

Still Coming Up Rosa

By Tara Schroeder

Theatre Organ – Journal of The American Theatre Organ Society September/October 2001

Movie mogul Marcus Lowe said, "We sell tickets to theatres, not movies." On-screen fantasies, presented in the grand luxury and fanciful architecture of lavish motion pictures palaces of the 1920s, transport people from Main Street to anywhere. Today, more and more people are discovering (and re-discovering) the magic of that experience. Tampa Theatre, a 1926 John Eberson atmospheric, presents silent film events several times a year featuring the Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Organ (12 rank, 3 manual). Theatre organ legend Rosa Rio has been the featured organist for these special events since 1996, always making her entrance with "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

"The first time I saw Rosa perform, I felt elated," says Reuben Ward, a college student who drives 131 miles from Gainesville, Florida to attend silent film presentations at Tampa Theatre. "It really felt like she was sharing something with her audience. The fact that she had played silent scores in their original time and context gave me an understanding of what timeless actually meant. Her authenticity and belief in what she was doing made me feel like I was witnessing something very important to her. I think she is just trying to make the movie better. She laughs and cries with her audience."

Mia D'Avanza, another college student who drives along with Reuben agrees. "I was in awe the first time I saw Rosa perform. If I hadn't been laughing so hard at "Our Hospitality," I would have been crying. She is obviously concerned with being an all-around entertainer as well as an organist and she is incredibly successful at both. Her charm and skill make the silent movie experience complete."

Rosa Rio is a testament to the will of spirit. Her prolific career began with a simple declaration to her family at age eight, "When I grow up, I want to play a big piano, wear pretty clothes and lots of jewelry, and make people happy." Her extraordinarily positive, motivated and determined attitude has allowed her to seamlessly adapt to changes in the entertainment industry (silents, talkies, radio, tv, and now, back to silents). "I can't believe that I've been so fortunate to have been in so many things that went out and I bounced back," she says. Her path was not without challenges. As the only skirt in the orchestra pit, she routinely challenged men who considered her to be second fiddle because of her gender. She allayed those stereotypical reactions with talent, charm and a (sometimes bawdy) sense of humor.

Although most people retire to Florida, Rosa and her husband/manager Bill Yeoman simply moved to Florida in 1993 and she continued her busy performing and teaching schedule. "The word 'retire' is not in my vocabulary," she says emphatically. Her business card reads "Organ-Piano-Voice Instruction-Concerts-

Films-Recordings." Finding a home large enough to fill her passion was quite the challenge. She owns a nine-foot Baldwin concert grand (once owned by famed pianist and conductor Jose Iturbi), a Rodgers theatre organ and a Hammond organ.

Tampa Theatre organist and Central Florida Theatre Organ Society member John Otterson was shocked to meet Rosa at a CFTOS meeting. Rosa quietly took her turn during open console. "She sat and played and was very good. Then I got her name and said, 'That's Rosa Rio!'" He immediately invited her to Tampa Theatre, and asked if she would play a silent film. "She's one of the best," he says. "Her chording and combinations are marvelous. But what I enjoy most about Rosa is her spirit. Her positive mental outlook is incredible."

Buster Keaton's "The General" was the first of twelve silent films presented at Tampa Theatre featuring Rosa Rio at the Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Organ. That first performance drew 199 people in 1996; three years later a Buster Keaton double feature drew 1,253 people. In total, 8,639 people have attended Rosa's silent film performances, with an average attendance of 785. She has also accompanied "College," "Big Business," "The Mark of Zorro," "The Phantom of the Opera," "Nosferatu," "Son of the Sheik," "The Thief of Baghdad," "Our Hospitality," and "The Cameraman."

Rosa meticulously prepares for each performance by watching the film several times and planning for cues and themes. "First I view the silent picture," she explains, "then I decide on the themes (character, love, dramatic, suspense, misterioso, hurry, aggitato, stings, or for comedy, a song in both major and minor changing tempos). When I write my cue sheet, the line ups are for title inserts, scenes, timing, type of music, and so forth. I memorize the main themes and rely on my ability to improvise (not fake) the correct music for each scene, hence my eyes stay on the screen and not on the music rack."

