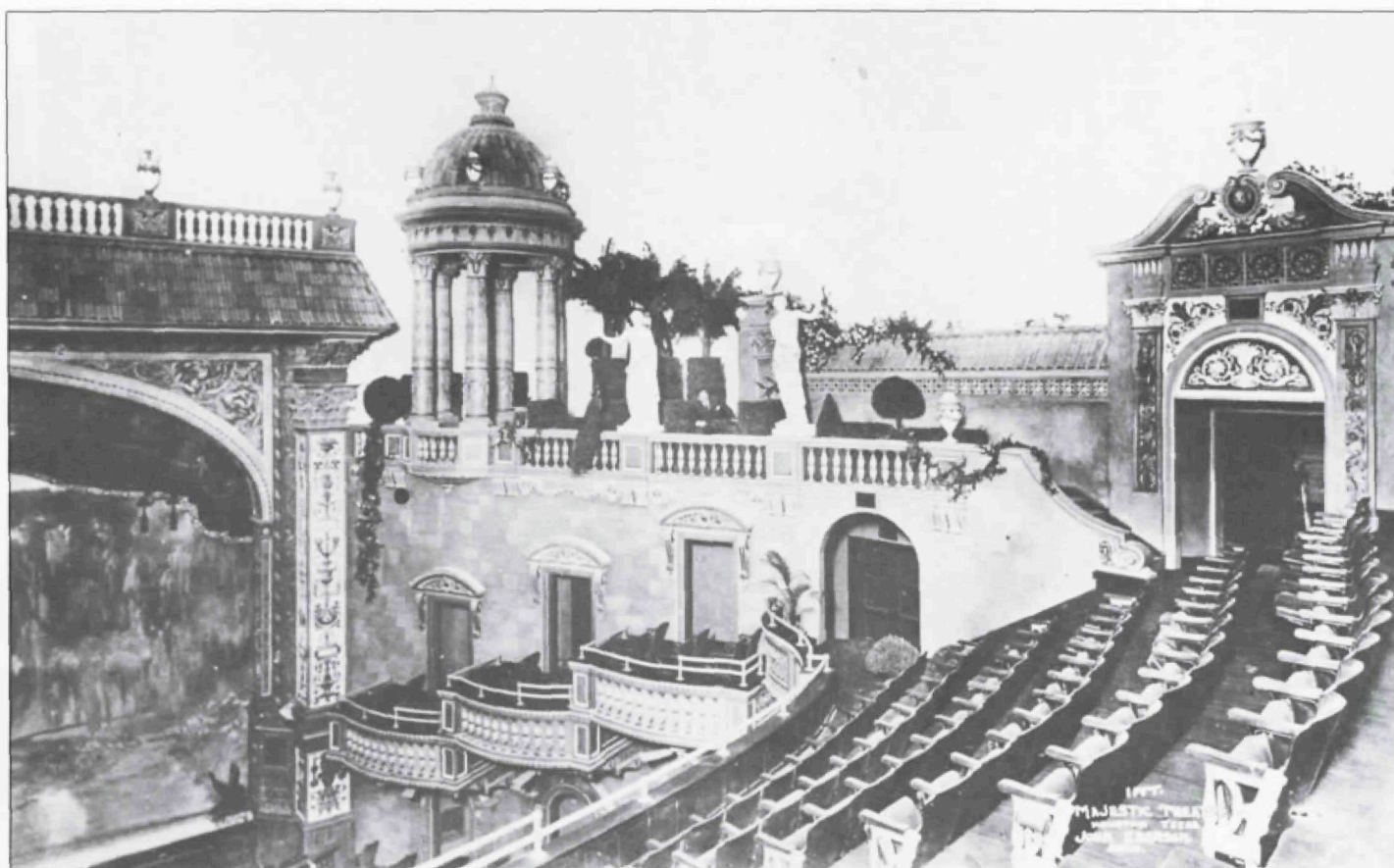


Once, where you saw a film was as important as the film you saw.

