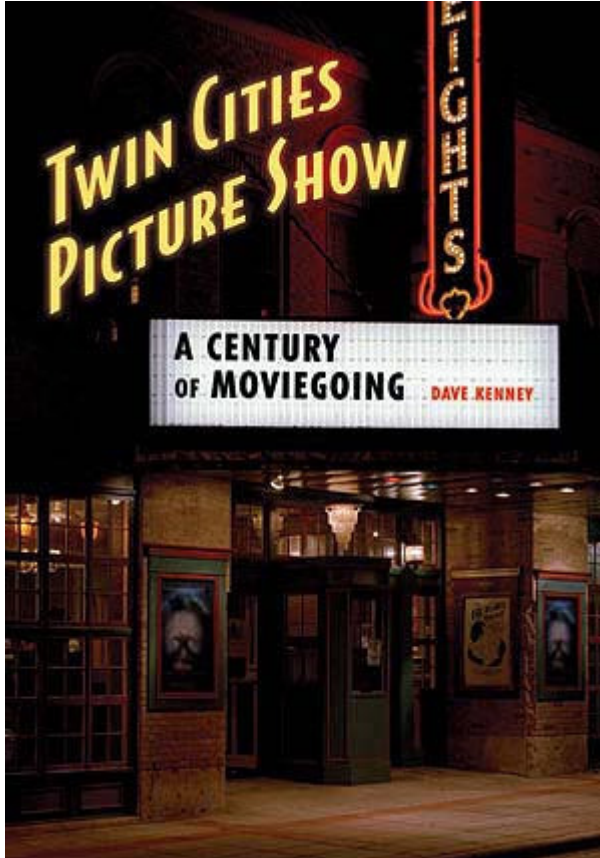


## The Rake Magazine

### Return of the Great White Way

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The way it looks now, it's hard to imagine that Hennepin Avenue was once a Great White Way of cinematic wonder, each downtown block blessed with at least one tempting marquee adorned with blinding lights. In my own early years of moviewatching, I was able to take my pick of many single screen palaces on the strip, all showing the hottest new releases — at least, "hot" in the eyes of a preteen horror buff. This included the State (where I saw *Blacula*), the Mann (*Blackenstein!*), the Orpheum (*Godzilla Vs. Megalon*) and, most prominently, the Gopher (*Jaws*, no less). Within a few years of my visits to these shrines, the State became The Jesus People Church, the Mann and Orpheum abandoned tombs for the homeless to flop in, and the Gopher accommodated a porn house before being crushed by the Godzilla of City Center.



Such was the fate of all too many downtowns throughout the country, as multiplexes took over the suburbs and drew away patrons disturbed by the urban core's crime, grime, crowding and, worst of all, lack of free parking. But, at one time, Minneapolis and Saint Paul, both in its downtowns and neighborhoods, were home to dozens of movie houses — many of them elegant art deco, atmospheric, or atomic age complexes that each offered one film, and one film only, projected on a screen larger than the average megamall wall. Dave Kenney's new book [\*Twin Cities Picture Show\*](#) (Minnesota Historical Society Press, \$29.95) offers an equally elegant look back at the history of Twin Cities theater exhibition, from its extravagant beginnings at the turn of the last century to its uneasy state in the first decade of this one.

Kenney, who researched and wrote this general history for the Minnesota Historical Society over a two year period, is not, himself, a historian, but a freelance journalist who specializes in Minnesota history. He began the project when he was alerted to a mountain of photographs and documents on local movie theaters and exhibitors, left behind by two MHS staffers who had amassed them for a book that never came to be. "There aren't very many books that deal with the moviegoing experience," he explained to me, "You do find a number of books that deal with the architecture. But what really gets me excited is finding something that you can see and experience right now, and go back in time and see how we got there."



Many past and present comparisons can be made with classic theaters that still stand and bear most of their original design and light displays - even if most of them no longer show movies. Two dazzling examples are the Orpheum and the State, which each rose like Lazarus from desolation to become premier spaces for concerts and Broadway shows. Another is the Ritz in Northeast Minneapolis, whose structure was maintained and protected from the elements during the many years it was closed, so it could open as a solid home for various dance companies two years ago.



