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History of Theatres on North Avenue

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10 November 2005

Many theatres existed on North Avenue from the early 1900's until the mid 1950's. What brought these theaters to North Avenue? What styles were the theatre that many people visited? What was the history of those theatres that brought entertainment to the area of North Avenue and Charles Street?

At the turn of the twentieth century Baltimore's North Avenue was a prosperous district. In the 1870's, North Avenue was known as Boundary Avenue; it was the street that separated the county from the city.¹ The area began to prosper when wealthy white civilians moved to the area, built grand homes and developed a small business district. Boundary Avenue turned to North Avenue when new structures were being built and the road needed to be expanded. The intersection of North Avenue and Charles Street was the home of the first traffic light in Baltimore.² Eventually upscale hotels, dance halls, theatres, and restaurants came to enrich the lifestyle of Baltimoreans. In the area where North Avenue and Charles Street intersect, four theatres were standing at one time. These theatres included the Aurora, Peabody, Parkway, and Centre.³

Going to a theatre in the early 1900's was an elite outing for upscale society. Many theatres were built to convey a sophisticated atmosphere. Going to the movies was a social event where women and men both dressed in the finest clothes with furs and top hats to see the newest showings.⁴ Names of upcoming attractions were spelled out in large letters across front of the buildings, above entrances, and movie posters were

¹ Cinema Treasures, Parkway Theatre, 21 December 2003, <http://cinematreasures.org/theatre/1878/> (21 October 2005)

² Ibid

³ Cinema Treasures, Aurora Theatre, <http://www.cinematreasures.org/theater/5564> (21 October 2005)

⁴ Cinema Treasures, America's Stunning Theatre's, 7 July 2005, http://cinematreasures.org/links/13310_0_5_0_C/ (25 October 2005)

displayed in glass cases.⁵ Movies were advertised in many places and going to the movies became a grand outing. Many theatres sprang up in the early 1900's. There were eight movie houses in 1908, that number rose to 58 in 1910, 93 in 1912, and about 113 in 1914.⁶ Eventually after 1913 the rise and popularity of movie houses started to decline

Many factors contributed to the down fall of the movie going industry. In the early 1930's there was a law that prohibited movies and other amusement on Sunday.⁷ Baltimore was dead as a proverbial doornail on Sundays before 1932.⁸ The usual moviegoers started to engage in other activities. After World War II, there was a decline in motion picture attendance; bad times were over and the public no longer sought the secure escapist atmosphere of a movie house.⁹ Television was beginning to erupt and movie outings were coming to an end.¹⁰ A significant event that changed the entertainments on the streets of Baltimore, specifically North Avenue, was the desegregation of certain districts during the 1960's. Race riots had begun and North Avenue's serenity had been destroyed. High traffic contributed to the lack of intimacy North Ave once expelled. Despite the downfall of the area, North Avenue had created a district which encouraged entertainment and theatres throughout the early 1900's.

One theatre that existed as North Avenue began to flourish was the Aurora Theatre. It opened in the fall of 1910. The Aurora was located at Seven East North Avenue. The original owner was Eugene A. Cook's Paradise Amusement Co. Cook's paid \$15 – 25,000.00 dollars for the building and reconstructed the building into a movie

⁵ Robert Kirk Headly Jr. "Exit-A History of Movies in Baltimore" (Maryland, Robert Kirk Headly Jr. 1974), p. 12.

⁶ Headly, 9-10.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Headly, 15.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Headly, 19.

house. The theatre fit about 400 persons and housed a bowling alley. In 1921, the Aurora was extensively remodeled. The auditorium and lobby were redecorated with fresh paint, new maroon draperies, deep old rose carpet, and a leaded glass window was placed over the lobby entrance.¹¹ This remodeling cost about \$6,000. In 1949, the theatre was sold at auction for \$150,000.00 to the JF organization and the Rapaport Company. Aurora continued the policy of running first class films.¹² Running first class films was a way to show patrons that the Aurora was still an upscale movie house. In 1964, the Schwaber organization bought the Aurora at auction for \$33,000.00 and remodeled the facility.¹³ The price decrease portrayed the massive decline of North Avenue and movie houses during the 1960's. The property value declined 117,000.00 in fifteen years. The fifties and sixties were times when theatres began to cater to foreign and art films.¹⁴ When Schwaber organization acquired the Aurora Theatre the company changed its name to Seven East. The Seven East showed foreign and art films. The theatre closed as a movie theatre in 1978 and is being used by Solid Rock Free Baptist Church.¹⁵

Another theatre that existed on North Avenue was the Peabody. The Peabody's address was 11 East North Avenue next door to the Aurora Theatre. The theatres name was originally the Theatorium. It was bought in 1909 for around \$30,000.00, an expensive price in those days. The Theatorium seated 500 persons. The theatre was a low scale theatre; it did not possess the magnificence that the Aurora or Parkway produced. To see a film the cost was ten cents. The owners changed its name to the Peabody in 1913.

