



## Requiem For a Palace of Guilty Pleasures **or** Bell-bottomed Exhibition at its Finest

By Gerry Flahive

It was described, simply, as "fabulous." Huge and ornate, there was nothing else like it around. Interest ran so high that the public lined up just to look at it a week before its official opening.

It was the Imperial Six Cinema, the jewel of the Famous Players chain and a revolution in film exhibition upon its opening on Toronto's Yonge Street in 1973. Its manager, Phil Traynor, known to his staff as Mr. T., resplendently tuxedo-clad and wielding a cigar so large you could get a tan off it, surveyed the 3,000 patrons surging through its ornate oval lobby each Saturday night, snapping his fingers at one of the battalion of 35 ushers

on duty if so much as a speck of prepped popcorn lingered on the carpet. Its opening attraction was Daniel Petrie's *The Neptune Factor*, a film financed, in part, by the Canadian Film Development Corp., and starring Ernest Borgnine. It opened in the days of boogie nights, a time when "showmanship" was a term still applied to the movie theatre business, and closed a decade later. But considered from our day of megaplexes and interactive entertainment complexes, the Imperial Six seemed small, familiar and slightly seedy. Bruce Lee, Linda Lovelace and Steve McQueen were on the marquee then.

Almost exactly a quarter-century later, Famous Players will open, at the corner of John and Richmond streets, what it bills as the latest in moviegoing. Festival Hall, built at a cost of \$100 million, will be an "entertainment retail complex," home to a "high octane, interactive playground" and Famous Players' Paramount Theatre, featuring 13 screens plus a

state-of-the-art IMAX 3-D theatre. Not just a movie house, Festival Hall represents, according to its developers and local politicians, a "revitalization" of that section of the city, a "five-star hit" with investors and a triumph that "will inspire millions of people to rediscover the vibrancy and vitality of the heart of our great city."

The Imperial Six carried few such burdens of expectation on its garishly renovated shoulders. Exhibition is the retail end of the film business, open to all comers and the part whose profits depend on food, not films. And despite being the flagship of the Famous chain, the Imperial Six just couldn't rise above being the K Mart of cinemas. It was a palace of guilty pleasures, at a time when there seemed to be less guilt floating around. As an earth shoe-wearing, bad-hair victim for whom, at 16, the Imperial Six seemed like paradise (as an usher I got access to free movies, free popcorn, free-thinking usherettes, company-issued megaphones for use in bullying ticket buyers into line, as well as the authority to throw people out for trying to sneak into another cinema), I admit my memories are clouded by cinematic hormones.

In the largely unwritten history of Canadian film exhibition, the Imperial Six now resides, uncomfortably and most frequently forgotten, in between the romantic movie palaces of a bygone era and today's megafORMAT entertainment "environments." On opening week, the Imperial Six presented a stew of white trash, disaster and blaxploitation films. *The Neptune Factor* was a *The Poseidon Adventure* knock-off; Robert Aldrich's *Emperor of the North Pole* pitted Ernest Borgnine (Borgnine on two screens in two movies, now that's entertainment!) against Lee Marvin; *The Harrad Experiment* was about college sex, and was vigilantly checked by 16-year-old ushers on a minute-by-minute basis; *Dillinger* starred Warren Oates in a story told once too often; *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* was an edgy and underrated crime piece with Robert Mitchum; and *Shaft in Africa*—well, do you remember that there was a sequel to *Shaft*? It's doubtful that Festival Hall will open with such a motley slate of low rent and slightly dishevelled flicks. Too bad.

The Imperial Six was neither the most noble nor the most sticky-floored of these now vanished Toronto cinemas of the day (at the 99-cent Roxy, the New Yorker, the Crest, the Donlands, Cinecity, the Park, the Yonge, the Coronet, the Rio, the prerenovated Carlton, Cinema Lumiere, the Fairlawn, the International, the Nortown, the Toronto Dominion Cinema, the Towne, the Glendale and the University the entire food chain of filmmaking was on display from *The Sorrow and the Pity*, to *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat*, to *2001: A Space Odyssey*), but with six screens, it represented the great middle of an eclecticism in programming that has also sadly disappeared. In an October week in 1977, Famous Players was showing a total of 12 different films in downtown Toronto. The Imperial Six alone sometimes managed to squeeze seven films in a day (with double bills like *Sacred Knives of Vengeance* and *5 Fingers of Death*).

But it would be pointless to blame the exhibitors for the change. The filmgoing context which surround the Imperial Six was utterly different. It opened two years before the monster-hit syndrome of summer film exhibition was heralded by Spielberg's *Jaws*, which raised the stakes for studios and exhibitors. We expected less of movies then and perhaps we don't have time to kill anymore. The 12:30 afternoon show at the Imperial was an important one as it catered to fedora-clad businessmen playing hooky from sales calls. They cared little for what was playing, just what time it got out.

In a business now driven by excruciatingly hyped "events," there are many explanations for the demise of the Imperial Six and other similar cinemas, the near disappearance of repertoire houses, and the market-driven sameness of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking. Over the past 25 years, film festivals, home video, cable TV, the expansion of film education, demographic changes and a myriad of other reasons have made the continued existence of an Imperial Six impossible. Who today among us would be willing to be seen slinking into an early matinee showing of *Dirty Mary*, *Crazy Larry*, or *McQ* (starring John Wayne), or *Walking Tall Part II*, or *The Towering Inferno*, or *99 and 44/10% Dead*, or *Linda Lovelace For President*, or *Fists of Fury*? I know I would. Just keep reminding yourself—it's only a movie. ■



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