

SPOT LIGHT

on curly posen

Curly S. Posen has been in the business – the entertainment business – for a long time. Being president of the Motion Picture Theatre Association of Ontario for the last five years is only the culmination of a career which started as an usher and ran through stoking the calliope and booking strippers, not to mention owning and running theatres.

He remembers how it was, and talks about the beginnings of exhibition in Canada. Outspoken as always, Posen has seen enough to know what he thinks.

Cinema-Canada: *How did you get into the film business?*

Curly S. Posen: I was going to school and one of the fellas sitting next to me, his father owned a movie theatre, so we used to go in on Friday and Saturday and usher. That's how I got into it. I was in the music business too. After I left school I went with a carnival and then with a circus, and played the calliope.

Cinema-Canada: *Which circus?*

Curly S. Posen: The Maple Leaf Circus. We had a lot of fun, you know, and it was all one big happy family. The travelling was tough, because we used to travel in broken-down trucks anywhere from 100 to 250 miles a day or every second day, because you couldn't play in towns close by. Nobody believed in it at the time, just like the film industry. You know, if you're next door, you can't play because you're going to lose business by it.

We had a big top and we used to have to set it up each time. Everybody worked at everything, don't forget, even cooking and washing and washing down the horses. We had clowns and everything. I used to be kind of an entertainer too, I used to dance.

Cinema-Canada: *You danced in the circus?*

Curly S. Posen: Well, I did, you know, hoofing. I used to be a soft shoe dancer and then I went into ballet – I used to take ballet lessons when I was

a kid. You can't tell it now, by my size. I was 107 pounds then and I danced ballet. And then I used to travel around with burlesque. I used to play with the band in burlesque. I worked with Gypsy Rose Lee and Phil Silvers.

Cinema-Canada: *Do you remember Phil Silvers?*

Curly S. Posen: Oh yes, he knows me today. What's-his-name, Red Buttons, I remember when he started in the shows. We were doing a communist scene with Phil Silvers, I think it was, and Red was running down the aisle yelling, "Down with the Communists" and he used to fall on his pratt.

photo: John Wlodarczyk



Was there real stripping back then?

No, no. They were wearing net brassières, and G-strings, you know. When they first started, there were net pants actually. There was no stripping – they had pants. Then they got the G-string. Rose LaRose was the only one that always wanted to lose her G-string – she was the dirtiest one of the bunch. Today she has

a big burlesque house, I understand, in Toledo – a big nightclub that features strippers.

What kind of life was that?

We enjoyed it. Every show was one big happy family. The person himself meant something. I remember I went to Muskegan one time with one of the shows, and one of the trumpet players who was with us, his mother wouldn't let him go – he was only 17 at the time. She didn't want him to go away because she was afraid he wouldn't go to church on Sunday mornings, you see. So I promised her that I would take him. I went to Catholic church every Sunday with him, and it didn't bother me. When they kneeled, I kneeled and when they crossed, I crossed and that was that. So they didn't know the difference, and I used to go with him every Sunday because I had promised his mother. She believed me so she let him go. I guess I had an honest face... I don't know about today...

What happened to your orchestra?

It's still going.

When did you get into that?

I've been doing that since I was a kid in the school band. I was playing in the band with the shows I was going with, and I played the calliope when I was in the circus.

You never left that?

I wouldn't give that up. That's relaxing. You know, when I go out I see how crazy people can be at an affair. I enjoy myself.

What kind of affairs does your orchestra play at?

