BEHOLD !
THE MIGHTY WURLITZER RETURNS

The 100 Year Journey
1926 - 2026



In 1910, the *Rudolph Wurlitzer Company* took on the eccentric English organ builder Robert Hope-Jones, and I'm sure that they could never have realised that the result of this union would capture the world market the way it did. By bringing together Hope-Jones' crazy ideas about organ building and their financial power, the "Wurlitzer Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra" as they were first marketed, was born. These amazing pipe organs, really a one-man orchestra, were created to replace the "live" orchestras that were accompanying the silent movies in the teen years and the 1920s.

By 1926, the Wurlitzer Company was almost swamped with orders for their *Unit Orchestra's,* later just known as *theatre organs,* from cinemas and theatres all over the world. It was that year that the company made its first million dollars from theatre organ production and was shipping a complete organ a day from the factory in North Tonawanda New York State, in a bid to meet demands.



On Friday, October 15, 1926, the Wurlitzer Company's 1,475th "Unit Orchestra" left their New York factory for the long journey down to the bottom end of the world and a magnificent picture palace in Queen Street Auckland, called the Regent Theatre, which opened in December 1926 right opposite Smith & Caughey's department store. During the Christmas/New Year holiday period, the organ was installed in the theatre, playing its first notes in the Regent in February of 1927. The Regent Wurlitzer was the first of the larger theatre organs to come to New Zealand, and it was to have a busy life at the Regent until there was a paradigm shift in the movie industry – the movies started to talk!

The Regent Theatre in Queen Street in 1927. (Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries)

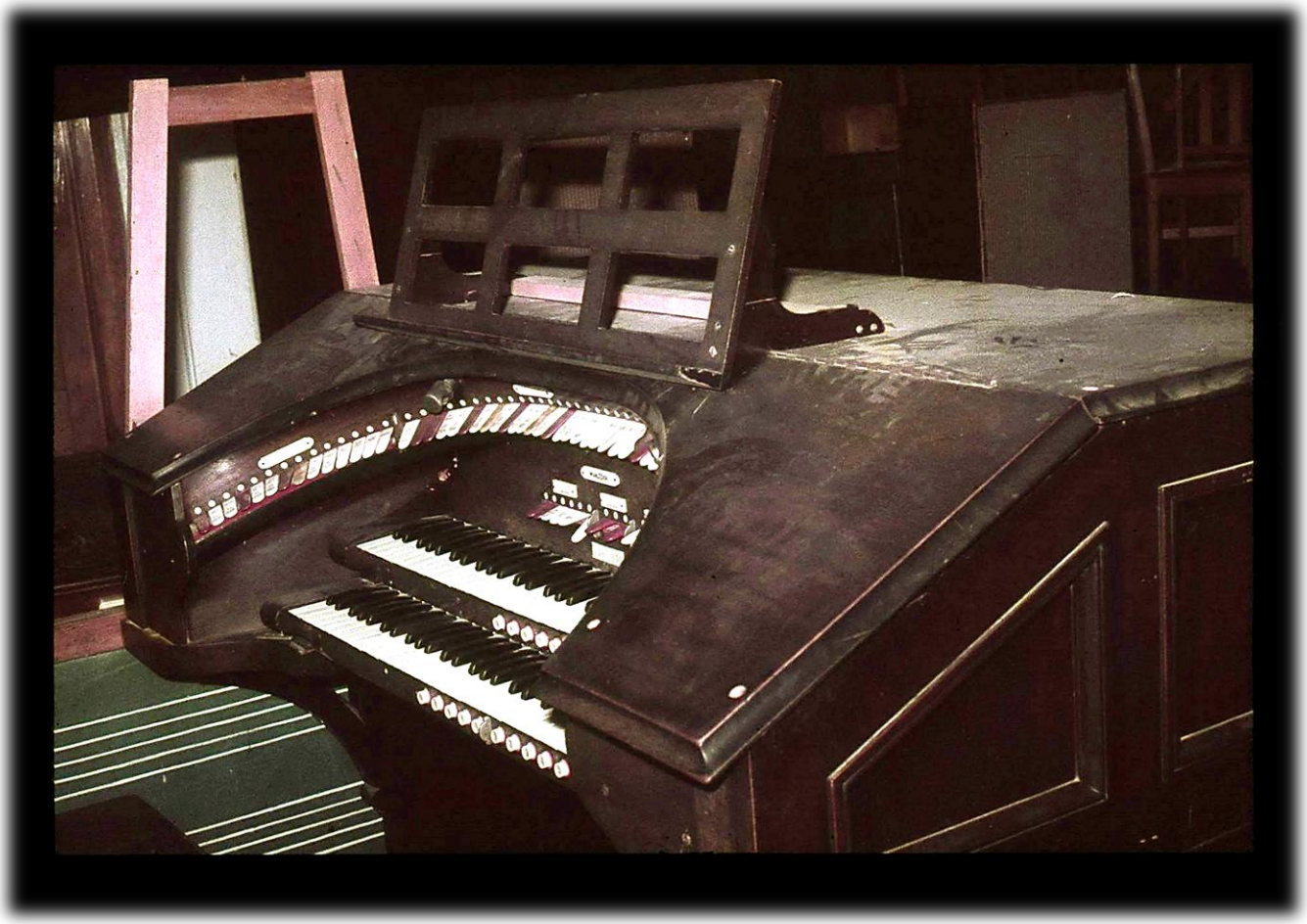
In 1929, Al Jolson leapt on to the screen singing "Mammy" in the movie "The Jazz Singer", it was the only part of the movie with sound, but quickly saw sound technology perfected, with both voice and music soundtracks now being cut on to the film.

