

MARQUEE®

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MARQUEE®

THE JOURNAL OF THE THEATRE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA
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EDITOR

Ken Bloom
344 W. 49th Street, 1-D
New York, NY 10019
212.974.0229
E-mail: ken@kenbloom.com

DESIGNER

Scott Citron
www.scottcitrondesign.com

PRODUCTION

Richard Sklenar

THEATRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

www.historictheatres.org

HEADQUARTERS

York Theatre Bldg. 2nd Floor
152 North York Street
Elmhurst, IL 60126-2889
Phone: 630.782.1800
Fax: 630.782.1802

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Richard Sklenar
Thrhistsoc@aol.com

BUSINESS HOURS

Tuesday–Friday: 9 am–4 pm
Archive research by prior appointment

OFFICERS, 2009–2011

PRESIDENT

Karen Colizzi Noonan
147 High Street
Geneva, NY 14456-2556
315.789.6158
ebersonian1@aol.com

VICE PRESIDENT

Michael Hauser
5786 Grayton Rd.
Detroit, MI 48244-2052
Home: 313.884.6929
Work: 313.237.3279
mhauser@motopera.org

SECRETARY

Lowell Angell
3034 Manoa Road
Honolulu, HI 96822-1225
Home: 808.988.2098
Work: 808.956.4890
angell@hawaii.edu

TREASURER

Gregory Davis, CPA
1875 Century Park East, Suite #1120
Los Angeles, CA 90067-2512
Work: 310.557.0761
Fax: 310.557.0727
gsdcpa@aol.com

ARCHIVE DIRECTOR

Kathy McLeister
630.782.1800
e-mail: archiveTHS@aol.com

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

No one got a bigger laugh out of the subject of this issue of *Marquee* than Dr. Tom DuBuque! He gleefully combed our vast and often unwieldy files searching for appropriate (and acceptable) photos and ads to enhance this strange and wild side of the history of America’s theaters. So it is somewhat fitting that we memorialize Dr. Tom in this very issue. Of course, no one ever thought this would be happening—a jarring and poignant reminder of the fragility of life and the random length of our moment on Earth.

The entire THS organization is deeply grateful for the outpouring of love and support since the awful news came from South Africa that our beloved friend and mentor had been killed in a car accident on Monday, August 15, 2011. There are honestly no words to express the global pain and helplessness felt by his legions of friends, but that did not stop the effort to do so. A flood of emails, phone calls and Internet messages have attempted to comprehend, understand and accept this deeply sad turn of events.

I have slowly—and not easily—come to embrace the frequently repeated statements that he lived life to the fullest, he died doing something he truly loved and that he would not want us to grieve too deeply or too long before picking up his unfinished business and carrying on as a tribute to him.

So, that is what we will do. Not without heavy hearts and not without a tear or two at those emotional memories that will certainly catch us at random moments. But carry on we will, because that is exactly what his wishes would have been.

I was walking through Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, NY a few days after Tom died and saw a small, simple engraving that said, “Someone may take his place, but no one will ever replace him”. We hold that sentiment close to our hearts as we say bon voyage to a truly great man and promise to forge ahead in his honor.

—Karen Colizzi Noonan, President

Cover: Lobby of the Belasco Follies Theatre, Los Angeles, CA. Terry Helgesen Collection, THS.

FROM THE EDITOR

Needless to say, we were all shocked and saddened when we heard the news about Tom. One of our first thoughts was to have a tribute in *Marquee* and we began gathering photos and reminiscences from his friends and coworkers. But then we reconsidered and thought we might do a better job if we gave ourselves more time to collect our thoughts and emotions. So, the next issue of *Marquee* will have the tribute to Tom that he deserves.

A personal note on this issue. Ask me about the time I ran the PR for *Deep Throat* star Harry Reems in his fight against the Justice Department.

—Ken Bloom, Editor



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THEATRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY DIRECTORS, 2009–2011

KEN BLOOM

344 West 49 Street, Apt. 1D
New York, NY 10019-7373
e-mail: ken@kenbloom.com

DONALD BOHATKA

1633 N. Prospect Avenue, Apt. 8A
Milwaukee, WI 53202-2479
414.273.3232
e-mail: decodon@sbcglobal.net

ED KELSEY

13854 Summer Wind Street
Victorville, CA 92394-2520
213.216.1004
Fax 213.228.1844
e-mail: OrpheumEd@sbcglobal.net

SUZANNE LEWORTHY

75 Farmington Crescent
London, Ontario, CANADA N6K 3J2
519.204.7024
e-mail: clippist.thsa@yahoo.ca

JOE MASHER

11 Camelot Drive
Norwalk, CT 06850
203.286.6912
e-mail: JMasher@bowtiecinemas.com

CRAIG MORRISON

160 East 38 Street, Apt. 25E
New York, NY 10016-2613
212.681.8029
e-mail: Craig.Morrison.AIA@gmail.com
Contact for New York City Metro
and Northeast regions

GARY PARKS

999 Evelyn Terrace, West #23
Sunnyvale, CA 94086-6780
408.739.3830
e-mail: ptahhotep1@earthlink.net

KONRAD SCHIECKE

1910 E. Kiowa Lane
Mt. Prospect, IL 60056
224.392.3903
e-mail: kschiecke@wowway.net

PHIL SHERIDAN

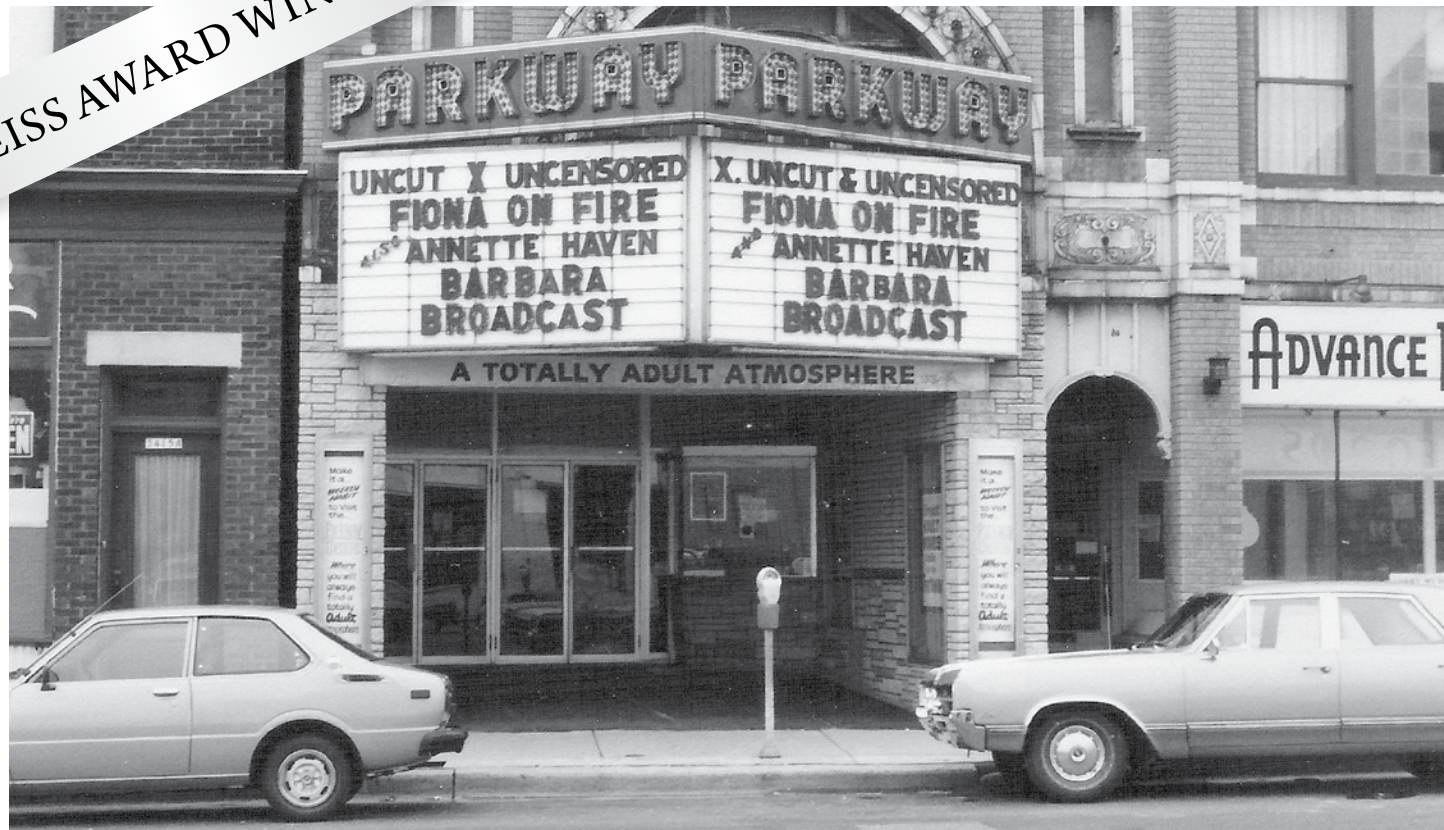
48 Christopher Drive
Sandown, NH 03873
603.887.8298
e-mail: phil44@comcast.net

DAVE SYFCZAK

4880 N. Hermitage Drive
Chicago, IL 60640
773.769.0817
e-mail: daviduptown@yahoo.com

DENNIS W. WILHELM

2655 Pine Tree Drive
Miami Beach, FL 33140-4321
e-mail: dennis.wilhelm@att.net



FADE TO BLUE

BY MATTHEW PRIGGE

ON MAY 1, 1993, THE MILWAUKEE SENTINEL reported that an exorcism was being performed on a plot of land in the 3400 block of West Lisbon Avenue. The land had been purchased by St. Andrew's Episcopal Church and ground there was soon to be broken for a new building. On a cold and damp afternoon, a rector symbolically smoked the ground with incense, claiming the area for God and casting out that which was against Him. The now blessed dirt had once been the site of the Parkway Theatre.

For fifteen years, the Parkway was Milwaukee's most notorious movie house. The first (and final) city theatre to show hardcore pornography, it was the target of near-constant attention from local and Federal authorities. But the Parkway saga is just part of a much larger story of the battle over what Milwaukeeans could and could not see at the movies. By the sixties, a movie industry in nationwide decline had turned sexually-themed films, once relegated to

the underground circuit, into a means of survival for many classic Milwaukee theatres. The popularity of these films brought about a stunning backlash, both political and legal, that questioned the scope of the First Amendment.

