

Boys Were Still Boys

On Saturdays there was usually action in the balcony. That's where teenagers made out by doing some sultry hugging and kissing. That meant the lights back of the last row near the projection booth had to be turned out. So the boys unscrewed the bulbs and operated in the dark. But heavy breathing, hugging and kissing was as far as it went.

My job was to seat patrons in the dark by using my flashlight and urging moviegoers already seated to move over and make room for additional patrons. At the same time, I had to keep a wary eye on the seats in the upper back in case I saw a light go out. Although I was only 15-1/2, I shined my flashlight in the faces of my elders--seniors at good old VUHS. But I faked it the best way I could muster.

Sex in the 40's--

I remember when *Duel in the Sun* opened in August 1947. Advance publicity had piqued moviegoers' desire to view David Selznick's lavish, lusty production of a western novel about a vivacious half-breed Indian girl. And what a case: Jennifer Jones, Gregory Peck, Joseph Cotton, Lionel Barrymore, Lillian Gish, Harry Carry and Herbert Marshall. A line outside the theater, down the side of the Fox, extending to the alley formed an hour before the box office opened.

The manager sent me walking up and down the line to exercise whatever crowd control I could create. But back in the balcony after the movie started for each sold-out showing, patrons were quiet and very attentive, waiting patiently for the shootouts, fistfights, and sultry heroine to roll by. After working eight showings, I knew exactly when the audience would laugh, cry and audibly gasp.

From Balcony to Door --

Later, I was promoted from the balcony to the door. Wearing the same uniform and the same smile, I stood just inside the door and tore tickets in half. If seats were not available in the balcony, I informed the moviegoer. If a major hit was showing and there was a line waiting on the side street, I let a few patrons in when a few patrons left. In those days, we had continuous uninterrupted showings.

The Fox manager had set strict rules for the doorman to follow. One was: No one gets in free. But of course, this rule was broken all the time as I soon learned. Policemen on their breaks walked boldly through the main entrance, only nodding in my direction to acknowledge my post. They especially liked their special privilege in the summer when temperatures exceeded 100. Their breaks then took 20-30 minutes, as they sat in lodges in the back row.

Then there were the mommies at the Saturday matinee who dropped off their youngsters. Occasionally, after receiving my permission to enter without a ticket, mothers had to search in the dark for offspring who dared to stay through the beginning of the film again.

Free passes were issued by the manager's office. I always pretended to examine them carefully because the authorizing signature was not always readable or the manager's office help signed the pass. Sometimes tickets, sold just as the box office closed at night, occasionally were not collected and reappeared at a later date. However, the box office informed me daily of the beginning ticket number so I could be alert to the number sequence on tickets arriving at the door. On occasions my

refusal to admit holders of old tickets caused some heated conversations. Most patrons simply went back to the box office and purchased a current ticket. Smugly, I thanked them for cooperating.

Winter is Orange - Summer is Blue --

Lighting in the Fox changed with two seasons, winter and summer. In the summer blue bulbs were installed almost everywhere, giving the illusion of coolness to moviegoers. In the winter yellow, red and orange bulbs were put in, thus giving a feeling of warmth and comfort. Although I changed a few lights while working at the theater, the janitor and his wife put in most.

After closing the main doors for the night, the janitor and his wife began their very indispensable job of sweeping and mopping the floors. The colored lights and twinkling stars were turned off. On went glaring white bulbs, which flooded the theater with light. The magic of palm trees and temples disappeared; dusty fake palms, cluttered, gum-globbed floors, and obvious chalky-looking plaster temples emerged.

Management is No Piece of Cake --

In the second semester of my senior year at VUHS Bob Benton, Fox manager, gave me a serious talk, pointing out the advantages of a theater management career. For \$24 a week as assistant manager and for working 12 - 14 hours daily, six days a week, I could eventually join him at the table of the middle class. So in January 1948, I exchanged my uniform for suit and tie. Somehow plans for UCLA were put out of my mind, and a prestigious job requiring no college education became my goal. But finishing that last semester of my senior year and working long hours conflicted. Had it not been for the efforts of Margaret Souza, who got my assignments and helped with homework, I would not have been able to handle my dual career. (Three years later she became my wife.)