By the 1930s, sound movies were coming to New Zealand in good numbers – the "talkies" had arrived and soon the Regent Wurlitzer was to fall silent. Across the road the Civic Theatre had opened in December 1929 and the Civic was to make their Wurlitzer organ, the last imported into New Zealand, a big feature of the entertainment package on offer.

For the Regent Theatre, the "sleeping" Wurlitzer organ was sold in 1944 to the Hutt Valley High School and installed in their school hall.

In 1968 the storm that caused the sinking of the inter-island ferry *Wahine* at the entrance to Wellington harbour, and wreaked havoc across the lower North Island, took the roof off the school hall and subjected the Wurlitzer organ pipe work to torrential rain. Considered unviable to repair, it was later sold to a Wellington enthusiast who placed it into storage.

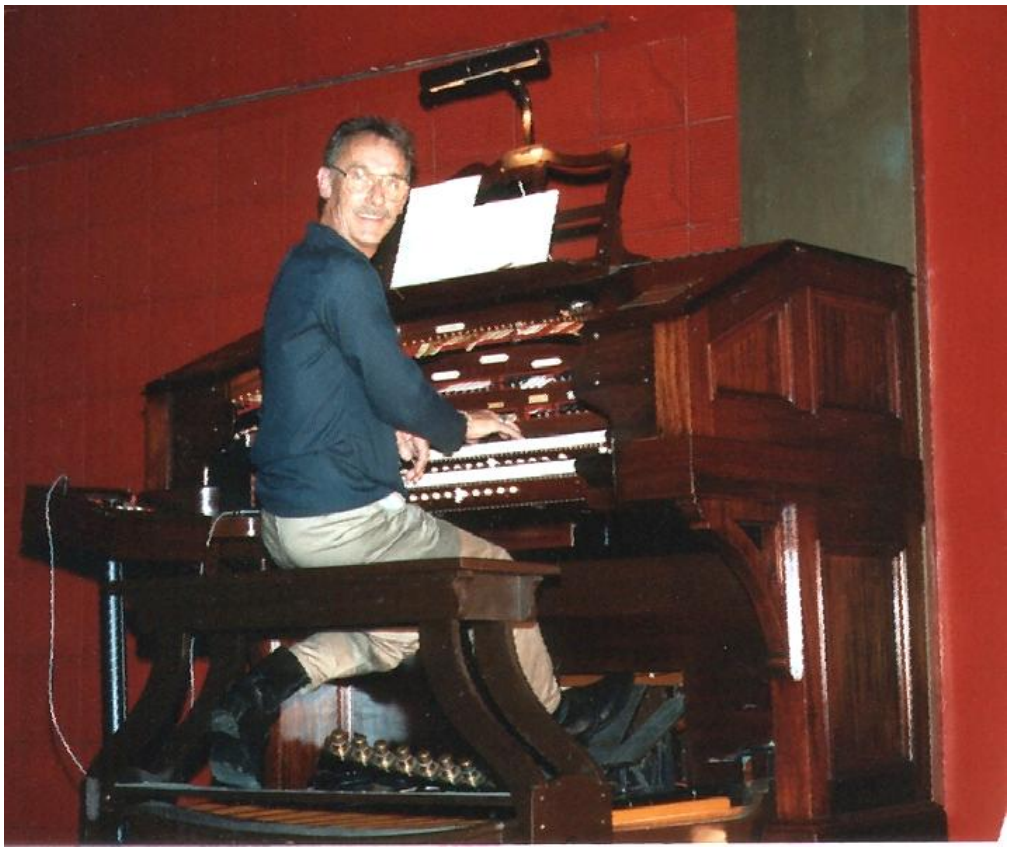
BELOW: A sad sight - the ex-Regent Theatre Wurlitzer organ console at the Hutt Valley High School after the Wahine Storm in 1968. (Ian Hanson)



In 1978 the Regent Wurlitzer was sold yet again, this time to an Auckland enthusiast, the late Les Stenersen, who with a team of volunteers brought the organ back to Auckland in two 20ft containers and a whole new life at the Hollywood Cinema. The late Jan Grefstad, manager and owner of the Hollywood, learnt that the Auckland Regent Theatre Wurlitzer organ was looking for a home and Jan jumped at the opportunity to have it at the Hollywood Cinema.

A massive clean-out on the stage behind the motion picture screen saw space provided for three organ chambers to house all the pipes and percussion instruments. The console was mounted on a worm-drive hoist, to recreate the time-honoured Wurlitzer tradition of the console rising into view, and part of the under-stage area housed the blowers and other equipment.

In 1982 the "Hollywood Wurlitzer" had its premiere performance before a sell-out house, and thus began what became a 33-year career of very successful concert and silent movie shows.



