

A Master Leaves His Properties

by Orrin Howard



Carmine Marinelli

If someone were to mention fixtures in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion the reference would almost certainly be to the splendid chandeliers that throw their golden glow throughout the Auditorium, the Grand Hall, and the Founders Room. But the Pavilion's backstage has had its own fixture, one having nothing to do with electrical illumination, namely a man who has functioned as the Master of Properties from the time the building opened its doors in 1964.

Carmine Marinelli has truly been a man of the theatre, specifically of our largest, first-to-open Music Center theatre, an old hand who has always been there to make a performance possible, without whom there would be chaos. A show goes on — be it a symphony concert, opera, or any one of a variety of stage presentations — only if all the huge number of physical objects are exactly where they should be, ready for the performers to go through

their artistic paces. When it comes to the well being and correct placement on stage of the properties of a performance, the buck stops with the Master of Properties. Until last September when he retired, Marinelli had that title and its responsibilities as a member of the stage crew that is represented by what is surely one of the most ungainly union titles in existence — The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Machine Operators of the United States and Canada, Local 33. (But what's in a name.)

Who'd have thought a time would come when one wouldn't see Carmine backstage, he seemed to be such a permanent part of the scenery, so to speak. But it was time, said the veteran of performances past counting, to say goodbye to a wonderful part of his life that has left him with memories past counting. And there are memories that precede the Music Center, and even of the old Philharmonic

Auditorium where he worked the Philharmonic concerts and the Civic Light Opera shows. [For those whose Los Angeles experience only started with the Music Center, the Philharmonic Auditorium, now nothing but an open parking lot on the north-east corner of Fifth and Olive, was the home of both the L.A. Philharmonic and the Civic Light Opera, which rented space from the Temple Baptist Church, which owned the building and held its services there.]

Carmine found his way to a backstage profession by first selling theatre lighting equipment for Otto K. Olsen. This job led to his joining Local 33, in 1955. With this connection plugged in, it was not long before he was on permanent call at NBC, working as head electrician for some of the big names in television — Pinky Lee, Dinah Shore, Eddie Fisher, Tony Martin, George Gobel, Dean Martin, and others. Working as head electrician and stage manager of Philharmonic Auditorium was Carmine's initiation into the world of a symphony orchestra and of opera theatre. This was the groundwork that prepared him for his long-held position at the Pavilion.

Whether the Pavilion would come into being at all was, of course, a very large question mark in the late 1950s. Carmine relates that when the Temple Baptist Church made it known that it didn't want show business in its sanctuary any longer, Civic Light Opera manager Edwin Lester proposed to Dorothy Chandler that he would buy the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood for the CLO if the Philharmonic would take it for six months of the year. In spite of the fact that two bond issues to build a Music Center complex had been turned down by the voters, Mrs. Chandler advised Mr. Lester not to buy the Pantages. She assured him that with the help of the County and through serious fund raising a real home for his Civic Light

Opera and for the Philharmonic would become a reality. That this amazing and indomitable woman had such faith in her dream is one of the brightest pages of Los Angeles history. Carmine Marinelli is one of the multitudes of beneficiaries of Mrs. Chandler's energy and her fabled gift for fund raising and for surrounding herself with such enthusiastic and successful minions as Olive (Mrs. George S.) Behrendt, Grace (Mrs. Henry) Salvatori, Asa Call, John A. McCone, and many others.

Carmine's abilities backstage at the Pavilion were not confined to his dispatching of his duties as Master of Properties. In fact, mention Carmine's name to any number of people around the Center and they will begin to wax eloquent about his Italian cooking. And he didn't need a fully equipped restaurant in which to ply his gourmet talent; for tucked away in a backstage corner is a small room that gained fame as Carmine's Kitchen. With equipment that he inherited when the Founder's Room in the Ahmanson Theatre closed, the Minnesota-born Italian set up shop and turned out meals that won raves from many illustrious patrons, including Mrs. Chandler. One of the chef's countless specialties is a world-class tiramisu, which he makes at the drop of a hint. (This writer wheedled the recipe out of him, but the result never matched the master's.)

