

American Film

Magazine of the
Film and Television Arts

May 1981
\$2.00

THE PERILS OF MOVIEGOING

LEE RICH:
TV'S HIGH
ROLLER

SCREENWRITER'S
NIGHTMARE:
WHO GETS
CREDIT?

<i>Admission</i>			
ADULTS	EST. PRICE 3.81 D.C. TAX J9		\$4.00
SENIOR CITIZENS 60 & OVER	EST. PRICE 2.85 D.C. TAX J9		\$3.00
CHILDREN UNDER 13	EST. PRICE 1.90 D.C. TAX J0		\$2.00
ALL CHILDREN MUST HAVE TICKETS			

TICKET GOOD FOR
SHOW INDICATED
ONLY

NO
TAPE RECORDERS
OR RADIOS
PERMITTED.



THE PERILS OF MOVIEGOING

Ronald Haver

Scratchy prints, floors littered with popcorn and candy wrappers, loud patrons, and rude ushers—that's becoming a typical night at the movies.



Drawings by Frank Modell

Going to the movies isn't what it used to be. I'm not referring to the quality of the films, but to the decline in the quality of theater operation. You don't have to be a nostalgia nut to long for the days when motion picture theaters were run with the pronounced intention of making moviegoing a pleasurable, inexpensive, comfortable experience. Consider this: Each week in 1950, seventy million people paid an average of fifty cents to get into one of the more than nineteen thousand theaters across the country. Each moviegoer spent another fifty cents on refreshments, sat in a large, clean, well-supervised theater, and saw a short, a newsreel, coming attractions, a cartoon, and two features. The prints, whether they were shown in a first-run theater or not, were seldom spliced, never scratched, and were projected brightly on large screens at the proper sound level. The manager and his staff were available to listen to complaints, answer questions, and generally make the evening's outing a pleasure, no matter what the merits of the onscreen entertainment.

Flash forward to the present: Twenty-two million people a week are trying to get into the 13,329 indoor theaters across the country, and this is what they're confronted with: (1) a four-dollar admission price (in some cities five); (2) paying three dollars for junk food that costs half as much anywhere else; (3) a theater staff that is ill informed, disorganized, and sometimes hostile; (4) an odorless auditorium whose floor is slippery with spilled soft drinks and littered with half-eaten hot dogs, empty popcorn tubs, and other trash; (5) onscreen advertising for newspapers, automobiles, other theaters, and assorted local businesses; (6) watching a film advertised as "70mm Dolby stereo" that is projected in the wrong size, out of focus, or with a sound system that buzzes, howls, rasps, and sometimes disappears altogether (in the case of twin or triplex "cinemas," a picture that is slightly larger than a projection television system, and with sound that is either hollow or thin, when it is not being upstaged by the sound track next door); (7) a print that is dirty, choppy, scratched, or faded; (8) verbal abuse and the threat of physical violence when asking loud talkers to keep it down, after vainly trying to find an usher to do it for you.

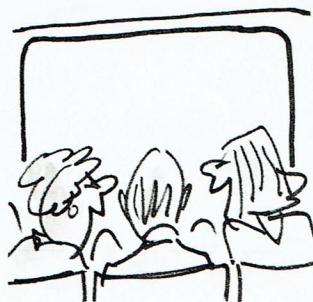
Unfortunately, most of the above is the norm rather than the exception at many commercial theaters these days. For example:

□ A filmgoer went to see *Heaven's Gate* during its brief run in Manhattan and complained to an usher that the film was out of focus. "What do you care?" the usher replied. "It's supposed to be lousy anyway."

□ Patrons in an Oakland, California, theater waiting for the start of *Gone With the Wind* were treated to a make-do short—the last half hour of the movie. "We didn't want to spend money on a short," the manager explained to a questioner. "Everybody's seen *Gone With the Wind*, so what difference does it make?"

