

Minneapolis Star
A fine State of affairs by Barbara Flanagan
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The State Theatre at 8th Street and Hennepin Avenue will celebrate 50 golden years in show business on February 5, 1971. Let's regild the "old girl" and keep her going another 50. I didn't realize the State was 50 years old until Steve Adams, a 21-year-old theatre buff, told me. Adams, who moved to town from San Francisco last year, loves old theatres, old movies, old Wurlitzer organs and old columnists (well, not THAT old) who write about such things, like me.

Since Adams is the oldest living "complete" expert on the State, he took me on a tour of it this week. James Eshelman, the theatre manager, joined us. I must say that although some of the golden cherubs on the balcony are slightly tarnished and some of the bountiful nudes on the walls and ceiling are a bit faded, the old place looks great. Nobody knows the name of the artist who did the murals.

The Italian Renaissance palace with its crystal chandeliers and palatial lobby fireplaces was built on the site of T.B. Walker's old home and first art gallery. A Chicago firm was supposed to operate it. The firm went broke so Minneapolis movie men Finkelstein and Ruben took over for the opening show. And what a show it was!

On the silent screen was Constance Talmadge in "Mama's Affair." It was billed as "a pictorial version of last season's big stage triumph of a Harvard prize play by Rachel Barton Butler. That must have brought out the Harvard men it not the "Yalies." A short subject, "Get Rich Quick Edgar," by Booth Tarkington, a newsreel and Pathe travelogue were also on screen.

On stage were Lillian Crosman, soprano; Walter Pontius, tenor; and Katherine Stang, violinist, plus "elaborate scenic investiture," whatever that was. Miss Crosman scored, said the critics, with a solo of "Oh, Promise Me." Frank Pullman and his 30-piece "band supreme" also wowed the crowd playing a new composition for the occasion entitled, "The State." Arthur Depew was at the pipe organ. (Leonard Leigh played noon organ concerts daily during opening week. Eddie Dunstedter didn't take over until the mighty Wurlitzer was installed in 1925.)

T.B. Walker, in person, and Gov. J.A.O. Preus were among the opening night VIPS. Special police were called out to control the crowds in weather that was described as cold and blustery. Well, at least Februaries don't change. Adams, who did his research on the theatre for fun, pointed out that J.E.O. Pridmore, the Chicago architect who designed the theatre, described his work as "free" Italian Renaissance.

No doubt about it- it runs freely in curlicues and zigzags up the walls, across the ceilings, around the pillars and up and down the balustrades. The \$1 million building seated 2,400 people. It was considered big, but, more important, it was uniquely modern. The reason its air conditioned ventilation- the first around town.

Adams and Eschelman showed me the pipes and vents and pumps to the 840-foot deep artesian well. It used to keep the air cooled at 72 degrees. And it still does. They also showed me the mighty and versatile stage, plus huge rehearsal rooms, orchestra rooms, dressing rooms- and a spot in the stage floor that used to be illuminated to give performers a "floating" effect in the big stage shows.

And what blockbusters they were. They had to be when sound arrived in 1927 and the screen gave audiences Giovanni Martinelli of the Metropolitan Opera singing with the New York Philharmonic. Or George Jessel doing his famous, "My Mother's Eyes." And Al Jolson, of course, who said the very first words on screen. Glyde Snyder, producer of Schiek's Sextette shows, started on the State stage as the "funny little fat boy" in Finkelstein and Ruben's kiddie revues. Later he was joined by his sister, Helen Snyder Cavanaugh, the dancing "star" of many of the stage shows.

If you didn't like dancers, there was William Warvelle Nelson conducting the State Symphony Orchestra. And Eddie Dunstedter- always Eddie. You got lots of entertainment for 50 cents in those days. The theatre has been operated by A.B.C. North Central Theatres in recent years. This week, Ted Mann took over the lease. Mann likes big and theatrical whoop-de-dos. I hope he's considering one in 1971 for the State's 50th birthday.

How about bringing back that first film, "Mamma's Affair?" Or the third anniversary show, "The Marriage Circle" starring Marie Prevost, Florence Vidor and Monte Blue? And there's the 13th anniversary hit, "Going Hollywood," with Bing Crosby and Marion Davies. Maybe we could bring back Bing, in person, and Dunstedter and Snyder with a line of dancing girls. I'd buy a ticket. So will Steve Adams. Wouldn't you? In the State, we've got an honest-to-goodness historic site growing older on horrible downtown Hennepin. It needs to be cherished- at least until 2021.