¹¹ Cinema Treasures, Aurora Theatre, <http://www.cinematreasures.org/theater/5564> (21 October 2005)

¹² Robert Kirk Headly Jr. "Exit-A History of Movies in Baltimore" (Maryland, Robert Kirk Headly Jr.1974), p. 07-108.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Headly, 51.

¹⁵ Cinema Treasures, Aurora Theatre, <http://www.cinematreasures.org/theater/5564> (21 October 2005)

Peabody survived a few more years but couldn't compete with the elegant theatres on North Avenue.¹⁶ The theatre closed in 1924. New owners made the facility into a restaurant called the Oriole Cafeteria. In 1963, the building was sold again to Center Stage, the State Theatre of Maryland. This theatre was quite successful; it offered classic, musical, and new work plays. In 1974, a huge fire destroyed the theatre. Center Stage relocated to Calvert Street and renovated an old building which was once part of Loyola College. The theatre reopened its regular season at its new location in 1975.¹⁷ Meanwhile the location at 11 East North Avenue is still in shambles and has not been remodeled.

One of the most prestigious and elegant theatres on North Avenue was the Parkway Theatre. This movie house is located at 5 West North Avenue. The Parkway was designed by Oliver Wright, and built by the Henry J. Miller Co. for H.W. Webb's Northern Amusement Company.¹⁸ According to one account, a friend of Mr. Webb was visiting the West End Theatre of England in 1913. He friend was so impressed with the theatre he obtained plans and photographs of the West End, and sent them to Mr. Webb. Webb was equally impressed and organized a company to build the Parkway.¹⁹ The original construction began with a stage and the ability for live theatre. During construction developers realized the onset of projectile movies and changed the theatre to a movie house. The auditorium was reached through marble stairs leading from either side to a large lounge or tea room.²⁰

¹⁶ Cinema Treasures, Parkway Theatre, 21 December 2003, <http://cinematreasures.org/theatre/1878/> (21 October 2005)

¹⁷ Maryland State Theatre, Center Stage, 15 October 2004, <http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/mdmanual/01glance/symbols/html/theaterc.html> (5 November 2005)

¹⁸ Robert Kirk Headly Jr. "Exit-A History of Movies in Baltimore" (Maryland, Robert Kirk Headly Jr. 1974), p. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Headly, 23.

The theatre opened in October 23, 1915 and was built for wealthy patrons. Inside the theatre was decorated with rose, ivory and gold colors.²¹ There were two sets of balconies called “Royal Boxes”, where the most upscale people sat. The Parkway could seat 1,100 people. The lobby had a marvelous chandelier. Taking in a show at the Parkway, included sounds from an orchestra, an organ and news displayed prior to a show. Before 1917, movies shown were silent. Around 1917, George R. Webb, (Oliver Webb’s brother) incorporated sound with picture, called “singing pictures”.²²

The Whitehurst organization acquired the theatre in the early 1920’s and then sold it to Loews in 1926. As Loews gained ownership the company gave the elegant theater a makeover. The boxes were removed and extra gold leaves were applied.²³ Loews replaced the original organ with a Wurlitzer organ, which played music for the silent movies. Many say that the redecoration took away from the elegance of the Parkway. Loews continued to feature first run- high class films under the new management.²⁴ Sound units were installed in 1928, bringing the theatre up to date with new technology.

The Parkway stayed strong in the 30’s and 40’s unlike other cinemas that had fallen on bad times; this theatre stayed a Baltimore favorite. This theatre survived due to reputation of its beauty and unique qualities. During this era the Parkway hosted a live midnight radio show which featured an organ broadcast and poetry, called the

²¹ Cinema Treasures, Parkway Theatre, 21 December 2003, <http://cinematreasures.org/theatre/1878/> (21 October 2005)

²²Headly, 23.

²³ Cinema Treasures, Parkway Theatre, 21 December 2003, <http://cinematreasures.org/theatre/1878/> (21 October 2005)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵Ibid

²⁶ Robert Kirk Headly Jr. “Exit-A History of Movies in Baltimore” (Maryland, Robert Kirk Headly Jr.1974), p. 23.

“Nocturne.”²⁵ The 1950’s is when the Parkway and North Avenue began to lose its high class appeal. Morris Mechanic bought the Parkway from Loews in June of 1952.²⁶ Mr. Mechanic leased the Parkway to Hilltop Players, which were a theatrical group that did live shows. This only lasted a year and the theatre was vacant from 1953-1956. In March 1956 the Schwaber Organization obtained ownership and remodeled it for art and foreign films. Schwaber change the name to the Five West Theatre. Schwaber also had ownership of the Aurora Theatre during this time period. The Five West was decorated with black lights and a coffee bar rather than a tea room. Patrons could view works of Baltimore’s artists while viewing a show at Five West. The theme of theatre gave an Audrey Hepburn aura.

