

A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES

...STILL GOING STRONG AFTER MORE THAN A CENTURY

By Christopher P. Jacobs

Slightly revised from the form originally published in *The High Plains Reader*

“A night at the movies” – the phrase still suggests a special, almost magical experience. The movies have long been a means by which an ordinary person can leave the cares and troubles of everyday life behind for a couple of hours, and become caught up in an entirely different, more glamorous, more exciting life; to laugh, to cry, to fear, to cheer, and to emerge with just a little bit richer background of experience.

Movies, in their various incarnations, are more popular than ever right now. Home video sales and rentals (especially on DVD and online streaming) are booming. Pay-cable and other TV movie showings abound. Theatre box office receipts have increased dramatically in the past two decades. There is tough competition for the entertainment dollar – sporting events, concerts, plays, cable and network television, video games, the internet, and more. Yet the film industry is thriving. Although annual attendance has its ups and downs depending upon the major Hollywood releases, movie theatres continue to be profitable despite initial predictions that home video would quickly render them obsolete.

The reason, for the most part, is simply that magical experience. People are rediscovering the fact that going out to a movie is something special that cannot quite be duplicated by home video, however more convenient it might be. The impact of the much larger and sharper picture in a theatre is just one aspect. Even a large-screen television picture, three or four feet wide, cannot compare with a movie screen twenty to fifty feet wide. And even high-definition broadcast television standards are still a fraction of the image

resolution possible on professional motion picture film.

Another important factor which enhances movie-going is the group reaction in an audience. Comedies seem funnier when seen with a receptive crowd. Action films seem more exciting when an audience collectively cheers on the hero. And at a good suspense film a viewer can almost feel the crows on the edge of its seats. There is also something about sitting in that dark auditorium that is able to draw one into the story. Even in a crowd one feels strangely isolated and secure in the darkness... as if the film on the screen is a private dream that somehow is shared with one's fellow viewers. A movie must be extraordinarily powerful to have a similar effect when seen on video, amidst the ambient room light, interruptions and outside distractions one finds at home, whether commercials, doorbells, telephones, or whatever. And of course there is the social interaction of just going out for the evening, getting away from home surroundings for a while.

Many theatre operators, faced with the easy availability of films on video and cable TV, take extra measures to insure that movie patrons will have a pleasurable experience. Their intent is that moviegoing will again be perceived as a special event. Most theatre chains realize that the days are gone when someone can just set up a projector, a screen and some seats, and expect to sit back and collect the money. More and more theatres try to stress friendly service, comfort, and superior presentation to draw moviegoers back to the theatres more often. They appreciate constructive comments and suggestions from patrons. It is easy to take movie-going for granted until experience a theatre somewhere that routinely gives substandard presentations. Such annoyances as regularly out-of-focus pictures, poor sound, no crowd control or patrolling of auditoriums, dirty screens, etc. can easily turn viewers off of moviegoing.

True film buffs also appreciate seeing films projected in their correct screen format. Some theatres show everything in one or two compromised screen shapes, and of course standard television always cuts off the edges. Technical extras like stereo sound,

especially full-featured digital sound systems, enhance the movie experience even more.

The movies have been one of the main forms of entertainment since the turn of the century. Although they had just been introduced to the public as a novelty in the 1890s, within a decade the silent “photo play” had already become a major industry. By the time of World War I, filmed drama and comedy surpassed the live theatre in popularity and widespread availability. During the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, movies enjoyed a golden age in which they both reflected and shaped America’s way of life. A night out at the movies was a regular habit at least once or twice a week for many families until major competition from television emerged in the 1950s. Hollywood responded by making movies with wider pictures and stereo sound, so that the theatrical experience would be more impressive than a little box with a flickering, glowing window in someone’s living room.

While the growth of television reduced movie attendance drastically, the growth of home video a generation later actually increased the number of movie viewers. With increased, low-cost access to recent movies on video and availability of higher-quality audio/video systems, fans are seeing more movies overall. This makes them more likely to want to see the latest releases featuring their favorite stars on the big screen.

Hollywood producers, lately, have been realizing that people will pay the extra money to see a film in a theatre rather than waiting for home video or cable versions if the film is appealing, high-quality entertainment. A few even use the extra-high resolution 70mm IMAX film process with extra-large screens to entice viewers who place a premium on picture quality. With the high cost of both film production and exhibition, few really bad films even make it to theatre screens nowadays. Instead they go straight to cable and home video if they are even distributed at all. On the other hand, some high-quality films with a small, specialized appeal unfortunately rarely make it to commercial theatres either. The dropping cost of digital video production has drastically increased the number of

movies being produced and being distributed for home video, often bypassing theatres entirely, but independent filmmakers always hope for theatrical exhibition if possible, because of its greater viewer impact.

When movies first became popular, many predicted the end of live theatre. When synchronized sound was perfected a couple of decades later, many were sure of it. They were wrong both times. When television became widespread, many predicted the end of movies in theatres. They, also, were wrong. Now, despite the spread of high-definition television and digital streaming, any predictions that TV, the internet and home video technology will replace traditional movie theatre presentations seem premature as well. A “home theatre” setup is still at home and just isn’t the same as a commercial theatre, even when the picture and sound quality of a Blu-ray on a home HD projector and a good audio system may be nearly identical to what can be seen and heard in a typical modern digital cinema. Although electronic digital presentation is continually improving, and during the 2000s and 2010s theatrical presentation technology has been converting to digital projection from its century-old standard of 35mm motion picture film, a night out at the movies will likely survive as one of the many entertainment alternatives – and the one that remains something special. 🍿