Just private affairs. The dates have gone down quite a bit. I don't want to play rock all night because I'm more of a Guy Lombardo type, and because they raise the scales on them. I mean, they used to use big bands; today you're going out with 3 and 4 musicians. At one time I used to be a big shot – I used to say, sorry, if you're going to have the affair at this place, you're going to have so many

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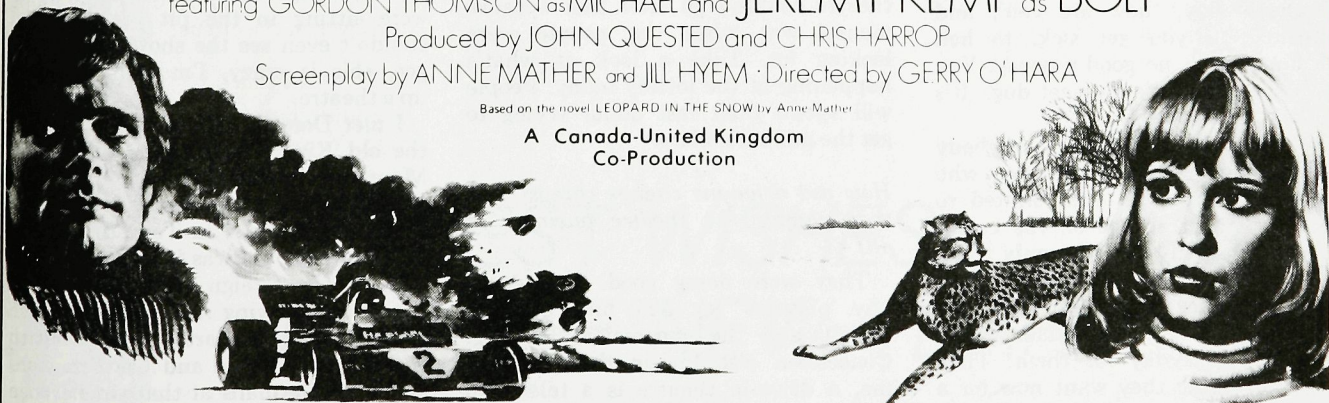
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SPOT LIGHT

musicians. But today, I don't argue because they can go and pick up a group with all of the amplifiers and everything, and with 2 pieces they can make enough goddam noise to blow the bar out.

When did you open the Casino theatre?

In '36. But before that, when I came back, I was working for the Allens in the comedy gift night. That was just after the Depression, you know, when we couldn't get any films, and we were giving out dishes, plus we had comedy gift nights and amateur shows and so on.

What were the Allens like?

Very good. Very good. The best people in the world to work for. And I'm not kidding you – Barry Allen wasn't even born when I worked for them. But you see, you're going back to an era where the industry was a family industry. They weren't related to each other, but everybody that worked in the industry meant something to somebody else. No matter who, from the janitor right up to the president. There were no big shots. There was nobody that, just because he was president or vice-president, wouldn't come and say 'hello' to you or anything like that. Or ask you questions, or anything.

And you feel that the atmosphere has changed.

Well, today it's dog-eat-dog. You know, nobody gives a damn for the next person. It's not like the old industry, you know. You're here today and they'll say, 'how are you', and everything. If you get sick, to hell with him – he's no good anyway. You see. This is it. It's dog-eat-dog. It's not like it used to be.

Everybody is outbidding everybody else. It's got so that one guy who wanted a picture, he even offered to give them a percentage on the candy bar. On the candy bar, the only thing that's kept the theatres going. It's a heyday for the film companies, not only American but Canadian, all of them. It's a heyday for them. They can get anything they want now for a picture. There's a shortage of pictures. The hold-overs that you see all these weeks sometimes, they don't even have pictures to play, so they have to hold them over. In the meantime, they're holding over and the other guys in the small towns can't

get any new films because there are no new films.

Haven't the independents always had that problem?

I want to tell you something – years ago, a lot of independent theatres made a lot of money, became rich men. I'm going back now to the 30's during the Depression when Nat Taylor gave up his law practice. I don't think he was a good lawyer; maybe that's why he gave it up. He went around to all the little theatres and said, "let's join in one shot together and we'll do the buying and booking for you and be partners and pay expenses and everything, and you manage your theatre. We'll look after it all". These people all became millionaires, those little independent corner theatres that you don't see anymore. Taylor made more than 24 of them who had the guts to go in with him – millionaires.

So they did alright.

They did very well.

Until television.

Actually, television didn't... bingo killed us more.

Why don't you explain that. I thought television was the thing that...