A Key to the Door --

As assistant manager, I acquired a key to the front door. What a feeling of power and importance. Imagine, a key to one of the most important businesses in Visalia. But I didn't feel like a businessman. My teenage impulses took over. On several Saturdays, long before other employees came to work, I went to the theatre to explore the hidden spaces and dark recesses of the building.

I lifted pipes of the great organ from their seat and blew through them. I talked behind the screen to center stage and tried to sing as an opera star might. I opened the room where huge bags of pre-popped popcorn and boxes of candy were stored, and discovered a mouse or two scurrying about. I turned on the PA system in the tiled entry. While standing at the mike and using my best imitation of an Orson Wells voice, I announced the obvious to people on the sidewalk passing the box office -- the theatre was closed. But the most stimulating experience was running up the luxuriously carpeted stairways, and then descending slowly and regally as a Rockefeller might at an elegant ball where his guests awaited his appearance.

The Exit is the Entrance --

When the box office opened each day, one of my tasks, especially on Saturdays, was to keep young kids usually 10-14, from sneaking into the theatre

from the exits. Their routine ran like this: One bought a ticket and took a seat near the exit. As soon as the lights went out and the movie began, that boy would quickly open the exit door and his friends waiting outside would rush in, crouch down, and scurry to seats in different aisles. But if I was not needed in the lobby or elsewhere, I stood guard near the exits and foiled the boy's plans. Most of the boys had 12-cents for a ticket, but preferred to spend it at the candy counter.

Money Is Success --

From my first \$24 check, I took 25-cents to purchase a bag of cashews at the candy counter. Until that time, I had only dreamed of the time when I could afford such extravagance. For that 25-cents, I got ten cashews. I slowly munched each one thinking I had really arrived at the pinnacle of success.

The Fox Has Competition --

The Fox was not without competition for patrons, especially for Saturday nights. Besides the other three theaters in Visalia, there was the Rancho Theater in Farmersville, which opened in August 1947, preceded by the Visalia Motor-In Theater in 1946. Then there were dances luring customers at Mills Grove, The Sahara, McKay's Point, the Elks Club, and the PPAV Hall. At the Visalia Civic Auditorium the likes of Gorilla Ramos, Jimmy El Pulpo and Danny McShan wrestled their opponents to the mat.

So what did Fox management do to keep audiences? Two examples: On Saturday kiddies at the 10 o'clock matinee could see 17 cartoons or Dr. Murray Holt and his Magical Fun Show. To lure adults, management scheduled horror movies for showing after midnight.

Good-bye Fox --

My theatre career ended after graduation, however. Hawkish members had batted around a Congressional proposal for Universal Military Training for six months. Times-Delta stories reported such a bill was likely to pass, and all upcoming high school graduates would eventually be inducted into the army. The US Navy was recruiting at the time with a siren song of Why wait to be drafted into the Army when you can join the Navy and pick the career of your choice! That message was convincing to me. In June 1948 I shed my double-breasted suit at the Fox and shipped out for boot camp in San Diego. UMT did not pass, but the Navy had me for four years; UCLA would just have to wait.

Fantasy Key Disappears --

My key to the front door of the Fox remained in a dresser at my parents Visalia home. Somehow that key, in my mind, still represented the open sesame to a world of enchantment and make-believe that existed nowhere else. For thirty years that key was my secret treasure. It disappeared in 1978 when my parents moved.

"Count the Elephants" Contest

The first promotion in the new theater was a "Count the Elephants" contest, announced on March 13, 1930 (just a few weeks after the Fox opened). Theatergoers under the age of 15 were challenged to accurately count the total

number of elephants woven into the East Indian décor of the foyer. The announcement went on to warn that counting the elephants was not as easy as it sounds.

"There are dozens of them...lining the huge arches that support the foyer...marching on and on in endless line."

Indeed, long-time Visalian and Fox patron Fielding Combs remembers the "Count the Elephants" as "very frustrating" to participants because each time they counted, they would reach a different total. As a means of increasing contest interest, the Fox Theatre announced a special time during which it would turn on all the lights in its usually dimly-lit foyer for a short time to allow the children to see the elephants more clearly.