As the less-than-holy ghosts of the Lisbon Avenue site were chased out in 1993, the physical remnants of the adult film business in Milwaukee had largely been erased. Most of the theatres engaged in the practice had been razed, their footprints remolded and barely recognizable. But the need of St. Andrew's to cleanse the ground shows just how prominent the issue once was. At a time when so much in Milwaukee and America seemed to be falling to the rot of a culture that knew no morality, the battle over blue movies was seen by many as a battle for a city's soul.

The first bawdy films appeared in Milwaukee in the 1950s. As white flight and television pulled the rug out from under the movie industry, theatre operators were scrambling to find something that people could not get at home.

Amplly-endowed actresses like Jayne Mansfield, Mamie Van Doren, and Brigitte Bardot all had something to offer that television did not. The earliest "girlie" films in Milwaukee would hardly be recognizable as such today. Nonetheless, the glimpses of cleavage and racy themes these films employed were enough to raise the ire of the Milwaukee Motion Picture Commission (MMPC). The MMPC had been established in 1913 in an attempt to protect the youth of Milwaukee from flickering, black and white immorality. An unelected arm of the Mayor's office, the MMPC reviewed all films booked to play in the city. With theatre operators increasingly relying on flesh and innuendo to sell tickets, the MMPC was duty-bound to try and stop them.

The Princess (738 N. Third St.), an early gem of the Milwaukee movie circuit, was the first city theatre to go blue full-time, making the switch in 1960. Try as the MMPC might, they were unable to stop such films as *Gun Girls* and *Human Cargo*. By the time the first films featuring nudity appeared at the Princess in 1963, the power of the MMPC had already been severely undercut. The crux of the commission's power was vested in the mayor's office. The MMPC could not ban films outright, however they did issue regular reports to the mayor, flagging certain films as unsuitable for exhibition in the city. If a theatre were to cross the commission and play a flagged picture, the mayor could then press for a revocation of the theatre's operating license. Cooperation with the commission was reported as "most frequent."

The commission enjoyed an excellent relationship with Mayor Frank Zeidler, in office from 1948 to 1960. Progressive on most fronts, Zeidler was decidedly prudish when it came to the movies. In 1954 he claimed not to have been to the movies since 1926, when he walked out of a gangster picture for being too violent. Henry Meier, elected just weeks after the change-over at the Princess, shared little of his predecessor's concern for cinematic morality. Early commission complaints about the Princess were politely ignored by the new mayor. Just months into the Meier administration, the MMPC had lost its only source of power.

No longer in danger of being shuttered, other theatres had joined the Princess in the skin game by the mid-sixties. The Tower (757 N. 27th St.) began showing nudie-cuties, as well as uncut European 'art' films. The Palace (535 W. Wisconsin Ave.) began screening 'sexual health' documentaries. The Wisconsin (530 W. Wisconsin Ave, now known as the Cinemas 1 & 2), Esquire (310 W. Wisconsin Ave.), and Times (5906 W. Vliet St.) also experimented with racy pictures around this time.

Without a champion in the mayor's office, the MMPC had no means of enforcing its rulings. Desperate to remain relevant, the MMPC reinvented itself as the local defender of the state's obscenity law. When the Cinema 2 opened *I, A Woman, Part II* in November of 1967, the commission broke out of its bureaucratic cage, using local police and media to fight the war the mayor was ignoring. *Woman* followed a young wife and her depraved husband as he makes her



The Princess Theatre opened in December, 1901, as part of the Saxe chain. It began showing adult films on January 15, 1960.



The Princess in 1973.

available to his high-society friends in a series of explicit and sexually humiliating encounters. The District Attorney's office, acting on the outcry spawned by the commission's public crusade against the film, charged the Cinema's operators with violation of the obscenity statute. A Federal judge, however, stepped in and ordered the case dropped. The film in question, he ruled, did not meet the Federal standard of obscenity. The film played on at the Cinemas, its operators enjoying a ten-fold increase in ticket sales thanks to the publicity generated by the case.

Abandoned by the Mayor and knocked down by the Feds, the commission went on a public relations binge, decrying the judge's decision and demanding the power to do its duty. They insisted the Common Council pass an ordinance mandating that all films be made available to the commission for review and that all commission decisions have the power of an official decree from the Mayor. Any theatre showing an unauthorized film in the city would lose their license and be closed.

Although the constitutionality of what the MMPC was proposing was unclear, there was considerable public support for the move. Letters of approval flooded the commission's office and hundreds of vocal supporters (most of them mothers) packed meeting halls and hearing rooms.

The most vocal opponents of the proposal were the theatre owners. They ridiculed the idea that a board of seven men and two women, all white and averaging over sixty years old, would decide what could or could not be seen in the city.

In May of 1970, the city attorney, certain the proposed rules could not be enforced, offered a more moderate ordinance that did not include mandatory screenings. "This has all the substance of a wet noodle and all the sincerity of a harlot's kiss," an MMPC spokesman told the press. The battle dragged on and on. Votes were scheduled, then delayed or canceled. Far out suggestions, such as stocking the commission with clergymen, were proposed and dismissed. All the while, sex and indecency continued to do big business in Milwaukee. Five theatres were now showing adult material exclusively.

In October of 1970, fully aware it would likely be overturned by the courts, the Common Council passed the commission's ordinance. As expected, theatre owners sued on the grounds the ordinance violated their First Amendment rights. An injunction preventing the new rules from taking effect was issued and six months later Federal Judge John Reynolds struck down the law. Five days after the ruling, with a sense of fatalism in the air, the MMPC met to discuss the future of their organization. After a brief deliberation, the members voted unanimously to disband. The 58-year-old commission was dead, but the battle over what Milwaukeeans could or could not see at the movies had really just begun.

Christmas week, 1972. Fewer than two dozen of the 80-plus Milwaukee movie theatres that existed at the end of the war were still in operation. The year had been a historic low point for the film industry. The average American had gone out to the movies more than 32 times in 1946. By 1972, there were less than four tickets sold for every citizen, a staggering decline of 88 percent.

Touring downtown Milwaukee must have given one the impression that the worst fears of the Milwaukee Motion Picture Commission had been absolutely right. Five X-rated pictures were showing up and down Wisconsin Avenue, with names like *Prison Girls 3D* and *Sex and the Office Girl* glittering from marquees as Christmas decorations still hung from lampposts. The Tower and Uptown (2323 N. 49th St.) theatres, once two of the five glamorous Saxe Bros. neighborhood palaces, were each showing erotic double features. Of the remaining theatres, half had at least dabbled in sex films. For many, it was the only way to stay afloat. That final week of 1972, as the nation mourned Harry Truman and Richard Nixon tried to bomb North Vietnam into oblivion, the game would change for blue movies in Milwaukee. It was the week Milwaukee found out about *Deep Throat*.

In December of 1970, the Racine-based Detco Inc. purchased the Parkway Theatre at 3417 West Lisbon Avenue. The Parkway was a typical worn-down neighborhood house, too many seats and not enough parking, playing year-old pictures to dwindling crowds. Detco also owned Racine's Venetian Theatre, running it as an adults-only movie house and arcade. When the new management took over the Parkway, they immediately began a steady program of sexually-themed documentary films.

The films were framed as educational or political, but indeed featured scenes of unsimulated sexual intercourse. By the summer of 1971, police began seizing film prints, claiming their exhibition was in violation of the state obscenity law. A county judge declared one to be "raw (and) vile... pornography in its worst form." Despite the forceful language, a Federal judge disagreed, ruling that the films did not meet the standard of obscenity and ordered the prosecutions ceased.

While everyone seemed to be in agreement that the Parkway was showing more than anyone else in town, no one was quite able to define it. The law stated that obscenity was something wholly without value beyond prurient sexual interest. Local authorities had taken the vivid depiction of the sex act, the actual sight of vaginal penetration, to be their cue to move in. However, Federal courts sided

with those who claimed the films were not wholly without value beyond the prurient. As documentaries, educational or political, they were considered protected speech. The anti-smut faction in Milwaukee seemed to be stymied. That is, of course, until the Parkway's Christmas treat.

While *Deep Throat* was not the first hardcore feature film, for many people it was the one that made them aware such a genre existed. It premiered in June of 1972, but it was still mostly unknown when it opened at the Parkway the day after Christmas. Listed in the newspaper movie ads simply as *Throat*, the film was largely a New York City phenomenon, embroiled in a court battle after its successful run at numerous theatres there. The film had been barred from playing in Chicago, making the Parkway its exclusive Midwest exhibitor. Newspapers from Green Bay down to Illinois and as far west as Madison ran advertising for the film. The ads boasted that it was "worth the trip," and word of mouth spread quickly.

When word of the picture got to the DA's office, they moved to have it declared obscene. Once again, Judge Reynolds stepped in, ordering them not to act until it had been determined that showing the film did indeed violate Wisconsin law. The back and forth between Judge Reynolds and the DA's office was daily news, generating lots of free ink for a picture that was filmed in six days and cost only



It's dish night at the Parkway, 1941.



All this action made news. The January 31, 1972 cover of the Journal showed the pickets in front of the Parkway, including the marquee bearing the name that wasn't even being listed in the ads. The Parkway's former manager claims that the week after the front-page photo ran his theatre had the highest gross of any house in Milwaukee history. *Deep Throat* was showing eight times daily, many times to sellout crowds of 900 people, each paying three dollars admission. Even at two-thirds average capacity, a week's worth of shows would generate more than \$100,000 in sales, a figure that any downtown theatre in their prime would have been lucky to match. By the end of the week, the newspaper listing no longer even gave the film's title. "Held over a 6th week! Linda Lovelace "----" The One and Only!" The film that opened in anonymity was now so notorious that its name did not even need to be mentioned.

In early March, the raid finally came. But it was not the familiar vice squad locals. With the film now declared obscene in a New York Federal Court, the FBI swept into the Parkway with orders to seize the print. At the last moment, Detco lawyers got wind of the raid and tipped off theatre management. With the reels hidden, agents managed only to find 16 clippings of the film in a projection booth trash can. They were sealed in an evidence bag and removed.

