

HARK! HARK! REMEMBER THE CLARK?

A former downtown film exhibitor recalls the days when movies were movies, gals were gals, and pigeons could be checked at the door.

By Bruce Trinz

As I walked into the Loop from the Northwestern station with a group of fellow commuters one morning, a man I had not met before asked me what I did. "Don't you know?" said another man. "Bruce runs the Clark Theater." "The Clark Theater!" exclaimed the newcomer. "Isn't that where all the bums go to sleep it off?" I pointed a finger at him in mock admonition and said, "Don't ever let me catch you!" "Well," he replied indignantly, "you don't have to get so hostile about it."

The Clark was, in many ways, a unique establishment. Open from early morning 'til late at night, it was a business, yet an institution: a mecca for film buffs, a home-away-from-home for the "loners" of the city, a way-station for salesmen between calls or stymied by a sudden rain-fall, a hideaway for office workers "getting away from it all," a resting-place for weary women taking a shopping break, a central retreat for the "night people." Here rich and poor, young and old, erudite and uneducated shared the common experience of the cinema.

How does one get into the theater business? At an industry convention a number of years ago, I asked a young man how he had. "To make a long story short," he said, "I'm really an undertaker, but the local theater owner died and his family didn't have enough money to pay for the funeral." That's one way. Or you can be born

Bruce Trinz is now a consultant for the Devon, Adelphi, and 400 theaters.

into it as I was, a third-generation member of a "show-biz" family. (My grandfather went up to Milwaukee to open his first nickelodeon because Chicago was overrun with them—there were seven here!)

Satchel Paige, the eminent contemporary philosopher, has warned us not to look back because "something" might be gaining on you." But I usually remember my 25 years at the Clark as I do my experiences in the military—with a sort of nostalgic amusement that forgives the "Catch-22" aspects of both.

When I returned after World War II to the Clark, where I had worked during high-school and college vacations, the movie business was in the midst of a "golden age"—meaning lucrative. We used to joke about opening the doors for the day and jumping aside to avoid being trampled. Clark and Madison was one of the busiest corners in Chicago, especially at night. The reformers had not yet closed in on—and closed—the nightclubs, bars, and "B" joints. We experimented with a later-and-later "last complete show" and more frequent changes of program, finally arriving at the format that was to become the theater's hallmark: "Doors Open 7:30 a.m.; Last Complete Show 4 a.m.; Double Feature Program Changed Daily." Business boomed, but that particular bubble was about to burst.

And what a burst! In the late '40s, the "one-eyed monster" began to appear and it became fashionable to brag about how long it had been since you had gone to the movies. A story going the

rounds had a man calling a theater to ask what time the next feature started and the cashier saying, "What time can you get here?" A man I knew told me that his wife and he had been watching television from 6 o'clock to midnight every evening for months and never had seen a bad program. Exercising great self-control, I refrained from suggesting that he bequeath his brain to the Sanitary District.

So we were forced to reassess our position as independent exhibitors. (In the movie industry, "exhibitor" means theater owner. A woman once asked my wife what business I was in. My wife replied that I was an exhibitor. Raising her eyebrows, the woman said, "Oh? And exactly what is it that he exhibits?" After that, my wife always said that I was a theater owner.) We lacked the financial strength to compete with the big chains for first-run films. Our location was good, but not as good as one in the Randolph and State "Rialto." So flexibility and ingenuity became more important than ever. For many years the Clark had been an "action house," showing mostly western, gangster, war, and adventure films—an area that was now being taken over by television.

Our first, tentative response was the launching of the Sunday Film Guild, presenting two films each Sunday that we normally would not have shown. We felt that this kind of double feature would attract a new audience. We also believed that we would attract more

women, a presumption that Women's Lib undoubtedly would have contested quite hotly had the movement been under way.

