

GOING TO THE MOVIES

Now that I have cable TV, I am able to see a movie “at any time of the day or night.” I fell in love with Turner Classic Movies (TCM) at first sight. It is on RCN channel 143, and when I am bored with whatever I am doing, I switch on TV and check out what is being shown. (I haven’t figured out how to find what is being shown beforehand.) If I tune in at the right time, I might catch the host, Robert Osborne, telling us something about the movie. He must be the hardest working person on TV. He is on 24/7, walking toward the camera every two hours, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I imagine he gets some sleep between movies.

If I don’t like what is on TCM, I click over to the other movie channels. They tend to show the same movies over and over, but if I haven’t seen them, or if I have forgotten them, it doesn’t matter. I really don’t do this “at any time of the day or night.” It is usually in the evening between 8 and 11 pm. I lean back on the couch with a pillow at my back, and the remote at my side, ready to be transported..

But going to the movies wasn’t always like this. I harken back to yesteryear, to my childhood in the Bronx, to the many movie palaces in our neighborhood that beckoned to us, all through the depression. The movies were there to take our minds off the depression, unemployment and poverty, by showing us happy, rich people, silly comedies, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, chorus girls and song and dance men. Within walking distance from my apartment house on Fox Street and Longwood Avenue were the Congress theatre (which changed its name to the Ace), the Empire, the Prospect, and the Star, all third run theatres, and the RKO Franklin, and the Loew’s Boulevard, Burland and Spooner, which were second run, after the feature attraction left its first run, higher priced showing downtown.

As kids, we always went to the third run theatres, which were the cheapest: 10 cents, as opposed to 15 cents, for matinees. We didn’t go very often, but when we did go, it was Saturday morning and we would see two movies, cartoons, a newsreel, a chapter, and coming attractions. (A high point of movie-going was when there was a break-down. Everyone would yell and whistle until the projectionist fixed it. It doesn’t happen any more, and I miss it.)

It didn’t matter what time we went in. When we saw the same scene in the movie a second time, we knew it was time to leave, unless your friend hadn’t seen it or didn’t remember it. We might go in alone or with a few friends and meet other kids. Some theatres had a children’s section and the ushers made us sit there. Most of us would bring food from home: bread, crackers, cookies, candy, fruit, or nuts, and eat it during the show. (Many of us still do.) No one had money to buy anything at the refreshment stand. I am not sure if there were refreshment stands then. When we returned from the movies, we would tell our friends who hadn’t gone, all about the movies we had seen. Our favorites were cowboy movies, which one of my friends called “shoot-em-ups.” We each had our favorite cowboy actors: Buck Jones, Harry Carey, Tom Mix, and I had Ken Maynard. (Gene Autry and Roy Rogers came later.)

I would also go to the movies with my mother, on weekend afternoons. It was usually to the Prospect or the Franklin, which was just up Longwood Avenue to Prospect Avenue. My mother had her favorite actors and actresses: Ann Harding, Janet Gaynor and of course, Paul Muni who had been a star of the Yiddish stage. We were aware that a few other performers were Jewish, and went to see them as well: Edward G. Robinson, John Garfield and Sylvia Sydney. My mother didn't care for the gangster movies, but in the '30s, those were the movies in which Robinson, Garfield and Muni starred. Paul Muni eventually became so big, they put his name before the name of the movie, and called him MR. Paul Muni. We had no idea that so many of the movie makers were Jewish, as were many more performers. They had all changed their names.

To encourage more frequent movie-going, the theatres would give away dishes. This usually took place on a Wednesday evening. Prices changed at 5 PM, so if you entered the theatre before the prices changed, you would not be eligible for the free dishes. It was a dilemma for some. My mother didn't bother with it. We had our own very nice dishes, thank you.

From time to time, my mother and I would go to the movies when she left work. She was working downtown at this time and would take the Seventh Avenue train which took her to the Prospect Avenue station, instead of Longwood Avenue. I would buy the tickets before the prices changed, and wait for her. When she descended the stairs, I was there, and we went to the Prospect Cafeteria, next door to the Prospect Theatre, for dinner. It was a special evening—dinner and the theatre with my mother.

