
Film exhibition has undergone a considerable metamorphosis over the last eighty years. The transition from variety to full-length features necessitated the building of multiple theatre facilities. With the advent of television, the theatre industry entered a period of decline. This is thoroughly documented in Ivan Ackery’s memoir, Fifty Years on Theatre Row. He recounts the period from vaudeville to the modern trend of splitting a facility among various tenants.

Ackery worked for half a century in the movie business, primarily in Vancouver. For over thirty years, he ran the Orpheum, a showplace for popular, family-oriented films. For over twenty years, he was associated with the Canadian Film Distribution Corporation. His memoir traces the events of his life from the glory days of vaudeville to the period of its decline.

In the area of film distribution, Ackery notes that large-scale productions are owned by the public. For this reason, most of the earnings go to the few distributors while Canadian exhibitors are left with a mere 29 percent of the proceeds. The situation is similar for the television market, but is a mere 29 percent. The situation is not augur well for the future.

In the area of film exhibition, Ackery notes that the majority of hard-core viewers are concentrated in the university-educated, young adult category as opposed to being drawn from all walks of life. A 1952 poll of 40 percent of the population found that the theatre was going to fall victim to the modern trend of splitting a facility among various entertainment venues.

The Narrows was a popular gambling casino where entertainers found work after the decline of vaudeville. Ackery’s greatest talent seems to have been expressed in his promotions for the films that played his theatre. He took the prospect of filling 2871 seats seven days a week, he resorted to all sorts of gimmicks to bring in the public. This was especially important when the film was a success.

Promotions frequently involved ties with stores, window displays and joint advertising campaigns. Ackery would take things a little further by placing free tickets in the store merchandise. On another occasion he offered $10 to any woman who could sit through a midnight screening of the Canadian horror film The Mask in an empty theatre. Based on the description of the film itself, it sounds like she deserved the money.

When King Kong played, he had an usher dress up as a gorilla and climb all over the marquee while a spotlight dramatically pointed him out. Ethnic events such as Chinese New Year and B.C. Indian Pow-Wows were common, as were magic shows, joke nights and sports competitions (ping pong, weightlifting). While these devices seemed to be a great idea, their attraction in pre-television Vancouver must have been very strong.

The Orpheum had been built in 1927 for a mixed vaudeville and film format. The change to an all-film program was never total as various acts or musical performances occasionally supplemented the film. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Frank Sinatra (when he was one of the Hoboken Four) were among the many entertainers who played the Orpheum.

Every Tuesday for twelve years after the Second World War, the "Nabob Harmony House" radio show was sent across Canada. Music was also to be heard at various contests ranging from a midnight amateur show to Elvis look-alike competitions in the late fifties. A rock and roll performance might accompany a Saturday matinee of the latest gadget film.

The Orpheum’s long link with music was recently cemented when it became the home of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. In the early 1970s it appeared that the theatre was going to fall victim to the modern trend of splitting a facility into smaller units. An enormous public outcry eventually led to the preservation and restoration of the magnificent theatre. There is no doubt that the efficacy of that concern was triggered in part by the strong and happy memories of the Orpheum felt by many Vancouver citizens. There could be a better testimony to the power of Ackery’s work as a creator of corny but colourful programs and promotions for over half a century.

Andrew Johnson •