



I Was a Spy For Cineplex

By Briane Nasimok

How did it all begin? Let me see...

Innocently enough, I had picked up a brochure while exiting the Market Square Cinema in downtown Toronto. It invited me to become a Mystery Shopper, one of a select group of movie aficionados who could change the state of film viewing forever. A faceless member of an underground army of consumers dedicated to cinema, a subversive movement whose very actions would evolve.... Sorry, let's start again. A spy for Cineplex—a secret shopper who would attend movies and make suggestions for change. In my hands I held the fate of the free world of cinema as we knew it.

At last here was my chance to get back for the sticky floors, day-old popcorn and admission charges just slightly less than a second mortgage. All I had to do was send in a minimal fee (for processing and my secret spy decoder ring), select the cinemas nearest my abode and wait for them to process my application.

Well, I waited and waited. No response. Had they checked my RCMP file and discovered that while at the University of Toronto I had illegally set up a tent city on campus? Had they seen my student movie or knew I was a former student of Joe Medjuck? (Granted, only a few readers will get this reference, but those few will howl.) I couldn't figure out the delay.

Finally, it came. "Dear Madam/Sir: (How secret can this get?) Thank you very much for your interest in our Mystery Shopper Club program. (A club! I hoped we didn't have to meet.) Please accept our sincere apologies for our late response. (My papers were in order.) Technical difficulties and a higher response rate has forced us to review the way we will be managing the program. We have assigned additional staff to handle the large volume in order to ensure a better and faster service. We thank you for your understanding. Please accept these two free passes to be used in any Cineplex Odeon cinema."

Wait. What's so secret? There was no plain brown envelope. The return address

was brazenly obvious in the corner. My neighbours would know that I was a spy! This was not good. I could be rooted out. My first assignment, however, did come with this caution: "Discretion is absolutely necessary."

Yes!

Along with this caution for secrecy came the tutorial for the Mystery Shopper Evaluation Form, the shopper's Assignment Confirmation Sheet, the Mystery Shopper Evaluation Form, a paid-postage business reply form, two courtesy passes, \$10 in gift certificates and a credit card receipt (if applicable). It was. And my assignment: the Carlton Cineplex in the heart of downtown Toronto.

Loser!

Very early in my viewing career I swore off the flagship—or would that be the *Titanic*—of Cineplexes, the original Eaton's Centre venue. The rear-screen projection is horrible and, from my recollection, the floors swamp-like. The Carlton is known for a similar viewing experience, except it presented mostly art/foreign/Canadian/little-known films (not movies). The screens are small, the seats nowhere near stadium-size and the complex is not the most inviting. It is, however, a necessary evil around the time you want to see Academy Award Best Foreign-language Film nominees. Frankly, I was disappointed with my assignment, but a spy has to do what a spy has to do. Maybe there was a special reason I was given this assignment. They had seen my student film.

With the Mystery Shopper Evaluation Form (disguised as a *National Geographic*) in hand, I approached the cinema and followed the instructions. *First Impressions: Was the parking lot, building exterior and front entrance clean and free of debris?* Yes, except for the homeless man asking for small change, holding a small board listing his life accomplishments. Was he looking for work in the cinema? Had he made a student film? I was supposed to check to see if the front door and glass were free and clean of fingerprints, and if there were fingerprints, who did they belong to? (Or is that, to whom did they belong?) *Please present your passes at the box-office. Retain your stubs and return with completed Evaluation Form. Please write down the box-office employee's name in the space provided.* I approached the box office in a cool

manner. I was just a normal patron, carrying a *National Geographic* who was interested in cleanliness. It worked for me.

I had passes for two, but my designated spy mate was late, so I decided to use my Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television pass for one of the tickets—a Canadian film. I hoped I wasn't breaking the rules, but this might make it seem more like I was just an ordinary patron and not a spy. When I came to the ticket window I recognized the employee. We'd worked together in another life. I had to keep my cover. "Hey, how're you doin'? I, uh, got this pass because I gave a transplant." I think he bought it. *Was the box office clean, neat and organized? Check to see that glass and floor are clean, signage is organized, box-office process is displayed and there are no handwritten signs.* "So how are things?" I continued. "Boy that floor looks clean, doesn't it?" *Were you greeted with "welcome to Cineplex" or similar greetings?* "Yeah, the floor's clean. How's the divorce coming?" (That was sort of the welcome they were asking for.) Yes, the cashier was friendly and a little too nosy for my liking. My tickets were ejected from the printer, and I was told to enjoy the show. All in less than three minutes. My evaluation: We won't have him killed.

My assignment continued. *Please write down the doorman's name in the space provided.* Done. *Did the doorman give directions to the auditorium and were you told to "enjoy the show."* Of course. *Was your ticket torn and the same ticket returned to you?* Ah, here it is. The resale scandal! The real reason for the mystery. I waited for the old switcheroo but I got the same ticket back. Next....

Time for the concessions stand—the gold mine of movie profits. Similar questions and answers. Thankfully, I was not served by one of those Stepford attendants, but unfortunately my server did not pass the test. She didn't offer me a value combo or suggest I have an apple pie with my meal. Sorry, but I had to report her. My only hope is that she's not been assigned to Siberia (or Mississauga). With food and drink in hand, I made my way to the auditorium with enough time to check all the little important things on the list. The auditorium was clean and the floor free of debris. It was dry and not "sticky." The seats were clean. In fact, they were empty.

Only two assignments on the checklist left to do. Do I go to the restrooms first or



last? Go now. The longer I'm inside the sooner my cover could be blown. All clear in the toilet department. (I need not go into too many details here, but clean and odour-free came up a lot in the evaluation form. The checklist on the wall showed that someone had inspected it just minutes before my arrival—a good thing.) As for the women's room, after considering standing outside of it and taking a survey of the patrons, I passed. Next time I'll bring a change of clothes or a female companion who actually shows up.


Back to the auditorium and I'm set to get to the essence of my assignment. The quality of my viewing experience. I checked my list. The only question dedicated to my main reason for becoming a subversive—Question 19—simply asked: "Was the picture and sound quality to your satisfaction?" Yes, but what about the seating, the small screen, the big heads in my way? After Question 20—concerning the overall experience—I was told in bold lettering to "feel free to provide any additional comments you may have." I did.

For assignment two, I enlisted the help of a couple of friends, which made it far more serious, and gave us a chance to visit both washrooms. Once again passing grades, except for the overly pierced box-office attendant. Enjoy Mississauga, sweetie. In the second report I suggested that they move me to another cinema as my friend at the box office was getting kind of suspicious. (There's just so many times you can ask about how clean the floor is.) My transfer was denied.

When I received my third assignment, I was told to return to the Carlton. New developments had arisen. Some spies had been sussed out by the staff, so they changed our passes. (Now we couldn't use them if the "no passes allowed" stipulation accompanied the film.) After one more assignment, I planned on retiring. You have to know when to get out. I tried to do my bit for cinema viewers around the globe.

Dare to struggle. Dare to win.

Oh yeah, later I went to the upscale Varsity Cinemas and saw a print that was awful. The three of us complained (after the show), and we got passes. Maybe it's better to complain publicly instead of being a member of this Secret Society. •



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