The really special treat were the few occasions that we went to Broadway on a weekend or holiday afternoon for a movie and a stage show. The *crème de la crème* was the Radio City Music Hall. It was breath-taking. We waited on line outside the theatre with hundreds of other people, anticipating the thrill of entering the most lavish theatre lobby anywhere. Then, being carried along by the crowds to a seat in the most enormous theatre I had ever seen, and in front of us, the most enormous stage I had ever seen. An organ filled the Hall with music as you entered and everyone waited with great anticipation for the show to begin. When the curtain was raised—the Rockettes! And a first run movie! It may have cost a buck and change, but it was worth it. We also went to the Roxy and the Capital where there were stage shows—a band and a comedian and maybe a juggler or a tap dancer—but it couldn't compare to Radio City.

By the time I was in high school, and into big band jazz, the Paramount was where it was at. At least once a semester, during our last two years attending the morning session at Stuyvesant High School, after we got on the subway at 125th Street, someone would say, "Benny Goodman is at the Paramount." Instead of riding to 14th Street, we got off at 42nd Street and stood on line at the Paramount to catch the first show. We didn't care about the movie. It was the stage show that we wanted to see.

When we started dating, we would take our date to the movies. Initially, it was to a neighborhood movie. Then it was downtown, to the Broadway movie houses. It was

Saturday evening, and all of New York seemed to be on line to get into the theatre. If we double dated, it was easier to maintain the conversation while we waited. But it was harder to find four seats together when we entered the movie house. We would find each other at the end of the show and go out for coffee. When I discovered live theatre, I stopped taking my dates to the movies. It was a lot classier to send away for tickets, and take your date to Broadway for a play, instead of a movie, and not have to wait on line.

I didn't stop going to the movies, but my taste in movies began to change. College coincided with the remarkable post-war films coming out of Italy, France and Scandinavia. The Irving Place Theatre on 15th Street played Russian movies, and there was a movie house on 42nd Street, between the movie houses playing X-rated movies, that played second run foreign films, as well as the Thalia on 95th Street and Broadway. I also became a big fan of comedy films, going back to the silents. Through the late '40s and '50s, I must have seen every one of the silent movies made by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. And I reruns of the Marx Brothers. Taking Spanish in college, I learned about Cantinflas, a Mexican comic actor, comparable to Charlie Chaplin, and got to see his movies in my neighborhood, which had a growing Spanish population.

Just as going to a Broadway movie house gave you a two-fer—a first run movie and a stage show—the Museum of Modern Art provided a two-fer: entrance to the museum and a movie worthy of being shown in a museum. I never went to the Modern Art Museum (we didn't call it MOMA then) without seeing the movie. The museum even provided a brochure, which gave you information about the film.

Time marches on. Sylvia and I marry and have children and are happy to get a baby sitter for a night out at a neighborhood movie. And with children came children's movies and the noise in the theatre during those children's matinees. Fortunately, this period didn't last too long. An even briefer period was when we would take infants to the movies in our arms, counting on them to fall asleep. (When they got older, and we watched children's television together, I would fall asleep.)

In 1972, when my first marriage ended, I found an apartment in downtown Washington, and for the first time, in a long time, I went to a movie by myself. It was a depressing feeling. Nobody to make a comment to. Nobody to put your arm around, or to hold hands with. Fortunately, this period didn't last too long, either.

Seven years later, I moved to Boston, met Fran, got married, joined the Museum of Fine Arts, and what do you know—the MFA also showed movies. However, a ticket to the movie was not included in the price of admission. They charged regular movie prices. They also played wonderful movies that you would not see in a commercial theatre, and the MFA regularly showed films as part of the Boston Jewish Film Festival.

Boston had fewer motion picture palaces as compared to New York, but Brookline has a wonderful neighborhood movie house, the Coolidge Corner Theatre. Cambridge had the Orson Welles, but that is no more. Then came VCRs and DVDs. We used to record movies off the TV but then realized that we weren't watching them again. The Senior

Center and the library show movies regularly. And the library has a section with films that you can take out. So with all this and cable TV, I am drowning in movies. Gevalt!

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