More raids followed. The next two films to open at the Parkway were seized by vice cops. A thousand dollars in refunds had to be given one night when police took a reel of *High Rise* right out of the projector. Meanwhile, a Federal grand jury was investigating the theatre for its involvement in transporting *Deep Throat* across state lines. Four employees, including the ticket taker and a candy counter girl, were questioned. By the end of March, when cops took a third consecutive film, the theatre was closed for a weekend while they scrambled to find something to play. Still, nothing had come of any of the action against the theatre. The explosion of hardcore films that came with the success of *Deep Throat* had caught the legal community off guard. The old Potter Stewart adage of "I know it when I see it" was just not enough anymore.

Just months after the Feds raided the Parkway, the United States Supreme Court handed down a landmark ruling on pornography and the First Amendment. In *Miller v. California*, the Court made it easier for sexually explicit material to be ruled obscene. The definition of obscenity was little changed, but Miller gave states the power to use contemporary community standards in making these assessments, not a national standard. Local authorities no longer had to wait for a Federal decree on a film before prosecuting.

A challenge to the Wisconsin obscenity statute was pending when the Miller ruling was handed down. A three-judge panel

had barred further action against the theatre while they sifted through the meaning of the new precedent. In late October the panel ruled the state statute to be incompatible with the existing Federal definitions of obscenity and that local standards could not be applied as allowed with the Miller ruling. The panel ordered the DA not to continue with prosecution against the Parkway. On went the show...

To call the Parkway a 'dirty movie theatre' in the early seventies would have been an observation based purely on taste. As classic theatres all across the city were in the final stages of a slow and ignominious decline, the Parkway was experiencing a boom not seen since the end of World War II. The lobby and house had been entirely renovated with the change to adult films. The tattered screen was replaced and a new sound system was installed. New carpeting, fresh

paint, and improved lighting were all added. The theatre staff was expanded, adding a full-time housekeeper. Two young women were stationed at the rebuilt snack counter and a man sold tickets at the front booth, all dressed smartly in matching brown and tan uniforms with bowties and PARKWAY THEATRE badges. Outside, the glittering marquee listed the features and stars in tall, block letters. Glass cases displayed posters and films stills. "It was a real theatre," recalled the former manager, "a real class place."

Despite the carpeting and bowties, the tastes of State Supreme Court were decidedly against the hardcore films that the Parkway exhibited. In May of 1974, in response to the rulings of the three-judge panel, the Court issued a new state guideline for obscenity. Compatible with Miller, this gave a green light to local vice cops to resume raids. Despite the legally tenuous situation, the hardcore business was far too lucrative to abandon. By the fall, both the Parkway and Princess were showing hardcore films. Raids followed and prints were seized. This pattern continued throughout the seventies. The Parkway was raided about twice a month, so frequent that vice cops and theatre workers got to know one another. Actual charges against either theatre were rare, but typically resulted in guilty pleas and fines of one or two thousand dollars. It was simply the price of doing business.

It was not always just what was on the screen that the police were after. When the Parkway introduced live entertainers, raids occurred almost nightly. Legendary adult actress Georgina Spelvin was arrested there in February of 1976 during a striptease. The arrests at the Princess were a little gamier. Numerous busts for prostitution and vice crimes drove Police Chief Harold Brier to begin actively lobbying the Common Council for a license revocation. The Princess, once known as the "coziest little theatre in the west," and now infamous as Third Street's dirty little secret, was part of a much larger issue.

At the peak of nationwide movie attendance, there were thirteen downtown Milwaukee theatres with a total seating capacity of over twenty-two thousand. Along four blocks of W. Wisconsin Avenue and an intersecting, two-block stretch of N. Third Street, dozens of films played every week, the latest hits with the top stars. But as the post-war reshuffling of the population drew moviegoers away from the heart of the city, it became increasingly difficult to book mainstream films in this area. By 1977, almost half of the downtown theatres had closed and of the seven that remained, five were regularly showing adult films. While the occasional blockbuster still came to downtown, most of the screens were filled with some kind of sex, vice, or violence. Family pictures, once the backbone of the circuit, had vanished almost entirely.





The one-time center of city consumerism was now a place where many feared to tread. Violent crime in the downtown area increased three-fold between 1969 and 1974. The smut films shown in the theatres were joined by adult book stores, peep shows, and an active street sex-trade. A 1974 study by the Milwaukee Journal reported that downtown spending now accounted for just one fifth of all spending in the metropolitan area. Shopping malls had drawn much of the business away, setting up in the suburbs or in the outer reaches of the city. Mall-based theatres, most featuring multiple, low-capacity auditoriums, were where the big hits now played.

In 1977, Mayor Henry Maier, eager to pump new life into the area, personally wrote to each of the major film studios, urging them to take another look at booking in the downtown theatres. The common reply was that it was just not economically viable. The big downtown houses had too much overhead and drew too few people. By the end of that year, the Cinemas 1 & 2 were temporarily out of service and there was talk of converting one of the houses into a video arcade. The Towne, years removed from its last mainstream films, had been abandoned by its owners. It would briefly serve as a venue for Christian films and concerts before being vacated for good.

Those rotting monuments joined others. The vacant lot that had once been the Alhambra (334 W. Wisconsin Ave.) was still waiting for development. The house of the Palace had been razed, but the lobby still stood. With no money or will to complete the demolition job, it had become a magnet for transients. The White House (739 N. Third St.) and Empress (755 N. Third St.) theatres had been demolished in 1955, but their lots were still undeveloped.

Maier's push for revitalization triumphed in 1978, when the city was awarded a \$12 million grant by a Federal urban development program. The money was earmarked for a

three-block long enclosed shopping mall along Wisconsin Avenue. The mall would connect via skywalk to a Federal office building that had been secured for the city, which would connect to a new Hyatt high-rise hotel and conference center.

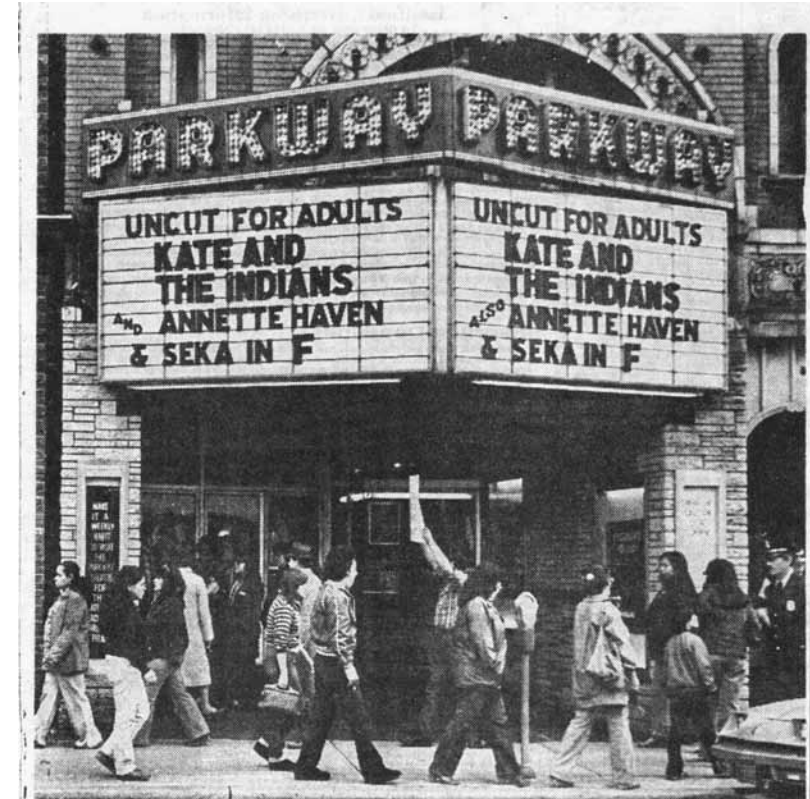
The grant was the beginning of a decade of development and building that would both modernize the area and effectively erase most traces of the once-great downtown movie business. To make way for the new Federal building, the

Esquire was closed and razed. Parking structures soon covered the footprints of the old Third Street theatre sites. With the new projects, downtown boosters soon targeted the types of movies being shown at the remaining theatres. The city redevelopment board convinced all but the Princess, whose marquee would be visible from both the main entrance to the new mall and the front steps of Federal building, to clean up their programs.

As the old palaces all gave in to the progressive spirit of the redevelopment movement, the Princess was about to score a key victory in de-

fending its line of work. An appeal over a 1978 obscenity fine of \$6,000 had made its way to the State Supreme Court. The point of contention involved the rapidly progressing definition of what constituted obscenity. The US Supreme Court had revisited the matter in 1977, stating that only juries, not state governments, would be allowed to set community standards for obscenity. Princess lawyers argued that the state courts had not kept up with the changing opinions on the Federal level. The State Supreme Court agreed and in June of 1980, the state obscenity statute was struck down. While no longer in fear of the law, the final act for adult cinema in Milwaukee would not be a triumph.

With the market now dominated by hardcore films, the old nudie-cutie format was long dead. Adult show houses like the Tower, Uptown, and Majik Grand (2917 N. Holton



Indian demonstrators protested the film and its title. Milwaukee Journal, May 9, 1981.

St.) had all closed down. Porno Chic, the fad that made it hip to be seen out at a smutty movie had faded away. New breeds of feminism and conservatism were equating porn with the degradation of women. A 1979 anti-pornography rally drew more than 2,500 marchers to the city. The next year, *Deep Throat* star Linda Lovelace (now Linda Marchiano) visited the UW-Milwaukee campus to condemn pornography and claim that her participation in it was the result of coercion and threats of violence. When the new mall, christened The Shops at Grand Avenue, finally opened in the fall of 1982, all but three of the downtown theatres had closed and of the dozen still in operation across the city, only the Parkway and Princess still ran adult pictures.

As the Princess was being threatened by the rebirth of its neighborhood, the Parkway was endangered by the decline of its area. The northwest corner of the city had become plagued by crime and gang activity. The theatre, one of the last businesses in the area that could draw customers from all over the city, was an especially enticing target for young hoods. Cars parked in the nearby city lot were targeted for break-ins and theft. Some robberies and assaults went unreported as victims didn't want it known where they had been. Police calls to the area were common and cops even took to staking out the theatre from nearby rooftops.