Local organist John Hardicker makes music at the Hollywood Cinema. (James Duncan)

1993 saw the *Wurlitzer Organ Trust of Auckland* (WOTA) formed to purchase and take on the ownership of the instrument, to ensure its on-going preservation and provide entertainment for the people of Auckland. However, this small silent-movie organ was never designed to be the centre of attention and entertain an audience for two hours with "pops" type concerts. Back in the silent movie days, the audience's attention was focused purely on the screen, the organ and organist were in the dark bringing the silent screen to life with music and sound effects. Today, much more was going to be required of the organ and organist!

Nearly $100k was raised through the support of the local Community Board, the *Trusts Community Foundation* (formerly *Portage Licensing Trust*) and *Lion Foundation* to perform a major upgrade on the organ, with additional sets of pipes installed together with still more percussion instruments. A larger 3 manual console, ex-Lowes Theatre in Norfolk Virginia USA, of the same vintage as the original Regent console, was acquired and a new solid-state relay control system installed which now provided huge versatility for the "new look" Hollywood Wurlitzer. The project took ten years to complete and saw the organ double in size, to become internationally acclaimed as New Zealand's "Showcase" Wurlitzer organ making it as much fun to play as it was to listen to.



2012 USA organist Dave Wickerham at the Hollywood Wurlitzer console

It was in 2015 that the news broke, that the Hollywood Cinema was going on the market to be sold, and the Trust was asked to remove the organ by end-September. The USA's Jelani Eddington had already been booked to perform in August of 2015, so this was now going to be the organ's final show at the Hollywood.