The Parkway survived until the mid 1980’s. The Theatre could not withstand the continuing decline of North Avenue. After closing, the Parkway switched hands to a Korean Business Owner Association who used the theatre as an office suite.²⁷ Recently, the theatre has gone under “urban renewal” in which the city acquired properties around the North Avenue district for the purpose of revitalization. Among the properties are Parkway Theatre and adjacent properties that will be offered as a package to any developer looking to revitalize the properties. The developers must be any person with a

²⁷ Kilduff’s, Parkway Theatre, n.d. <http://www.kilduffs.com/PCA.html> (25 October 2005).

²⁸ Parkway Theatre Restoration Initiative, 15 May 2005, <http://www.parkwaytheatre.com/> (24 October 2005)

²⁹ Robert Kirk Headly Jr. “Exit-A History of Movies in Baltimore” (Maryland, Robert Kirk Headly Jr. 1974), p. 57.

³⁰ Ibid.

plan for the property and enough money to finish the project²⁸ Charles Dodson is the current owner of Parkway Theatre and has great expectations for this vacant, magnificent piece of Baltimore's history.

One of the last theatres to join North Avenue was the Centre Theatre. The Centre was located at 10 East North Avenue and designed for Morris Mechanic. This theatre had the most modern technology during this time.²⁹ The opening of the Centre created negative reactions from the Aurora and Parkway. The Centre was the first Baltimore movie theatre to be completely equipped for radio broadcasting. The studios of WBFR were located on the upper level of the theatre.³⁰ Movie patrons could listen to live broadcast and news from WBFR while attending a movie. The entrance was unique; it obtained two heroic nude sculptures. The décor colors were in blue green, cream, silver and gold. The nudes were a symbolism of the motion picture industry.³¹ The opening of the Centre was in February of 1939. The event was sold out. Opening night was a glamorous occasion, people such as the governor and senators attended the affair. Prices at the Centre were 20 cents before 6:00 p.m. for adults and 10 cents for children. After 6:00 p.m. prices were raised to 30 cents and 15 cents.³² Eventually the theatre started running second class films, and temporarily closed. The Centre was then obtained by Isador Rappaport who reopened it as the Cinema Centre. The Cinema Centre closed from

³¹Headly, 32.

³² Robert Kirk Headly Jr. "Exit-A History of Movies in Baltimore" (Maryland, Robert Kirk Headly Jr.1974), p. 58.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cinema Tour- Cinemas Around The World- Centre Theatre, 12 2002 27, <http://www.cinematour.com/tour.php?db=us&id=13856> , (22 October 2005).

1956-1958 and was then known as the Film Center.³³ The building continued to house WFBR for many years and eventually used as a storefront church.³⁴ The auditorium space was converted to office space by the Equitable Bank but the beautiful lobby has been left intact. The marquee of the original building is still present.

Many factors contributed to the end of the extravagant movie going industry. In the early 1930's there was a law that prohibited movies and other amusement on Sunday. Baltimore was dead as a proverbial doornail on Sundays before 1932.³⁵ After World War II, there was a decline in motion picture attendance; bad times were over and the public no longer sought the secure escapist atmosphere of a movie house.³⁶ Television was beginning to erupt and movie outings were coming to an end.³⁷ A significant event that changed the entertainment on North Avenue was the desegregation of the area. After the desegregation in the early 1960's, race riots began to occur and North Avenue never recovered. High traffic also contributed to collapse of the entertainment district. Despite the downfall of the area, North Avenue created a legacy which still affects the lives of many Baltimoreans.

Entertainment on North Avenue existed for many years. The district influenced many lives. Memories of North Avenue continue to live with in the hearts of many Baltimoreans. Esther Martin the owner of Club Charles, which is located on Charles

³⁵ Headly, 15.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Headly, 19

³⁸ Brennen Jensen, "A Bar With a View", *Baltimore City Paper* 2 2000 16, <http://www.citypaper.com/news/story.asp?id=3622>, (27 October 2005

Street a few blocks from the intersection of North and Charles, remembers a time when ‘people got dressed up, they got dressed up-cocktail dresses and such. You had to look sharp to go out. Nobody wore jeans. The area of North Avenue has changed. Esther Martin relays it as ‘they keep telling me this area is going to come back; things are going to get better. Well, I’m still waiting and watching.’³⁹ Ms. Martin missed her chance to see the change; she died January 2003. Revitalization is on the horizon. Great people are now involved to help restore North Avenue. A joint effort between the local community and investors is helping to restore the area of North Avenue. The outlook for this entertainment district is promising.

³⁹ Brennen Jensen, “A Bar With a View”, *Baltimore City Paper* 2 2000 16, <http://www.citypaper.com/news/story.asp?id=3622>, (27 October 2005)

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