Likewise, with the increase in 'respectable' downtown enterprise, the Princess was struggling for survival. The city redevelopment board, determined to erase the downtown blight within view of the new mall and Federal building, voted in late 1982 to include the theatre as one of several properties that would be purchased by the city and demolished. Lawsuits followed the decision, lawyers representing

the theatre employees were joined by Joseph Balistrieri, attorney son of Milwaukee crime boss Frank Balistrieri, in opposing the move. No matter who was behind the fight to save the Princess, the writing was on the wall. With sinking revenues and hostile neighbors, its days were clearly numbered.

The matter dragged on for another year and a half. The purchase went through in March of 1984, the city paying \$292,000 for the building and lot. However, when the demolition date came, the theatre operators refused to vacate the building. The Princess, now technically owned by the city, stayed open for another month while the redevelopment board sued to get them to leave. Finally, on August 11th, the Princess Theatre ran its last program, a double bill of *Sex Games* and *Society Affairs*. Later that month, the city's oldest movie theatre was unceremoniously bulldozed. The development board, ostensibly with grand plans for the future of the site, said the land would be 'temporarily' used for parking. Twenty-six years later, it remains a parking lot.

The whole idea of the blue movie was to give people something they couldn't get at home. With the proliferation of home video systems, hardcore sex was no longer exclusive to the local adult theatre. The Parkway had survived hundreds of raids and dozens of legal challenges, spent thousands of dollars to defend its business under the protection of the U.S. Constitution, faced off with numerous city, state, and Federal authorities, and survived protests, pickets, and sabotage. But what it could not defeat was videotape. By the mid-eighties, the Parkway had become an anachronism in a bad neighborhood.

In its last years, city police and elected officials continued

to blame the theatre for drawing "easy marks" to the neighborhood. A police report on the area claimed that 1,300 serious crimes had been committed around the complex in 1984 and early 1985, including nearly 60 sex and vice offenses, 62 car thefts, 27 assaults, and four murders. According to police, it was one of the most crime-ridden areas in the city.

The shrinking revenues showed in the character of the 64-year-old building as well. The roof leaked and the boiler was faulty. Both needed to be replaced. The well-dressed young ladies that once worked the candy counter were a thing of the past. The neighborhood made it difficult to find anyone willing to work at the theatre. On Friday, January 11th 1986, just over 15 years since it ran its first adult film, the Parkway played a program of *Flash Pants* and *Up, Up, and Away* and closed its doors forever. In the end, the little theatre that was, for one tumultuous week, the king of Milwaukee movie exhibition could not even be sold. It was abandoned, left to the city for back taxes. On a snowy day in December of 1990, the Parkway Theatre was stripped of its

useful pieces and razed as a part of a city-sponsored blight-elimination project.

Twenty-five years after the last dirty movie clattered through a Milwaukee projection booth, the battles over adult theatres in the city are largely forgotten. The days of the skin-flick are dismissed as sad and ignoble final chapters in the otherwise grand lives of local picture houses. But the theatres that went blue were the theatres that survived. Adult films brought the thrill and mystery back to movie-going. Just as in the infancy of the movie business, people had to go just to get a look at it. For this, theatres like the Parkway and the Princess were in many ways the last great gasp for the movies in Milwaukee. Today, just three Milwaukee movie theatres are still operating. Averaging over 84 years old, these theatres are equal parts curiosity and entertainment. There is no longer any spectacle in going out to the movies, no thrill of seeing something that you couldn't see at home. There was a time when this was not the case. It was much more recent than people care to remember.



The Uptown, another Saxe theatre that ended its day as an X-rated house.



Caption TK

BACK STAGE AT THE FOLLIES

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY
JOHN WRIGHT

AFTER THE 1991 SAN FRANCISCO CONCLAVE OF the Theatre Historical Society, my plans included a visit to Los Angeles to continue work on some of my theatre projects. After leaving San Francisco, I stopped in Fresno and Bakersfield, and arrived in Hollywood on June 26th. The very next morning, I was awakened at 7:45 a.m. by the earthquake. The significance of this event reminded me of two things. The first was the quake of 1971 when I was working at the Los Angeles Theatre, and the second was the large cement patch on the back wall of the Los Angeles Burbank Theatre to repair the damage from the 1933 earthquake. I remembered the latter because I worked as a stagehand at the Burbank Theatre in its final days as a burlesque theatre.

In 1959, I was “asked” by the Union to take the relief job at the Burbank. It was certainly not one of the most sought-after jobs in the city. In 1959, there were two burlesque theatres on Main Street, Los Angeles, the Belasco/Republic Theatre at 337 S. Main Street (the old Follies), and the Burbank Theatre at 548 S. Main Street (the new Follies). The Belasco did not really present burlesque at that time, as it only presented girls stripping to recorded music. This was not always the case, as some of the greatest names in “real” burlesque had played the Belasco. The Burbank, on the other hand, presented girls, comics and a live orchestra. I don’t know when the change in the Belasco’s policy occurred, but both theatres were under the same management.

The Burbank Theatre was built in 1893 by David Burbank. It did not really become a successful house until Oliver Morosco took over as manager. As Morosco’s success grew, he used it as a break-in house before taking shows to New York. But by spreading himself too thin, and after a number of lawsuits and his divorce, he went bankrupt.

Over the next few years there was not much mention of

the Burbank Theatre. The first mention of burlesque was in April 1920, when Ed Armstrong and his Dolls appeared in *The Morning After*. The ad for this show refers to the theatre as Gore’s Burbank Theatre.

The Burbank’s auditorium, as well as the building front on Main Street, was extensively renovated into an Art Deco style. However, little work was done on improving the stage itself.

When I started to work at the Burbank, the theatre was operated by Suey Welch and Bob Biggs. The union stage crew consisted of a carpenter, an electrician, and a prop man. There was also a swing man who would work the other men’s day off. There were four men in the pit band—piano, drums, trumpet, and sax. Two more men worked in the booth (one opening and the other closing), doubling as projectionist and spot light operator. All these men were members of Local 150, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (I.A.T.S.E.).

As for the talent, there were two comics and a Master of Ceremonies (who was also a straight man) and, if needed, an Irish tenor. Usually there were six girls, one of whom was the feature. The feature would be booked for two weeks, while the other girls would usually change every week.

This was quite a change in casting, for in the glory years of burlesque there would be a pony line (of dancers), five or six comics, and both a Master of Ceremonies and a straight man. Besides this, there would be a full orchestra and a full stage crew. Anybody who has seen the Broadway production of *Sugar Babies* will have some idea as to what burlesque was like in its heyday.

The stage at the Burbank Theatre was quite large. A few of the dimensions were:

- Proscenium opening, 37 feet
- Proscenium height, 33 feet

- Depth to back wall, 45 feet
- Height, stage to grid, 65 feet

When the theatre first opened, the seating capacity was 1844, which was later reduced to just over 1500.

The stage door was located down a long alley on the left side of the house when facing it, past a shoe shine stand, as seen in many movies. The alley was also the emergency exit from the auditorium. The dressing rooms were all located on the stage left side, one set on stage level and the other located one flight above, although the upper dressing rooms were not needed during my tenure and were not used. The comics dressed in a very large room upstage center, what once might have been a wardrobe shop or a chorus room. Behind the stage was a very large scene storage area. The switchboard was located on the stage right side, as was the fly-floor. The under stage area was used for prop storage and also contained the musicians’ lockers. The Burbank was a hemp house with a wooden grid. When opened, the theatre was illuminated by both electricity and gas. The gas fixtures

were still in place in the grid when the theatre closed, although they were never used. When the productions were cut down so as not to require elaborate scene changes, an auxiliary pin rail was installed about 10 feet upstage for the curtain, and directly below the fly-floor in order to be able to tie off each set, and thereby be able to make all the changes from the stage and not the fly-floor. The way that the drops were hung made it very rare to have to change drops unless something special was needed. All the drops and drapes were rented from R. L. Grosh Scenic Studios in Hollywood on a yearly basis.

From the house curtain up, hung the first border, followed by the first electric (three circuit border lights of red, blue, and white), the first traveler, then three or four drops (a street scene, a corridor drop, and a landscape drop). Then came the second border and legs, the second traveler, and the second border light. Following this were more painted drops and colored drops. Then came the picture sheet and a black traveler that was used to close in when the sheet was



flown. Following this were a few more drops and finally the black back drop. The number four electric border hung behind this and was only used for work lights. Other than the three circuit border lights, there were no special spotlights hung. We did not regularly use any side lights, although two moveable towers were available. There were also three circuits in the footlights and black light strips. Three or four flood lights hung on the proscenium and there were about six 500-watt spots on the balcony rail. The dimmers on the board were not used, so everything was either on or off. One thing to remember is that when the girls worked they would only use the reds or blues for the very beginning of their number. After that, it was all done by the follow spot. The comics used only the whites for their scenes, unless a specialty might require the other circuits. We rarely went upstage past the second opening.

When the full shows were discontinued at the Belasco, a lot of the props and sets were moved to the Burbank. These included tables, chairs, special tables used in bits, signs, cut-outs, a profile car, different carriages, etc. In fact, anything that could be used was stored either in the scene dock, on the upstage wall, or in the basement. Only the prop man could know where everything was, and he could put his hand on anything immediately, as soon as he was asked for it. Besides these, there were many special props that he

stored, which were not obtainable any longer. Added to this were the cases of seltzer water, which were very hard to get. Then too, were the countless items that were used in the production numbers such as rifles with flags that came out, or else that would light, parasols and transparent umbrellas.

Because of the number of people, it was impossible to put on many of the bigger scenes. At the most, scenes would have one or two comics, a straight man and one or two girls. Each comic had a trunkful of material which couldn't be used because it required more people than were available. Each comic would appear in the other's scenes, but they never used the same material. Some of the most popular scenes that were used were the school room, the court room, and the crazy house. One rule that was closely followed was that no bits with seltzer or water were used just before the feature. Among the comics who regularly appeared at the Burbank were: Harry Clexx, Harry Arnie, Harry Meyers, Leon DeVoe, Slats Taylor, "Scurvy" Miller, Willie Dew, and Jack London. The feature stripper would never appear in any of the scenes and the girls appearing just before or just after the scenes would likewise not appear in the scenes.

