

# Theatre Author Praises Al. Ringling

## *Tales of Earlier Days*

By Bob Dewel

This column does not usually do book reviews. The following is an exception, and announces a book signing in Baraboo on Monday October 19 from 3 to 5. The New York author himself will be at the Booksmith to sign purchases. Some 24 pages of his book are devoted to Baraboo and its most significant historic theatre.

So why does the book merit a Baraboo signing? Here's a hint: Name the 10 most distinctive historical theatres operating today in Wisconsin. Not the Overture in Madison, only an infant in terms of historical importance, and operating yet on shaky financial ground.

Except for the Pabst, there is nothing in Milwaukee or elsewhere that has not been architecturally violated over the years. So why Baraboo and its palatial gem, the Al. Ringling?

Give up? Professor Brian Doyle, recently of Lehman College of City University of New York, has done the research for us with a 250 page volume titled *Encore, The Renaissance of Wisconsin Opera Houses*. Featuring the finest workmanship that the publishing world has to offer, it represents years of investigative research by Professor Doyle.

### How Others See Us

Developed in concert with the Wisconsin Historical Society Press, this magnificent and highly illustrated volume traces the origin and history of 10 historic Opera Houses. As Sauk County residents can well imagine, Baraboo's Al. Ringling is prominently pictured and discussed.

Baraboo citizens are generally laid-back about their theatre, ignoring its historic nature and forgetting its significant contribution to city and county finances—a gift serving 94 years and counting, and saving taxpayers millions in construction of civic auditoriums. Indeed, during most of those years, the Ringling paid taxes into the community coffers, which community centers do not.

In his book, Doyle first compliments the region and city, praising the beauty of our area and noting that the downtown of Baraboo as presenting Norman Rockwelleske architecture, capped by the quality facade of the Ringling.

Eleven newly created photos by Mark Fay are presented, along with four originals from 1915. Other cameos are scattered throughout the book and on the spine of the dust cover.

### Local History Cameo

The chapter is introduced with complimentary observations regarding the beauty of the Baraboo valley and the fortunate location of Baraboo therein. A brief history, even including the saga of Abe Wood, is followed by the significance of such developments as the railroad, and of course the Ringlings, the theatre being named after Al., their leader.

There are extended remarks about the early days of the theater as well as its striking significance in the development of the silent movie industry. A striking double



Left Proscenium Jewel Box and Columns, Al. Ringling Theatre, Baraboo

page view of the auditorium from the stage is presented, a sight not ordinarily seen by the public, and not usually photographed

There also is an auditorium view presenting the huge painting of pre-revolutionary France on the fire curtain. Also not usually seen are the original open switch lighting board and the pin rail and its ropes to operate the curtains manually.

Since books of this quality and depth are written well before publication, the new use of Stage II as a ticket and refreshment counter and gathering area is not noted. Indeed, this area is still under continued development.

This book is a quality keeper. Besides the theatre, it also presents a cameo history of the area. It is suitable also as a gift for family or friends living elsewhere now, but formerly of this city or county. . It can be viewed without obligation at the theater or at the Booksmith.



**Professor Brian Leahy Doyle**

*Photo by Adam STOLTMAN*

**Opposite; an unusual view of the Al. Ringling house from the stage.**

**Mark Fay Photo, Wisconsin Historical Society**