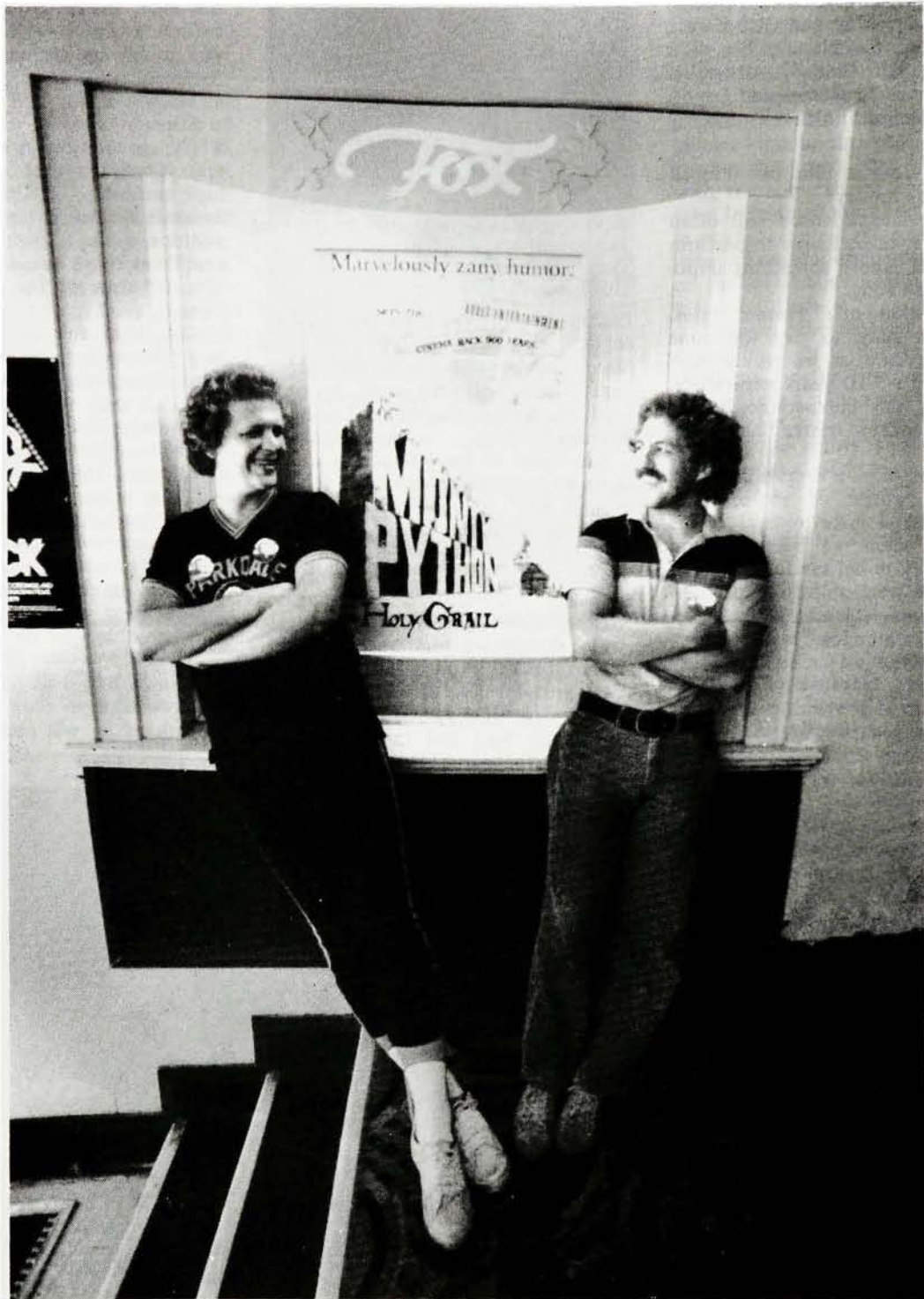


---

# tom 'n' jerry



Tom Litvinkas and Jerry Szczur lounging in the lobby of their prize possession, The Fox Theatre on Toronto's Queen Street East photo: Bill Dunn

by linda west

**Tom'n Jerry's story is "an old-fashioned young-entrepreneurs make good story" that can still happen right here in Canada. What it took was hard work, a certain charm and plenty of down to earth business sense.**

the Brighton, a downtown theatre, previously owned by a 72-year-old Polish gentleman who wanted to retire and sold out for \$150,000. The other two theatres, the Richmond Hill, north of the city, and the Kingsway in the west end are leased.