Well, the people who went to theatres, most of the time, couldn't afford television at first. If you recall, they were too expensive. But then, bingo came in. And that's what killed us because they could afford it and they could make money on bingos – that's why dishes or anything in a theatre couldn't go after that because money was what the people were looking for. Take a look at what's happening at the lottery today. People will spend their last dollar trying to get the million dollars.

How did drive-ins change things? Did they change the theatre business at all?

They were doing good. You could buy pictures for \$25 and take in \$2,000, and the concession was big. Concession was big in drive-ins. To me, a drive-in theatre is a television screen with refreshments – a drive-in restaurant, actually, and you're letting them watch television on the screen. If you watched at a drive-in, the first feature that goes on, they don't sit in the cars and watch the feature, they eat, eat and eat. I don't

know what the hell goes on – how much can they eat?

What were other things like? When did the Sunday showings start?

Exactly, I can't tell you. I remember I was fighting the Lord's Day Act. As a matter of fact, in one of my theatres, a drive-in, when we didn't have Sunday movies, we used to show the film free, but charge for parking and then they grabbed me for that. By the time they brought me up and were going to fine me, we had already fought the fact that we could open up on Sundays.

And this is what we were fighting. I've always been fighting the film companies and the chains, although I represent the chains too now, you know. I'm from the Association but I still have my fights with them... Mind you, it's getting better. You'll notice that independent theatres with Odeon are playing day and date in the city now. Some pictures they don't want us to play – this new picture opening up, **Close Encounters** that Columbia's got – it's supposed to be a big picture. They don't want nobody else playing it with them. But Odeon broke down and they're letting you play now. I play with Odeon in Brantford even. Famous will eventually break down.

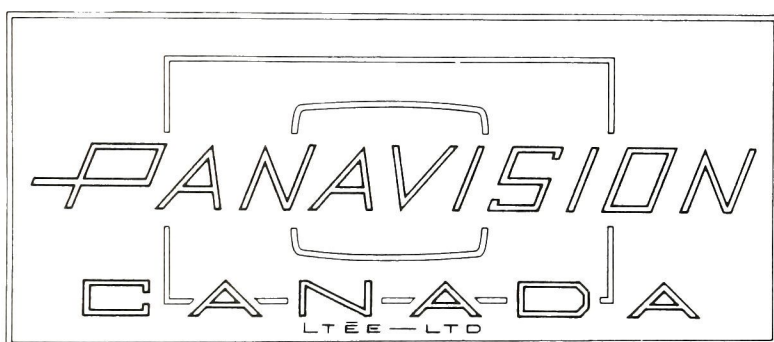
When did you start showing foreign films?

When I came back from the States in '49. I took a look at the halls where they were having ethnic shows and, Christ, the places were jammed with an influx of ethnic groups from Europe coming in after the war. They were sitting in the pit with us and couldn't even see the shows. So I said, gee, this is crazy, I'm going to open up a theatre.

I met Dorothy Burritt and I opened the old King Theatre on College and Manning. It had been closed and I started to show the first, actually the first, foreign films in Toronto because the International was in and they were calling it a foreign film theatre, but they were showing nothing but British films. Well, I started with Jewish films, Italian films and German films – no, no Germans at that time. When we showed the Russian films, the people from Yugoslavia were against the Russians. We used to have fights outside, and then when we showed some other kind of films that some nationality didn't like, they were picketing outside. We had to have police there.

An ornate, black and white decorative border surrounds the entire page. It features a repeating pattern of stylized leaves, flowers, and scrolls, creating a classic, elegant frame.

*MERRY
CHRISTMAS*



*BEST WISHES
FOR THE NEW YEAR*

But you kept taking the pictures?

We kept taking them. I remember the Yugoslavian picture we had, Christ, they were hitting each other, but we did big business. We were actually the first all-around foreign film house in Toronto.

Were the films subtitled?

