

Why a Book on Ottawa Movie Theatres?

A movie theatre is something special. It's a business, but not like just any business. It doesn't compare to a gas station or a hardware store. It's built to entertain people; a place where kids gather for their first outings into town alone, experience a first kiss, and get to dream. It's a place where people go to get away from their daily routines and headaches for the space of two hours; where you bring a date, or go to be alone. It's a place that holds an enchantment, a certain something; a place that in its purest form will fill you with awe and give you a particular sense of occasion. In all these ways, a cinema is very much a social space.

When it was announced that the Elgin theatre was closing, in late 1994, I felt incredulous and sad. Memories of going there after school as a kid, after or during class, immediately came to mind. I particularly remember standing in a two-hour lineup to get tickets to the premiere of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. No way, I thought to myself, the Elgin can't possibly be closing. And yet it happened.

I'm too young to remember the Capitol. The Regent was torn down when I was four years old; the Centre (by then the Odeon Mall) quietly went dark a year later. But I do still remember going to see Walt Disney movies at the Rideau, where a trip to the upstairs arcade was de rigueur. I still remember seeing children's movies at the Cartier, long before it went porno. One such movie, *La poursuite mystérieuse*, fascinated me to the point that I asked my mom if I could go see it a second time. My folks also used to take my sister and me to the little De Paris for Sunday double features.

Later, when I started going to movies with friends, it was at the "Rat Hole," which only the newspaper ads referred to as the Rialto. There you could catch triple-bill exotic kung fu movies for about 75 cents. My friends and I considered going there a special thrill because it was in such a rough area of downtown. Then there was the Nelson, where I remember sitting one cold December night with my best friend and a handful of other patrons, way up in the balcony, watching *Dune* and sipping rum and eggnog right out of the carton. I later returned to the Nelson with one of my first dates. And then there was the Towne, located in a strange area that I didn't know too much about as a teen-ager, but where I saw *Pink Floyd: The Wall*, a movie that fascinated my young mind at the time.

By that time, most of Ottawa's movie palaces and neighbourhood houses were a thing of the past, but the few that remained were my favourites. You went to see a movie, then you walked right back into the street and into a public space. Within a few seconds you were engulfed in the city, rehashing in splendid solitude your favourite scenes from the film. Or if you were with the gang, you'd be talking loudly about it while deciding where to go hang out next.

Kids today may never have these same experiences. Sure, they'll go to movies, but more often than not it will be at a mall or at a power centre. They will have had to be driven to it, and after the movie the only place they will be able to explore is ... the mall. The two surviving true movie houses in town, the Bytowne and the Mayfair, are alone in providing an alternative — as long as they survive.

The idea for this book came to me in 1994, although its seeds were already planted well before then. I've always had a special interest in cinemas. I was sad when the Rideau was torn down to make way for the Dalhousie Street extension, and when the De Paris closed its doors. I recall feeling angry when the Rialto (by then the boarded-up Phoenix) was unceremoniously demolished, because homeless people were taking refuge inside to fight the cold. In other cities I always notice grand old theatres. I lived in Montreal for two years and made it a point to go to the Imperial and the Rialto just to see what they were like inside. Also in Montreal, one of the most depressing sights is the number of derelict theatres decaying behind barricades: the Seville, the Electra, the York. It's the same in Boston with the Paramount, and in Toronto with the University. Nostalgia makes me pause every time I see a closed cinema. The movie *Cinema Paradiso* speaks directly to that feeling.

In 1994, when both the Elmdale and the Elgin died, that did it. I started collecting photos and information, talking to people, going through old newspaper microfilms and archives. It wasn't always easy. Lots of information is available on the bigger theatres, starting with *All That Glitters*, Hilary Russell's authoritative dissertation on the Capitol, but for the smaller neighbourhood houses the task proved to be very challenging. When these places were open, people didn't go around taking pictures of movie theatres, and newspapers had no reason to photograph them. The National Archives, while providing me with a wealth of documentation on the better-known showplaces, held little information about the small neighbourhood screens. I spent hours going through private collections, squinting at negatives, combing the papers page by page, and talking to people who had known these small theatres. I had already picked up a few books about theatres in other cities, such as Dane Lancken's excellent *Montreal Movie Palaces*. I then decided it was time to do the same here in Ottawa. That is my first answer to the question, Why a book on Ottawa movie theatres?

The other reason I had for writing this book has a bit more to do with love for my city. Most books and tourist memorabilia available for Ottawa

focus on Parliament Hill and a few big monuments. To the outside world, Ottawa is known as the capital of Canada and not much else. Even other Canadians often have a distorted view of our city. Ottawa is resented for being the seat of the federal government, which takes their tax money, and they may have a perception of our city as a fat cat burg where everyone lives off the teat of big government. Of course, we who live here know how unfair that portrait is.

With this book, I want to help dispel this image of our city. I want to show the world outside that beyond Parliament Hill there is a vibrant city with real people having real lives, and one small part of those real lives involves going to catch a show. This book is, in a simple way, about how the real people of this real city entertained themselves over the past century and a half.

For us, the people of Ottawa and Gatineau, I wanted to write a book about the places in our neighbourhoods that we cherished over the years and have lost. I want to contribute to the sense of pride we all ought to feel about this city and its place in Canada. A little-known fact the reader will note is that Ottawa was at the forefront of many innovations in the movie exhibiting industry.

This book is for the people of Ottawa and Gatineau, to help us know our city better and feel good about it; and it's for people who don't live here but are curious and willing to look beyond the familiar caricatures of Ottawa that appear in the media every day. Covering theatres in the cities of Ottawa and Gatineau (formerly Hull), this book treats our community as I believe it should be treated: as one metropolitan area.

Introduction

Movie theatres were the focus of their neighbourhoods in many ways. In the days before television, entire families would go sit before the silver screen several times a week. Kids would religiously follow serials weekend after weekend, or sit at the rear with friends and learn to smoke. Moviegoing was an event. It got entire communities together and involved in all sorts of entertainments and contests. Collecting the sets of dishes that theatres offered as premiums and participating in the long-forgotten Foto-Nites are only two examples.

In their early days, movies were condemned by the Church as corruptive. This was particularly true in the francophone community, in both Ottawa and Hull, where priests regularly advised parishioners to stay away from theatres. The French-language newspaper, *Le Droit*, refused to carry cinema advertising well into the 1920s. This practice tended to backfire, however, since an edict by the priest against a particular movie usually ensured full houses for the theatre owners. In those days, movies were cheap. The price of a ticket in the 1940s was about a quarter of what it is today, roughly the same as streetcar fare.

Theatres came and went with the many changes in the exhibition industry. Opening a nickelodeon in the first decade of the twentieth century was a relatively easy thing to do. Prospective exhibitors did not have to worry about booking arrangements or circuit affiliations. Nor were they much controlled, in the very first years, by fire code regulations or today's arcane zoning and parking requirements. As in all other North American cities, several dozen nickelodeons sprang up in the various neighbourhoods and downtown sections of Ottawa and Hull, and lasted anywhere from a few months to several years. The only obstacle faced by nickelodeon operators was their dubious respectability, in a society that originally associated movies with low-class and corrupt entertainment.

With the increasing popularity and social acceptance of moving pictures, the construction of permanent cinemas became viable. During the 1910s, large auditoriums were built along many of the city's main streets. These facilities were designed with stages for the vaudeville shows and with orchestra pits, as silent movies had to be accompanied by music. This decade gave Ottawa some of its most enduring cinematic landmarks, such as the Centre, the Regent, the Français, and the Imperial theatres. It also