Such high-finance real estate dealings are a long way from the \$6000 investment Tom and Jerry made five years ago when they decided to get into this crazy business. Tom was 22. Jerry was 21. They were both film addicts (as opposed to buffs; they liked bad movies, good movies, any kind of movies). One of their addictions was the 99 cent Roxy, whose biggest claim to fame is its regular midnight screenings of **The Rocky Horror Picture Show**.

"We thought the city could do with more than one Roxy," they said, "so we started looking around."

In the meantime, they were scanning the papers one night to see what was playing at their local movie house, the Kingsway. They couldn't find any ad. Ah ha! After a few inquiries they found that, sure enough, the old theatre had closed down and was waiting for a new tenant. Only trouble was, their lawyer-accountant told them they needed \$20,000 minimum to start such a business and the most they could scrape together was \$6000.

"So we paid two months rent, painted the lobby, and opened the doors," said Tom.

At first the two partners did everything themselves from taking tickets to sweeping the floor. They sold out the first night and had about 15 people for the rest of the week. During the first year-and-a-half the ticket price was kept to 99 cents, but economy has forced the average price up to about \$2.50 now.

In 1973 Tom Litvinkas was driving a truck for Molson's. Jerry Szczur was working at Continental Can. In 1974 these two young entrepreneurs had launched themselves on a career as movie exhibitors. Working in the shadow of giants like Famous Players and Odeon, they have managed to acquire four strategically located neighbourhood theatres in Toronto and, while George Destounis is probably not shaking in his boots, Tom 'n' Jerry are doing brisk business and proving to the world that you can charge \$2.50 at the box office and still make money.

Refreshingly blunt and down to earth, Tom and Jerry are the perfect "odd couple." Tom is bigger, more outgoing, the obvious spokesman of the two. Jerry is friendly, quieter and the one to ask for details. It's a combination that has worked well.

Their theatre policy is twofold: show recent second run Hollywood movies at a cheaper price than the downtown run a couple of weeks earlier, and provide a friendly, comfortable atmosphere so that "going to the movies" is the entertaining experience it once used to be.

"We want to put showmanship back into the movie business," said Tom. "We run shorts and trailers along with the feature and our staff is friendly and relaxed. The doorman even lets little kids in free sometimes."

Tom and Jerry also want to revive the idea of the neighbourhood theatre, where people recognize the manager, chat with the box office attendant and generally feel at home. They can walk to the show (that saves energy — at least the non-renewable kind) and have an inexpensive evening out.

Part of the charm of TJ Theatres (as they now call their "chain") is the antique quality of the movie houses. Dating from the art deco period, they still have all their curves and chrome and Tom and Jerry have chosen to restore rather than update the decor. Their prize gem is the Fox which is located right on Queen Street East in the heart of the popular Beaches area of Toronto, itself a throwback to the quieter days of straw hats and boardwalks. Tom and Jerry bought the Fox last year, complete with ten apartments and a vast maze of back rooms and offices, for \$200,000. The apartments carry the operating expenses and the theatre collects around \$3500 a week at the box office. Now the partners are trying to convince Wintario to assist them in restoring the building. They want to clean the bricks, do some paint removing, re-carpet and put in a new snack bar. They are also looking for an old marquee to replace the original one that's been lost.

Another recent purchase in the Tom and Jerry chain is

*For the past 8 years Linda West has been working in film and show business as a freelance writer. She has also published articles in Quest Magazine, Canadian Business, The Financial Times, TV Guide and numerous other publications.*



**KEY TO QUALITY**

**KEY TO CANADA'S  
FINEST OPTICALS**

**FILM OPTICALS OF CANADA LTD.**

**410 ADELAIDE STREET WEST  
TORONTO (416) 363-4987**

**MONTREAL (514) 937-2336  
VANCOUVER (604) 687-4491**



"We were originally trying to get an older audience," said Tom. "Our first films were two W.C. Fields movies, **The Bank Dick** and **Horse Feathers**. The older people thought the idea of a theatre in their neighbourhood was great, but they only go out to a show once a year. So we changed and went after the teenage audience."