□ A first-run screening of *Flash Gordon* in Houston started with the wrong lens in the projector. Minutes later, after complaints to the manager, the projectionist changed lenses and aperture plates—while the picture was running. At the reel changeover, the same problem occurred. This time the sound also disappeared for about two minutes.

□ At a first-run showing of *One-Trick Pony* in a Florida city, a couple who asked talkative teenagers behind them



to quiet down were harassed with thrown popcorn, spilled drinks, and threats—until an usher suggested the couple sit somewhere else.

To anyone with a long history of moviegoing, this state of affairs is as disgraceful as it is frustrating, especially to those of us who had our first jobs working in theaters. We can recall firsthand the constant reiterations by our bosses to give out correct information, to make certain the popcorn was, if not fresh, at least hot, and also to pick up trash whenever possible, know where the empty seats were, check to see that the picture and sound were bright and audible, and make sure that the screening wasn't disrupted by loud talking, smoking, or any other rudeness. There was a certain pride, an esprit de corps, to working in a theater, where everybody was dedicated to the comfort and care of the patron.

What happened? To find out, you have to trace back to 1948, when the Justice Department forced the studios to give up their tightly controlled theater chains. "Monopoly" and "restraint of trade" were phrases most often used in forcing this issue through, and while the charges may have been true in some areas, the overall effect of the "divorcement decree," as it came to be known, was eventually to erode the standards of operation and showmanship that characterized the exhibition arms of the major film companies. For though the production companies did give their pictures preferential playing time in their own theaters and were guilty of block booking in others, they also managed to keep at a high level of quality the operational and showmanly standards of not only their own but all the theaters that played their pictures.

Every aspect of moviemaking, from the production through the making of the print to the advertising and the exhibition, was controlled by the parent company, and the concern for the corporation's image as purveyor of quality merchandise was manifested all down the line. Each of the eight major producers maintained a network of some thirty regional exchanges for distribution, exploitation, and maintenance of its output. These exchanges arranged bookings, advertising, inspection, repair, and shipment of the company's product to the theaters. Field representatives from the exchanges monitored the theaters, checking on presentation, cleanliness, and audience size and reaction. For much of the first decade after the decree, there was little change in this procedure. The production companies managed to keep control of the theaters by simply forming separate corporations to administer them. The corporate structure was knocked slightly askew, but the same ex-

“You don’t dare try to tell an audience to keep quiet during a film,” says one exhibitor. “We’ve tried it and been booed and sometimes even threatened. People feel they’re entitled to do whatever they want in a theater. Talking is a habit they bring with them from watching television.”

executives continued to be in charge of making sure that the operational status quo was maintained.

But then television entered the living room, and attendance at movies dropped almost by half, to thirty-nine million weekly by the end of the fifties. Simultaneously, throughout the decade, the government continued its efforts to free the theaters from any control by the major producers, and by the early sixties this divestiture was complete. The theaters were now totally in the hands of the exhibitors, all of them vying for the reduced output of the studios. Pictures began to play longer to smaller audiences at higher prices; operating overhead for the theaters stayed the same, but lower grosses meant less profit for the theater owners. Instead of concentrating all their efforts on selling showmanship and service, more and more channeled their energies into selling popcorn and candy, for the money to be made at the refreshment stand began to mean the difference between profit and loss.

With fewer and fewer pictures to service, the distributors began cutting back on their personnel; film inspection was farmed out to independent contractors and shippers such as National Film Service, which charged the distributors a fee every time a print was inspected. To cut costs even more, the distributors began stipulating that prints be inspected only after playing three or four theatrical engagements. Minor damage, such as breaks, scratches, and burn spots, was left unrepaired. Laboratory work was no longer done in the studio, but was handled mostly by the larger independent processors, who were using new, cheaper, and impermanent color processes. (Black-and-white printmaking, supplanted by color, became an almost lost art in the space of fifteen years.)