Losing It At the Movies: From Palace to Multiplex

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The atmospheric interior of Houston's Majestic Theatre (John Eberson, architect; razed) simulated an Italian courtyard.

In the days of the great picture palaces, going to the movies was an "other worldly" experience. For the most part, picture palaces were built in the 1920s when ostentation was king and the big studios were in their heyday. Downtowns across the country became dappled with re-creations of ornate European palaces, Gothic cathedrals, and grand opera houses. Americans, always on the prowl to claim a historic past, became busy architectural bees, ravaging countries and cultures of their monuments. Time-honored artifacts were re-created and assembled anew as fanciful embellishments on fantastic designs. Inspired by the opening of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922, Egyptian styles phoenixed before architects set their sights on the dynasties of the Far East and mock temples such as Grauman's Chinese flourished in Hollywood.

In essence, the great picture palaces were emblematic of the democratic ideal, the common man's Shangri-la, where he could lean back in an opera box, elbow-to-elbow with blue bloods, tapping his foot to the swells of the Wurlitzer organ. There were plushy seats that gave with every scream and belly laugh. Late patrons were escorted by flashlight-bearing ushers, trained in the fine art of trailing the slanted beam so that it scattered over fleur-de-lis carpet, never spilling on the hurried patrons' footfalls. Waterfall curtains ascended and gave way to the magic of the big screen where larger-than-life images transported the movie-goer away from the world of the common day.

In the southwestern corn belt, architect John Eberson built his fabulous atmospheric theaters. San Antonio's Majestic (still standing) is reminiscent of an abandoned Moorish castle replete with turrets, trellises, hanging vines, and pine trees with stuffed doves at their roosts. The Houston Majestic (1923, since razed), catering to 2,116 seats, simulated an Italian courtyard with all the romantic appeal of the Mediterranean. Although the atmospheric theaters weren't picture palaces per se (in the grand old style), the audience must have been razzle-dazzled by the curved plaster ceilings with their star-filled azure skies on which projected doves danced and wisping clouds wandered. Surely, if nothing else, the patron was offered a psychological reprieve from the Texas heat.

In the 1930s when the Depression dug its long fingers deep into the pockets of the studio moguls, the idea was to create theaters with all the showy glamour of a



The opening of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 inspired Egyptian interiors such as this one in the Metropolitan Theater, 1926, Alfred C. Finn, architect

palace but with a less costly price tag. Extravagant use of marble and crystal went out of style and were replaced with decorative plasters, mirrors, and indirect lighting. By virtue of its richness of design, yet relative simplicity, art deco surfaced as the whimsical hallmark of theaters like New York's Radio City Music Hall.

In the late 1930s and '40s, as people started to radiate out from the downtown areas, theater owners met the challenge by building in strip shopping centers. In the Southwest (Alabama and Texas), a chain of 200 ABC Interstate theaters dotted neighborhoods and outlying areas. In Houston, on 28 November 1939, the River Oaks Theater (Pettigrew and Worley, architects), billed in local papers as "Houston's newest neighborhood theater," opened with Ginger Rogers and David Niven starring in (an obscure but surely a swell little film) *Bachelor Mother*. According to River Oaks management, the theater always has been the home of a mish-mash of styles: "semi-atmospheric cove lighting, and sort of art deco, but not really art deco - didn't quite sort out the interior - maybe art moderne, but plainer than that."

Feelings run high among dug-in and long-standing Houstonians that the River Oaks has always harbored intellectual ambitions - a place to see serious "art" pictures. Perhaps in 1941 one such patron saw an aged and money-soiled hand holding a glass paperweight. Within the glass ball, snow swirled and fell dreamily on a meager log cabin. Then there was a

tight shot of Orson Welles's (a.k.a. Citizen Kane's) lips whispering the last words of a dying man - "Rosebud . . . Rosebud." So began the classic American tragedy of money, greed, and despair. Not unlike the plot of *Citizen Kane* is the story of the neighborhood movie house - where simple values and humanist aesthetics have given way to the multiplex: the fast-buck, bigger-is-better burgeoning trend of gigantomania in America.