Among the many features who appeared at the Burbank were: Tempest Storm, Betty Rowland, Rusty Lane, Lili St. Cyr, Gay Dawn, Candy Barr, Texas Sheridan, Jenny Lee Pattiwaggin and Scarlett O'Hata.



The Burbank Theatre, built in 1893. Photo circa 1903. Photo: Terry Helegesen Collection, THS.



Backstage at The Burbank Follies.

The physical work wasn't difficult, but the hours were long. With four shows a day, it was necessary to be in about noon. The shows were at 1:00, 3:30, 7:30 and 10:00 p.m. An additional show each Saturday was at midnight. A new show was presented each Friday. Getting ready for the new show would typically begin on Monday. It was then that the management and the comics would decide what scenes would be used and which girls would be used. On Tuesday night, between the 7:30 and 10:00 shows, the comics and girls would start to rehearse the scenes. On Wednesday, all spare moments were spent rehearsing, including coming back early from supper break. After the show on Thursdays, stage rehearsals with the comics was done, and following that was musical rehearsals for the girls. The feature went first, followed by the other girls. If any curtains or drops had to be rehung, that was the only time to do it, also any re-lamping that might be needed. Usually, the crew didn't have to hang around for the rehearsals, as the comics would just give us the blackout lines to cue dousing the lights. It was, however, necessary to be back in around 8:00 a.m. to check on everything for the new show and to set the screen and speaker

in place. During the first show on Fridays, the manager timed the shows, and made adjustments for time or material. Then the show was set for the week.

The running of a typical show involved the stage crew working together. The projectionists would buzz to signal the end of the picture, the electrician would bring in the house curtain, the prop man would unplug the speaker and roll it up stage, and the carpenter would take out the picture sheet and close the black traveler. The electrician would then coil the traveler or bring in the drop, and then stand by the house curtain to take it out. The M.C. was there and after signaling the orchestra to stop playing, he would begin and the house curtain was taken out. It would continue this way with the carpenter and electrician working together during the changes while the prop man would make whatever set changes were necessary. During the girls numbers, the prop man would have the added duty of catching their wardrobe, hanging it on a hanger, and taking it to the girls dressing room. Each girl paid \$1.00 to the prop man for this service. Usually, every girl started her number dressed in a very heavy beaded gown which was very expensive, so few

complained about the charge.

When the girls were working on the runway, if anything happened either by accident or on purpose, such as losing a pastie or in some cases the girls "flashing", the spotlight operator would buzz and he would black-out, and we would immediately start making the change, leaving the girl to walk off stage in the dark. The laws were strict and followed by the management and crew. You never knew when a vice cop was in the house. Some of the girls had a reputation and such "accidents" only happened during the 10:00 or midnight show on Saturdays. Another problem was when the house was filled with young kids. They would love to blow peas, etc., at the girls. That was very dangerous and one girl was blinded by just such an act.

Usually between the 3:30 and the 7:30 show, it was time for supper. As the carpenter lived at the Roslyn Hotel, he usually went home. The prop man and I would eat at a small cafeteria on 6th Street between Main Street and Spring, joined by whoever cared to join us. On Wednesdays, I usually ate at Googie's at 5th and Grand, and would stop by to see the guys who worked at the Philharmonic Auditorium



Demolished in 1973, the site is now a parking lot.



or the Biltmore Theatre. Sometimes, I would sit at Googie's at suppertime watching the (slow) demolition of the Paramount, just across Pershing Square.

Occasionally, we had visitors backstage, but only people who were known. Sometimes it might be a stagehand passing through town who worked with the comics or girls, or worked in a theatre someplace else; or girls who were passing through town. Once, when *Gypsy* was playing at the Biltmore Theatre, Joey Faye and the other comics would come by after their show. Joey always brought bagels or pastries with him. A few times he and the other comics from *Gypsy* would get into the scenes that were being done. It didn't matter what scene it was, they knew them all.

In 1966, the Burbank changed hands and the new operators went completely non-union. They used only a few girls stripping to recorded music and showing only X-rated films. I always remember the picket line in the front of the theatre, but I cannot find either the pictures or the article that appeared in the paper. The new venture wasn't very successful and the Burbank Theatre closed in 1971. It was not until 1974 that demolition started. A month or so later, the other burlesque theatre on Main Street, the Belasco, was also demolished. Most of the bricks from both houses were, however, packed on pallets to be used again. So, maybe some place there is a building containing the remains of these two theatres.

(This article originally appeared in Greater L.A. Metro Newsreel in 1992.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John R. Wright was a member of Locals No. 1 and 33, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees in New York, as well as Local 150 in Los Angeles. He worked in New York as a property man with Broadway productions, including *Lost In Yonkers*, *Rumors*, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Broadway Bound*, *Biloxi Blues*, and *Barnum*. He toured with the Joffrey Ballet, *The Wiz* and pre-Broadway productions. Prior to moving to New York he lived in Los Angeles and his I.A.T.S.E. work included maintenance stagehand at the Los Angeles Theatre, property man with the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera, as well as working on the extra board of the Local.

John was a THS member from at least 1980. Many will recall John and Bill Benedict having a smoke break in front of Conclave theatres as both attended many Conclaves. John was a prolific and adept photographer. He documented many legit houses before and after rehab for the 42nd St. Development Corp. He died in November, 2009. In November, 2010, his niece, Beatrice Maloney, donated thirty cartons of his photos and this story to THS. The John R. Wright Collection continues to be processed. We will feature John's fine photos in future issues of *Marquee*.



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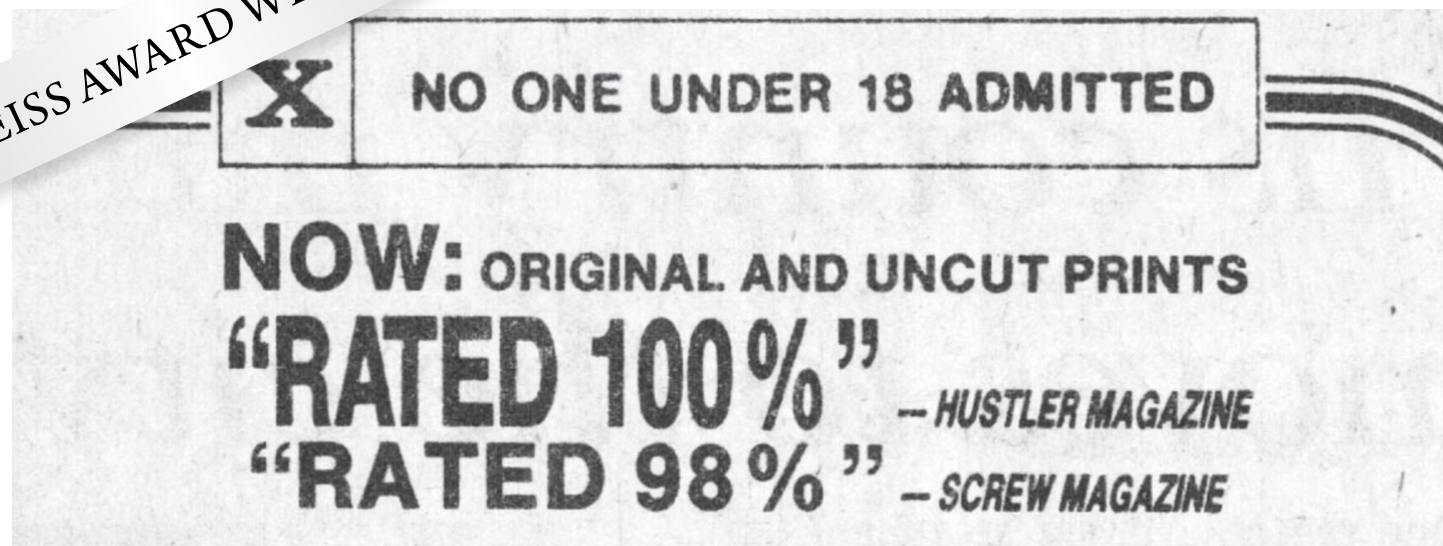
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Above: The Detroit Avenue Burlesque, Detroit, MI.



THERE'S NO 'X' IN OKLAHOMA

BY JEFF STUCKEY

ONE OF THE MORE COMPLEX, CONTROVERSIAL, and confusing aspects of modern motion picture production involves a five-category rating system first developed in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and its president, Jack Valenti. This far-from-perfect method of categorizing films based on their content is the responsibility of the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), whose secretive nature and notorious defiance toward filmmakers has been questioned and scrutinized over the last few years. *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, a 2006 documentary directed by Kirby Dick, is the latest attempt in an ongoing quest to expose the organization and its processes. Despite any criticism leveled at CARA, the motion picture ratings system has held strong for forty years and has continuously met its initial goal of being a source of information for parents while creating a way for the film industry to avoid state and Federal government interference.

Concerns about the movie industry and how to best regulate the content in its films existed long before Valenti and the MPAA. In the early 1900s, as nickelodeons and arcades invited the public to experience the new spectacle of moving pictures, civic and church leaders across the country grew suspicious of the new technology. They feared that the combination of unruly images on-screen projected in dark and crowded rooms would eventually lead to objectionable

behavior both inside and outside of the theatre. In an effort to combat this perceived threat, many cities introduced special censorship boards that examined and approved each film's content before it was allowed to be presented to the public. In 1907 Chicago was the first city to introduce such a board, followed by New York City in 1909. Soon after, state governments followed suit with Pennsylvania being the first in 1911, and Ohio and Kansas two years later.

The growing censorship movement across the country attracted the attention of the film industry, and plans were made to counter these protests with a new method of self-regulation. The National Board of Censorship, established by the Motion Pictures Patents Company (MPPC), met for the first time on March 25, 1909. Its mission was to review all films before they were sent out to theatres and either to approve their content as-is, or to recommend that certain scenes be excluded from the final product. In 1915, as the American public grew uneasy with the idea of "censorship", the organization changed its name to the National Board of Review and promised to examine the "quality" of each Hollywood production. Industry executives implemented these changes in order to both satisfy the concerns of local and state governments, and to avoid any possible lawsuits against movies when their material was thought to be obscene. Unfortunately, Hollywood could not escape the latter.

