

The Movie Pictures...A Look Back

Ah.. The movies..... Now there is subject we all can relate to. Most of those probably can't remember the first movies we went to. Going back in time there is a remembrance when young people were admitted for as little as nine cents .The Saturday matinee often served up a steady diet of Roy Rogers or Gene Autry Westerns with a short serial attached. The serials were special because they always ended in the cliffhanger that made you want to return the following week to see how the hero or heroine got out of it. Old memories of the Perils of Pauline, Nyoka the jungle girl, or the Green Hornet or even Flash Gordon serials may be faint but it would be interesting to find out what ever happened to those old short films of yesteryear. They surely would be classified as high camp, considering what is shown now.

In the early days, the movie houses would only show one main feature but if you were lucky on special occasions, sometimes a double feature would be shown. A great number of the early movie houses were very ornate with terraces on the side walls to sometimes resemble a village scene or a special setting, and many were adorned with artificial shrubbery. Some had starlit ceilings with puffy white clouds that appeared to endlessly drift slowly by throughout the dim lit auditorium. Today, a lot of the great ones have been destroyed making room for new commercial structures or parking lots, but luckily a scant few have been restored to much of their former brilliance.

In the old grand movie houses in larger cities, the movie would be sometimes preceded by a concert provided by an organist playing on a giant console that would mysteriously rise out of the orchestra pit with a bombastic selection of music. And in other theaters such as the legendary Paramount in Times Square, prior to the, film, the curtain would rise to the sounds of the big bands like Glen Miller or Tommy Dorsey with vocalists Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, or Peggy Lee performing. It would not be unusual at these events to see many in the audience dancing in the aisles.

Again, a few of these grand movie palaces remain, but most films now are shown in huge 30 to 45 screen Cineplex auditoriums with stadium seating arrangements. The theaters mostly have done away with one having to look through and around heads of the tallest and burliest man who could qualify for the world wrestling federation or the woman with the biggest head of hair in seven states. Each row now is raised to the point that vision of the screen is no longer impaired.

Admittedly the new theaters have made it easier to have a wider selection of films but many will admit that the concession stands in the lobby may have gone completely out of control. The cost of a bag of popcorn and soft drink rivals the price of the movie ticket itself, but who can withstand three hours of film without the traditional drinks and munchies also sold at the popcorn counter. One almost feels naked while walking down the aisle without both hands full of those overpriced assorted goodies.

It has been interesting over the years to actually meet several movie actors, but in my case several occurrences could have resulted in embarrassing or even tragic endings. While a student at the University of Texas at Austin, I often served an assistant stage manager for the Broadway plays that came to our Gregory Gym. While the Caine Mutiny Court Martial was being performed there one evening, I had not noticed that actors legendary movie actors Henry Fonda, John Hodiak and Lloyd Nolan had slipped out the rear stage door and down the fire escape for a little liquid refreshment at a local nearby pub. At the appointed time for the curtain to come up, the stars were nowhere to be found. About 15 minutes after the performance was scheduled to start, a loud shouting and a frantic banging on that same door got my attention. Initially ignoring the situation, because frequent play crashers were always trying to get in the stage door, my response was delayed, but when the panic screaming and shouting persisted, the door was cracked open slightly to see hat the three main actors in the play had locked themselves out of the stage door. After unlocking the door this person was soundly cursed and chastised by an angry Mr. Fonda.. The late performance went on, however, without a hitch, despite the libations that had been consumed by the three, and the crowd gave them a standing ovation. Later, however, the three laughed about the episode and apologized, and I had a good round of autographs to show for the experience.

Years later while serving as senior shore patrol officer in Cannes, France, I was designated a liaison officer for the U.S. Navy and the Cannes Film Festival. After making arrangements to take the visiting stars out to my anchored carrier to visit our guys in sickbay, I was given the Captain's gig for transportation to our ship out at anchor. Arriving on the pier and boarded were long time actors Edward G. Robinson, Gene Kelly, Rhonda Fleming and a host of other foreign movie stars. Now, the Captain's gig was a very small vessel. It eventually became so crowded that the craft almost had no freeboard at all and was riding very low to the waterline. Then as the vessel was preparing to cast off, a young man came running up and wanted to get on. This was an aspiring new star that had just won the Palm D'Or award for the best actor in a British film "Room at the Top". He begged to be able to board but the loading limits for the gig had already been surpassed and the vessel was settling lower, but finally, crossing my fingers, I relented and anxiously watched the Captain's gig glide lowly out of Cannes Harbor with her deck almost awash. The last boarding passenger's name was Englishman Lawrence Harvey who was to become famous in the United States in such notable films as "The Manchurian Candidate" and "The Alamo" with John Wayne... But... a visualization of next days headlines across France crossed my mind... "Young US Naval Officer Drowns Famous Cannes Movie Stars in Captain's Gig. Film Festival Postponed in Mourning" I did not sleep well that night.

