INTRODUCTION

We sell tickets to theatres, not movies.

MARCUS LOEW

★ THIS IS a book of shadows.

Recollected through words and pictures, it embraces a time gone by, places that no longer exist, and the people who made it happen. Mostly it is about rose-colored glasses—which is, after all, what the cinema has always been about. Movies offer a touch of the fantastic to a sometimes too harsh reality.

This sense of wonder is magnified when experienced through the eyes of a child, for whom the surrounding world seems exaggerated and extra large—perhaps because the smaller we are, the bigger everything around us appears. Is it any surprise that people's memories of their first movie experience are awash with more than the usual rose tinting?

Understandably, the screen—for that matter, the whole auditorium—seemed huge at that age. As the smell of candy

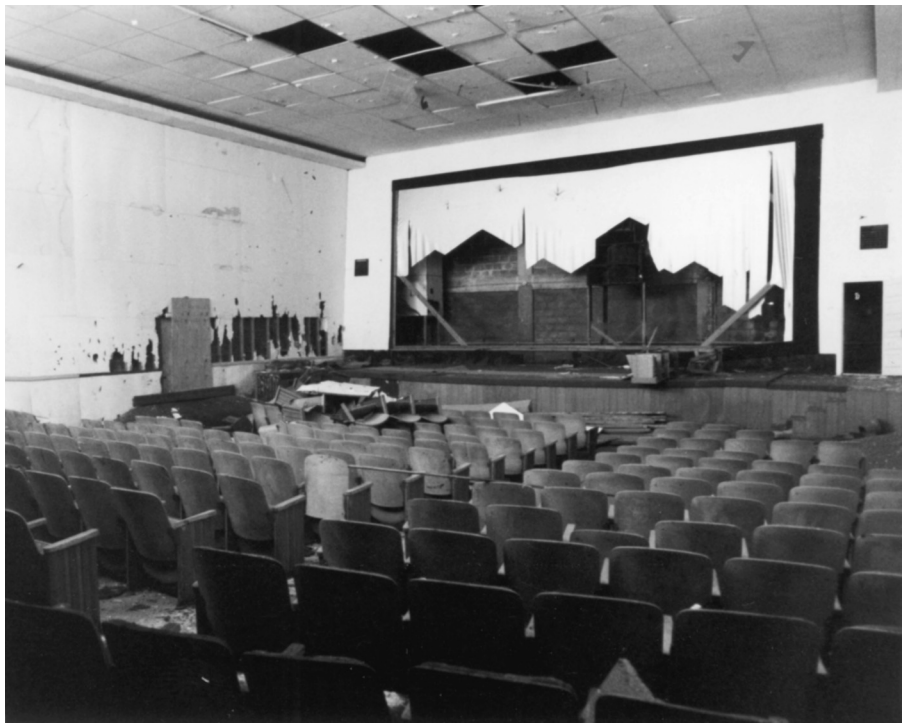
and popcorn permeated the air, we sat in chairs way too big for us, some with spring-loaded seats that we could barely weigh down. The fear of darkness swelled uncontrollably as the house lights dimmed, plunging the auditorium into black—only to be dispelled as that first image appeared before us on the screen.

I remember—if only in bits and pieces, which is to be expected from a five-year-old. Early childhood recollections are elusive and slippery, not quite tangible in the way of later experiences. They come in flashes of half-formed moments.

Yet I remember the theatre clearly . . . and as much as I would like to claim that those early memories were of a spectacular picture palace, with its grand antique-filled foyer leading to a massive auditorium adorned in gold trim and deep, plush velvet curtains—my recollections instead are of a worn-out small-town movie house not far from Houston.

The old Alvin Theatre had long since seen its glory days. The seats were worn and torn, the floors sticky from the layers of candy mixed with soda syrup, the air reeked of stale popcorn—and age. It had accumulated a lot of that. The passing years had slowly diminished whatever magic had been entrusted to those walls. This was a modest, unpretentious, bare-bones kind of affair. The darkness that enveloped the auditorium helped mask the neglect that the theatre had endured over its three decades of existence.

In short, the theatre was a rattrap. That was what my brother called it, and even joked of the tug-of-war he had waged with an oversized rat after dropping his Mars bar to the ground. The tug-of-war was dubious; the oversized rats were not. The place was a dump.



Auditorium of Johnny Long's Alvin Theatre, 1987. Photograph by David Welling.

Of course, none of that mattered to us kids. The Saturday matinee was the never-never land for us. Movies offered escapism, and it made little difference whether the cinematic fare was a western—naturally popular in a small Texas town—cartoons, or cheap science fiction.

The attraction on that particular day was *Godzilla vs. the Thing*, featuring a man in a rubber monster suit and some really bad dubbing. I had tagged along with my older brother, who more than likely had been given parental orders to take me with him.