Until 1915, the United States Supreme Court avoided cases involving film censorship because they did not want to intrude on decisions made by individual cities or states. However, as local governments started to ban films in their respective markets, and film studios sought injunctions against these rulings, the justices had little choice but to intervene. In possibly the most famous case from this era involving motion pictures, *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, the U. S. Supreme Court affirmed Ohio's right to ban any film when its content was found to be offensive, a decision which strengthened the power of censorship boards across America. When Mutual Film claimed this to be a clear violation of free speech, the court argued that rights guaranteed in the Constitution concerning freedom of speech and press did not extend to motion pictures. Films, according to the Court, were more a business than an art form and, therefore, could not be afforded certain rights. Justice Joseph McKenna added that movies attracted a different audience than other types of media and were usually made with a distinct group in mind, not society as a whole. As crippling a blow as this was to the film industry, executives would continue to find ways around government censorship.

In the years following World War I, movies became one of the most popular forms of entertainment, and censors continued to monitor their content for inappropriate themes. Once again, the film industry attempted its own type of self-regulation with the creation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Mr. Will Hays, a former Postmaster General, was named as the organization's president, and he addressed any concerns about films being produced by Hollywood. In 1930, Hays, along with publisher Martin Quigley and Rev. Daniel Lord, a Roman Catholic priest, developed guidelines for what film producers could and could not show in their work. This new list of rules, known as "The Hays Code", promised that "no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standard of those who see it." Scenes involving, among other things, sexual perversion, certain crimes against society and law enforcement, and curse words were outlawed. Furthermore, a Production Code Administration (PCA) was established to ensure that these guidelines were followed, and movies that were judged appropriate for distribution were affixed with a special seal. Studios promised not to release any product without this seal. Hollywood's new system of self-regulation was well received by the public, and cries for censorship became less and less.

The PCA met its first challenge in 1948 when the Supreme Court ordered all movie companies to produce their financial holdings. The court recognized that the

studios responsible for producing and distributing motion pictures also owned the vast majority of movie theatres where these films were exhibited. This case, also known as the "Paramount Decision", broke apart Hollywood's monopoly over the nation's cinemas as justices ruled studios could not own both the production facility and the theatres themselves. The ruling also meant that individual theatre owners could now show films without the special PCA seal because studios no longer supervised their activities. Also, along with its judgment, the Supreme Court overturned its 1915 decision and declared that movies, "like newspaper and radio are included in the press whose freedom is guaranteed in the First Amendment." Movies had finally been recognized as a legitimate art form, rather than as a simple spectacle.

With the restraints of the PCA and the Hays Code loosened, Hollywood movies were free to become riskier in content. Otto Preminger's *The Moon Is Blue* caused controversy in 1953 when it was the first American film released without the PCA seal due to the use of the word "virgin" in one scene. Regardless of the scandal, the film was a financial success and proved that movies with adult content could find an audience in America's theatres. Hollywood studios realized they did not need to follow the code in order to have a hit, and other films like *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966), *In The Heat of the Night* (1967), and *Blow-Up* (1966) were all released without a seal; each did extremely well at the box office. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, a film marketed with an "adults only" warning on its posters, was the third-highest-grossing film of 1966 behind seal-approved films *Thunderball* and *Dr. Zhivago*.

As movies matured in their content, theatre owners grew concerned and thought that a new classification system was necessary to alert parents and other patrons as to any inappropriate material in a film. They believed that if the government created such a system, it could be strictly enforced, and decisions made by managers to restrict certain audience members from seeing a particular movie would be considered legal. Theatre owners also worried about possible repercussions following the *Ginsberg v. New York* case, where the Supreme Court declared storeowners could be prosecuted for selling adult material, like soft-core pornographic magazines, to children, a judgment that could, no doubt, be expanded to include inappropriate movies. Along with the *Ginsberg* case, the justices ruled on another suit involving movies, *Interstate Circuit v. Dallas*, where the City of Dallas tried to impose its own rating system on movies and determine what was appropriate for audiences under the age of sixteen. The Court ruled Dallas' system to be unconstitutional, but added that a more structured method



Caption TK

for rating film content could be deemed acceptable. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA; formerly the MPPDA) and its president, Jack Valenti, followed these cases carefully and raced to create their own system before any similar lawsuits were filed.

From May to September 1968, Valenti held over 100 hours of meetings with representatives from the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) and the International Film Importers and Distributors of America (IFIDA) to discuss plans for a possible film classification system. They declared that this was not to be a move toward censorship, but rather a way for filmmakers to experience more creative license in their work and “to ensure that the freedom which encourages the artist remains responsible and sensitive to the standards of a larger society.” Valenti believed that the Hays Code was simply outdated, and progressive producers of the 1960s should not be expected to follow rules initially meant to protect audiences of the 1930s. When rumors about the new rating system spread throughout Hollywood, reactions were mostly positive because studio executives and filmmakers feared that Federal intervention into their projects was just around the corner. “We’re all preparing for classifications most meticulously,” said Peter Bart, then an executive at Paramount Pictures, “because some kind of Government classification is a clear and present danger.”

On October 7, 1968, Valenti, along with Louis Nizer, General Counsel to the MPAA, Julian Rifkin, NATO President, and Munio Podhorzer, IFIDA President, announced their plan to begin labeling all movies based on their content. The new voluntary ratings system, which was meant to prevent children under sixteen from viewing any adult-oriented material, was initially comprised of three different categories: “G”, meaning films are acceptable for all audiences, “M”, signifying that material is for mature audiences, and “R”, content is restricted to children under sixteen unless a parent or adult guardian approves their attendance. The “X” rating (for adults only) was not part of Valenti’s original system because he believed parents maintained the right to take their children to any movie, free of any regulation or protest. However, after the *Ginsberg v. New York* ruling, NATO insisted that a safeguard be in place to protect theatre managers from prosecution. The “X” classification was included in the final plan for rating motion pictures, which was set to begin on November 1, 1968.

There was widespread hope that Valenti’s new method of self-regulation would succeed where other attempts had failed. It was not in place to censor motion pictures or judge their quality but to present parents with a key to understanding which films were appropriate for their children. In doing

so, it was believed that any government regulation over the movie industry could be avoided. Ratings were determined by the CARA (formerly the PCA), under director Geoffrey Shurlock and a five-man panel of social experts and journalists. In its first week, the CARA rated forty-three movies and assigned fourteen “G” ratings, twelve “M” ratings, fourteen “R” ratings, and three “X” ratings. The three films unfortunate enough to receive the “adults only” distinction were *The Girl on a Motorcycle* (1968) for its themes of adultery, *Birds in Peru* (1968), a story about a nymphomaniac, and *Sin With A Stranger* (1966) for its scenes of violence; all three films were directed by European filmmakers.

Movie ratings received mixed, but mostly favorable reactions from theatre supervisors and the public at large. In Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, movie managers were thrilled to have Valenti’s program in place; one such manager was Bob Busch, who believed that he, like so many other exhibitors in America, had waited far too long for such a system to protect moviegoers from certain types of movies. “We’re 300 percent in accord with the idea,” he said. “Most motion picture exhibitors feel like [film ratings] are long overdue.” Before ratings, Busch and other managers relied on a “green sheet” issued by Hollywood studios that contained advisories regarding questionable material in films. It was up to the theatre manager to then pass this information along to their patrons. There was still concern, however, that audiences would not fully understand what each of the ratings were meant to signify, thus defeating the purpose of the entire system. Managers worked feverishly to publicize it through flyers at the box office, posters in the lobby, and trailers before each film.

Despite their best efforts to inform moviegoers of the new classification system, some theatre operators questioned the point of some ratings. Movies rated “M” for mature received the same treatment as those films with the “R” distinction even though these classifications were meant to be completely different. Bill Neill, film buyer for Oklahoma City based Spectro Theaters, was one of the many cinema operators across America who believed a change to the system was necessary. “There has been some confusion on ‘M’ ratings,” said Neill, “Who can define maturity?”. Earl Murray, manager of the Shepherd Twin Theatre in Oklahoma City, followed these comments by stating, “A lot of mothers call up and when they hear we have an ‘M’ picture, say they can’t bring their children. I think most ‘M’ films are suitable for children.” Valenti and the MPAA later addressed this issue in March 1970, when “M” for Mature was changed to “GP”, indicating that the film is suitable for all ages with parental guidance suggested. One year later, the letters in the rating were reversed to create the “PG” symbol that still exists



Caption TK

today.

Although theatre staff welcomed the new ratings system, the general public still harbored some apprehension toward the new classifications, especially the “X” rating. In a poll conducted by The Daily Oklahoman, the majority of respondents believed that posters and newspaper advertising for adult-oriented films would entice minors to attend and to find creative ways around any theatre restrictions. Following these comments, Edward L. Gaylord, then Executive Vice President of the Oklahoman Publishing Company (OPUBCO), announced that ads for “X”-rated movies would not run in The Daily Oklahoman, The Sunday Oklahoman, and The Oklahoma City Times. His policy also extended to WKY-TV and WKY radio, which were both owned by OPUBCO. Gaylord argued, “some movie-makers have gone too far... and we are not going to let them use our columns to promote their wares.”

Readers cheered Gaylord’s decision to keep his media outlets free from any offensive and lewd material. One week

after his new policy was revealed, The Daily Oklahoman received three hundred letters and postcards about the paper’s stance against “X”-rated films; only five were against the ban. Support poured in from local churches, charitable organizations, youth groups, high school teachers, and university professors. Dr. Robert B. Kamm, President of Oklahoma State University (OSU) at the time, commended Gaylord’s decision to defend his papers against filth and recommended that OSU’s student publication, The O’Collegian, follow suit. Robert F. Weber, then President of Kiwanis International, awarded the OPUBCO executive with a special commendation for his efforts against adult films. “Here in Oklahoma City,” Weber said, “you have a man who has taken a strong, and a probably costly stand against pornography.”

Oklahoma’s war against “X”-rated movies did not rest with the newspapers. On several separate occasions, groups of young adults picketed downtown Oklahoma City theatres for presenting material they judged to be obscene.

