

Chicago repertory cinema: From grind to boom to bust

By Dave Kehr

Movie critic

Repertory cinema has a long, rich history in Chicago, beginning in the days when revival theaters were still known as "grind houses."

The granddaddy of them all was the Star and Garter, a repertory cinema cum flop house located in the midst of Madison Street's Skid Row. For a nominal charge, the Star and Garter provided shelter from the elements plus, almost

Chicago's only commercial repertory cinema is, happily, one of the best.

as a bonus, an erratic program of scratchy, obscure Hollywood movies—apparently, whatever was lying around the film warehouse and could be booked at a minimal rental.

The origins of the Star and Garter are lost in the mists of time, although Jack Kerouac spends a night there in "On the Road." It was still functioning in the late '60s, playing to foolhardy movie buffs and snoring winos.

Further down Madison and around the corner was the Clark, a much more legitimate operation than the Star and Garter, though a certain aroma in the atmosphere suggested a slight overlapping of clientele. Manager Bruce Trinz changed the double bill daily,

knitting together Hollywood classics and adventurous foreign titles, and actually published a monthly schedule (headlined "Hark! Hark! To the sound of the Clark!") that made it possible to plan ahead.

The Clark fell to the wreck-er's ball in the early '70s, leaving the field open to two more marginal theaters: the Biograph in Lincoln Park and the Parkway in New Town.

The Biograph, with its penny candy counter and whimsical programming (the all-time classic: a double bill of Frank Zappa's "200 Motels" and John Ford's gentle rural comedy of 1953, "The Sun Shines Bright"), had a pleasant family atmosphere.

The Parkway, cramped and dingy, radiated hostility and suspicion—patrons who called ahead to find out what was showing were greeted by an edgy "What do you want to know for?"

As revivals became more profitable and more legitimate, both the Biograph and the Parkway were sold and renovated—the Biograph reopening with an art deco interior, far better prints, and of course, much higher prices in 1974; the Parkway becoming part of the national Landmark chain in 1981.

In between came the Davis on North Lincoln Avenue, whose short-lived revival policy featured a memorable 3-D series, and the Sandburg, near the Rush Street meat market.

Operated by two college film

majors, the Sandburg remains the most fondly remembered of Chicago's repertory houses, offering an eclectic mix of exploitation films, American auteur classics and foreign premieres.

But the boom went bust as the '80s wore on, as shifting demographics and competition from home video forced the Biograph and the Sandburg into first run and forced the Parkway (as well as Landmark's Evanston outpost, the Varsity) to close.

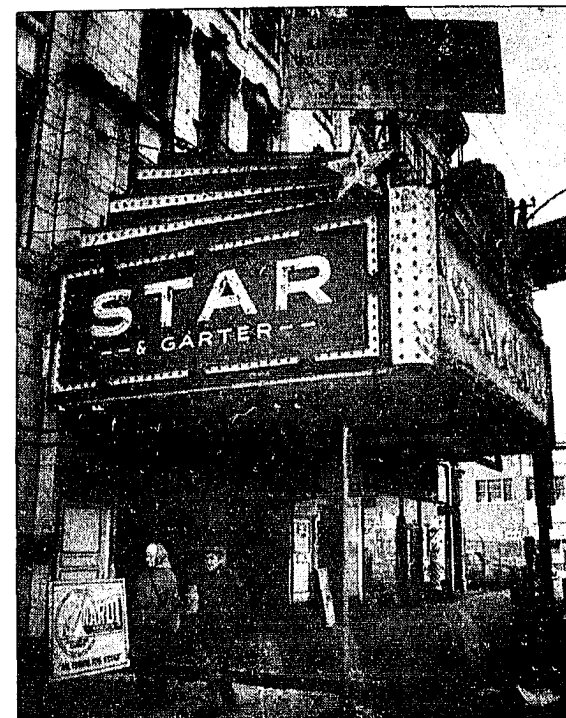
Chicago's only remaining commercial repertory cinema is, happily, one of the best the city has known—the Music

Box, located in an impeccably restored 1920s auditorium at 3733 N. Southport Ave. Owners Chris Carlo and Bob Chaney and manager John Schlesinger offer a modified version of the Landmark booking policy, which includes cult films, American classics and selected foreign revivals, as well as chancier ventures such as extended premiere engagements of new foreign and independent American films and the occasional silent movie night with live organ accompaniment.

The last of a vanishing breed, the Music Box is a very precious resource.



Orson Welles in "Citizen Kane."



Tribune photo

The Star and Garter on Chicago's Skid Row was a repertory theater cum flop house before its demise in 1973.