apartment on Riverside Drive, where, after dinner, he, my father and Oscar Levant would improvise together in an attic room with three pianos. Levant nicknamed my dad "Juilliard", probably because my father seemed so sincere as a starry-eyed twenty-year-old. Or maybe it was also because he was a good pianist, good enough to support himself and his mother by playing at clubs and speakeasies around the city.





Gershwin knew my dad needed work, so he got him a job as the pianist in his new musical *Let 'em Eat Cake*, the sequel to *Of Thee I Sing*, but the show was a flop and my dad was soon out of work.

So, Gershwin introduced him to Irving Berlin, who needed a musical secretary to put the songs he created on paper. Berlin could neither read nor write musical notation. He was so afraid he would lose an idea before someone could write it down that he'd call my father in the middle of the night, telling him to get over to his office right away before he forgot the melody. It wasn't the easiest job in show business, but it was a start.

Little by little, my dad became the pianist for many Broadway musicals, gradually working his way up to becoming a musical director. By the 1940's he was conducting Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma* when he noticed an attractive harpist in the orchestra who became my mother a few years later. Harpists lean their instrument back on their bellies to play, filling my gestation period with arpeggios and glissandos. Fortunately for me, Broadway shows kept mostly to major keys.

We traveled around the country in the early 1950's during the twilight of the great passenger trains with the national tours of *South Pacific* and *The King and I*. The whole company rode together on the train: Yul Brynner as the King, Patricia Morrison as Mrs. Anna, a score of Hispanic kids as the king's children, who passed for the Siamese royal family under the lights. There were key stage hands and the eight principal musicians in my dad's orchestra. We would pull into a new city on Sunday night, get to the hotel and next morning my dad would pick up the rest of a brand-new orchestra for a performance that night. Next Sunday we'd travel again. We did this for five years.

Long before 1960, school prevented me from continuing life on the Road and my parents had grown weary of traveling, so the job of Choral Director at Radio City offered my father that rarest of things: a steady job in live theater.

It was steady because in those years the Music Hall never closed. It was the biggest indoor theater in the world, seating an audience of over 6,000, alternating a new stage show with a first-run movie premiere four times a day, seven days a week. For the weeks around Christmas and Easter, there were five shows a day to accommodate the huge crowds who waited in lines around the block. When the movie changed, the stage show

changed with it. Everyone at the theater hoped for a long movie run so they didn't have to rush into production for the next show.



On that afternoon in 1960, my mom and I found the 51<sup>st</sup> street stage entrance and went up to the fifth floor where my dad had a small office with an upright piano and a desk. His job as Choral Director was to hire and rehearse the singers needed for each production, which varied, depending on how many voices were required. Sometimes he put together a choir of 16 men to sing Max Bruch's "Kol Nidrei" for the show that ran during the Jewish high holy days; sometimes he needed a group to sing carols and double as wise men for the Christmas show. Leon Leonidoff, who had never lost his Romanian accent, turned to my dad at the dress rehearsal of a Christmas Show and asked "Vill, where did you find such stupid vise men?" He didn't like the way my dad's singers stumbled around the manger.

There were live animals during the Christmas show: a baby elephant, a camel, a horse and several sheep who stayed on stage level in the Animal Room, making the theater smell like the circus it actually was. Besides the Rockettes, there was a resident Corps de Ballet, vocal soloists, the 50-piece orchestra, and guest acts that were booked for every show: jugglers, acrobats, magicians, professional whistlers, stand-up comics, bull-whip artists who could flick a cigarette from the lips of a glamorous assistant.

Behind the scenes, a phalanx of carpenters, prop men, electricians and hydraulics mechanics handled the sets, the fly floor, the lights, and the three massive elevators and turntable which made up the surface of the stage.

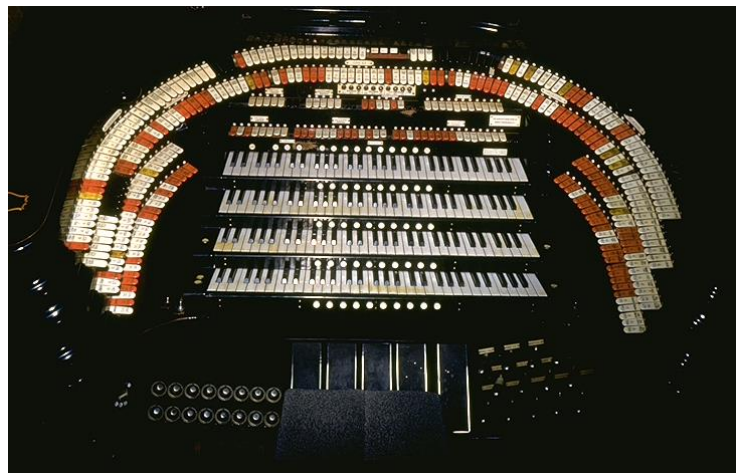
Interestingly, the elevator system was built by Otis Elevator in 1932 and used as the technology for U.S. aircraft carriers in World War II. During the war, there were government agents backstage to prevent espionage.