Also we did start to attract a new kind of audience—including women—stereotyping groups and classes in one's thinking can lead to embarrassing misconceptions. One day a little white-haired, grandmotherly woman approached me in the lobby and asked why we didn't have more "lovely shows" like the one she had seen a couple of weeks before. She was unable to recall the names of the films, so I picked up one of our monthly programs and handed it to her. "Here it is," she said, triumphantly. "Such a lovely show." She was pointing to a double-feature listing of "Vice Squad" and "Inside The Mafia."

The success of the Sunday Film Guild encouraged us to present our first Film Festival, an eight-day program including films of social significance—"The Red Badge of Courage," "The Oxbow Incident," "The Asphalt Jungle." From this humble beginning, the Film Festival came to be a summer-long, four-month reprise of the great past and contemporary classics—an annual "happening" that ranked among the important cultural and entertainment events of Chicago.

In spite of the increasing attractiveness of our programs, however, many women hesitated to go to a downtown theater alone; so we decided to reserve half of the mezzanine for women only. We hired a contractor, retained one of the city's

leading interior designers, and began construction. Now the problem was to find a name that would convey the idea. Someone came up with "Mezzanine of Roses," undoubtedly the greatest original thought since an executive of London House said that he was tired of the slogan "Make a Date with a Steak Tonight" and suggested replacing it with "Good Food, To Eat." Eventually, we hit on "The Little Gallery—For Gals Only" and put a large sign outside the theater advertising it as a "new concept in moviegoing." The day the sign went up, a man stood at the curb and examined it for a long time, then walked up to the cashier and said "Concept? Concept? What's that—some new kind of washroom or something?"

Shortly after it opened, a very attractive woman entered the theater and walked past the mezzanine stairway. "Wouldn't you like to sit in our special ladies' section?" I asked her. She smiled and said, "No thanks, I'd rather be mothered." Some time later, a man with a New York accent approached me, pointed to the sign, and asked me to explain it to him. When I told him that it was a special section upstairs for women, he said, "My God, just like a synagogue!"

We planned several "Ladies' Days" and scheduled films we thought would appeal to women. Eventually, we designated every Wednesday and Friday as the days with reduced admission. This attracted a group of regulars who assumed a proprietary interest in the "Little Gallery" and drove out any man who

After a few weeks, people began shouting “Hark! Hark! The Clark!” to the cashier.

dared set foot in it. Generally, they looked as tho they might be members of Sig Sakowicz’ Grandmothers Club.

To build up our late-night business, we started advertising on an all-night radio station after the midnight newscast, and I suggested a catch-line to open our one-minute spot. The head of our agency objected that it was “just too corny,” but we insisted, and our commercial began with “Hark! Hark! The Clark!” This was followed by a limerick about the late show, concluding with the names and casts of the films playing that evening and a teaser about the

following day’s program. (The agency should have been thankful; we could have insisted on opening with “Voh-doh-dee-oh-doh, Boop-boop-a-doop. Go to the Clark, In the Heart of the Loop!”) After a few weeks, people began shouting “Hark! Hark! The Clark!” to the cashier as they walked in front of the theater.

We had a considerable repertory of special limericks, unfortunately lost to posterity when some old files were thrown out. I hazily remember a few:

*An old tuba-tooter
named Spark*

*Was overheard to make
this remark:* 35 ▶

One night our projectionist called to say that strange noises were coming from in front of his booth.

*"I'm wrapped up in my work,
But I'd sure be a jerk
To miss the late show at
the Clark."*

*A circus performer
named Bright
Was shot from a cannon
one night;
As he flew through the
dark,
He aimed for the Clark . . .
And hit the late show
in his flight.*

*Said a wolfish young
fellow named Stark
To his date as they sat in
the dark:
"Now is the hour
And you're in my
power,
Let's catch the late show
at the Clark."*

In any business dealing with the public, one is bound to run into eccentrics, oddballs, and situations reminiscent of the Marx Brothers. On one of the slow nights when the balcony was supposed to be closed, our projectionist called the manager on the intercom to say that there were strange noises coming from in front of his booth. The manager and a policeman who happened to be in the theater found a couple on the floor of the balcony, locked in an X-rated embrace. The policeman questioned them and learned that they had just met in a bar. "Look here, young lady," he said to the girl, "if you can't entertain at home, why don't you go to a hotel?" "Now, you look here, officer," she replied indignantly. "Just

what kind of a girl do you think I am?"