They carried signs that read, “Youth For Decency,” “The Silent Majority,” “Young Americans for Freedom,” “Rallies for Decency,” “Ban Lewd Movies,” and “Christ Is Our Hope,” and vowed that their protests would not end “until they close [adult] movies down.” The District Attorney at this time, Curtis P. Harris, sympathized with the youth and permitted them to picket these films as long as they did not block any city streets or sidewalks. He added that any officer that arrested a demonstrator without any probable cause would answer directly to the D.A.’s office. Harris rendered theatre managers powerless to these protests, stating that any complaints would be met with a full investigation of their business. Furthermore, any films found in violation of certain codes of decency would be immediately confiscated. “The theatres apparently feel our youths’ moral standards are low,” Harris claimed, “or they wouldn’t show some of these films.”

Three months after these initial protests, Harris followed through with his warning and conducted raids on the Sooner Theatre, the Academy, and the Majestic Art Theatre in Oklahoma City. Six theatre employees were arrested on complaints of exhibiting obscene films, and five movies,

which detectives labeled as “skin flicks” were removed from the premises. Judge A. P. Van Meter presided over one case and ruled the movies in question to be a “public nuisance,” but did not extend a measure to close any of the theatres permanently. The District Attorney’s office promised its continued support to any organization against the showing of “X”-rated films in Oklahoma City and alerted theatre managers that similar raids would take place if situations warranted. In April 1971, lawmakers stayed true to their word and ordered sheriff’s deputies to shut down the Trend Theatre on North Pennsylvania Avenue after there were reports of obscene movies being shown at the location. Another charge against the Sooner Theatre was filed in October 1971, and similar obscenity cases involving the Midwest, Majestic, and Centre Theatres were heard in the following months.

While battles against “X”-rated movies continued inside the capitol city, complaints from a smaller Oklahoma town would capture America’s interest and attention. On September 2, 1971, Hoyt Shadid, then mayor of Altus, Oklahoma, proposed an ordinance to ban adults-only films from his town for good. His was the first attempt in the nation to place a full restriction on “X” movies and Shadid felt it was his duty to set this precedent. He argued, “...pornographic films constitute a present danger, not only to the public health and welfare, but also a danger present to the very life and well-being of all.” Shadid claimed that the war against filth was “now a local problem and call[ed] for local action now.” J. Cooper Burks, operator of the Movies I & II theatre in Altus supported the mayor’s proposal, but worried that a ban on “X”-rated films might hurt his business.

Shadid and the City of Altus received the full attention of Barbara Scott, then Vice President of the MPAA’s legislative council, who believed that a complete ban on adult movies was not legal and such a measure should not be approved. Before the Oklahoma matter, Scott addressed similar issues with towns that wanted to outlaw “X”-rated movies at various locations, like outdoor drive-ins, but never an entire city. She believed such a proposition would not work in its then present form. Scott advised, “if they don’t define what they want or use obscenity in some way in their laws, it’s just not legal.” She added, “‘X’-pictures are not necessarily obscene pictures, although they can be. We feel they aren’t for kids under 17. I think if we went to court, we would win on any flat prohibition.” Regardless of the MPAA’s position, Shadid pushed forward and presented his measure to the Altus city council for its vote. The eight-member panel approved the mayor’s plan with seven for and one against.

Altus’ ban outlawed the “displaying or exhibiting of any motion picture film which is obscene, filthy, indecent, lascivious, or lewd.” In addition to his ordinance, Shadid



Tower Theatre
Oklahoma City
Seating cap. 1850
early 1930s
Through this tiny facade is a large auditorium, with balcony, work
stage, and a fine organ. Art Deco Interior. Very long lobby.

Caption TK

recommended that a “citizen’s committee” be created to review all films presented at local theatres. After viewing each feature, the committee would determine if it violated any part of the new city ordinance and recommend a film’s removal based on their findings. Since language in the ban did not limit injunctions to “X”-rated films, committee members could also decide if certain “R”-rated features were subject to exclusion. Anyone judged to be in conflict with the Altus ban would be subject to “a penalty of up to thirty days in jail and a \$100 fine.” Theatre owners were allowed thirty days to comply with the city ordinance. The MPAA approved the town’s ruling because it outlined specific offenses and did not simply outlaw any film with an “X” rating.

The successful ban in Altus paved the way for other Oklahoma cities to pursue their own fights against adult films. Lawton attempted a measure to ban “X”-rated films inside the city, but civic leaders were convinced it probably would not stick. Councilman Doyle Cagle stated, “even if we pass it, and it gets down to the courts and they find that it is illegal, I feel the momentum we will have started in showing the movie industry that people want a return to the good old-fashioned movies might be enough to reverse the present trend in pictures.” He noted that Lawton was especially afflicted with adult films because of the town’s large military population. “Anytime you have a large concentration of young, unmarried men,” Cagle argued, “you will have more [“X”-rated] movies.” City leaders in McAlester also debated an Altus-type plan for their community.

In November 1971, El Reno launched the largest attack against adult-oriented movies as three church leaders proposed a ban on all “R” and “X”-rated films. At a monthly town meeting, the pastors, accompanied by over fifty members of their respective congregations, demanded that their measure be placed on the next available ballot, and a vote of the people would determine the fate of adult films in the city. Reverend Earl Jolly, then Assistant Pastor of the Bible Baptist Church, exclaimed, “We can’t control smut in America, but we can control it in El Reno.” On April 4, 1972, citizens voted on the ban, which failed by only nine votes. “The cause of Christ really took a whipping today,” stated Reverend John Aldrich, one of those who led the charge against “R” and “X”-rated movies. City council members were pleased with the outcome and noted that they now understood how citizens felt about the issue.

Back in Oklahoma City, District Attorney Harris’ crusade against adult movies continued. In 1973, his cause was justified by a decision of the U. S. Supreme Court, which ruled that it was legal for local communities to determine if material, such as movies, magazines, or books, was considered obscene and in violation of any laws. Harris wasted

little time in wielding this new power against one film in particular that was both critically acclaimed and infamous for its mature themes. Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango In Paris* (1972) opened in Oklahoma City at the Plaza Cinema Theatre on July 18, 1973. The film was rated “X” due to explicit sexual content, and, as with other similar cases, Harris stood ready to lead the charge against it. After only two showings, the D.A.’s office ordered Oklahoma City police to occupy the theatre and stop further screenings of the movie. Farris Shanbor, Manager of the Plaza Cinema Theatre at the time, was given an ultimatum to either shut down Tango or face felony charges. After a brief consultation with his attorney, Doyle Scott, Shanbor complied with their demands.

Harris made the case against Tango after receiving obscenity complaints from Irvin Box, then Assistant District Attorney, and Bill Mead, former head of the Oklahoma City vice squad. Both men knew of the film’s reputation and made it a priority to review the feature when it opened. Shortly after a 1:00 p.m. screening, Box and Mead reported their findings to Harris, who then demanded the movie be stopped immediately. Theatre management and attorney Scott supported the film’s suspension, but were quick to release a statement explaining their position. “[*Last Tango In Paris*] is not what we would call a ‘skin flick,’” Scott commented. He continued, “this film is in a completely different class. We’ve always run a good, clean house. We’ve never shown ‘skin flicks.’” Manager Shanbour added that he had tracked Tango for over a year and studied its reception at theatres across America before he decided to bring the movie to Oklahoma City. The feature was well received in other locations and, with a star like Marlon Brando in the cast, it was generally believed to be a respectable motion picture. Harris disagreed and was determined to present his case before the courts, if necessary. “I’m perfectly willing to let a jury decide whether I’m right or wrong, but [the movie owners] obviously thought it was pretty bad,” said Harris. “They know what is obscene and what isn’t.”

Ironically, only a few miles up the turnpike, theatres in Tulsa started their second month of Tango screenings. City detectives were aware of the film’s graphic content, but refused to file an injunction because the movie opened in Tulsa before the Supreme Court decision regarding obscenity; the decision which influenced Harris’ crusade against the film in Oklahoma City. Bob Stover, head of Tulsa’s vice squad at the time, commented on the capitol city D.A. and his case against Tango. “Knowing him, if there’s anything he can hang his hat on, he will. He’s a ball of fire, isn’t he?” While the film’s ban continued in Oklahoma City, several residents, who had read about the controversy surrounding the movie and were curious about it, traveled the one



Caption TK

hundred or so miles across the state to see *Last Tango In Paris*. In the capitol, newsstands around the city were inundated with requests for Tulsa papers and information about the town’s theatres. “We’ve been averaging twenty calls an hour for the movie schedule,” said one Oklahoma City store manager. “We finally were running out of papers so we took the entertainment page out of one and just [told] people [the show times] when they call[ed].”

Despite the fanfare in other Oklahoma towns, Harris’ Tango ban held firm. On July 24, 1973, United Artists Corporation, the company that owned Bertolucci’s film, filed an injunction against the District Attorney’s office for interfering with their movie’s exhibition. Louis Nizer, attorney for the film company, contended that Harris acted improperly by threatening theatre managers with civil charges and declared that Oklahoma obscenity laws were

unconstitutional. He argued that state ordinances mention limits on the presentation of “sex” in vague terms, and movie studios were unclear about Oklahoma’s exact moral standards for entertainment. United Artists asked for a temporary restraining order against the D.A., which would allow *Last Tango In Paris* to proceed with regular public showings. Three days later, Chief U. S. District Judge Fred Daugherty denied the studio’s request to let the film continue in Oklahoma City. He did, however, agree to construct a Federal inquiry into the legality of Oklahoma’s obscenity laws. In the meantime, Tango remained under lock and key, and local theatre owners grew increasingly frustrated because the film’s absence also meant an absence of profit. Summer movies were big business, and United Artists expected their feature to generate at least \$40,000 from Oklahoma City movie houses.

Over the next five months, lawmakers debated and discussed the case against *Last Tango In Paris*, but were reluctant to reach a verdict. Three Federal court judges, who convened to determine the constitutional aspects of Oklahoma’s obscenity laws, were not willing to reject any ruling by the state. Furthermore, they believed their authority could not supersede that of the local justice system, whose right to levy charges against any form of obscenity was guaranteed by the U. S. Supreme Court. With the case in an obvious stalemate, United Artists withdrew its request for an injunction and asked that the State return its film print of *Last Tango In Paris* without any further objection. By the end of 1973, Tango had completed several successful engagements across the state, but, after only the two showings in July, it never appeared on screens in Oklahoma City. The film returned in August 1975 for a limited one-week engagement at the MacArthur Park Cinema. It is not clear why Harris let this slide, but theatre manager Monty Thomas joked that “everyone in the D.A.’s office must have been on vacation.”