Between the stage shows and movie presentations was a twelve-minute intermission when audience members who'd already seen the show could leave, and new spectators could enter and take their seats. It was known as the Organ Break because when the houselights came up, one of the Music Hall's resident organists would pop out of an alcove on either side of the stage and play the massive pipe organ, the largest ever built by the Wurlitzer company.

The organist's sudden appearance seemed like magic because the audience, distracted by the end of the movie, hadn't seen him slip unobtrusively behind the curtains housing the organ console on the side of the stage.

When the houselights came up, the organist would hit a switch, opening the alcove curtains and moving the entire console out towards the audience on a motorized track and into the spotlight. At the end of the break, he'd hit the switch and glide back into the alcove.





Ray Bohr, the assistant chief organist, told me that one day when he flipped the switch and started playing, the console kept moving out, straining against four huge chains which held the organ to the back of the wall, threatening to topple over into the first rows of the audience. Bucking back and forth on the organ, Ray yelled at the people in the front to get away from him before they were crushed. Stagehands disabled the switch and saved the day. Ray finished the break, and the show went on.

It was just one of many backstage stories, some funny, like the star of Bethlehem getting stuck on its overhead track at Christmas, and some fatal, like a performer falling to his death when part of the stage had been lowered sixty feet to load a set. It was a big place with a lot of moving parts.

As a kid, I was always fascinated by the pipe organ, whose parts were hidden all over the ceiling of the auditorium—Radio City's famous series of concentric rings, shaped like a sunset. From my dad's fifth floor office, I would wander down the hall to a big metal door, unlocked in those days, which led to shadowy catwalks inside the roof of the theater. There in the darkness I could glimpse the stage and the audience far below.



During the organ breaks, xylophones and bells a few feet from me would burst into life as the organist pulled the stops. The huge 32-foot bass pipes for the pedals made the whole building shake.

Since the theater never closed, there was a daily rhythm to the Music Hall, like a small village, starting around 10 in the morning when the doors would open, and ushers would seat people for the first showing of the movie.



The first stage show happened around noon and would run anywhere between 35 minutes to an hour, depending on the length of the film. The second show began around 2:30pm, the “dinner” show around 6pm, and the last show would start between 8 and 9 in the evening.

The fourth show was considered the most important of the day, with ticket prices slightly higher and performers warmed up and on their toes. The musical director wore a tuxedo instead of a dinner jacket for the fourth show and until the 1950's, the chief stage manager also wore a tux backstage, even though the audience couldn't see him.

Thanks to his Broadway experience, my dad soon became one of the assistant conductors. His boss was Raymond Paige, who'd made a name as a popular orchestra leader in the 1950's. Red-haired and of Welsh extraction, Mr. Paige was a showman on the podium. With a sense of humor and a taste for drink between shows, he told my dad that one of the 1930's mother-of-pearl buttons on the conductor's stand could blow up the orchestra pit. My dad never tried it, but he quickly became the musical liaison between Raymond Paige and the hot-tempered producer, Leon Leonidoff, on the opening day of a new show.



Furious that tempos were wrong and corrections from dress rehearsal hadn't been followed, Leon would search for Paige in his office and backstage. “Vill,” he would ask my dad in his ungrammatical way, “Did you see Paige? He is hiding from me. I know he is hiding.” My dad would plead ignorance, then, back in his office, he'd get a phone call with a quiet voice on the other end.

“Will? Raymond Paige. Is your wife with you?” “No, Mr. Paige.” “And your young son...he's not visiting?” “Why no, Mr. Paige.” “Good. I'm in the second chair behind the blue mirror in the Men's lounge. Come get me and we'll step across the street to Schrafft's and have a cup of cheer.” At the restaurant bar, my dad would go over the show notes. He was becoming part of the family, part of a self-contained entertainment complex.

The Music Hall had its own cafeteria, its own hospital, its own daytime dormitories. There were vast rooms in the basement where sets for the next show were built, rehearsal halls

on the top floors where the orchestra, dancers and singers could work out their routines. Dress rehearsals took place at 5am, hours before the theater opened for the run of a new movie and a new show. Stagehands had been up all night, taking down the old scenery and putting up new sets. It was known as “working the change.” Many of the staff had been with each other not just for weeks or years but for decades, longer than the longest running Broadway show. Everyone referred to the theater simply as “The Hall.”

