

# Back Comes The Music Hall

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A THEATRE executive who for years has worked beside Samuel Lionel Rothafel (Roxy, now, to millions of his countrymen) reveals the sole circumstance which can ruffle his usual slightly quizzical kindness. That is to be told by anybody on his staff, apropos of some new plan or project, "It can't be done." This is one explanation to which he flatly refuses to listen.

"It can be done!" is his working principle—and standing at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Fiftieth Street looking up at the stupendous bulk of steel and limestone that is the new Radio City Music Hall, one concludes that it works. This Tuesday evening the Music Hall is to be inaugurated with pomp and ceremony, the largest theatre of modern times.

The sheer physical size of it is not so appalling as might be expected. When one speaks of a theatre covering three-quarters of an acre, of a stage built to hold 750 people, of a grand foyer a block long, the listener is impressed—in fact, almost overwhelmed. But by tricks of perspective, by a well-calculated color-scheme, by the use of concentric semi-circles for the proscenium and the ceiling arches, the theatre's giant size is knit together into a unity that is not in the least appalling. Although "the largest theatre in the world" sounds a trifle terrifying, the interior is no more so than that of any of the great theatres of Europe, such as the huge Drury Lane, the Paris Opéra, the Vienna Opera or Berlin's Grosse Schauspielhaus.

The stage, 144 feet wide by 80 feet deep, was designed in part for the presentation of spectacles, but so flexible are its adaptations that it can serve also as a setting for a much more intimate type of entertainment. And that, too, will be offered on the thoroughly catholic schedule of Roxy, who believes that a music hall should be a music hall and a little more than that.

With this theatre he hopes to give a new meaning to that old name. For, while he has not discarded all that the traditional music hall implies, he has built up something else also, a music hall suited to contemporary needs and shaped in the contemporary manner—an expression of today in its conception, its execution, its architecture, its decoration, its entertainment.

At the Radio City Music Hall Roxy hopes to originate a new type of variety and to build his entire bill from it, without the assistance of any motion pictures whatsoever. He interprets variety not in the older sense, but much more broadly, more—if one may use the word—modernly. Variety to Roxy means not only acrobats, comic singers, blackface comedians, jazz bands, clowns, dance acts and sketches, but also classical ballet, the modern dance in terms of Harald Kreutzberg and Martha Graham, choirs, symphonic music and opera. He believes that this material ought to be staged in the grand manner, regardless of whether it is a clown act, an oratorio or a bit of opera.

His policy is to be worked out in perhaps the most perfectly equipped theatre plant ever devised in the history of the stage. It is the product

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# THE MUSIC HALL AGAIN, BY "ROXY" AND RADIO CENTER

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of dozens of experts, who have collaborated to build a smoothly functioning machine for any type of theatrical presentation. Peter Clark, one of the best known stage engineers, had a part in it. Eugene Braun as lighting expert, Stanley R. McCandless of Yale as consultant in lighting, Ted Weidhaas as curtain expert and dozens of other men, each a master of a certain phase of stage technique, were called in by Roxy in his determination to make the plant of the music hall the finest that human ingenuity could devise.

From a technical standpoint the outstanding things about Radio City Music Hall are:

1. The combined elevator and revolving stages. The 11,520 square feet of stage area contain three sections, each seventy feet long, electrically propelled above or lowered below the stage. They can be interlocked, so that they may move above or below the stage level as a single platform, or each may be moved up or down separately. Each section can be raised a different distance above the stage, so that a step formation is obtained, which is very effective for some ballets, for combined choruses or for the orchestra.

Built into the three platforms is the electrically operated revolving stage, itself in three sections. It is forty-three feet in diameter. When not needed, the sections fit unobtrusively into the stage floor. In use, the stage may be revolved either clockwise or counter-clockwise, raised or lowered, and used either in conjunction with the platforms or independently.

2. The so-called "bandwagon." This is a sort of musicians' chariot operating under its own power from batteries. It is large enough to accommodate the Radio City Music Hall Symphony in its full strength of ninety musicians. Normally it is placed in the pit at the front of the stage, in what would have been the apron in our older type of stage. Like the movable platforms, however, it can be raised or lowered above the stage. The maximum depth below stage is twenty eight feet. At that point, if so desired, the bandwagon may move under its own power to the rear of the stage onto one of the movable platforms, and ascend to stage level again without discharging its load of musicians. This makes possible rapid changes, and also saves the confusion of having ninety musicians on foot backstage while men are working at top speed to set up new scenery.

3. The lighting system. This is, in fact, the most interesting of all the technical features of the Radio City Music Hall. Extraordinarily complex, it is operated by a console or control-board almost unique in America, in that it is placed on the audience's side of the footlights, instead of being, as is usual, concealed in the wings. According to those well informed on such matters, it is one of the most intricate and sensitive pieces of mechanism of its kind. In it is embodied all the latest lighting practice, as well as some newly developed devices which promise to bring to still greater perfection the art and science of stage illumination.

The board is by actual measurement 15 feet 6 inches long, 3 feet 6 inches deep, and 5 feet 6 inches high. It contains 4,305 separate handles, which may be "pre-set" for ten different combinations, and then worked simply by throwing a master switch.