They ran films like **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** and teenagers flocked to their doors. Tom and Jerry have lots of stories to tell about that first hectic year. There were times when someone in the audience would get too rambunctious. They would just hoist him up in front of the audience and say, "Does he go or does he stay? "Out!" they'd yell and the offending party would be tossed out the door. Audience involvement they call it. Then there was the time they were running **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** and someone actually came tearing down the aisle brandishing a turned on chain saw. (Too much audience involvement.)

And they'll never forget the scene that took place one groggy 3 a.m. The building was open late that night because a theatre group had been using the stage for a play and had to strike the set before morning. When the work was done, everyone got into a bit of a party mood. Someone was pounding a few beats on a set of drums and suddenly, through the front door, came an older man and a young woman who proceeded to waltz down the aisle. Everyone had had a little too much to drink by this time, especially the strange couple off the street, and the lady climbed on stage and began taking off her clothes.

At this opportune moment, a policeman happened to walk in. He was about to book the whole group, when the older man took the officer's arm and led him to one side.

"I don't think I'd lay any charges if I were you," he said. "I'm Judge So-and-so of the local court."

As time went on, Tom and Jerry added the Fox, later the Richmond Hill and finally the Brighton, for a total of 4000 seats. Movie fare at all four theatres is becoming more family oriented now and the cult film is being replaced by second-run mainstream pictures like **The Deerhunter** and **Julia**. They don't mind waiting to get the good pictures.

"The longer they run downtown, the more advertising they get, the better for us," said Tom.

To staff the growing business Tom and Jerry hire mostly students, young people who are interested in movies, eager and friendly.

"We don't want our customers to get rushed through the door by some bored ticket taker," they said.

In the past five years Tom and Jerry have learned a lot about the business. They've learned that the movie industry is controlled to a large extent by a few big monopolies that can make life difficult for the small independent. They have learned that movie house furnishings and equipment are very expensive — \$4500 for a snack bar, \$4000 for an automated curtain, \$16 an hour to install seats that cost up to \$80 apiece to buy. Since most of the equipment is imported, they run into charges like 41 percent duty to bring seats across the border. (And *when* is someone going to start a *Canadian* manufacturing company to service theatres?)

Tom and Jerry have also learned that while their theatres make good money, and their popcorn machines make even better money, it's the distributor who really makes money.

Not long ago, they had a lead on an interesting picture which they thought could become another cult classic. A

distributor in Toronto wanted to charge them \$7000 for the right to run it in their four theatres, so the pair decided to go direct to the New York distributor. There they negotiated

a six-year contract on all Canadian rights (not yet spoken for, as it turned out) for only \$5000.

And so, with the acquisition of **Eraserhead**, a first film by artist-filmmaker David Lynch, Tom and Jerry entered the distribution business. Unlike the branch office general managers of the major U.S. distributors, these fellows don't have to consult New York or L.A. before they make a \$1500 decision (like one case we know) or a \$200,000 decision. They are working on their own campaign to introduce **Eraserhead** and have their eyes on several more properties. An associate, Carm Bordonaro, heads up the distribution arm, called Creative Exposure.

The story of Tom Litvinskas and Jerry Szczur is an old-fashioned young-entrepreneurs-make-good story. It's a story we don't hear very often in Canada. These bright businessmen didn't attend any universities or film schools. In fact, Tom took a four-year commercial course instead of Ontario's usual five-year high school term.

"I thought four years was long enough to go to school," he said, laughing, "and I figured typing would be easy."

But all the reading and degrees in the world won't make a good businessman. The proof is in the doing. Tom and Jerry obviously have the initiative, the enterprise, and the common sense required to create a good business and keep it going. Their sense of humour makes the whole thing fun. Let's hope they continue to keep alive the tenuous tradition of the independent entrepreneur. □

## CineMag

In August, no. 20:

- Canadian Producers Included in Sect. of State's Redefinition of Canadian Film
- Mickey Stevenson Sets the Record Straight
- Canada is Producer's Heaven

Subscribe Today for  
Industry News  
and Views

**Canada's only independent film trade paper**

CineMag only (12 issues) \$10 in Canada, \$15 Abroad  
CineMag with Cinema Canada, \$15 for individuals  
\$20 for companies, \$18 for individuals abroad

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Country \_\_\_\_\_

Please bill me  My check is enclosed   
Mail to CineMag  
Box 398,  
Outremont Stn.  
Montreal