Following closure of the contest on March 29, the winners were announced. Milton Hadley won the top prize of \$5, correctly counting 154 elephants. The four runners up were Billie Hammer, Sally Douglass, Lee Cree and Harold Colby. Entry guesses ranged from 60 to 278. This caused the Visalia Times-Delta reporter covering this story to remark that these entrants could profit from a visit to Dr. Kellenberg (who also provided the prizes), "for they must be very near sighted or seeing double."

The Clock Tower- A Visalia Landmark

The famous Fox Theatre clock is a Visalia landmark which is used as a logo by Fox TV Channel 26 and the City of Visalia. The three-way clock was the largest of its kind ever constructed when the theatre opened in 1930. Its face measured over six feet in diameter and was rimmed in neon so it lighted up the sky in all directions at night. Only trouble was, it apparently never kept very good time. Management spent hundreds of dollars trying to get the intricate mechanism to work properly.

Finally in 1949, Frank Kiler, a retired electrical and metal teacher at Visalia Union High School, volunteered to work on the clock in his spare time. He got it to run correctly for some time, but the clock eventually stopped working. Keeping the shafts lubricated was difficult, and the heavy neon on the hands kept them from operating correctly. Through carelessness, the trap doors were left open so that pigeons were allowed to roost in the clock chamber creating quite a mess.

Cleaning out that mess was one of the first projects Friends of the Fox tackled when they acquired the building in January 1998.

A Missing Piece Returned

Friends of the Fox regained a very visible part of the Fox Theatre in the summer of 1998—the missing hand on one of the clock faces in the famous landmark clock tower. The anonymous donor returned the aluminum hand to Friends of the Fox member Lloyd Warren, saying it was from the "Friends of the Ranch." Lloyd presented the hand to Frank Kiler who was very familiar with the hand; in fact, he had reconstructed it some 30 years earlier!

"The original hands were made of steel," he said. "They were outlined in neon tubes and there was a neon transfer inside them that made them terribly out of balance."

Because the clock didn't run well, Kiler decided to remake the hands out of the much-lighter aluminum. This was one of the hands that were returned to

Friends of the Fox. So Frank reentered the picture. He and Dennis Jahn of Visalia Clock Works removed the clock works from the tower and repaired them. They had to remake some of the parts. But that aluminum hand is one thing they were happy to have back.

Lighting System from the 30's

If you were at the grand reopening of the Fox, or even more recent concerts, you may have noticed that the house lights were a little slow to come up at intermission. That's because the antiquated lighting system in the theater has much to be desired when it comes to convenience.

Although A-C Electric has done a tremendous amount of work to make the electrical system workable, there still is no central light panel. In fact, the theater light switches, panels and fuses are spread throughout the building. There are all kinds of switches up in the projection booth, for everything from the twinkling stars to the subdued lighting on the murals to the balcony lights. The lobby switch is in the new snack bar area, but in one case, you have to unscrew the fuse to turn it on. The same is true for turning on the lights for the right temple up in the projection booth. The aisle lights, for some reason, are located in what is now one of the downstairs restrooms.

Manager Sean McMichael hopes that at some point there will be a central panel to control the lighting system. And talking about lights, it took plenty of labor to get all the lights under the marquee lit up again. Once the wiring was repaired and the area painted, Randy Zeeb, Tom Peltzer and Gene Lobdell got up on ladders and personally screwed in over 1,000 bulbs to illuminate the sidewalk area around the theater.

Electricians Bob Samaniego and Ron Jungk were rewiring the lights in the display cases outside the Fox when they discovered the original ornate cases hidden for some 50 years under newer aluminum ones. Next time you walk by the theater, notice the scrollwork and detail on those three cases.

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Why is the Lobby So Small?

Lack of back stage and lobby space has been a problem at the renovated Fox since the theater's reopening last November. Large casts must be crammed into the tiny wings and small dressing rooms backstage. Intermission crowds at sold-out shows find it hard to buy concessions, get to the restrooms or move around the crowded lobby.

Well, apparently William Fox planned on building a theater with more space, but complications arose. Initially, officials hoped to have the theater built and in operation by November 1929 (it wouldn't open until February 1930). But unforeseen problems prevented Fox and his West Coast Theatre chain from meeting this goal.