Most impressive of all is the Heights in Columbia Heights, which still operates as a profitable first-run movie house. As Kenney tells me, current owner and operator Tom Letness, who reopened and renovated the building with partner Dave Holmgren, has "figured out who his audience is. There are enough people out there and there are so few places to go see movies in Columbia Heights. He also owns the Dairy Queen next door - and he doesn't have extra rent to pay, because he has a studio apartment he designed himself above the box office and lobby!"



The fate of most of the grand palaces of the teens, twenties and thirties, though, has not been so rosy. Saddest of all, not least because the water-damaged shell of the building still stands as a reminder of what it once was, is the Hollywood in Northeast. Kenney, himself, remembers going there in 1980, to see the Jamie Lee Curtis classic, *Prom Night*, and regarding the place at the time as an old dump. Twenty-five years later, he would discover during his research that the Hollywood was actually once a masterpiece of palatial design.



Another long lost gem was The Minnesota on 9th Street in downtown Minneapolis, which was the largest single screen movie house in the cities' history. "I've talked to people who remember going into that thing," recalls Kenney, "The enormity and the space, and to think that it was built to show one movie at a time for up to 4,000 people." This, on top of a hydraulic orchestra lift and a back lit ceiling dome, plus a lobby that was larger than most theaters. Needless to say, even in the heyday of film exhibition, this monolith never made a dime, and, after twenty years of on-again, off-again service, met the wrecking ball in the mid-fifties.

Similar fates awaited all but one of the atomic age theaters, which sprung up in the fifties in order to lure back patrons who had sworn their allegiance to television. In addition to providing gigantic screens for 70 mm CinemaScope productions, these sleek structures offered soda fountains, play areas for kids, smoking lounges for their parents and, interestingly, spaces for young and old to kill time before the feature by watching ... television.



The undisputed king of this era was the Terrace in Robbinsdale. In its golden years it featured a snack bar, a country club and a soundproof nursery where parents could watch the show with babies without disturbing other patrons. The only movie hall of this type to still operate (sans the restaurant, lounges and country club) is the Riverview in South Minneapolis. "I think the Riverview is doing okay," muses Kenney, "But for some reason they've decided to use their space for free access to World Cup Soccer broadcasts and political debates. I guess they're not bringing in a whole lot of people anyway, so they must figure why not expose the theater to as many people as possible."

Exposure of a different sort affected the exhibition scene in the seventies and eighties, and it was not the type most residents wanted in their backyards. In fact, it was their very backyard, or neighborhood, movie houses that were bought up and turned into porn arcades by the Twin Cities' robber baron of skin, Ferris Alexander. Thanks to this patron saint of the raincoat set, homeowners in these areas - and their kids - had to walk or drive past marquees boasting titles like *Girl Scout Cookies* and *The Strange Sex Life of Adolf Hitler*. Despite frequent, forceful protests by neighbors and activist groups during the twenty years he bought out struggling theater owners, Alexander managed to build a small empire on Triple-X features shown at formerly legit joints like the American, the Rialto and the Franklin.

Ironically, the bushy-browed entrepreneur built an even larger fortune reinvesting his porn money in real estate, reaping huge profits selling his theaters to the city, which would in turn tear them down to make way for parking ramps, malls or office buildings. However, his reign came to a thunderous end in 1990 when, thanks to a two-year investigation by the FBI and IRS and a subsequent trial, he went to prison on obscenity, tax fraud and racketeering charges. "Ferris Alexander, I think, would be a great subject for a biography," admits Dave, "I have a pile this high of FBI

files on the guy. (There are) great stories of Ferris walking around carrying big bags of cash, which he would use to buy his properties. A lot of people liked him and thought he was a hoot, but he was definitely a bull in a china shop."