Cooking Italian the old-fashioned way was something he learned from his mother. It certainly couldn't have hurt either that he lived in Italy for many years. In 1931 he moved with his parents from Minnesota to a small town just south of Rome, which with war clouds gathering and intensifying became a precarious place to be. Indeed, by 1939 Italy was a place to leave, and Carmine, the only member of his family to obtain a passport, sailed for America on the last crossing of the Rex. He lived for a time in New York with an aunt, but destiny was to bring him back to Italy in short order. Drafted in 1942, he was placed in the 3rd Infantry Division's medical corps, which was to hit the beach of North Africa in preparation for a landing in Sicily. In one of their smarter moves, the Army had realized that Carmine's fluency in Italian would be very valuable to them and they put the right soldier in the right place.

One is taking poetic license, however, to say the right place. Carmine tells of his wartime adventures dispassionately, but clearly it was, as war inevitably is, hell. In North Africa, the young soldier underwent an emergency appendectomy shortly before the landing in Sicily. With his surgical



wound bound securely, he barely survived the Mediterranean crossing, only to become involved in a rescue operation of embattled soldiers that netted him a serious injury. The recipient of the Silver Star, he carries a shell fragment in his body to this day.

Some, although probably not all, say that Carmine deserves a Silver Star for service to the Music Center. Backstage at a multi-purpose theatre like the Pavilion is frequently a hotbed of frantic activity, and he has always proved to be a real pro. No one knows about Carmine's professionalism any better than Sandra Kimberling, president of The Music Center Operating Company. "For 34 years Carmine Marinelli worked tirelessly behind the scenes of the Chandler Pavilion — building props, setting orchestras and taking care of the special needs of the performers," says Kimberling. "This was all in a day's work for Carmine — not to mention the wonderful pasta and canoli he would make in his famous backstage kitchen for cast and crew. We hope his retirement will be filled with the same sentiment as he gave all those years to the Music Center."

Gordon Jenkins, booking director of The Music Center Operating Company and a long-time colleague, drew this mini-portrait of Marinelli. "Carmine and I began at the Music Center about the same time, and in those early weeks subsequent to the opening of the Pavilion, a round-

the-clock schedule for the stage crew became the norm. It amazed me that, working under those pressures, Carmine was always successful in coping with the many challenges presented by a seemingly endless procession of diverse attractions. Day after long day, amidst all the confusion, he never lost sight of why we were all there: to get the show on!"

William Severns, a former executive-of-many-parts at the Music Center, attributes Carmine's effectiveness to his great love for everything (well, almost everything) that came to the Pavilion stage. "He loves music, he loves opera, and he loves the artists who make the music and sing the opera," Severns says. "He may not be the only member of a theatre's stage crew to have such a deep affection for the arts," Severns adds, "but this affection clearly gave Carmine's work a special distinction."

Ernest Fleischmann, who saw Carmine in action from the time he became the Los Angeles Philharmonic's executive director in 1969 until he retired last March, speaks also of the man's affection. "Carmine demonstrated his warm feelings for the Philharmonic often and in many ways. He really had the interests of the Philharmonic at heart," says Fleischmann. "For example, he would give us opportunities to get work done at the lowest union cost, and obviously this was a special consideration that was greatly appreciated by the Orchestra."

"Carmine's Italian proved to be very valuable to Music Center Opera," says that company's production manager Chari Shanker. "There was many a day that Carmine saved by communicating with an Italian conductor who for temperamental reasons would suddenly lose his English."

To end such a long career that was so meaningful to him has proved difficult, Carmine admits. But in truth a certain disenchantment had set in during the past few years and Carmine was willing to talk about it with anyone who would listen. He had many solutions for the problems he perceived were troubling *his* Music Center. But quite apart from those concerns, the time had come to face a life that didn't involve the Chandler but would have to do only with himself and his family. The answer was, of course, retirement. Enjoy it, Carmine, you deserve it! □

A frequent contributor to Performing Arts, Orrin Howard was the Director of Publications for the Los Angeles Philharmonic for more than 20 years and is now serving in its Archives. He continues to write program notes for the Philharmonic and is also an annotator for the Phoenix Symphony.