As attendance continued to fall, the theater owners found themselves with two thousand-seat palaces that were playing to one or two hundred patrons daily. The larger houses soon were divided into twins and even sextuplets in an effort to catch as many members of the elusive fragmented audience as possible. In the projection booths, entire features were spliced together and fed into the projectors from huge open platters, gathering dust and scratches from the new mechanisms, which were designed to let one projectionist run as many as three shows simultaneously.

The talents of the average projectionist were stretched to the breaking point. He had to cope with new concepts and equipment that he barely understood, trying to remember to push the right buttons, turn the correct knobs, put in the proper plugs, and listen for the proper assortment of hums, whistles, and bells that warned him when to do all this. The higher salaries projectionists demanded for these tasks pushed up operating costs; staffs were cut and fewer ushers were used, resulting in noisy, untidy theaters. The distributors were now demanding upwards of ninety

percent of a first-run theater’s gross; so during the seventies, admission prices leaped to as much as five dollars, taking movies out of the realm of inexpensive entertainment.

And so there you sit, in an expensive but stained rocking chair theater seat, listening to a scratched record play Mantovani, waiting for the start of a show that’s already twenty minutes late. And as the picture finally comes on the screen, completely out of focus, and you wait long minutes for someone in the projection booth to notice, in Reno, Nevada, Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, is telling a convention of exhibitors not to be afraid of declining audiences, cable television, or videocassettes and discs. “I believe in the movie theater,” he says. “It has no peer. . . . The large screen, far bigger than any home screen can possibly be; incomparable sound . . . and the enticement of a lively, clean, spacious, attractive entertainment place, the embrace, the glistening a film gets in your motion picture theaters.”

One wonders whether Jack Valenti ever goes out to the movies. For that matter, do any major executives of the studios or distribution companies ever go out to the movies? The evidence is that most do not. So there is no one except the patron to complain about the way things are being run. But complaining to the theater manager or his staff seldom brings any result. Letters or calls to distributors are usually answered with a standard “Thank you, we’ll look into it,” and complaints to theater owners bring apologies and two passes. But the conditions prevail, and seem to get steadily worse.

Trying to find anyone in authority in the industry to talk about these problems is particularly difficult. You can query any number of persons—from vice-presidents in distribution to bookers, managers, union officials, projectionists, and ushers—and most will deny that any major problems exist. Others will only talk anonymously for fear of angering higher-ups.

One who will talk, and who is in a position to do something, is Charles E. Good, president and general sales manager of Buena Vista, the distribution arm of Walt Disney Productions. Good has had a long career in distribution. He started with MGM in 1945 and joined Buena Vista in 1957, succeeding Irving Ludwig as president last year. A low-key, unpretentious, thoughtful man, Good takes his family to movies at their neighborhood theater.

“I love going to the movies,” he states. “I always have. Although it gets a bit difficult to find pictures for the whole family to go to and enjoy. But people want to go out; they want that community experience, that mass emotional sharing that you get from watching movies in a theater. That’s something I don’t think will ever die, that

need, and that's why I'm convinced that theaters will always be with us; they're still the primary marketplace for motion pictures."

Good is one of the few industry people who will acknowledge that there has been a definite decline in the quality of moviegoing. "The golden days that you and I remember are gone forever," he says. "The downtown palaces that made going to the movies such a sumptuous experience are almost vanished. The smaller suburban theaters and twins and triplexes are what most people relate to when they think of going to the movies—although I do think that trend toward smaller theaters is going to reverse itself. More and more theater owners are going to have to compete with the new video technologies; one of the most important ways to do that is to offer audiences an experience they can't get at home. There is nothing in the world that can compare with a huge, sharp theater picture and the kind of sound you can get these days. The technology and the equipment are there, and I think that eventually exhibitors who allow their theaters to operate with substandard equipment are going to suffer."