One of the problems stemmed from the failure of Fox officials to secure a large enough parcel of land for the theater they originally envisioned.

The theater's original plans had to be altered because the owners of the property to the immediate west would not sell, according to Ron Clark, recalling information related by his mother, Willadean Van Deventer Clark, one time box

officer cashier and secretary to the Fox manager.

Long-time Fox projectionist Albert Cox reportedly noted this same problem in acquiring the desired real estate. The property in question, owned at one time by W.B. Pennebaker, consisted of a large city lot containing both the family residence and a barn.

Without this property, Fox officials were forced to shorten the stage and shorten the lobby in order to fit it into the size lot they had, according to theater manager Ken Kucera.

Tony Salierno and Greg Collins Go Back 30-40 Years: Put Up the Fox Marquee

Two prominent Visalians who were very involved with the Fox restoration also worked for the Fox Theatre in their youths, putting up the letters on the marquee. In August 1998 they relived their youth when they agreed to help Friends of the Fox by putting up a "Light Up the Tower" message on the marquee as volunteers worked on the project to relight the famous Fox clock tower. Tony, owner of Provident Mortgage and a member of the Friends of the Fox board, worked for the Fox about 1951-52. He remembers walking from his home in North Visalia to his job. He was only around 14, but there were no child labor laws in those days.

The marquee was an older style then. The letters were thick and had little hangers that hung on rails. The Fox manager, John Fredericks, would tell Tony what he wanted put up, and Tony would do it. The movies changed twice a week, and Tony changed the marquee on Wednesdays and weekends.

Tony says he got so good on the ladder that he could go up and down with an armful of letters. He also learned how to jiggle the ladder while he was on top, so it would move along the sidewalk and he wouldn't have to keep going up and down to move the ladder. Tony was sometimes asked to help change the twinkling lights up in the attic. That was a scary job, going up on the catwalks high above the theater floor. He remembers being afraid he would drop through the ceiling.

But because of that job so many years ago, it was Tony who showed Tom Peltzer, back when he was representing the property, how you got to the attic and the "stars." A cabinet blocked the doorway in the projection room, and when Tom was giving Tony a tour, Tom mentioned that they hadn't found the entrance to the attic. Like *déjà vue*, Tony suggested they move the cabinet, and there was the door. Tony says the best part about working at the Fox was that all employees got passes to all the movie theaters in town and also some out of town.

Greg, former city mayor and former co-chair of the Fox fund raising campaign, doesn't remember his stint at the Fox as clearly. He worked there a few months in 1967, taking the place of a buddy who wasn't able to do the job after all. He remembers it was dark when he changed the marquee (either early morning or at night, he can't remember which). He says he only changed two sides of the marquee, just the south and east sides.

Air-Conditioning: 1930's Style

Back in the 30s, the Fox put out big signs advertising that it was "air cooled" inside. The theater was originally designed for an ice truck to deliver big blocks of ice (there was a chute in the alley to shovel it through) into a pit under the floor. The

cooled air would come up through the "mushrooms" under the seats to keep the auditorium comfortable.

But before the system could be used, mechanical refrigeration was designed, and the original plan was abandoned. Instead, cooled or heated air was discharged at the top of the balcony and the "mushrooms" were used as return registers to pull the heated or cooled air through the theater.

This information all comes from Mike King, service manager at American Air, whose company installed a state-of-the-art AC/heating system in the theater after it reopened in November 1999. (The old compressor they removed was installed in 1929 and had a serial number of #2!)

American Air used the same airflow ducts and worked with Ram Air, which installed a digital control that is programmed by computer. The system knows exactly when to turn on the heat/AC so that the theater will be at the right temperature for a concert. Because of new equipment and cleaned vents, the theater now only takes 16 hours to heat (instead of three days).

Cramped Space in the Lobby and On Stage From "Visalia's Fabulous Fox: A Theater Story"

Many patrons and performers at the Fox wish the lobby and backstage area had more space. Large casts must be crammed into the tiny wings and small dressing rooms backstage. Intermission crowds at sold-out shows find it hard to buy concessions, get to the restrooms or move around the crowded lobby.