Over the years some of the classic quotes in movies still survive. Mae West's "**Come up and see me sometime**" to Bogart's "**Play it Again Sam**" gave way to Eastwood's "**Make my Day**", Strother Martin's "**What we have here is a failure to communicate**", or Arnold's "**I'll be baaaak**". However, a real old campy favorite that still is in use today after all these years itself may be Alfonso Bedoya as Gold Hat's famous quote in the Treasurer of Sierra Madre "**Badges, what badges?... We don't need no steenkin' badges**". The old black and white film won an Academy Award.. That quote was also used in Mel Brooks' "Blazing Saddles".

Now most have their favorite movies of all-time and there are her different opinions on what is good and what is not good. A mystery prevails however when some young people today are asked what their favorite movie is and the stunning answer is often something like "Gone with the Wind" made in 1933 or the old classic "Sound of Music". The Walt Disney classics rear their creative heads every few years but Pixar and Dreamworks are in front these days mesmerizing a new generation. Most young men will pick new action movies while the women still mostly those with a romance angle. Some films are often described as "date movies". Opinions on the quality of a movie varies. Some reviewers rate good features as "Two Thumbs Up" when they pass inspection and the "Rotten Tomato's website offers a consensus of many reviewers rating films as "fresh" if the majority rules in favor but "rotten" if they don't.

A few of us will remember the drive-in theaters. They were large square shape structures that usually had ornate fronts with painted murals on them. The backside, of course, served as the gigantic outdoor wide screen. The movies were projected from the pillbox building located in the midst of a huge fan shape parking lot and the concession stand was usually placed either there or located beneath the screen. Sections of the drive-in parking lot were raised into elongate bumps that served to position the automobiles to have the proper angle for viewing through the windshield. In the beginning the sound came from giant speakers at various locations throughout the drive-in but this gave way to individual post-mounted speakers that could be placed inside the car. Some of these however often remained inside the vehicle after the movie was finished, because sometimes the driver would accidentally drive off with the speaker still inside the car snapping it from the post. The drive-in initially charged ticket fees for all persons in the auto but this gave rise to the practice of hiding some of the moviegoers in the trunk of the car. Another diabolical plan was to back into the exit, but the placement of tire spikes soon prevented that practice from continuing. For some folks, these drive-ins were a huge draw for obvious reasons because instead of having to park in some remote area for romance, the young people could feel remarkably safe parked there for the movie. On cold winter nights one could see numerous fogged up windshields, which gave evidence to the activity inside. As a result, drive-ins were given the new nickname name "Passion Pits" So many are gone now and most of these treasured locations have been dismantled, but in some small communities as a reminder of their place in time, the unmistakable shape of these still rise out of the suburban darkness.

It is also noticed that the day of the elaborate wedged shape bulb bordered movie marquee is no longer with us. Those old back lighted and tracked billboards have been replaced by electronic moving scripts and computer driven lighted images.

Today the movies have gone overboard in subjecting us to numerous commercials and bombastic flash previews that are also programmed to blast you right out of your seat. I'm sure most have noticed this annoying practice that is planned to entice the viewer to see an upcoming film, but by the time the main feature begins, your ear drums are still vibrating by the THX, Dolby or Sensaround sound system used in these annoying flash frame scenes that are filled with loud crashes when the scene changes. Also, creative directors seem to have gone nuts in trying to be original. Several recent movies subject the viewer to rapid changes in scenes or shaky hand held cameras to a point that the audience becomes dizzy just after the first reel. One particular film entitled Memento starts at the end of the film and finishes at the beginning, leaving the viewer to figure out what the hell the story was about in the first place.

Today, a controversial problem is the rating code for movies. Most films today have an R rating that prevents most families from attending as a group, severely limiting the younger set from seeing some pretty good features but it is rarely enforced. It also remains a mystery why the film industry feels it necessary to permeate the film with huge amounts of offensive language and sexuality that was once considered taboo in days gone by. Several recent offerings are filled with expletives that permeate nearly every line of script.

Despite the language and violence, movies appear to be drawing crowds out in record numbers, and furthermore, there are more selections than ever before. James Cameron's "Avatar" has set all kinds of box office records recently by utilizing all kinds of special effects, but I am sure the movies of the future may even surpass that film. We have gone from old silent black and white flickering images through the big studio musicals, campy westerns, sci-fi thrillers to amazing computer animated sequences. Today, the images we see may not be real at all, but shapes and figures conjured up by those special effects experts. The blue screen background has allowed giant outdoor scenes to be added to scenes where actors are performing in a bare studio. When videos originally came out, Hollywood predicted a downturn in production but the market for rentals only bolstered the movie making activity. Many now are seated comfortably in those plush couches or recliners watching any number of selected films on big screen 55-inch high-definition television screens. As this is being written, the Internet today allows downloads of digital movies in streaming video to home computers and TV's all over the world. Netflix also allows subscribers to receive the movies on a DVD in the mail and has dented the Blockbuster free standing chain stores to the extent they now have to also offer mail outs. Now definition Blue Ray discs have added to the realism and 3D television sets are already on sale. This technology is upon us and probably will not be halted, because the cat is already out of the bag. What amazing changes we have seen in the motion picture business.

In the Broadway play Miss Saigon the main character sings about the "movie in my mind". The movies in our minds will be with us as long as there are memories of the ones we liked and the ones we didn't like, but if we care to, for the memorable ones we can emulate Bogey himself once again when he said to Sam the piano player in Casablanca... "Play it again".

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