Buena Vista's reputation as a distributor of high-quality product is something vigilantly watched over by Good and his people, especially in the area of prints. "I think we're the only distributor that insists on one hundred percent inspection of our prints by National Film Service. That means that every time a print comes back from a playdate, it's checked out thoroughly before it goes to the next theater. We're constantly checking on print condition. If footage needs replacing, it's done immediately, and for a major reissue, we have Technicolor make up new prints. We just had another new set of stereophonic prints of *Fantasia* made up for some upcoming playdates."

Good candidly admits there is little a distributor can do to make sure that conditions in theaters are maintained at an acceptable level. "We spot-check, of course, looking at the condition of the theater and the projection quality, and we can write letters and make phone calls if something is not right. But by and large, you have to leave that in the hands of the theater manager. It's ultimately his responsibility. And there, I think, is the biggest problem, because many of the new young people who are being trained in these areas are not as dedicated as their predecessors. They don't have a sense of the tradition of showmanship associated with theater operation. It's very difficult to try and convince a college-educated youngster to make a career of the theater business—the low pay, the long

hours, working on weekends. You have to be extremely dedicated, and I'm not sure that dedication exists in the numbers of people needed to make a difference."

Good's views are echoed by Robert Selig, a veteran of forty years in the theater business and now vice-president of Pacific Theatres, one of the larger theater chains in the country. "We're extremely hard pressed to develop manpower and womanpower," says Selig. "Our company has a particularly strong recruitment and training program. We have a man named Daniel Chernow. He's a personnel training expert with a master's degree, and he goes around to high schools and colleges interviewing people to try to get them interested in our business, to make it palatable and acceptable as a career, not necessarily just as a place to work while they're going to school. He's doing a creditable job, and it's an ongoing program, which other companies are doing also. It's a very serious problem for us, the shortage of qualified, interested people who are dedicated to this kind of life."

"One thing about the theater business," says Selig, "it seems to be the largest employer of first-time workers. We do accept people and hire them without any employment record at all. We're very realistic about it. We take a chance on them, start them out in actual theater situations under a wide degree of circumstances, and the ones who seem to have the feel and the enthusiasm we encourage, promote them, train them in other facets of good theater management. But it's not easy; the turnover rate is very high."

One of the innovations of which Selig is properly proud is Pacific's new policy of clearing out the theater after every performance and having the staff do a fast pickup of litter before the next show. But he is quick to defend the necessity of merchandising food. "We are bedeviled, berated, and derided about the snack bar and the importance of it. People have to understand that if it weren't for that snack bar, there wouldn't be a theater business today. You cannot operate a theater and pay sixty to ninety percent of what you take in at the box office in film rental and still have enough left over to pay the other forty-three classifications of expense necessary to operate that business. I don't think there's a single one of our theaters that could show a profit just from the box-office take. And it's a customer service. People *want* to eat in the movies; they demand their popcorn and their soft drinks. They'd be unhappy without them."

About the projection problems, Selig is frank. "I blame the projectionists union," he says. "Do you know how a projectionist learns his craft? In bits and pieces from another projectionist. The union has no overall training program, no place where you can go to learn to be a projectionist, or to brush up on what's new in technology."

"We did have a school," says Robert Perlmutter, a spokesman for the projectionists union in Los Angeles. "But there's no demand for it right now—we have enough operators. As far as training people goes, if a man or a woman comes to the union and says they want to join, then we give them a test. We weed out the bad ones. We *do* have seminars on current technology for our operators. We go through the instructions on working with the Dolby process and the new platter systems."



The next time you're dissatisfied with going to the movies, let somebody in authority know. If enough people complain, theater managers do listen, and so do the heads of the operating companies, especially if the complaints are loud and numerous.

The L.A. local, Perlmutter adds, "has a six-man team that goes around and inspects projection rooms to make sure there are no TV sets and the floors are clean. If they find a bad situation, like a flickering lamp, we alert the theater manager. I think a lot of the newer, younger operators are a little intimidated about ordering parts. They don't come on strong."