After a visit to the cramped concession stand, positioned in the matchbox lobby behind the ticket window, we took our seats in the kid-filled auditorium. The lights dimmed. The projector lit up the screen. My life has never been the same since.

Eventually, my parents forbade us from going to the Alvin movie house—some-

thing to do with its nasty condition. This reason made little sense to us kids. What did we care if the floors were sticky and the walls were destined to fail the white-glove test? Regardless, it was deemed off-limits. The old theatre would close soon after that, leaving Alvin without an indoor theatre until a new one was built in 1968. When the old theatre eventually opened its doors again, it was as a place for religious revivals, and people came for prayers and sermons, not cowboys and Indians. Eventually, it would close for good, falling into disrepair before facing demolition in 1996.

LONG'S ALVIN THEATRE, as it was originally called, was quite a big deal when it opened in 1936. A story ("New Alvin Theatre to Open Friday, Feb. 28th") in the *Alvin Sun* touted its modern design and construction, which featured a vaudeville stage accented with rich, crimson velvet curtains and large dressing rooms on either side. The townsfolk flocked to the February 28 gala event, paid their twenty-five-cent admission, listened to a mayoral dedication, and then watched the Harold Lloyd comedy *The Milky Way*. The Alvin High School girls pep squad presented the patrons with spring flower arrangements as they entered.

As a second newspaper story ("Completion of New Theatre Is Source of Pride to Citizens of Alvin and Community," *Alvin Sun*, February 28, 1936) noted, this was the fifteenth theatre in Johnny G. Long's theatre circuit, which included houses in Texas towns such as Bay City, Port Lavaca, El Campo, and Beaumont. His was an independent chain that booked second-run films, usually after their initial showings in the Houston movie palaces. Long had previously bought the Alvin Grand Theatre, which had been showing flickers since 1919.

For Alvinites, Long's theatre was a center of activity, back in much simpler times. People would "go downtown" on Friday and Saturday nights for a movie or just to sit in their cars and watch the crowds go by. That was Saturday-night entertainment.

Aside from a steady stream of motion pictures, live appearances by such luminaries as Tex Ritter and his Musical Tornadoes, Ramblin' Tommy Scott, and Luke McLuke were also common occurrences. A Bonnie and Clyde stage show, complete with a bullet-ridden Model A Ford parked in front of the theatre, would sell out the house. Midnight spook shows with live productions were also held, as were occasional church services.

The popularity of television, among other forms of entertainment, took its toll, not only on the old Alvin Theatre but also on Long's entire theatre chain. By the sixties, the Alvin Theatre was a pale ghost of its former glory. Finances were thin, repair and upkeep difficult, and for the wages paid, janitors did a bare minimum. Finally, the roof that had long been weakened by water damage gave way. It came crashing down into the auditorium during an evening feature. Amazingly, only one minor injury occurred. As for recompense, the patron was quite satisfied with the theatre management covering her doctor bill, and never was heard the discouraging word "lawsuit." Again, those were simpler days.

The roof was rebuilt, but the theatre's end was in sight. Long's closed down, and except for its brief stint as a place of worship, sat dormant, neglected, and forgot-

ten. The roof would eventually collapse again, exposing the balcony to the elements. A few years shy of demolition, the balcony itself would fall, effectively barricading the lobby entrance. Rusted theatre chairs and torn remnants of the movie screen were all that was left inside.

The old Alvin Theatre was razed in 1996 as part of a downtown-revitalization program.

TALES OF THE BIG CITY were not that different from those of its small-town cousins. In an early-seventies edition of the *Houston Post* there ran a short paragraph paying homage to one of Houston's great movie houses. Accompanying the text was a series of photographs of the abandoned theatre, taken by a staff photographer. Below these images ran the following copy:

> *In January 1923, reporters hailed the new Majestic Theatre at 908 Rusk as the "playhouse the duplicate of which cannot be found in America." On opening night, Houstonians from Rev. Peter Gray Sears to Mayor Oscar Holcombe flocked to the Majestic to see Henry B. Walthall starring in* The Unknown. *This week—after almost 50 years of vaudeville, musical productions, dramatic performances and movies—little is left from the Majestic except for the rubble of demolition crews. Modern economic conditions and contemporary entertainment trends had taken their toll. Now the broken and discarded remains of Greek statues, Roman pillars, Italian Renaissance fixtures and electric exit signs are mute testimony to the years gone by.*

Architectural obituaries such as this are rare. Unless they are noteworthy landmarks, most buildings fall with little or no fanfare. This is especially true of Houston's movie houses, which die without the crowds, reporters, or klieg lights that heralded their ribbon-cutting births. Instead, there may only be a passively curious onlooker as the demolition crews do their work.

