

Book Reviews



A Theatre Near You: 150 Years of Going to the Show in Ottawa-Gatineau. ALAIN MIGUELEZ. Manotick, ON: Penumbra Press, 2004. 370 p. ISBN 189413138-X.

Throughout the pages of *A Theatre Near You: 150 Years of Going to the Show in Ottawa-Gatineau*, the very act of “going to the show” entails much more than simply seeing films outside of the home. As Alain Miguélez explicitly stresses in his preface, cinemagoing is a communal ritual that encompasses a unique interaction between spectators, the theatrical exhibition space, and the urban environment. As a result, he treats the movie theatres where people watch (and have watched) films in the Ottawa-Gatineau region as social centres of the community in which a wide range of practices and experiences linked with viewing movies in the public realm are played out. As sites that encourage both social interaction and private contemplation, movie theatres have the ability to function as repositories of memories that are both collective and individual. The book underscores this duality by giving prominence to the personal memories that were formed within these public spaces, as well as to the personal memories of the public spaces themselves.

Preserving these parallel streams of private and public memories informs the heart of Miguélez’s project, which has been brought to print by local publisher Penumbra Press under their “Archives of Canadian Arts Culture & Heritage” series. Published to coincide with the sesquicentennial of the City of Ottawa, *A Theatre Near You* serves as a nostalgic commemoration of the different cinema exhibition spaces of the region and the specific social experiences that were shaped by them. The fact that both of these subjects of investigation are primarily anchored within an urban context informs their participation in a conception of city life that is rooted within broader discourses of modernity. To this end, the social activities associated with cinema are tied to a larger historical consideration of the urban fabric of Ottawa-Gatineau, wherein the impact of these cultural institutions directly affects the casual public life of a downtown core. For Miguélez, the celebration of cinemagoing is inextricably linked to the celebration of the region as a metropolitan community.

The book uses this paralleling of the history of Ottawa-Gatineau alongside the local history of “going to the show” to establish a longitudinal framework that chronicles the changing nature of the exhibition spaces within the National Capital Region (NCR). Opening with the earliest establishments of theatrical exhibition in the city, originally known as Bytown, and concluding with the contemporary consideration of the suburban megaplexes, the author’s master narrative weaves between these temporal bookends in a chronological order that spans nine chapters representing specific historical eras. The arrangement of the book into chapters titled “Stage and Vaudeville,” “Park Shows and Nickelodeons,” “Early Legitimate Cinemas,” “Downtown Picture Palaces,” “Talking Picture Theatres,” “Post-War Theatre Boom,” “Porno Theatres,” “Theatres in Malls and Office Complexes,” and finally, “The Megaplexes,” is distinguished by particular characteristics of the exhibition sites themselves, which, in turn, are marked by attributes that signal a significant shift to their very identity, whether they are technological, geographic, industrial, architectural, spatial, or structural in design. The individual profiles of Ottawa-Gatineau’s venues for spectacular entertainment reside in their appropriately assigned chapters, and it is within these entries where the substantial meat of the book resides. Intertwining a wide variety of archival sources including local and national newspapers, industry trade publications, registry office records, city directories, journalistic accounts, and community anecdotes, Miguez traces the life cycle of each theatre space, recounting a combination of physical and social details within a narrative trajectory that follows their glorious rise: from the gala opening night to their humble demise as a result of the forces of nature, technology, or commerce. Taken collectively, these short histories provide evolutionary glimpses into the specific relationships that are implicitly constructed between exhibition site, the spectator, and by extension, the community.

While *A Theatre Near You* provides a wealthy compendium of the necessary information about these exhibition spaces, its greatest strength lies in the treatment of the physical environment of the theatres themselves. Miguez devotes a great amount of importance and space to providing highly detailed descriptions of the spatial and structural dimensions of each theatre, walking the reader through a series of social spaces mediating between the ticket booth, the staircases, the lobbies, and the auditorium. Heightened attention is paid to the minutiae of exterior and interior architectural décor, offering valuable insight into how these elements have historically worked to viscerally manipulate the cinemagoing experience. This text is visually supplemented by a superb selection of vintage black and white photographs that illuminate the majesty and ambience of these movie theatres, accompanied by captions that often point out the different ways that architectural details can encourage status, tastes, fashion, behaviour, and different types of social interaction. Drawn from a variety of archives and private collections, the photographs are

complemented by clear reproductions of historical documents ranging from newspaper advertisements, programs, posters, drawings, and construction blueprints that provide a wider scope to locate the exhibition sites within specific contexts. Some of the most interesting photographs are exterior shots showing theatre marquees, not only because they offer clues to the programming of a specific time and place, but more importantly, because they help to situate the venue visually in its social and local context through the extension of the cinema space to include its relationship with the street.

The theme of architectural design and its connection with the social experience of cinemagoing begin to take negative overtones as the chronology reaches the historical era when single-screen movie theatres were being usurped by multiplexes, and then later by suburban megaplexes. There is an accelerating undertone of lament in Miguelez's discussion of these structures and it is within these profiles where his commentary is most visibly informed by his background as an urban planner. His disdain is most evident in his remarks about the loss of local identity associated with the arrival of these theatres, due mostly to their move away from the pedestrian street life of the downtown core into the suburban shopping centres where cars are needed for access. These are exhibition sites where local design distinctions are casualties to the aesthetic flattening of corporate architecture, where the naming of the theatre after the shopping centre it serves emphasizes the connotation of the theatre as an appendage of the larger retail complex. For the author, this loss of individuality and audacity in theatre design leads directly to the loss of permanence in architectural expression, which allows people to invest memories into a theatrical exhibition space. It is within this context of loss that *A Theatre Near You* ultimately justifies its existence, striving to capture the remaining evidence of these memories before they vanish in the rubble of the movie palaces of yore.