By the time I entered high school, my dad had become Musical Director of Radio City and I could travel to 50<sup>th</sup> street by myself on a Friday afternoon. I’d arrive before the third show and watch it out front with the audience. Sometimes I’d spot Mr. Valentino, a white-haired gentleman who sat in the first row on the left almost every day, although he usually attended a first or second show. Some of the Rockettes would recognize him and give him a wink.

My dad and I would have dinner together and I’d tell him how school was going. He’d describe his latest challenge, such as finding 18 performers who could sing and ice skate at the same time, replacing a Dutch troupe who had suddenly quit because Leonidoff had promised them a deluxe hotel and put them up in a fleabag instead. There was a teeter-board act, two men who juggled Indian clubs while balancing on a board and roller, who’d fallen down because one of the assistant conductors played their music too slowly. They had ducked under the curtain as it fell, screaming “Assassino! Assassino!” (“assassin”).

This unfortunate conductor also happened to be on the podium during a show that required a band car move, where the big wooden platform that held the orchestra rolled on metal tracks from the front to the back of the stage. But one of the wheels rolled over the power cable, stopping the orchestra in the middle of the stage.

Frozen in the lights, the orchestra had to repeat the “Rakoczy March” four times before a new cable could be spliced, causing backstage wits to joke that it was the only time this particular conductor had ever been asked to play an encore. Nobody got hurt, which was always the main thing.

After dinner, we’d return to my dad’s office, now a much larger space with a grand piano, where he’d change into his tux for the last show. Everybody knew me because I’d grown up in the place, so I got to watch from the wings backstage. I’d watch the Rockettes clickity-clack in their tap shoes, forming up on either side of the stage to make their entrance. There might be an acrobat on a ladder who balanced a sword on the point of a dagger held in his mouth, followed by my dad’s choir driving Chevrolet convertibles on stage to sing “New York, New York, it’s a helluva town...”



Every stage presentation at the Music Hall was a variety show, following the formula that Roxy Rothafel had offered in the 1920's. They started with something cultural for a middle-class audience, like Strauss's "Fledermaus" overture or Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol."

At Christmas, the Rockettes would dance the "Wooden Soldiers" routine created by Russell Markert. During Easter, every show would begin with a cathedral set where Rockettes and Ballet dancers, dressed as nuns, would slowly carry bouquets of white lilies until they formed a gigantic cross, hit with spotlights as the music climaxed.

And if the movie happened to be short, there was time for really big production numbers like the "Undersea Ballet," first choreographed by Florence Rogge for the Roxy Theater. The entire stage was flooded with ultraviolet light and dancers dressed as sea creatures would bob and weave in fluorescent costumes, flying through the air on wires.

The Rockettes and Corps de Ballet would do a combined version of Ravel's "Bolero," my dad picking up the tempo slightly each time the melody repeated, to avoid running into thousands of dollars in overtime at the end of the week. Maurice Ravel might have objected, but the composer never had to perform his piece four times a day.

Each show's finale would have everyone on stage as the orchestra played the final notes, the folds of the motorized contour curtain would come down, the band car would descend from view into the basement and the deep notes of the organ would signal another intermission before the final showing of the movie that night.

Singers and dancers walked off stage, wishing each other goodnight, the stage managers would reset the elevators and turntable to their original positions, stagehands would raise and lower sets for the first show the following day and the block-long movie screen would slowly descend behind the curtain, ready for the film to begin.

Almost all the films were first run premieres, using their run at the theater as promotion: "Now playing everywhere after eight sold-out weeks at Radio City Music Hall."

In the 1960's I remember several iconic releases such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *The Music Man* and *Mary Poppins*. In the 1930's it had been *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. And every stage show also had a title, like *Enchanted Islands* produced by Leon Leonidoff or *Autumn Album* produced by Russell Markert.



In 1976, after the close of my first career as a high school English teacher and the beginning of a second career in broadcast television, I became a summer relief stage manager to make some money and give the three regular stage managers time to take their vacations. Suddenly the ropes and the curtains illuminated in half-light of backstage were filled with deep responsibility. In live theater, you can't go back to fix a mistake, and from the edge of the contour curtain, I could see the rows of patrons, staring up at the movie screen, who expected a perfect show to follow. I couldn't disappoint them, or my dad, who might be conducting that day rather than one of his assistants.

