

Screen Savers: Can grand old theaters survive the age of the multiplex?

By Dan Gilgoff

In 1908, a Baltimore bank teller named Frank Durkee took to wandering the streets with a hand-cranked film projector and a roll-up muslin screen. He played silent films inside barrooms and on the sides of buildings, then quit his day job to open a picture parlor he called the Paradise on the first floor of a local row house. By 1950, Durkee and his partners had more than 40 palatial single-screen theaters across Baltimore, with names like the Ambassador and the State lighted in neon across huge marquees.

Today, only the Senator survives; all the rest have been boarded up, torn down, converted into clothing stores or cosmetology schools. Run by Durkee's grandson, 49-year-old Tom Kiefaber, the Senator still has its single, 40-foot-wide screen, private viewing parlors in the mezzanine, gentlemen's and ladies' lounges, and a huge rotunda lobby hung with photographs of movie houses from the former Durkee kingdom. "I'm trying to prevent this place from becoming a museum," says Kiefaber. "To me, the Senator is a living thing."

But keeping it alive has become a full-time job. A megaplex construction boom that has generated more than 12,000 new screens since 1990 and left a half-dozen theater giants bankrupt has, some say, put a stranglehold on vintage movie houses and led the National Trust for Historic Preservation to put historic movie theaters on its annual list of the nation's most endangered places. According to the trust, fewer than 50 historic theaters nationwide are showing new releases.

Clearing out

The conventional wisdom has suburban megaplexes luring patrons from aging downtown theaters with acres of free parking, stadium seating, and dozens of screens. In other words, the free market wins out. But many independent theater owners tell a different story. Big theater chains, they say, prevent locally owned theaters from booking first-run movies by bullying movie distributors in a practice known as clearing. When a

chain-owned theater clears a nearby independent, it refuses to show a movie unless its own area screens get sole access. Without first-run movies, historic theaters, which tend to be independently owned, see their cavernous auditoriums—and cash registers—empty out.

"I pick up the crumbs that are left when Regal is finished," says Charles Nakvasil, who owns the Depression-era Cinemagic Theater in Portland, Ore., where Regal Cinemas operates five nearby plexes comprising nearly 40 screens. "The film companies tell my movie buyer that Regal will pull the film if Cinemagic plays it. I'm blocked out of the marketplace."

When Regal erected a 12-screen complex three blocks from Vancouver's 66-year-old Kiggins Theatre in 1999, managing partner Gary Hubbard resorted to showing second-run movies, classics, and captioned pictures for the deaf. "They've even prevented us from playing first-run movies for deaf people," says Hubbard, "even though it's a completely different audience." Last year, however, a rift between Regal and New Line Cinema gave the Kiggins first-run access to *Rush Hour 2*, packing the 518-seat theater through the end of summer.

Clearances can be ruled anticompetitive in markets big enough to sustain multiple theaters. But chains say they don't target indie theaters. "The fact that a theater is independent or part of a large circuit has no bearing on our request for a clearance," says Dick Westerling, a Regal spokesman. Independent theater owners say they don't wield enough screens to fight back. "A chain exhibitor has every incentive to clear an independent," says Stephen Mercer, a Maryland lawyer who has represented local movie houses in clearance suits. "It's not like an independent can retaliate against a chain in another market."

Outside of cities, antique theaters are facing different threats. Since movie distributors require theaters to show first-runs for two to four weeks, rural single screeners must consistently attract big crowds to the same film. That task is compounded when nearby megaplexes play a first-run movie simultaneously on several screens,

dramatically shortening its shelf life. "When E.T. came out, we played it for 39 weeks," says Allen Michaan, who operates four historic theaters outside San Francisco. "That's unheard of today."

With blockbusters burning out faster than ever, nonhits fare even worse. "I'm stuck with the same film, good or bad, usually for three weeks," says Randy Buchtel, 39, who manages the Eagles Theatre in Wabash, Ind. "The megaplexes can rotate 18 movies in that same time." Built nearly 100 years ago as a vaudeville showplace, the single-screen Eagles boasts a half dozen dressing rooms (now used primarily for storage) and a bird-cage-style elevator. Buchtel expects two area megaplexes to drive the theater under. Those complexes can move dud films to their smallest theaters, while the Eagles runs them for weeks in a 648-seat auditorium.

The glut of movie screens has also prompted the big chains to shutter their own historic theaters. In 1999 and 2000, exhibitors shed almost 1,000 screens, many housed in chain-owned relics that couldn't match the box office sales of megaplexes within the same chain. With custom designs and aging infrastructures, single-screen theaters are usually more costly to maintain than their modern counterparts. A former Omaha Cinerama—a rare '60s-era theater with a concave screen said to be the world's widest—faced the wrecking ball a year after Carmike Cinemas vacated it last September. A parking lot will take its place.

Still, a scattered network of independent owners and aficionados is refusing to close up shop. Paul Sanchez announced he was giving up on his flagging 400-seat Art Deco theater in Greenbelt, Md., three years ago, but a group of locals and the city government have since raised about \$ 35,000 to help keep its doors open. "Before that, it was just an expensive hobby," says the 52-year-old Sanchez.

And once profitable theaters across the country, Baltimore's Senator included, are pursuing nonprofit status. When the 71-year-old Fox Theater in Visalia, Calif., went up for sale five years ago, a band of local residents persuaded the sellers to donate it to their newly formed nonprofit as a tax write-off. After a fundraising drive and pro bono restoration work by area contractors, the Middle-Eastern-style theater reopened in 1999 as a performance space and home for the county symphony.

Carved walls, a cloud-making machine, and a ceiling speckled with twinkling lights mark the Fox as one of the atmospheric movie palaces that sprang up nationally in the '20s, the decade Hollywood raised movies out of grimy nickelodeons.

Want fries with that?

With massive auditoriums to fill and limited access to first-run product, theaters like the Fox are carving out new niches rather than battle the plexes. Many have been split into multiplexes or converted into cinegrills, offering burgers and beer along with second-run flicks. "If we just showed movies, we'd be out of business," says Henry Doane, whose 1,800-seat Orpheum Theatre in Madison, Wis., doubles as a restaurant, nightclub, and wedding hall. "But you have to be in love with these old theaters to take them on. It's not really a money-making situation."

As old theaters increasingly become concert halls and churches, however, what happens to the art of moviegoing? "Watch a movie in a theater from the '30s or '40s with a big screen and fantastic architecture, and you feel like you're transported into a different reality," says Kennedy Smith, director of the National Trust's Main Street Center. "With 40-foot screens and a thousand people in the audience, going to the movies was once larger than life," says Douglas Gomery, a media history professor at the University of Maryland. "People used to wander into theaters to look at the chandeliers and the stars embedded in the ceiling." But now, he says, "it's been reduced to just seeing an image on a screen."