A couple of years ago, hard economic times fast on its heels, the River Oaks succumbed to the embrace of Darwinian dynamics and became a triplex. Structurally, the concern was to maintain the integrity of the main auditorium, and by walling up the balcony two new theaters were created. The new balcony auditoriums (not to disparage the savoir-faire of survival) are essentially stripped-down black boxes with few amenities and meager screens.

This evening in Houston, when your average couch potatoes unleash themselves from their lush-puppy TV or VCR existence and venture forth to a movie house, what remains, what is changing, and how does the run-of-the-mill Houston movie theater rouse the ordinary viewer to an extraordinary state on a typical evening? Consider, if you will, the case of the River Oaks, the Bel Air, and the Meyer Park 14.

The sociology of going out to a movie probably hasn't altered a great deal. Among other things, you still have the



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Meyer Park 14, 1987, Fullerton, Carey, and Oman, architects. It offers 14 theaters, 14 concession registers, and long lines.

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juggler's act of getting to your seat while nibbling on popcorn and not spilling your drink. But for some of us, going to the movies these days implies a certain amount of cultural literacy — "have you seen such and such," by definition, implies being in the "know."

Thus, bespectacled hunter-gatherers of information, seeking yesteryears' art pictures, inevitably find themselves under the neon ice of the River Oaks marquee. "Ars Longa, Vita Breva and all — bring on Antonioni, Bergman, and Bunuel!"

Happily the River Oaks remains a neighborhood theater, one of the few where you can still buy a book of movie passes, pick up a film schedule (a must for an icebox door), and read a newsy bulletin board for the goings on around town. It is a place where invariably there is a nod and wave from passersby and friends coming and going. The concession people, wearing their bow ties and aprons with aplomb, are as quirky, informed, and good-hearted as ever. "Bravo!" we call, cheering the very spirit of the place from our seats.

When the Bel Air (originally the Bellaire, Darrell P. Walling, architect) was built in 1948 it was billed as "Space Station 1950." Today the Bel Air, under the directional ownership of John Coles and the interior design of Archi Texas (of Dallas's Inwood Theater fame), has been "re-deco-ed" and revamped into a fiveplex and can rightly be viewed as a high-tech "Space Station 1987."

Like the River Oaks, the Bel Air has a word-of-mouth clientele and is largely frequented by those, who with hands cupped and ears pressed to the ground, are on the alert, listening for snatches of foreign dialogue. In film-fare terms, the Bel Air offers a wide range of first-run foreign and domestic films. Their multiplex advantage is in having several mid-sized theaters. They are able not only to specialize in "small films" (those made by independent film makers such as John Sayles), but also can accommodate private screenings as well as hold over such swells as Sweden's *My Life as a Dog*. Besides entrancing the viewer with state-of-the-art equipment, the Bel Air offers something a bit more: substances for adults. Instead of nibbling on popcorn in the lobby, you can stash yourself in the bar where, in a hipper-than-hip atmosphere, you can imbibe ambrosia-like concoctions with tags like "Orgasm" and "Deep Throat." See and be seen at your trendy best (always the serious moviegoer's concern) and sit at Champs Elysée cafe tables, taking in a

soundless film behind glass partitions. One fully expects to see Tama Janowitz (to say nothing of the whereabouts of Arthur Schlesinger) at a nearby table knocking back the Cuervo and writing serious fiction, inspired, to be sure, by the hologram on the wall. These amenities, in collusion with an eclectic range of very good, but loud (louder than loud), music ("avant-garde music for an avant-garde theater"), lend the place the air of a highly self-conscious nightclub. Fine by me, all is good and well, until the throb(?), pulse(?), beat(?) ultimately intrudes into the nearby auditoriums, where in the midst of a larger-than-life tender moment, dialogue is suddenly obscured by the clash and clang of a steel guitar (or was it a synthesizer?). You did, after all, come to see a film.