Assistant stage managers had to be backstage half an hour before each show to make sure everything was in place and to make announcements on the internal PA system, where they could be heard on every floor and every dressing room. "Twenty minutes to the show," I would say, as crisply as I could. This was followed by "Ten minutes to the show" then "Eight minutes to Organ," indicating the start of the organ break, which was when people started taking their places and the stage level became crowded.

Finally, I'd announce: "Five minutes to the show, musicians in the pit please." The chief stage manager would relieve me at the Prompt side, stage right, near the main control panel and one of the electricians and I would go down to the basement where the orchestra musicians were climbing up sets of wooden stairs to take their places on the band car. The electrician, often a guy nicknamed Bumpy, nephew of the Music Hall's formidable chief electrician, would place his hand on the emergency cut-off switch on the wall.

If you weren't on the band car when the show began, you wouldn't get paid. Once a crazed musician had leapt onto the band car as the first elevator was rising and was almost cut in



half as it reached the inside wall. Bumpy and I were there to make sure that didn't happen again, so when the conductor gave me the signal, I'd call upstairs for the elevator to raise the orchestra to just below audience level.

I'd return backstage and, as the overture began, I would hold a rubber-coated button with a long wire connected to the arc lights, above the third balcony, way in the back of the theater. In those days, there were no electric spotlights powerful enough to reach the Music Hall's stage from that distance, so they still operated with a 1930's carbon-arc, a



Dean Irwin and his father Will

curved piece of solid carbon which burned with an intensity which would blind you if you didn't view it through a thick piece of green glass built into the side of the spotlight. The lights were hot as a furnace, and the operators would have to slowly advance the carbon as it burned away.

I'd wait for the moment in the overture which called for a lighting change, push the button which signaled the arc light guys to switch their gels, turning the contour curtain from blue to red, orange to green, or whatever the show called for. The button made a loud buzz, audible not only to the arc lights but in much of the theater, but no one seemed to notice. I was on pins and needles never to miss those lighting cues hidden in the music. There are still pieces, like Gershwin's "Concerto in F", which I cannot listen to without reaching for that button.

Much of a stage manager's time is spent anxiously waiting for the next cue, often standing next to a performer about to step out in front of the audience, and the Music Hall held a really big audience. I recall standing on the "O.P." (Opposite Prompt) side, stage left, waiting to give my cue to the stagehands while next to me a stunning woman from Eastern Europe in a sequined costume would also be waiting for her entrance. Since this happened four times a day, I could not help trying a little conversation.

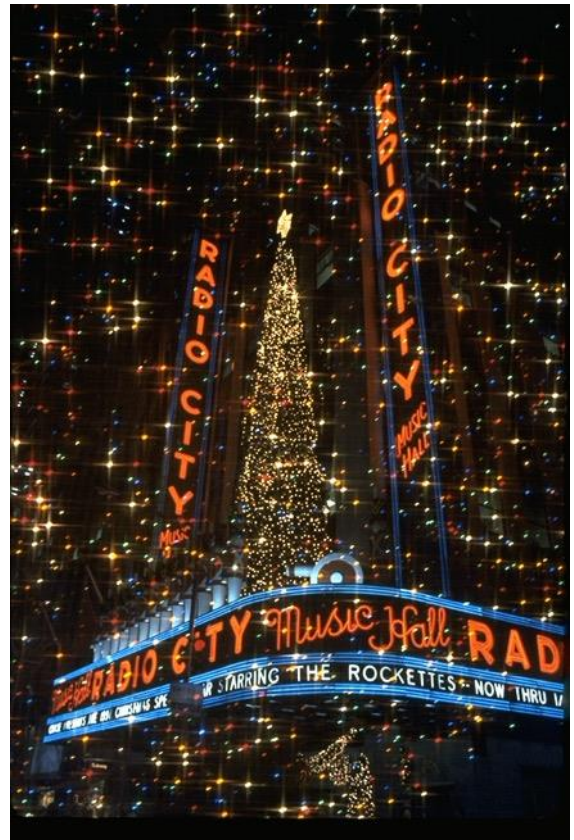
"Hello Olga. How are you?" Olga's eyes were fixed on her fantastically muscled husband, already doing flips on stage, as she replied. "Fine." "It must be difficult to do what you do." "Yes. Difficult." And so on. Weeks later, when Olga warmed to me slightly, she told me that once she had missed her grip on the trapeze, taking a long fall to a circus floor, breaking every bone in her back, including her heels. A month later, she was back on the trapeze, making up for lost time. "My gosh, Olga, that must have been terrible..." but she had

already stepped on stage, her sequins flashing in the arc lights, joining her husband on the high wire. I gave my cue and wondered how long it would take to learn the trapeze.