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Tulare County Symphony

The Tulare County Symphony has wanted to make the Fox their home for years. In fact, they were the first ones to look into the possibility of purchasing the Fox, talking with the owners in the early 90s. Because of that earlier request, the owners specified a special rental discount to the Symphony when they donated the building to the Friends of the Fox.

The Symphony moved their concert season to the Fox in January 2000 and has been delighted with the acoustics. Because equipment is limited in their new

venue, the Symphony has done fund raising to supply chairs, music stands and a light truss to the theater. They were also instrumental in getting a thrust stage installed, which significantly enlarges the stage area so the orchestra can fit on it.

Another happy result of their move to the Fox is full houses. The Symphony has been having almost sold out houses for their concerts since their move. The audience obviously enjoys the new venue.

New Organ is Bigger and Grander

When the Fox was built in 1930, it included (as did theaters in those days) a theater organ. The organ was purchased by Pete Sweeney when the theater decided to get rid of it in the 50s. Pete had played the organ during intermissions as a teen, and he installed it in a home he had built to hold all the pipes. After the Fox was restored in 1999, members of the American Theatre Organ Society hoped to return an organ to the theater. ATOS member Dave Schutt learned that fellow organ enthusiast Ruth Dresser was selling her house in southern California and needed a good home for her organ. In June 2003, Ruth not only donated her organ to the Fox, but a grand piano as well. Originally from Porterville, Mrs. Dresser and her brother Richard Villeman used to tune the Fox Theater organ in the 40s. More recently, she ran a Montessori school in Malibu and installed a pipe organ in her home where she hosted concerts. Friends of the Fox soon learned that there is a lot more to an organ than a console and a few pipes. In fact, the organ had some 1,500 pipes, plus a blower and many other pieces that make an organ play. It took a year of getting donations plus lots of volunteer help to get it installed.

The organ is a 4-manual Wurlitzer and was the largest organ Wurlitzer had produced when built in 1917 (much bigger than the original Fox organ). The 10 tons of pipes were installed in the pagodas on either side of the stage. Rich Manley, who maintains the air conditioning at the Fox and became intrigued with the organ, put in countless hours helping to prepare the pagodas and install the organ. He also ordered and installed an organ lift in the orchestra pit that will allow the organ console and grand piano to be stored in the pit and brought up on stage when needed. For this to happen, part of the thrust stage over the pit had to be cut out and the pit had to be excavated three-and-a-half feet with a jackhammer (so the pit would be deep enough for the organ console to fit under the thrust stage). When the lift is raised to full height, it fits flush with the rest of the thrust stage. When the organ or piano is needed, it will be brought up on the lift. Otherwise, each will be stored in the pit—especially important because of very limited storage and wing space at the Fox.

Meanwhile, the painstaking process of installing the 1,500 pipes—each of which requires a separate electrical connection for control—continued. Ken Kukuk and Ed Burnside (professional installers), Pete Sweeney and Kirk Hedegaard were actively involved in this work up in the two pagodas on either side of the stage. By March 2004, Lou Seeberger, retired Hughes Aircraft executive and organ enthusiast, who oversaw the project, reported that: • All chests that hold the pipes had been installed. • The wind lines which bring air from the blower to the chests were ready for testing. • Large pipes that make the basic organ sounds were in place. • The console had been converted to all electronic control to permit computer operation

of the various pipe ranks. This means that the console only requires a single small cable to connect it to the organ mechanisms in the two pagodas. • The organ console was ready to be moved from its display spot in the lobby to the stage so that integration with the computer control system could begin. Dave Schutt assisted with this task.

Finally, after nearly a year of planning, installing and fine-tuning the organ, the magnificent Wurlitzer Hope Jones Unit Orchestra, which refers to the additional assortment of percussion instruments and sound effects, debuted at the Fox on Saturday, July 24.

Renowned organist Jonas Nordwall, who has played around the world for over 35 years, presented the dedication concert. He has over 25 highly acclaimed recordings and for 25 years been organist for the Howard Vollum Estate in Portland, which housed the former San Francisco Paramount Wurlitzer. He resides in Portland where he is the organist with the Portland Symphony, and he presents a well-rounded repertoire of show tunes, jazz, and the 40s and current music.