Over the next couple of decades, the motion picture ratings system would slowly transform itself into what it is today. On July 1, 1984, Valenti decided to split the parental guidance rating into two different categories: “PG” and “PG-13.” The latter of the two was to signify “a higher level

of intensity,” and content could feature stronger scenes involving language, violence, and nudity. Changes to the adult classifications arrived on September 27, 1990 when the “X” rating was switched to “NC-17,” which signified that no child under seventeen years of age could be admitted even with a parent or guardian present. Valenti commented on this change stating that “the ‘X’ rating over the years appeared to have taken on a surly meaning in the minds of many people, a meaning that was never intended when we created the system.”

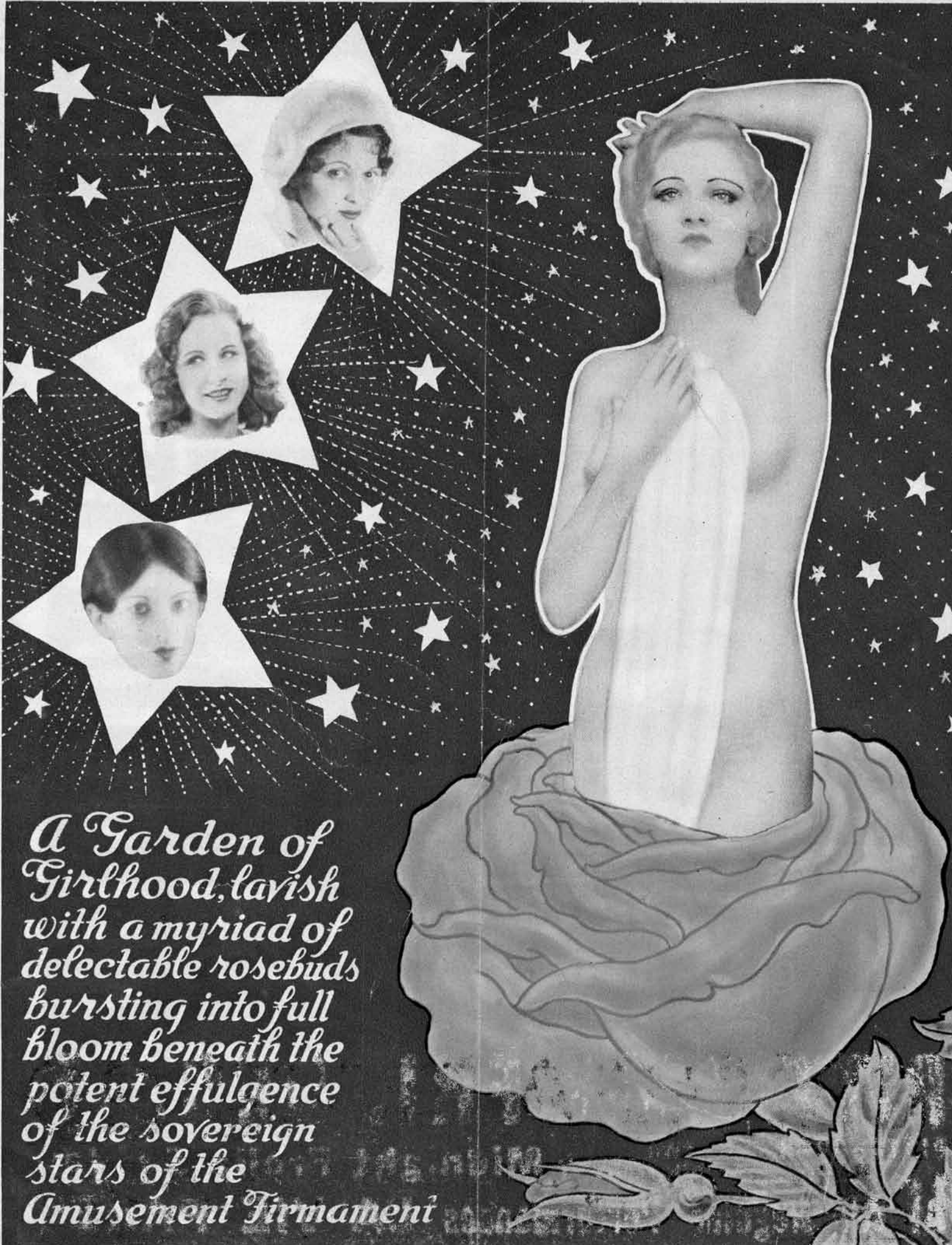
It could be argued that, in their movements against “X”-rated films, Curtis Harris, Edward Gaylord, Robert Kamm, Hoyt Shadid, and others, were trying to protect and enforce the moral codes shared by many Oklahomans. However, there is a fine line between decency and censorship. It is indeed noble that adults do their best to keep children away from inappropriate material. Unfortunately, restricting some things from kids makes them want those items more, and adult films certainly attract the interest of hormonally challenged, pre-pubescent youth. The MPAA created movie ratings for parents so they could better understand which movies are made for families and which were not. The decision “to see or not to see” should rest with them, not civic leaders or lawmakers.



Caption TK

THEATRE BIRTHDAYS compiled by Paul Moore

OPENING DATE	CITY	THEATRE NAME	ARCHITECT	SEATING
1906				
Sep 21	New York, NY	Astor	George Keister	1141
1911				
Sep 11	Brooklyn, NY	Bushwick	Wm. H. McElfatrick	2004
Sep 16	Detroit, MI	National	Albert Kahn	800
Sep 18	Boston, MA	National (Waldorf)	Clarence Blackall	3500
1916				
Aug 30	Indianapolis, IN	Circle	Rubush & Hunter	2638
Aug 31	Milwaukee, WI	Palace (Orpheum)	Kirchoff & Rose	2617
Sep 19	Detroit, MI	Regent (Center)	Stratton & VonSchneider	3600
Sep 30	Long Beach, CA	Palace (Newsreel)	H. Alfred Anderson	850
1921				
Jul 02	Phoenix, AZ	Rialto	Wm. Curlett & Sons	1700
Aug 27	Kansas City, MO	Pantages (Tower)	B. Marcus Priteca	2300
Aug 26	New York, NY	Loew's State	Thomas W. Lamb	3316
Sep 05	Bronx, NY	Franklin	Eugene DeRosa/Pereira	2855
Sep 22	New York, NY	Music Box	C. Howard Crane	1010
Sep 26	New York, NY	Loew's 83rd St.	Thomas W. Lamb	2727
Sep 28	Liberal, KS	Tucker	Boller Brothers	854
1926				
Jul 02	Los Angeles, CA	San Carlos	L. A. Smith	734
Jul 17	Portland, OR	Hollywood	Bennes & Herzog	1491
August	Topeka, KS	Jayhawk	Boller Brothers	1344
Aug 06	Monterey, CA	Golden State (State)	Reid Brothers	1600
Aug 11	Albany, NY	Ritz	Thomas W. Lamb	1134
Aug 18	Port Chester, NY	Capitol	Thomas W. Lamb	1748
Aug 23	Detroit, MI	Michigan	Rapp & Rapp	4038
Aug 26	St. Louis, MO	Ambassador	Rapp & Rapp	3000
Aug 27	Portland, OR	Broadway	A. E. Doyle	1832
Sep 01	Brooklyn, NY	Savoy	Thomas W. Lamb	2486
Sep 09	Chicago, IL	Congress (Mexico)	Friedstein & Co.	2904
Sep 06	St. Charles, IL	Arcada	Elmer F. Behrns	900
Sep 10	St. Petersburg, FL	Florida	Roy A. Benjamin	2100
Sep 13	Chicago, IL	Belmont	W. W. Ahlschlager	3257
Sep 16	Queens, NY	Oasis	Thomas W. Lamb	1750
Sep 18	Chicago, IL	Granada	Levy & Klein	3448
Sep 22	San Francisco, CA	Roosevelt (York, Brava)	Reid Brothers	1006
Sep 22	New London, CT	Garde	Arland W. Johnson	1545
Sep 23	Los Angeles, CA	Westlake	Richard M. Bates, Jr.	2000
Sep 23	Seattle, WA	5th Avenue	Robert C. Reamer, Jr.	2349
Sep 27	Woonsocket, RI	Stadium	Perry & Whipple	1500
Sep 29	Bryn Mawr, PA	Seville (Bryn Mawr)	William H. Lee	820
1931				
July 30	Phoenix, AZ	Fox	S. Charles Lee	1796
Aug 14	Los Angeles, CA	Westwood Village (Mann Village)	P. P. Lewis	1489
Aug 19	Torrington, CT	Warner	Thomas W. Lamb	1850
Aug 27	New York, NY	Earl Carroll	George Keister	3000
Aug 28	Schenectady, NY	Plaza	John Ebersson	2382
Sep 03	Aurora, IL	Paramount	Rapp & Rapp	2016
Sep 03	Spokane, WA	Fox Spokane	Robert C. Reamer, Jr.	2251
Sep 04	Cincinnati, OH	Paramount (RKO-Paramount)	Edward J. Schulte	2163
Sep 05	Ashland, KY	Paramount	Rapp & Rapp	1428
1936				
Jul 02	Hutchinsons, KS	State (Flag)	Sproule Brothers	490
Aug 14	Santa Cruz, CA	Del Mar	William Cehvalis	1521
Aug 20	Honolulu, HI	Waikiki	Charles W. Dickey	1300
Sep 16	New York, NY	Criterion	Lamb & DeRosa	1600
Sep 23	Philadelphia, PA	Benson	David Supowitz	499
Sep 24	Anaconda, MT	Washoe	B. Marcus Priteca	1000
1941				
Aug 01	Cincinnati, OH	20th Century	Maffit, Alcox & Stritzel (For F&Y Building Co.)	885
Aug 04	Vancouver, BC, Can.	Park	Kaplan & Sprachman	726
Aug 07	Detroit, MI	Main	Bennett & Straight	800
Sep 01	Orem, UT	Scera	Fred Markham	800
Sep 11	Ocala, FL	Marion	Roy A. Benjamin	902
1946				
Aug 13	Culver City, CA	Culver	Carl G. Moeller	1091



*A Garden of
Girlhood, lavish
with a myriad of
delectable rosebuds
bursting into full
bloom beneath the
potent effulgence
of the sovereign
stars of the
Amusement Firmament*