The stagehands usually had a big poker game between the second and third shows, winning and losing sums that dwarfed my earnings as a stage manager. They were wonderful guys who told salty stories but who would risk their lives in a second if an emergency happened on stage. And it sometimes did.

The backstage twilight seemed frozen in time, but I could see that things were changing. Alan Cole, a talented vocal soloist my dad often hired, no longer gave his live announcement at the start of every Christmas pageant: “And there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night...” Alan was gone, and his voice now played back on tape.

Jack Ward, an assistant organist who always wore a white dinner jacket and smoked with a long cigarette holder before he slipped out to the console, suddenly passed away. George Cort, a fellow stage manager who’d attended his funeral, told me that Jack had appeared in his casket wearing an identical white dinner jacket, as if he’d just gotten back from playing a break. Looking down at him, George automatically checked his watch, to make sure he wouldn’t be late for the show.



Radio City was still drawing big crowds at holiday times, but fewer feature films were being made that could play to a family audience and the Music Hall was no longer the only place in New York for big cinema premieres. There was more pressure to save money. The Corps de Ballet was disbanded, and guest dancers were hired only if a show needed them; the number of musicians in the orchestra was allowed to diminish drastically, which upset my father, and even the number of Rockettes were cut.

Russell Markert, creator of the Rockettes, whom I’d always admired for his waxed moustache, pin-striped suit and the goodwill that flowed around him in the theater, decided to retire. The Rockettes stole his dancing shoes and had them bronzed as a farewell gift.

Leon Leonidoff remained, older and grayer, issuing commands in his thick, Romanian accent and still able to create spectacular stage effects using the equipment built into the theater like the Steam Curtain, which could envelop the Cathedral set for the Easter show in a mist that looked like incense. Or the Rain Curtain, which sparkled under the lights but presented a hazard for dancers who had to step through the puddles. But by the late 1970's, the last of New York's Presentation Houses was losing money and running out of time.

When Leon Leonidoff retired after 42 years, empty seats were the norm for the first and second shows. To the horror of the dedicated performers still working to make good stage shows, it became clear that the Rockefeller Organization, the company that owned and operated Rockefeller Center, wanted the big theater to fail so they could tear it down and build an office building or a hotel, something that would make them more money. Money was more important to them than preserving the most famous theater in America and, in 1978, the Music Hall very nearly met the same fate as the Roxy Theater had in 1960.

A ballet captain named Rosemary Novellino-Mearns courageously began a campaign by the Music Hall's performers to save the theater. Singers and dancers in costume walked the block at Sixth Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> street, getting people to sign petitions, spreading the word on local television that the great theater faced annihilation. As Rosemary lays out in her book, *Saving Radio City Music Hall*, the New York City Landmarks Commission granted the theater last-minute landmark status, preventing any changes to the structure by Rockefeller Center. Without Rosemary and the group she created, there would be no Radio City Music Hall today.

For her efforts, management blackballed Rosemary from ever performing at the Music Hall again. But as it turned out, the stage show and movie format was almost over. Landmark status prevented the theater from being torn down but could not save the type of entertainment it had presented for 76 years. Probably nothing could have. The bridge from stage to cinema was no longer needed.

The last performance of the old Radio City Music Hall took place on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1979. I was there to see my dad conduct the orchestra for the last time. It was a fourth show, so he wore his tuxedo. John Jackson, a former stage manager who had become a producer, introduced my dad and the performers on stage, thanking the audience for their loyalty and marking the moment in history. The curtain came down, the audience got up and the pipe organ played one more break to march us out. The theater closed for renovations, my dad retired, and when the Music Hall reopened, only the stagehands remained as a permanent presence.

Covid closed the theater last year, but this November it will present its Christmas Spectacular for two months—where you can see the Rockettes dance once again, the orchestra rise out of the basement and hear the pipe organ. For the rest of the year, Radio City is a venue for special events and concerts. The little village of entertainers packed up long ago and was the last of its kind.

But the Music Hall and the glittering presentation houses that preceded it in the 1910's and 20's got audiences to accept motion pictures as a new way to see performance, by surrounding them with something familiar and reassuring. It turned out that movies, like radio, were not the end of live theater. The end of the old Radio City's long run came when it was no longer necessary to present both on the same stage.

Video streaming hasn't killed our appetite for performance. Just the opposite. It makes us more curious about the entertainers we see from the intimacy of our homes, more eager to learn about them and seek them out in other places. Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel would have understood that.

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*Photo credits: George A. LeMoine, Rosemary Novellino-Mearns and Dean Irwin*

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