Just for fun, Rosa throws in under-the-radar snippets of music, much to the audience's amusement. During a performance of "Phantom of the Opera," the audience heard a faint melody line of the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" as the Phantom dodged the mob by swimming under water and breathing through a straw.

Rosa made an unusual entrance for "Nosferatu" (1922) this past October at Tampa Theatre. As the Wurlitzer (without Rosa) rose through a cloud of eerie red smoke, Bach's thunderous "Toccatina in D Minor" bellowed through the dark theatre. The curtains parted. Six vampire-ish pallbearers somberly carried a black coffin to center stage. Rosa, enveloped in a large blood red scarf, stepped out to uproarious squeals of laughter and hopped on the organ to begin the show.

Rosa's gift for music emerged at a very young age. She was playing by ear at age four, picking out melodies and chords at age six and taking formal lessons at age eight. The lessons also taught her to appreciate the value of study. "I

thought I couldn't be bothered with the baby stuff when I could play the real big stuff like Alexander's Ragtime Band." People fawned over her natural talent, but after a few years, the novelty wore off and she realized that she'd better get serious about learning and studying if she wanted to advance. "It was the most valuable lesson that I never got over. To this day, I still want to learn."

When she was about 10 years old, Rosa got her first paying gig. She was filling in for a friend who played the organ at a neighborhood theatre in New Orleans. The job paid five cents for one hour. Since the projector and screen were in the same room, the friend advised her to play loud and fast to drown out the projector noise. The thrill lasted until her father arrived. "I felt his cold hand on the back of my neck," Rosa recalls. "I was in the midst of playing and he took me right out of there, saying that no daughter of his would do that kind of work."

Her parents encouraged her talent, but only wanted her to learn enough to play in church or at social events. Her interest in show business continued throughout her teenage years. One summer, while visiting her mother's side of the family outside of Columbus, Ohio she met an uncle on break from the vaudeville circuit. "I just went into ecstasy over his costumes," she says. "I just was in seventh heaven." The next summer she was brushed off when she asked to see the costumes in the trunks. She later learned that her mother had asked the family not to encourage her show business yearnings.

After high school, her parents acquiesced and sent her to Oberlin College to study music. She was reminded that music teachers were usually men or unmarried women, so her choice was to get married or become a spinster. Neither one appealed to the head-strong young girl, but off she went anyway to become a music teacher.

Until she was spellbound by the lure of a Mighty Wurlitzer.

While in Cleveland for spring break, Rosa took in the city's illustrious movie palaces. She recalls the Allen (Allen), the Ohio (Moeller), the Alhambra (Wurlitzer), and the Stillman (Skinner) theatres. "I went in and just oohed and ahhed," she recalls. "I'd never seen anything like the velvet draperies, gold and glitter. I thought I was going to see a show. Instead it was an organ that I heard and a spotlight that grew larger and larger. This organ came up on a lift, which I had never seen. I was floored. My eyes and ears exploded." She was mesmerized all day and decided right then to be a theatre organist: "I was bitten."

She ran across a magazine ad for the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY which taught "proper accompaniment to motion pictures" and immediately enrolled though she barely had enough money. A typical day's meal was an orange for breakfast, milk for lunch and a 35-cent dinner at the YWCA. "I was down to about 90 pounds," she says, "but I was just so happy." Her money dwindled and she would have had to leave after only one semester was it not

for the intervention of, the ironically named Mr. Fait, a producer at the Eastman Theatre.