While the book's lovingly detailed treatment of Ottawa-Gatineau's movie theatres as local landmark destinations represents its greatest strength, it also points to some of its weaknesses. Most glaring in the context of documenting the local history of "going to the show" is the omission of some of the alternative sites of exhibition that have historically operated in the area. There is the curious absence of the consideration of what could best be referred to as Ottawa-Gatineau's government-affiliated theatres, namely the National Arts Centre, the IMAX theatres at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the Library and Archives Canada Auditorium. While each of these theatre spaces may not retain exclusive identities as movie theatres, they have all certainly played unique roles in the cinema culture of the NCR, whether in a technological context (special event screenings of large-screen format films with stereophonic sound systems in the case of the former two) or an institutional one (the eclectic international/national cinema programming of the Canadian Film Institute in the case of the latter). The other conspicuous omission pertains to

the drive-in theatres of the area. It is surprising that in his consideration of the post-war rise of suburbia and the automobile culture as key factors that initiated the demise of downtown movie theatres, the author neglects to discuss how the local film exhibition industry straddled the relationship between them. Though drive-in theatres may not qualify as movie theatres in the same architectural sense celebrated throughout the book, the conscious decision to avoid their treatment ignores a discussion of the specific social experiences associated with them. For example, drive-ins offer a particular twist in the relationship between the illusion of public sociability such a space offers and the desire for private behaviour it affords, as seen in the unique opportunity for moviegoers to experience both the spectacle of cinema under the stars and a trysting place for sexual and alcoholic initiation. While these exclusions may ultimately be rationalized in the context of the book's main focus on movie theatres as historic buildings, the importance of such specific social practices linked to these theatre spaces necessitates their inclusion; their contribution to the cultural fabric of the community ought to be recognized.

The exclusion of drive-ins on the part of the author may suggest a discomfort with the consideration of such remote public spaces in the context of urban city life, and, in turn, could explain his awkwardness when negotiating the larger treatment of local geography. This is plainly evident in the manner in which the book relays specific information about the immediate geographic surroundings of each exhibition site. Five maps, representing five different historical periods of exhibition spaces based on the chapter headings, are located in the appendices, and each theatre presented in the book is appropriately marked on these maps according to their street address. While this certainly situates these exhibition spaces within the region's geographic boundaries as a way to get a clearer understanding of how these theatres functioned in tandem during overlapping time periods, the problem with the maps ultimately lies in their presentation. From a strictly utilitarian perspective, the location of the maps at the end of the book frustratingly works against the organization of the information provided in the individual profiles. The historical overlap of long-standing theatre spaces occasionally flash forward to events and periods that have yet to be introduced, and flash back to events of which the reader may need reminding. This overlap makes it confusing at times to map out the entirety of the landscape at a given moment, which becomes literalized in a reading experience characterized by flipping back and forth between the pages to refer to the maps (which may have been better located at the start of the chapters). More importantly, these maps are not period ones, as they are unfortunately advertised in the book's publicity. Instead, they are actually modern maps reproduced at different scales, with contemporary street names and layouts that simply provide readers with a general idea of the physical location of these exhibition sites in relation to a present-day representation of Ottawa-Gatineau. While this approach is certainly useful for

providing existing physical points of reference, it also represents a missed opportunity to encourage further contemplation of the role of cinema within the social geography of Ottawa-Gatineau against a backdrop of the historical expansions and transformations of its zones and borders.

These criticisms aside, *A Theatre Near You* represents an impressive achievement in popular archival research that sits comfortably within a context of cinema studies that treats exhibition spaces as historically specific sites of cultural processes. Miguelez should be commended for the depth and breadth of his investigative work, which serve his sincere efforts to provide the region with a cultural identity that functions as a necessary corrective to Ottawa's dominant political identity as the nation's capital. The care and attention to detail that so clearly inform this project carry over to the physical properties of the book itself. The high glossy quality of its production values present a handsome coffee table publication that celebrates, among other things, the physical attributes of its subject. As the author forthrightly admits, this book is a labour of love straddling the line between public record and personal memoir. As a result, the language and tone that he uses throughout its pages may be off-putting to those readers who may prefer the critical distance of academic objectivity. However, it is hard to deny that much of the charm of *A Theatre Near You* resides in those moments when personal stories of cinemagoing intersect with the grand sweep of film history. In this regard, the most telling section of the book may very well be the acknowledgements section. Beyond providing the obligatory platitudes to those individuals who provided financial assistance for his research, Miguelez generously thanks by name all those individuals who functioned as subjects of research themselves: those who shared their personal cinemagoing memories with him, whether in anecdotal or material form. Thus the project of *A Theatre Near You* can be seen to parallel cinemagoing through its attraction of large numbers of people to a single destination that raises the possibility for the creation of social interaction, where individual private memories formed within these structures accumulate to a shared collective. By tapping into this living archive, he has created a unique community, which in itself is a worthy social act.

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