Arguably as grim as Alexander's businesses were the multiplexes that slowly seeped into the Minnesota moviegoing bloodstream in the seventies, and clotted it throughout the eighties. Located primarily in suburbs, with Roseville as the hub, these Orwellian hell holes offered three to ten first-run features projected in shoebox-shaped bunkers, whose gently sloping floors and bobbing chairs made it likely that, at some screenings, at least, the person ahead of you would block your view. Ask most local moviegoers and they will point to the Har Mar - which, before it closed in 2006, came with eight screening rooms, complete with floors so sticky they seemed to be mopped with pop, and walls so thin the showings on either side could be heard - as the very nadir.

Luckily, a renaissance of sorts booted out most of the multiplexes by the late nineties. Starting with the eight-screen Willow Creek Cinema in 1989, and the Centennial Lakes 8 and Mann Maple Grove 8 a year later, patrons could experience movies in faux palaces with inlaid marble floors and custom designed carpets, auditoriums with stadium-style seating that all but guaranteed visibility for everyone, and huge, professionally run concession stands offering confections besides popcorn and candy. By the early 2000's, over eight Twin Cities suburbs would sport equally fancy and spacious fifteen-screen theaters.



As much of an improvement as this - the megaplex - era is over the dreary old multi, it is hard not to lament the passing of the great single screen theaters, which were as much victims of "plexing" as they were of the home video revolution. At present, only five still operate in the Twin Cities. The greatest of the fallen giants, and one most residents of a certain age would point to as a long lost favorite, was the Cooper in St. Louis Park. One of three theaters in the country owned by and bearing the name of the Cooper Foundation, the circular construction had a 105-foot curved screen that, with the aid three projection booths hidden in the auditorium's back wall, showed Cinerama films, as well as CinemaScope and other wide-screen epics.

I was fortunate to have caught a stunning revival of *Lawrence of Arabia* at the Cooper in 1989, three years before it was demolished to make way for an Olive Garden restaurant. Unfortunately, I missed its 1988 showing of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Martin Scorsese's feature was accompanied by the last of the big time antiobscenity movements, which inadvertently promoted many of the racier non-porn screenings throughout the hundred years of Twin Cities' film presentation. In this case, it took the form of daily rallies led by finger-wagging St. Paul Archbishop John Roach, whose flock was angered by the film's depiction of Christ as having doubted his divinity, and having fantasies about going to town with Mary Magdalene.



"Going to town" movie-wise still, alas, means generally driving to the suburbs. Admittedly, two of the three Uptown area theaters still thrive, as do the St. Anthony Main's little multiplex and the Grandview and Highland doubles in Saint Paul. And since 2002, downtown Minneapolis has been graced with the Block E 15. Originally owned by the Crown Theaters company, the complex is an impressive enterprise whose screening rooms and concession stands feature all the best amenities of the megaplexes.



Though the owners insist the theater has, thus far, lived up to expectations, Kenney is dubious about its future: "Crown doesn't even own the place anymore. It used to say the Crown Block E on the marquee, but now it just has this big blank space with the movie titles underneath. That's a sign that I don't think it will make it." Many of the same things burden the Block E as did the last downtown movie house, the Skyway. Among other problems, that multiplex, which thankfully shut down in 1999, seemed to attract the same crowd as the namesake strip club next door. I recall the last showing I attended there, for "Speed" in 1994, when I turned and saw a viewer apparently expressing his opinion of the action flick by urinating against the projection booth.

Despite the undeniable annoyances of the urban jungle, it would be a shame to see Minneapolis and Saint Paul lose all of its filmgoing offerings to the 'burbs. Even the last two, decrepit drive-ins that continue to operate in the area, the Cottage View and the Valli Hi, are worth clinging to. Hopefully, Dave Kenney's *Twin Cities Picture Show*", with its breadth of coverage, its many illustrations, and especially its "feature presentation" asides about significant Twin Cities show houses, will not only preserve our remaining single screen theaters but add new ones to the metro. Who knows, maybe The Great White Way will blind us all once again.