One day she wandered into the theatre just as the conductor, a German maestro, was ranting about a late pianist holding up rehearsal of a score. "He was one of those egotistical hot dishes who thought the more he ranted, the greater person he was," she says. "So people were afraid of him." She offered to fill in until the pianist arrived. Rosa's talent impressed the conductor and Mr. Fait. When Mr. Fait learned that she could not afford to stay, he hired her as a pianist for the Eastman Conservatory Ballet at \$25 per week (\$15 for tuition, \$5 room, \$5 food). Rosa remains grateful to him. "I think back and marvel at how a person like that did such a wonderful thing for me. I really appreciated it."

After graduation from Eastman, Rosa moved to New York. Her full-time first job was organist at the System Theatre in Syracuse. It paid \$40 a week (7 days a week, 11:30 am to 11:00 pm).

Later, she auditioned for Mr. Lutz, musical director of the Loew's organization at the Amsterdam Theatre, who noticed that she picked up the organ much faster than most. She was brash and young, but confident that her talent and Eastman diploma would nail the job. He gave her a nugget of advice she would never forget. He told her to put away the diploma. He didn't care with whom she studied or from where she graduated. "I'm only interested in one thing," she recalls him saying. "Can you do the job? If so, I have a marvelous theatre for you, the Burnside Brooklyn, opening in two weeks. If you can't do the job, you're out."

At the Burnside, she played a 3-manual Moeller. A typical entertainment line-up at the Burnside included an orchestra overture, newsreel, cartoon, organ solo and the main feature. For restroom breaks, Rosa would signal the manager to hold the chord.

The lesson she learned early on about the value of study stayed with her and she continued her music education with lessons from Joseph Schillinger, who taught a mathematical approach to music theory. His star pupils included George Gershwin, Glen Miller and Jesse Crawford and he wasn't interested in teaching a woman. Overcoming gender obstacles was nothing new and she had no difficulty proving her worthiness to the famed teacher.

Rosa moved back to New Orleans for two years with her husband at the time, organist John Hammond. They were married just a few years. He was the house organist at the Saenger Theatre (Robert Morton organ), and she often performed there as well. She also toured other Saenger houses in the South. The Saenger in New Orleans hosted touring presentations which had lavish sets and costumes, performers, a famous conductor (who led each theatre's orchestra), and a big star. "That's where I met Ginger Rogers," Rosa recalls. "Very pretty young girl." Ginger was 16 at the time and got married on stage right after the show. "Her

mother was livid," says Rosa. "but she couldn't do anything about it. That was her first marriage. It didn't last."

The balloon burst in 1927 with the advent of "talkies." "I cried. We all cried," she says. "This was the end of our careers." Although orchestral overtures were still performed before the movies, full orchestras were not cost effective and many musicians were laid off. Rosa was under a union contract at the Strand Theatre in New Orleans during this time and played interludes and solos before and after the sound pictures. She says that the transition was particularly difficult for the theatres. Adapting to the new sound technology was expensive and many theatres went under.

Rosa speaks fondly of her time in New Orleans, with the exception of a devastating flood in 1927. Rosa and a few others were at the Saenger that day when the Mississippi River (about 15 blocks from the theatre) swelled. They quickly lifted the organ, but were not able to rescue the instruments before the rising water filled the orchestra pit. They were stuck for two days, using curtains for bedding.

Rosa moved back to New York and soon landed a job at the Brooklyn Fox (4/26 Wurlitzer Opus, largest Crawford Special). No woman had ever played at the Fox; it was unusual for a woman to play in any large theatre. Rosa was a good sport about putting up with gender-related shenanigans. Her initiation to the Fox happened during the first rehearsal. Naughty words were written in the margin of her music. "They thought I was going to be prissy," she says. "When I started laughing, the orchestra broke up and they knew I was one of the boys."

George Weigl, the conductor of the Brooklyn Fox, worked with Rosa. To fill the large pit space, empty musician spots were filled with palm trees. "That business of cutting our orchestra from 55 to 14 was something unbelievable," said Weigl. "Each time we played a show and I stood before the orchestra, instead of having the orchestra in the palms of my hands to direct them, I had my hands in a bunch of palms. But make music we did, with Rosa's help, and they always raved about our orchestra; but few of those critics realized that it was our organist who made us sound well by arranging to fill in what we lacked. Our musicians, however, did, and they always speak of her now with great admiration and respect."