Two sell-out concerts were presented and as the organ console began to sink back down into the pit after the final show, emotions were running high as the Trust now faced the massive job of dismantling the organ piece by piece, crating it up and moving the organ to a storage facility.

Each pipe in the Trumpet rank seen here now carefully wrapped and crated. (Laurie Mathews)

Noted Melbourne theatre organ technician, Julian Arnold, hearing of the Trust's plight, offered his services to assist in the dismantling of the organ and advise on the precise process of storing the delicate pipe work to ensure its safe keeping while in storage.

During its years at the Hollywood, WOTA had created a contingency fund for *a rainy day,* by putting $1 per ticket sold, from every show, into a special account. It was now this fund that would enable the Trust to place the crated-up organ in a temperature-controlled facility, free from vermin and very secure. However, that came at some cost and within two years the fund was to be exhausted.

Auckland's *Museum of Transport and Technology* (MOTAT) had, from the day the organ came back to Auckland in 1978, an interest in the Wurlitzer but had never been in a position to provide it a home. Now, with WOTA's storage funds almost gone, MOTAT offered space at their Penrose storage facility, thanks to their Collections Manager Alba Letts. So, with heartfelt gratitude, WOTA had the Wurlitzer organ relocated to Penrose, where for a year or two, it was to sit alongside the museums stored trams, trolley buses and myriad of other heritage items.

However back in 2015, just as the organ was to fall silent again, this time at the Hollywood, discussions had commenced with Alan Burrows and the *Glen Eden Playhouse Theatre Trust (GEPTT).* They had expressed great interest in providing the Wurlitzer with a home and over the next two years, the logistics of how this might come to pass were being negotiated.

It was absolutely agreed by both parties, that the stage at the Playhouse Theatre was its biggest asset, critical for the groups who regularly hire the theatre, so a big "no" to the organ chambers going there. The best solution found was that the GEPTT would build an extension on the rear of the theatre to accommodate the organ chambers. Organ Tech Julian Arnold provided advice on the space requirements for the organ, and *Friends of the Wurlitzer* member Mr Graham Upton, an architect, designed the chambers to give the maximum output of sound through the smaller than normal shutter openings. The Percussion Chamber would be built over the top of the walkway at the rear of the stage that provides access from the Green Room.

Consents were sought and eventually granted by Auckland Council, and the GEPTT then engaged the contractors to now build the new annex.

Meantime, WOTA now began the task of seeking funds for the massive project of installing the organ once the chambers were completed.

First to arrive at the Playhouse Theatre was the gorgeous mahogany 3 manual console. The Trust had purchased a new hydraulic hoist that would raise the triple-keyboard console up to stage level from the orchestra pit. Each time the organ console is used, five sections of the stage floor, that covers the orchestra pit and now organ console, need to be lifted to expose the beast in its lair.

Over in Melbourne, Julien Arnold was in a dilemma, because in 2021, the Wurlitzer organ of the Dendy Theatre in Brighton, now had to be removed after over 50 years at that venue, as the theatre was to be turned into 4 smaller cinemas. The *Victorian Division* of the *Theatre Organ Society of Australia* were about to go through the same trauma as WOTA had in 2015. However, the removal of the Dendy Wurlitzer was of course Julien's to organise and reluctantly he had to withdraw from the Auckland

project. The good news for Julien was that the Dendy Wurlitzer was, in fact, going back to its original home, the Capitol Theatre in Swanston Street, in central Melbourne.

Then along came COVID, shutting the world down and particularly Auckland, which endured weeks of lock-down.

Once the borders were open again, WOTA received some very welcome news. Richard Larritt, noted theatre organ technician of Adelaide together with his friend and colleague Peter Hosking, offered to pick up the Auckland project from where Julien left off.