The console is of the Thyatron type, employing the same principle as that used in radio tubes. The inductor controls make possible a very much smaller board than the older type switchboard. Such a switchboard containing the same number of controls would have been from six to eight times the size, and would have required more than twice the number of men to operate it.

A system known to lighting experts as proportional dimming, a bit too complicated for easy reading, is contained in this board. There is also a Selsyn color-change control system which automatically, at the throwing of a switch, changes the metal color-frames, with their red or blue or yellow gelatin inserts. Heretofore these have had to be hand-operated by a stage electrician.

A full list of the lighting apparatus controlled from the console would read like an inventory of the stock of Kliegl Brothers, the lighting firm which supplied it. There are light bridges, light towers, spot booths, effect machines, borders, disappearing footlights, cyclorama borders, and cyclorama footlights. There are also three Schwabe cloud machines from Germany, the only imported lighting apparatus in the Music Hall.

The console controls not only this array of stage lighting equipment, but also the lighting of the auditorium.

In this Roxy hopes to give his audiences a new sensation. No longer will the patrons sit in darkness while the stage glows with many-hued magic. At the Radio City Music Hall, Roxy will literally flood his audiences with color. In the curved ceiling, which is constructed of semi-circular fluted bands of acoustical plaster, known as coves, there are 3,000 reflectors in eight strips. By means of these, the

entire ceiling may be made to glow with red light, which may be faded into a warm purple and deepened almost imperceptibly into a piercing blue that shimmers gradually into a sea of green, then diminishes to amber. The potentialities of such equipment, purely from the standpoint of audience psychology, need no comment.

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Even without the three now-famous banned statues, the front of the house, so-called, will probably attract much notice. It was planned as a homogeneous decorative scheme, and was executed under the direction of Donald Deskey. For the Music Hall, he had the not inconsiderable job of welding into a unity of color and design the grand foyer, the main lounge, the three broad corridors, the elevator lobbies and all the rest. It was by no means an easy assignment to weave a harmonious decorative scheme around the work of artists so widely different in their style as, say, Stuart Davis and Louis Bouché. In addition to doing this, Mr. Deskey also designed the carpet for the main lounge and the furniture and accessories for all the lounge rooms.

There are in all eight murals: "A History of Cosmetics," by Witold Gordon; "Men Without Women," by Stuart Davis; "The Phantasmagoria of the Theatre," by Louis Bouché; "The Fountain of Youth," by Ezra Winter, which occupies a space sixty by thirty feet over the grand staircase leading up to the mezzanines; nap-murals by Witold Gordon, painted wall decorations involving calla lilies, by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, a mural of the Wild West by Buk Ulreich, and a wall design by Henry Billings.

In addition there are fabrics designed by Marguerita Mergentime, and a hand-blocked linen fabric covering the walls and sides of the auditorium, a "History of the Theatre" designed and executed by Ruth Reeves. Miss Reeves also has done a carpet design of abstract musical instruments for the grand foyer.

Henry Varnum Poor executed all the pottery and lamp standards for the main lounge and the rest rooms,

while Lawrence Tenney Stevens did a black ceramic panther which stands—or, more properly, sits on its black ceramic haunches—on one of the wood-and-aluminum tables.

The immense auditorium, alone, does not give any effect of cunning contrivance. The unbroken sweep of the ceiling arches, the strong simplicity of the fluted curves make it seem vast without being bleak.

Balconies have been eliminated from the music hall. By watching carefully the reactions of crowds, Roxy concluded that this division of a theatre was not ideal for the group contact so necessary in such a house. The method adopted was to split the usual balcony into three parts. Looking down, the spectator in the mezzanines sees just enough of the other parts of the house to get the sensation of unity with the rest of the audience. Actually no seating space is lost. Exactly as many seats have been placed in the three shallow mezzanines of the music hall as could have been put into one wide balcony.

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The permanent features of Roxy's newest theatre—the Roxyettes, the ballet, the orchestra, the chorus—form an important part of all his bills. He has seen to it that their accommodations are comfortable and cheerful. In the course of the succeeding shows, which will be changed every month, the forty-eight Russell Markert Roxyettes, the large chorus directed by Leon Rosebrook, the orchestra of ninety, under the direction of Erno Rapee, the ballet trained by Florence Rogge—a total of several hundred persons—will all but make the music hall their home, with constant rehearsals and two performances a day.

Their quarters, the ensemble dressing rooms, are pleasant long rooms, mirror-lined, with heavy carpets on the floor, dressing tables of glistening metal, tiled shower rooms, metal upholstered furniture, gay curtains, and a radio loud-speaker which will broadcast the performance, number by number, from the stage as it is going on.

The institutional idea is further carried out in the art department, headed by Robert Edmond Jones, who has as his associate James Reynolds. In this department all the scenery and costumes for the Radio City Music Hall bills will originate.

The largest department of all is that of theatre operation, which includes the ushers and the cleaning staff, 300 in number.

All in all, a vast plant, with a vast personnel, headed by a quiet man with vast aims.

This last adjective is used with thought. Twelve thousand four hundred individuals a day make up the potential audience of the Music Hall. In a week, "Roxy" can reach, at capacity, 86,000 persons—and in a year, 4,513,600. But that is not all. Each week he is the central figure of a radio broadcast. Potentially, that reaches a hundred and one millions, and if it goes to Europe the audience is almost doubled.

Undoubtedly, a sizable class for entertainment, for education.