Rosa's classical training was instrumental in her resounding arrangements of pop music. "She is to the organ," said Weigl, "what Aurthur Fiedler is to the orchestra." Rudy Vallee was a big admirer of Rosa's and often stopped by just to hear the overture.

Theatres began closing and Rosa adapted by becoming a successful vocal coach and accompanist, one of the best in New York City. She teamed up with future Broadway star of "Peter Pan", Mary Martin, on the audition circuit. Late one night, Mary sent a car for Rosa to whisk her to the Waldorf Astoria. Mary was

called to audition for Cole Porter's new show, "Red, Hot and Blue," which eventually launched her career.

In her autobiography, "My Heart Belongs," Mary Martin writes, "All my life I have had a thing about accompanists. If they follow, and don't lead, if they can change keys at the drop of a hat, if they can play wonderful chords, which tickle my imagination, I am happy. I can sing for hours. Rosa had all that I wanted and more."

Rosa missed performing and auditioned at NBC as a staff organist. Eventually, she became one of the best-known radio organists. Rosa was dubbed "Queen of the Soaps," having provided organ accompaniment for 24 soap operas and radio dramas, sometimes dashing from one studio to another with seconds between shows. On average, she played for five to seven shows per day.

Her prolific radio career began in frustration. She was hired by NBC as a temporary replacement while they searched for a man. "I asked them if they were looking for a man or an organist," she says. She stayed for 22 years and was the first woman hired into an orchestra of 156 men. It would be ten years before another woman was hired.

Veteran broadcaster George Ansbro author of, *I Have a Lady in the Balcony: Memoirs of a Broadcaster*, worked with Rosa. "Rosa was the busiest of all the organists during those great days," he wrote. "We worked together on 'Between the Bookends' with Ted Malone and 'Thy Neighbor's Voice' with Robert Mills. What made Rosa stand out head and shoulders above most of the others in her trade was that besides being proficient and talented, which the others were, too, she brought great warmth and a remarkable sense of humor to whatever studio she might be working in."

Her radio shows included "Lorenzo Jones," "Between the Bookends," "Myrt & Marge," "Ethel & Albert," "Front Page Farrell," "When a Girl Marries," "Cavalcade of America," and most notably, "The Shadow" which starred Orson Welles (and later Robert Andrews, Bill Johnston and Bret Morrison). "Orson Welles was young and new at the game," she recalls. "He was absolutely fabulous to work with and very funny. He would do impromptu sketches during intermission and have us all in stitches." The main theme was from the symphony "The Spinning Wheel" by Camille Saint-Saens, but the rest of the original music and improvisation was left to Rosa's imagination. Her eerie music, an integral element of the popular drama, made spines tingle week after week.

During this time she also worked with Willard Scott, Victor Borge, John Forsythe, Jimmy Durante, Tony Randall, Jack Klugman, Keven McCarthy, Roddy McDowell, Lucille Ball and many others.

"Lucky for me," she says, "that wonderful experience in original background music for the silent films was a great advantage for the radio dramas and soap operas." In an article in "The Hammond Times" (Dec. 68/Jan 69) Rosa describes

the process. "Clock watching was just as important in radio as it is in television today. My experience as an organist in mood music for silent movies gave me the instant background needed for the radio dramas. As organist, I could produce an orchestra sound or effect with the Hammond Organ. Since my rehearsal time was always limited, the director might allow eight seconds for a certain musical bridge, only to frantically signal me from the control room during air time to cut it to four. This made it impossible to use printed music because I had to keep my eyes on the script, director, clock and the actors all at one time."

Rosa also had her own show, "Rosa Rio Rhythms" which was broadcast coast to coast and to the troops overseas during World War II. Which reminds her of a story...

