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Located near the Yonge and Dundas subway station, right in the heart of downtown Toronto, the first Cineplex theatre complex opened April 19, 1979. It closed March 12, 2001, just 23 days shy of its 22nd anniversary. It revolutionized motion-picture exhibition in North America and around the world, and in that lies a Canadian story worth retelling.

The idea for a multiplex cinema was the brainchild of distributor/producer/journalist Nat Taylor. In 1948, he opened his first twin cinema in Ottawa and nurtured the idea for a chain of such theatres. Nearly 30 years later, Garth Drabinsky came into his life, a young, smart, very ambitious entertainment law student eager to get ahead in the business. At first Drabinsky worked for Taylor writing for his various film publications, but he had bigger ideas. In 1977, he became involved with raising tax-shelter financing for Daryl Duke's *The Silent Partner*, which was being produced by Stephen Young. Part of the shoot took place in Toronto's recently opened Eaton Centre, and there Drabinsky saw an opportunity to implement Taylor's long-cherished dream.

The first Cineplex opened under the parking garage of the Centre with 18 screens and seating from 53 to 137 (a total of 1,600 seats), enough to earn itself a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. At first Drabinsky and Taylor catered to the art-house crowd with espresso, fresh pastry and works by major Canadian artists adorning the walls. But when it became evident that he would need more than a dwindling art-house audience to survive, Drabinsky took on the American distributors that traditionally had a lock-hold agreement with the two national exhibitors, Famous Players (which was, and is, American owned) and Odeon (which was British owned). To get access to first-run features, Drabinsky prepared a very detailed, brilliant legal brief and managed to receive a hearing before the Restrictive Trade Practices Commission in Ottawa. Just hours before the hearing began, six of the major American distributors caved in and issued a joint statement saying they would change their practices and ensure competition in the distribution and exhibition of motion pictures in Canada.

This competition lasted less than a year. Cineplex received a cash infusion from the Bronfman family during the go-go 1980s, and Drabinsky bought the Odeon chain, effectively reducing the competition for first-run films back to where it had been. Then he went on a buying spree and by 1989 had become the second-largest exhibitor in North America. However, the price of success was the sale of 49 per cent of Cineplex's stock to the American entertainment giant, MCA. Ironically, Drabinsky lost control of the company to MCA in a fierce corporate struggle almost 10 years to the day after he opened the first Cineplex. Once Drabinsky was given the boot, further corporate machinations eventually landed the company under the umbrella of New York-based Loews Cineplex Entertainment, which went bankrupt earlier this year. The theatre chain now rests with buy-out specialist Gerry Schwartz and has an uncertain future.

The original Cineplex went through several permutations as the core of downtown Toronto became more unpleasant, heading the way of many American cities. At first the crowds came in droves. In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was still an audience for 16mm prints of classic Italian cinema and low-budget Canadian fare. The concept was novel and the surroundings bright and clean. But when Cineplex built a more upscale version at Carlton and Yonge streets, several blocks north, and moved all its art-house and Canadian films to that location, the Eaton Centre began to screen second-run American fare. During the late 1980s and 1990s there were several brawls and stabbings around the Yonge and Dundas area as the Eaton Centre became a favourite place for teenagers to hangout. The tiny theatres that were once described as "jewel boxes" smelled more like *pissoirs* and the art was long gone.

Remarkably, despite all the changes in fortune for Mr. Drabinsky (who is now a wanted felon in the United States for his creative accounting practices with Livent, the theatre company he was given as part of his golden parachute out of Cineplex) and the de-evolution of civil behaviour that leads one young man to stab another for a "dissing" glance, the actual state of movie-going in Toronto has changed very little in the transpiring 22 years. The two large national chains still dominate the business and the percentage of Canadian films shown in either remains minuscule. The fortunes of Mr. Drabinsky may have come and gone, but, unfortunately, the growth of Canadian cinema, in terms of actual screen time, has remained stagnant. *Plus ça change plus pareil*. So, farewell to the mother of all multiplexes. It will not be missed.

W. P. Wise