Left behind are memories, along with newspaper clippings and photographs, for a legacy. Reduced to rubble, these structures are swept away to make room for newer structures, freeway construction, and that ever-popular use for property, the parking lot. Some are converted to retail space, their innards ripped out and discarded in the name of commerce. Euphemistically, it is called progress. For historians, it goes by another, less favorable word, but by any name, the buildings are forever lost.

What remains today of the downtown Houston theatres can be counted on one hand. The 1926 Ritz/Majestic Metro Theatre is the only downtown movie house to have been restored, and now functions as a venue for special events. The artistic integrity of the restoration rivals that of the suburban Alabama Theatre, which was restored and reopened as part of the Bookstop chain of bookstores. In both cases, though no longer commercial cinemas, they succeed for other uses because the architecture remains faithful to its original intent. In fact, they are more appreciated now for their "theatre-ness" than they were during their final years of running flicks.

The building that housed the Isis, Houston's first deluxe theatre, sat unused for years before undergoing a restoration in 1998 (although the theatre itself was

The 1912 Isis Theatre after reopening as the Mercantile Brewery in 2000, with the upper-wall ornamentation still intact. Photograph by David Welling.

long gone). Only a few architectural remnants remained from its movie house days. The Zoe/Capitol building, at 719 Main, still stands, but the theatre is gone. The Scenic, at 113 Travis, was neither glamorous nor expansive, merely a nickelodeon-style business operating in the early teens. It is now part of Treebeard's Restaurant in Old Market Square. The eatery takes up the former 113, 115, and 117 lots, and the space for the former movie house is still visible on the floor.

Historical respect is an elusive thing, especially when dealing with the intangibles that make something historic. If the qualifying factor is age, then at what point does a building make the transition from just old to historic?

In Houston, a structure is eligible for historic status after fifty years; the ill-fated Shamrock Hotel (1946–1986) was razed after only forty. Other buildings don't last even that long, falling quickly to the wrecking ball.

Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin have all held on to their Majestics, refurbishing them into performing arts centers. Efforts to raise public interest, find sponsors, and secure much-needed funds can effectively turn a losing proposition into a profitable one. Houston missed the boat in this area. Yet with the current revitalization of the downtown area, and the conversion of previously vacant buildings into private lofts, the prospect of such a restored performance center could have been quite feasible. The downtown theatres originally died off because of the push toward suburbia. Now the downtown district is rediscovering itself, but sadly, none of the original showplaces still stand. More's the pity.

Likewise, the original suburban theatres, which lured patrons from the downtown area, have also faced extinction. These were never palaces on the grand scale of their predecessors. Instead, they offered what is now considered the stereo-

A weathered wall advertisement for the Zoe Theatre (home of Paramount Pictures), c. 1995. Courtesy of Greg Neuman.

typical theatre design, rich in art deco and exteriors of bold neon.

Of this period, from roughly the thirties through the fifties, only the River Oaks has survived intact and active—and at the time of this writing, its future is uncertain. Some others still stand, either gutted and serving other functions or closed and abandoned. The rest have been demolished.

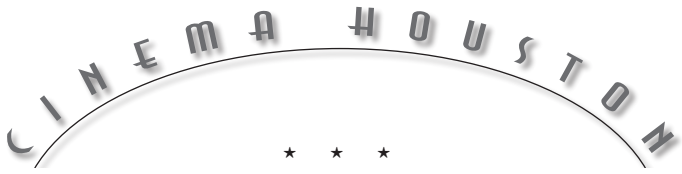
Taking the place of these theatres are the multicinemas and megaplexes, which have grown to as many as thirty screens. After a long period of throwing up matchbox theatres, movie-house owners are slowly rediscovering spectacle. Stadium seating, the reappearance of large-scale auditoriums (and large-scale lobbies), and food bars are all part of the redefining of the modern cinema.

Still, even the most expansive of these new cinemas can't hold a candle to the palaces of the twenties. Nowadays, they would simply cost too much to build. No more Greek statues, mezzanines filled with fine antique furniture, or Egyptian temple interiors. All this was of a different time, when movies, along with the places that showed them, were magic—palaces of light that did not stand the test of time.

But a wealth of photographs does survive. It is these photographs, along with a wide variety of other documentation, that form the heart and soul of this book. For those too young to have known the Metropolitan, Loew's State, or the Majestic, this is as much of their grandeur as we will ever get to experience. Going to the movies was meant to be a spectacle, both on the screen and in the theatre itself. It was meant to be larger than life. It was meant to be remembered.

Here, then, is a celebration of what once was and will never be again, of an age when going to the movies was a magical experience. If you look hard enough, you may very well find that the photographs here still contain that magic.

Sit back, enjoy, and don't forget the popcorn.


CINEMA HOUSTON

The Sweeney & Coombs Opera House. Courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS 114-805.