Have projection standards declined? They declined, Perlmutter asserts, "the minute they put up a theater with a small screen and made no allowance for any size screen except 1:85. Everything is cut down, diminished. Automation is supposed to make things easier, and I suppose it would, except that one man is now responsible for three or four theaters. If you're taking care of two or three different shows at the same time, you don't have time for checking focus or watching for an out-of-frame picture or bad sound."

The show can only be as good as the condition of the print, and that, everyone agrees, is the most difficult area in which to maintain control. "I've been in the business twenty years," says Mel Novikoff, president of the Surf Theatres in San Francisco, "and one of our biggest problems has always been print quality." Novikoff's five theaters are among the best-run and most imaginatively programmed houses in the area, not surprising in view of Novikoff's wide-ranging film interests. He's an associate director of the San Francisco Film Festival, and he has long been a champion of diversified programming.

"We have an image to maintain, a certain standard of quality in all our theaters," Novikoff says, "and it's difficult to maintain, even with current films. We had a sub-run, a move-over of *Ordinary People* in one of the theaters, and the print was barely adequate." The compact size of Novikoff's operation enables him to oversee all the details, from advertising to concession sales. "I hate the idea of popcorn and soft drinks, especially in an art house." But he ruefully admits, "Concessions do sometimes make the difference between profit and loss." The problems of finding qualified personnel to staff the theaters plague Novikoff, too, though not to the extent that they do the larger circuit operations.

"I've always been spurred by the challenge of competing with the larger chains," says Novikoff. "It became clear to me two years ago that the only way we could effectively do this was by offering a much more personalized feeling in the theaters. Our audiences are more discriminating in their film shopping, and they expect the surroundings and projection to be not just equal but better than the larger chains, and we do everything we can to live up to this. Our projectionists are largely younger, more knowledgeable, and really dedicated to what they're doing. But they do it all on their own, keeping up with the craft. Their unions

are certainly no help in this. And we have a great deal of luck with our supervisory personnel, our managers, and assistants."

"With many of the larger companies," Novikoff continues, "theater management is largely herding people in and out. I don't like that, and all of the people who work for us don't like it either. Our audiences respond to that kind of treatment, and we don't seem to have the same problems in audience behavior that some of the other theaters have." And here Novikoff touches on one of the worst problems confronting theater operation today.

Audiences may be better educated, richer, and more sophisticated in their moviegoing tastes than their fifties counterparts, but as a whole they are as rude and hostile as some of the employees that staff the theaters. "You don't dare try to tell an audience to keep quiet during a film," says Robert Selig. "We've tried it and been booed and sometimes even threatened. People feel that they pay their money and they're entitled to do whatever they want in a theater, regardless of who may not like it. Talking is a habit they bring with them from watching television in the living room, and they just continue it in the theater. Theater staffs have to put up with a great deal of abuse from the public, much more, I would say, than the public puts up with from them."

So what can be done about the decline in exhibition? Barring some unforeseen spirit of cooperation between sections of the industry, especially distribution and exhibition, there doesn't seem to be much that can be done, except on an individual basis. The next time you're dissatisfied with going to the movies, let somebody in authority know about it. If enough people complain, theater managers do listen, and so do the heads of the operating companies, especially if the complaints are loud and numerous. And perhaps local film reviewers should follow the lead of the *Minneapolis Star's* Joanna Conners, who reviews not only films but the theaters that play them.

Moviegoing seems to be a shrinking pastime. If current practices continue, and video technology advances at its present pace, movie theaters may well be relegated to the status—and number—of opera houses, with a small but dedicated band of cognoscenti patronizing them on a subscription basis. But if human nature is any guide, that won't happen. As Jack Valenti told the Reno conventioners, "Most people don't want to be held hostage in their living room, no matter how convenient the entertainment available. There is a large and durable market in this land for watching films in theaters." Then Valenti added, "But you are obliged to seek out audiences by offering in your theater an epic viewing experience not to be found in the home." ■

Ronald Haver, director of the film department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is the author of *David O. Selznick's Hollywood*.