The Adelaide Boys –
Peter Hosking and Richard Larritt

From 2022 onwards, Richard and Peter made regular trips over to Auckland for fortnight-long working bees, working alongside our own Neil Warrington and his small team of volunteers, to commence installation of the Wurlitzer. Both Australian men had work commitments just as the Playhouse Theatre had a steady stream of hires, which of course is the theatre's principal source of income, so the organ working-bee visits had to be timed around all these prerequisites.



Several tons of Wurlitzer pipe organ in crates and associated "bits" arrive on the stage at the Playhouse from storage

Kevin Reade & Peter Hosking carry a large Diapason pipe through the door to the Organ Chamber, at the rear of the Playhouse Theatre.
The Diapason Rank of pipes is the foundation sound of the church or classical pipe organ, also found on all good theatre organs!





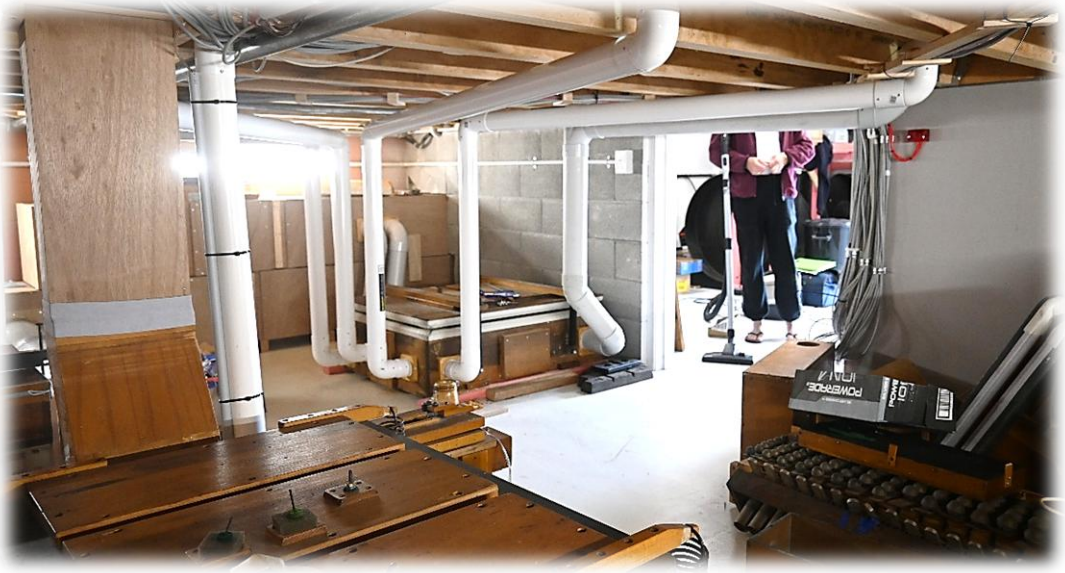
Richard Larritt setting up the 8' string in the Main Chamber. (Peter Hosking)



Solo chamber from the shutters.
Tuba in the foreground, then the Trumpet, then the Post Horn
(Peter Hosking)

Diaphone and Flute





Wind lines and regulators fitted in the sub-chamber.

(Peter Hosking)

The installation of a pipe organ is mind-boggling. Laying out where in the organ chambers everything will stand, installing the big chests that house the over 1000 pipes that make-up the organ's 15 ranks, running the massive wind lines that bring the high-pressure wind from the blowers to the regulators and chests, then wiring the whole thing in to the organ's solid-state control relay. The relay takes the low voltage signals from the organ console, works out what stops (voices) the organist is wanting and then sends another low voltage signal up to that particular rank of pipes and to the pipe (note) they wanted to play, firing off a magnet under that pipe which allowed air to race up the pipe and it to "speak". The same applies to the percussion instruments – when the magnet is charged, air fills a pneumatic "action" which expands rapidly, a hammer fixed to the action then strikes the particular note on the xylophone or glockenspiel etc, or strikes a cymbal or drum and they then sound!!