When the Nazis invaded Poland 1939, Rosa was called to the NBC studio at 2 am. "The whole place was in pandemonium," she recalls. For ten hours, radio waves carried news reports as they arrived over the wire and Rosa played during the newsbreaks. "During the times when we couldn't get anything over the wire, I was supposed to play; only I had to play appropriate music."

On Sundays during the war, Rosa performed for shell-shocked veterans at Pelham Hospital. "It was so great to play for the boys," she says. "Music was a therapy. The two most requested songs were 'Begin the Beguine' and 'Stardust.'"

Changing entertainment technology changed Rosa's course once more as television began to predominate. She got jobs playing for "As the World Turns," "The Today Show" and others. But she didn't enjoy television as much and there were not as many opportunities to make money.

Rosa and Bill (married in 1948) moved to Connecticut and opened the Rosa Rio Studio teaching organ, piano and voice. The pair also broadcast their own organ music and talk show, "Mr. & Mrs. Music" from there. While in Connecticut, she also created and recorded scores for 365 silent films for the Video Yesteryears collection.

After teaching for many years, Rosa began performing again. She gratefully credits ATOS co-founder Dick Simminton with providing the opportunity to perform at concerts and conventions.

Among the many honors bestowed upon her:

- At the request of two attorney generals, U Thant and Dag Hammarskjold, Rosa had the honor of two Command Performances before the United Nations General Assembly where she performed with Johnny Carson, Duke Ellington and Marlon Brando.
- Hall of Fame member of The American Theatre Organ Society
- Honorary Member of The Detroit Theatre Organ Society
- Honored at the 4th Annual Friends of Old Time Radio Convention

- Honorary member of The American Guild of Organists chapter in Clearwater, Florida
- Honorary member of The Central Florida Theatre Organ Society

Today, in between gigs at Tampa Theatre, Rosa teaches and performs both locally and nationally. She has taught theatre and silent film technique at two pipe organ workshops presented by the University of Colorado; one with Lew Williams and another with Ron Rhodes. The next workshop takes place in June 2002.

Tampa Theatre organist and CFTOS member Cliff Shaffer has studied with Rosa for nearly seven years and warmly credits her with guiding him beyond the mechanics. "She teaches the correct way, but also enables you to feel the music," he says. "She opened up the door for me. Rosa knows how to put it all together. She has the ability to zero in on improving shortcomings and enhancing natural abilities."

Performing at Tampa Theatre is truly a joy for both Rosa and her fans. "Ms. Rio should be declared a national treasure along with Tampa Theatre," emailed Rich Chatterson after attending "The Cameraman."

Make no mistake, Rosa sparkles in the limelight. "I was born with a show business ego," she says. But when watching Rosa perform and interact with the audience, it is profoundly evident that her joy comes from sharing her passion for music with others. Well-deserved standing ovations are the norm for Rosa at Tampa Theatre. But she graciously returns the accolades: "I have such gratitude for the wonderful people who have such love for the theatre organ, silent pictures and Tampa Theatre."

"Rosa has been a real find for us and a joy to work with" says John Bell, director of Tampa Theatre. "In addition to her considerable talents at the keyboard, she has brought to Tampa Theatre professionalism and passion for her work that is rare in today's world. I remain anxious about every detail of a silent film presentation until Rosa takes over. Then I know I can relax because it's her show, and it's time to sit back and enjoy the ride."

Rosa's next performance at Tampa Theatre will be accompanying "Sparrows" starring Mary Pickford on August 26th. "I pinch myself at having come full circle doing what I've loved most," she says. "My dream came true. I am truly blessed."

Recordings of Rosa Rio are available for purchase. Contact Bill Yeoman, 1847 Wolf Laurel Lane, Sun City Center, FL 33573.

By the way, the \$64,000 question is her age. Who cares? Or as she often quips, "Age is a number and mine's unlisted."

Tara Schroeder is the film program manager at Tampa Theatre and one of Rosa's scores of fans.