If the Bel Air is a space station, then the Meyer Park 14 (Fullerton, Carey, and Oman, architects) is an apocalyptic satellite. When it opened in May, 1987 it was the largest theater in the world. Its 3,081-seat capacity has since been superseded — nevertheless, on a good business day, turnstiles roulette at 8,500. Monitored by upwards of 80 employees, the Meyer Park is the home of computerized everything — air conditioning, 14 concession registers, and ticket counters. Popcorn, like an Ollie North shredder, zips, tumbles, and passes between hands at three concession stands. Forget about big box office, teen slashers, the Rat Pack, and Michael Caine — the concession stand is where the real money is made.

Finding the Meyer Park 14 can induce a crisis of mind. It is truly an adventure in wandering the wild, loop-de-loop of the Houston freeways. Recently, armed with a map, compass, and speed limit of 55, a carload of friends (hounds of popular culture — avid subscribers of *People* magazine) set forth to see a movie. Each of us, by virtue of a college education, felt uniquely qualified to serve as exit-spotting co-pilot. Havoc ensued:

"Get Off — Bellaire Boulevard."

"Wrong, it's Beechnut."

"I'm telling you, I've been to Meyerland one million times."

"Absolutely Wrong."

"Keep going, onward ho and all," one of us shouted.

The tender shoots of friendship slightly tattered but nonetheless intact, we arrived

in a parking lot the size of a football stadium and perused the aisles for a space.

While waiting in the 20-minute New York line, it is best to be sporting a reliable watch so that you can chat it up with strangers and muse about whether they (who are they, anyway?) are going to start the film without you. Once inside, having made your way past multitudes of teenagers whose designer-appareled bodies are pressed against video games, the lobby has the hustle-and-bustle feel of an airport or Grand Central Station. Naturally, locating the auditorium of choice is like being in one of those jokes where you have to select the right door. . . oh, these and other traumas lead to the suspicion that what you are doing is rehearsing for a role in *Waiting for Godot*.

Besides the fact that the serious pop culturist can drift from film to film and never see them all in one day, what is truly an amazing bit of business at the Meyer Park 14 is that from wherever you may be seated you can see the film. Necks are not needlessly craned, giants can sit in front of the short, and every seat is equipped with a marvelously convenient cup holder. Amazing! What a concept!

Needless to say, people go to the movies for a host of reasons: simple escape, to wander in dreamlike foreign landscapes, and to purge their souls by Aristotelian catharsis. Regardless of private compunction (on the part of the moviegoer or maker), modern film is modern myth, and just as ancient myths once helped to bridge necessary psychological gaps between life and the harsh realities of nature, so be it with modern film. Simply put, all of this rigamarole may be neither here nor there, but what is important is that for multivarious reasons (people radiating from the downtown areas to the suburbs, the advent of TV in the '50s, VCR in the '80s, and so on) screens in a good many palaces and semi-palaces have gone and are going black. Many, like the once fabulous Majestic, have been razed. The Tower Theatre (1936, W. Scott Dunne, architect) is being reused as a showplace, and some, like the Alabama Theater (1939, W. Scott Dunne, architect; rehabilitated in 1984 by Morris*Aubry Architects), have been creatively reconciled. Be it landmark picture palace or neighborhood theater, the buildings are tangible community assets — therefore, we must cheer them on. Cultural memory, after all, bonds us with a place and helps us to keep our seats. ■



River Oaks Theater, 1939, Pettigrew and Worley, architects



Bel Air, 1948, Darrell P. Walling, architect; rehabilitated in 1987 by Archi Texas

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