The shutter openings for the Solo Chamber looking out to the stage



The shutter openings for the Main Chamber looking out to the stage

In 2024, "she sang for the first time!!" The breakthrough came when the blowers were started up and wind filled the chests containing the pipes. Peter Hosking went to the console and began to play. The sound tumbling out of the organ chambers was heartwarming and thrilling. Even better, it could be clearly heard in the Playhouse Theatre foyer, removing all doubts that some had had, that the chamber openings would be inadequate to enable the sound to get out into the theatre.

It was all still a pretty raw sound, but rank by rank, the boys eventually got the entire 15 ranks playing. In November last year, Adelaide's Richard Larritt and Peter Hosking's final work program was undertaken, with them formerly handing the Organ over to us – their brief was to get the organ installed and playing – and these wonderful guys delivered this and so much more!

Early this year, all the percussions were installed and got working, more or less. The rubber cloth on the pneumatic actions had stiffened over time through ten years of no movement and work was then undertaken to get all the action freed up and moving again.

Critical to the theatre organ is the perfect operation of the Tremulants – these shake the air going into the pipe chests at a measured rate providing that vibrato – often described as "the wobbly bits". A Wurlitzer must have its Tremulants that affect the Tibia, Flutes and Strings beating at the correct depth and speed, or the organ can sound like cats in a microwave! We had significant issues with the tremulants for the Tuba and the Tibia. These had previously been rebuilt but had been rebuilt incorrectly. Richard spent quite some time rebuilding both tremulants which has improved them significantly.

So now, the heart and soul of this 1926 Wurlitzer pipe organ, that has had five homes (including a short stay in Tokoroa), is about to sing once again in this her 100th year! When the console rises with Jelani Eddington bringing us the wonderful sounds of the Wurlitzer in full cry, the marrow will dance in our bones once again!

As we thrill to these sounds, let us spare a thought for the organisations and individuals that helped to bring the Wurlitzer organ to this climax.

FUNDING

- ***The Trusts Community Foundation***
- ***Western Districts Community Foundation (Ian McHardy)***
- ***American Theatre Organ Society***
- ***Lotteries - Environment and Heritage***
- ***MOTAT Society***
- ***John Palmer***
- ***Friends of the Wurlitzer Members***

SUPPORT

- ***Museum of Transport and Technology (MOTAT)***
- ***Alan Burrows & Glen Eden Playhouse Theatre Trust***
- ***Playhouse Theatre Inc.***
- ***Nathan Smith & Kevin Hanna***

THE WORKERS

- ***Julian Arnold***
- ***Graham Upton***
- ***Richard Larritt***
- ***Peter Hosking***
- ***WOTA Organ Team led by Neil Warrington***
- ***Scott Harrison***



Jelani Eddington

In 1996, at the age of twenty-two, the then rising star of American theatre organ, Jelani Eddington, made his very first concert tour of New Zealand and Australia, with Auckland being the very first port-of-call. So, the Hollywood Cinema was Jelani's first contact with a "Down-Under" audience. This began what has become a very close friendship between Auckland and Jelani, with him taking an on-going and very active interest in the fortunes of this small group down the bottom end of the World.

Over the following years, Jelani graduated from Yale Law School to become a practising lawyer, and his musical career took off at the same time. Through all of this, Jelani made regular visits to play for us here in Auckland.

Jelani Eddington's last visit to Auckland was back in 2015, and when the trip was booked, it was going to be just another show in our 2015 concert series. However, in June, we learnt of the pending sale of the Hollywood Cinema, which meant that Jelani's August show would be the organ's farewell to the Hollywood. When Jelani took the console down at the end of what had been a sell-out show, he brought to a close 32 years of music-making by the ex-Regent Wurlitzer organ in this venue.

Eleven years later, and it is only right that Jelani Eddington should bring the beautiful mahogany console up out of the pit to launch a new chapter in the organ's now 100 year history, in its new home at Glen Eden's Playhouse Theatre.