An elderly ex-school-teacher used to come into the theater every day before making her rounds to feed Loop pigeons. This woman really liked pigeons; she once told me that she had a hundred of them in her apartment. Early on a weekday morning, the manager called to tell me that she was sitting in the auditorium with a pigeon inside her blouse, its head sticking out and swiveling around as it people-watched.

"Tell her to pick up her pigeons *after* she sees the show," I said. A couple of weeks later, he called me and said, with tears in his voice, "She's at it again." "Who's at *what* again?" "The Pigeon Lady. She's got another one with her." "Okay," I said, "check it." "Check it?" "Yes—punch a couple of holes in a box, put the pigeon inside, and check it."

After I hung up, I thought to myself, "Hey, there ought to be a story in this." I got

"I thought I had heard of everything when my partner wanted to paint bull's-eyes in the urinals."

hold of a bird cage, asked her to come in with a pigeon the next day, and alerted the newspapers. One of them sent a reporter and a photographer and ran a front-page picture story about the "checked" pigeon.

(The afternoon the story appeared, I attended a meeting of the local theater-owners association. When I walked in, someone said, "Checking pigeons! Checking pigeons! And I thought I had heard everything when my partner wanted to paint bull's-eyes in the urinals!")

Because we were open almost 24 hours a day, it was not unusual for me to be awakened by a post-midnight call from a frantic manager. The one I received when we were playing a special Beatles' program is unforgettable. A very apologetic voice at the other end said, "I hate to call you at this hour, but somebody jumped off the balcony." Suddenly I was wide awake. "How is he?" "I don't think he's too bad, but I don't know about the guy he landed on." "The guy he LANDED ON?"



Bruce Trinz and the theater he owned for 25 years.

"Yeh, they took him to the hospital, too." "Well," I said, "keep me posted." Almost miraculously, neither of the two was badly injured.

After one remodeling of the theater, a particularly extensive job, I stationed myself near the ticket-taker to assess customer reaction. A young couple came in, showed their student I.D. cards, and entered the lobby. They stopped abruptly and looked around. "Boy," one of them said, "they sure have ruined this place, haven't they?"

A continuing area of controversy in the movie business, even today, is the foreign-language film. When we started to run them at the Clark, many of our old "regulars" objected. "What are you, a bunch of

I have a theory about people who object to films with subtitles: I think their lips get tired.

Communists?" they would ask. "What's the matter with American pictures?" (I have a theory about people who object to films with subtitles: I think their lips get tired.)

In the mid-'60s, the Loop began to change. Suburban shopping centers and Near North stores were siphoning off business. Government offices, banks, and other institutional organizations began to take over street-level space from the small specialty shops. Instead of staying in town after work to have dinner and go to a movie, people got out as quickly as possible. Our old customers began to tell us that they were afraid to be downtown after dark. But when we announced, in 1970, that circumstances were forcing us to change to a first-run policy, we were astounded by the letters and calls of protest we received. (The letter I treasure is the

one that said, "I never got there, but it was nice to know that *you* were there.") The film critics lamented the passing of the "old Clark." One of the top state officials called it "a tragedy."

After a few months of showing first-run films, we concluded that the only choices left to us were to show X-rated films or to sell the business. We opted to sell. In May of 1971, we turned the keys over to our successors and the theater over to "adult" films.

Shortly thereafter, I stopped in to pick up my mail. As I was about to leave, I saw him again, the fellow who had thought that the Clark was "where the bums go to sleep it off"; he was handing a ticket to the doorman, and he studiously avoided looking in my direction. "No wonder we couldn't get thru to him," I thought. "We never knew what he wanted to see!" ■