Yes, they were all subtitled. And the funny part is that every picture that came into Canada, whether it was from the Communist countries or not, were all censored by the RCMP first, before they even went to a censor board. I remember I was going to New York to Art Kino pictures – Russian pictures down there – to make a deal for some pictures here and when I got to the border and I mentioned my name, they stopped me. Some guy by the name of Posen was a subversive and was on the black-list. I missed two planes before they found out it wasn't me.



photo: John Wlodarczyk

Why weren't foreign pictures shown in other theatres, like Famous Players?

Well, they didn't have the brains to show them. That's what I always tell them. You see, they didn't show anything except English pictures. Odeon started here because Famous couldn't show British pictures here; they couldn't get any dates on them.

Do you think there should be a Canadian feature film industry?

Oh yes, nobody's against it. I think it's a good idea, but the CFDC is putting money into films and losing millions and millions of dollars on crappy films, whereas they could get somebody in from the States with a name to direct these films and make

money. But they don't want to do this. Everybody wants their name in lights. Everybody is a ham. This is what I've got against the Canadian film thing: the people who are arguing that we can put on levies instead of going out and getting good stories that will be box-office. Fine, they want culture, go and make a cultural film and send it around to the schools and places like that. Don't put it in our theatres and force us to play it or pay a levy for it. Because we ain't going to get nobody in to pay for it. This is what I'm mad at – they start talking about culture in theatres but we're not a culture thing – we're a business. The small towns as well, for leisure time.

What do you think the future is for the theatres?

Good, if they want to listen, and want to work with people, and they got to start somewhere. Now, let's not kid ourselves. They're talking with this guy MacDonald (David, M.P.), how crazy can he get, talking

about how not everybody can be a Robert Redford. But I guarantee if they brought Robert Redford up here and made a Canadian picture with the CFDC sponsoring it and backing it, they'd get their money back in no time, even if it was a dog.

*Yes, but there are films that were made to look like they weren't produced in Canada – you know, so that they would be acceptable in the United States and I don't think that those films have done very well. I'm thinking of things like **Breaking Point**. Then there are films like **Duddy Krawitz**, **Lies My Father Told Me**, or **Why Shoot the Teacher** which are obviously set in Canada.*

But they're box-office because they're good stories.

Right. What I'm saying is that you can make a film that is set in Canada, and it can still be popular.

Certainly, but they're good stories, not culture, but good stories.

*But don't you feel that films like **Why Shoot the Teacher** or **Lies or Duddy** have a cultural impact?*

Just like **Fiddler on the Roof** had a cultural impact – it made money. **My Fair Lady** made money. **Star Wars** is making money – cultural. Future culture. They're well done. You know, I saw this picture, **Goldenrod**. Did you see it?

Yes

It's a nice picture. The title killed it. They wanted them to change the title and they wouldn't change it. The picture is a playable picture, but who the hell knows they were talking about that goldenrod that grows out West. I mean, why, why? If they had given it a rodeo title, it would have made a lot of money because everybody is interested in rodeos. But this is what I'm trying to get at. They've got their minds set on what they want and that's it.

I don't mind my tax money going to the NFB, but I hate like hell when my money goes into Canadian films to make things that had to go down the toilet. And they have no business putting any kind of a levy in theatres because there are other industries that they've never helped.

Ford is making a million out of here. Why don't they get after those guys? The newspapers say they're closing up Canadian factories because they're sending in everything pre-assembled. They make the parts in the US. It's the same thing here. Make the film in the US and send them up here and show them so you can get your tax money back. Isn't it the same thing, actually? You're making films in the States and sending them up here to make money and you're paying your taxes on it.

I think we should have a Canadian car. I wouldn't mind taxing GM and Ford to do that.

Fine, but they don't do that. They don't talk about that. You know why – because they're big people. We're not big here.

Kirwan Cox
Edited by Michèle Caron
and Kirwan Cox



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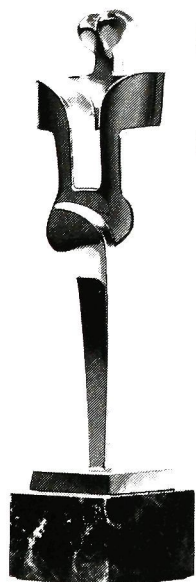


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