



Neon Lights and the Silver Screen

There is only one thing that can kill the Movies, and that is education.
- Will Rogers, (1879 - 1935)

In my locality are the classic theaters; the type that generally have a neon marquee, gilded facades, and unique names. Such showplaces are a common site among the downtown landscape – and though few seem to have retained the silver screen – much of the original façade and character stays on. These once-theaters may indeed remain as a community playhouse, an art studio or civic building of some kind; but for many, memories may be all that's left in the minds and hearts of those who know it as a place with neon lights and the silver screen.

In my younger days, two such theaters were: *The Calhoun*, named after the county; and *The Ritz* which was originally a vaudeville theater called *Lyric Theatre*. The former is the type that has fallen into decay while the later has been tastefully converted



into office spaces. As I pass these two spots on occasion, a thought of a distant movie or evening-at-the-movies comes to mind. How can I forget the blockbuster *Empire of the Ants* that dazzled my young mind; but on a more serious note, I saw *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on these same silver screens.

Before there were VCR's, and DVD's – and even while cablevision was in its infancy – neon lights and the silver screen was a place to gather for entertainment. These old theaters will forever remind me of one of the few if not the only means of seeing movies, and before that, the possibility of live-theater and vaudeville – the first of which I can recall and the second for which I must imagine. In this story of my soul, I elaborate on both as a duo for restoring (or reinventing) such an old place – for bringing to life that which may have lied dormant save the echoes of the last picture-show.



The Majestic is a movie that centers-around one such old theater. Taking place sometime after World War 2, the backdrop is a town (or downtown) that is dying, and a family that thinks that restoration of the theater will usher life back. Aside from the many details of the story or movie, the theme includes restoration of the theater to the grandeur of the past and as a springboard for the town's re-birth.



In the occasional passing-by of these local theaters – and particularly the one that is fallen into decay or *The Calhoun* – my mind lapses to the possibility that it too could undergo some type of rebirth.

A “live-theater” has some real appeal. Consider stage acting – even amateur or aspiring players – that not only perform on the stage but also extend their acting to the aisles and the patrons. As with the theaters of old, these casts might appear from a hidden place or secret entrance, rove among the guests, and break into song or other expressions at random at introduction or intermission. As I saw at a Medieval fair, such a traveling band energizes the audience with anticipation and even enables some interactive participation – impromptu though it be.

Continuing with the program, I would build these players and the silver screen around a theme or subject. Themes and subjects abound – along with the associated interests of segments of the population – but choices and selections would be focused on by on a family-based program – or one that young and old might enjoy alike. As a momentary *dose of realty* (amid the mind or





imagination) such an objective could be daunting – even impossible – in the modern age of mass entertainment of mode and media.. But it’s my mind and my story, and so I will continue with this concept of a live-theater – come to life!

A movie is so much the better if preceded by a cartoon and so, the possibility for a theme-based cartoon would not be overlooked in the program. Intermissions (if you could believe) would include live-theater, raffles, are other engagements with the otherwise passive audience. Lay aside the virtual world and take yourself back to a day of hard-earned entertainment and well-spent dollars, for the vision of such a program would be to leave the viewer (and participant) with a memorable association of movie, theme and the theater.

To try to bring this concept to some conclusion, I consider the kind of engagement that occurs at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or even the university free-movies that I frequented on campus – with the energy that a cadre of college students can supply to even the least expected of films. But since the audience would not necessarily include these self-entertained, the program would have to foster such an atmosphere – one with its apparent and unforeseen challenges that far exceed the conditions faced by the theater in earlier days. “Re-birth” may not be fitting for such a concept and endeavor but, more accurately, “birth or new-life” – not a renovation or renaissance, but a untested form of local entertainment for a society that is arguably over-saturated already.

While allowing the mind to lapse on this concept (and to put it to a story), reality and the aforementioned challenges are ever present. Beyond the concept and its challenges lies the health of the town itself as well as the condition of surrounding properties and businesses; thus, the idea becomes even more challenging or diluted in a sea of uncertainty and inexperience. Perhaps the concept is just a tacit effort at trying to contrive saving grace for the old building – as though to re-capture its essence and prominence as in the movie, *The Majestic*. Maybe the words of Will Rogers (that is, that an education can “kill the movies”) can be applied (or misapplied) to put an end to the farfetched concept and program of a live-theater.

In a nearby town – which is incidentally my parents’ hometown – I have been familiar with the names (and locations) of least four such old theaters. Two of these establishments remain in the downtown area: one is *The Pittman* which appears to be



largely intact from the marquee to the interior; the other use to be called *The Princess*, which has been converted to an art museum complete with a miniature model and narrated history of the town. Among the old photographs displayed with the model is one of *The Princess* during its days as a theater – perhaps before it burned and certainly before it became an art museum. Though a black and white photograph, the picture gave indication of a fine theater, well embellished with lights and the works. As for other old theaters of this nearby town, I am not sure; but like the concept of a live-theater, these will remain in my mind as *neon lights and the silver screen*.



No citations or notes...