



Playhouse, 1937, 344 College Street, near Brunswick Avenue.

The "Nabes": Toronto's Wonderful Neighbourhood Movie Houses, by John

Sebert, Mosaic Press, Toronto, 145 pages, \$25.00

The "Nabes" is a Toronto-centric look at independent movie theatres that dotted the urban landscape from the 1920s, the golden era of silent cinema, to the 1950s when fierce competition from the larger chains, television and cinemascope killed off many of the "nabes," or neighbourhood theatres. Photographer John Sebert has done a fine job tracking down these 86 time capsules, all reproduced with fine archival photographs and accompanied with a photo, by himself, of the existing building as it stands today. Remarkably, most of the original structures still exist, merely converted into another use – a bank, a McDonald's, a computer shop.

One prime example of this transformation is the Victory Theatre at the northwest corner of Spadina and Dundas. Built in 1922, on the rubble of an older theatre, the Victory began life as the Standard producing Yiddish theatre. In 1935, it became the Strand showing Hollywood fare. Then 20th Century, an independent chain operated by Nat Taylor, took over in 1940 and, being the early days of the Second World War, logically renamed it the Victory. It morphed into an upscale strip joint in the 1960s and 1970s, and eventually became the Golden Harvest Theatre in 1975, catering to the large Chinese community that had grown up around it. What Sebert leaves out of his account is that the Victory was the best place to hear the

early punk bands, including the legendary night Rush played on a double bill with the New York Dolls.

Sebert's account of the various histories is light and breezy and he follows the photo section with comments about growing up in Toronto and watching movies from the likes of Norman Jewison, former Toronto mayor David Crombie, and *Goin' down the Road* director, Don Shebib. Sebert leads with an equally breezy introduction that gives a historical overview but gets one salient fact wrong. He claims that the Allen brothers, who operated the first Canadian distribution and exhibition company of any note, went bankrupt in 1923 because their theatres were too lavish. It is well documented that Famous Players Canadian Corporation (FPCC) waged a vicious bidding war against the Allens and refused them the rights to Mary Pickford films, which were being produced by Paramount Pictures, which in turn was owned by Famous Players-Lasky Corporation in the United States. Effectively, it meant that Adolph Zukor, who was the chairman of Famous Players-Lasky, drove the Allens out of business and through FPCC, he bought all their theatres at a bargain-basement price. Still, given the fact that Famous Players, the corporate heir to FPCC, gets a generous acknowledgement at the front end of the book, this historical oversight is not surprising. It is rather ironic, however, that a book dedicated to the independent spirit of film exhibition – most of the "nabes" were run by the smaller chains or were mom-and-pop operations – should be given the blessing by the biggest corporate giant of them all, who drove most of them out of business in the first place. **TAKE ONE**

Weird Sex & Snowshoes, and Other Canadian Film Phenomena by Katherine

Monk, Raincoast Books, Vancouver, 357 pages, \$26.95

There is a definite need for more serious, well-researched books on Canadian cinema. Katherine Monk's *Weird Sex & Snowshoes*, unfortunately, puts too much emphasis on being serious and not enough on basic academic research, and Canadian cinema suffers yet another blow at the hands of one of its well-meaning, high-minded supporters.

Weird Sex & Snowshoes is composed of 10 essays of considerable length organized by theme – survival, language, identity, multiculturalism, sexuality etc. – that are interspersed with profiles, of varying length, of contemporary directors. The package is complete with 100 mini reviews. This structure is awkward, see-sawing between serious, deeply considered thematic writing and upbeat, journalistic prose. Monk's sense of purpose is further undermined when she marks the mini reviews with cute little maple leaves, as a daily film critic – which she is for the *Vancouver Sun* – would do with stars. Strange that Monk would choose to include films that only deserve one maple leaf, which she gives to Claude Jutra's *Surfacing* (1981).

However, the inclusion of *Surfacing* is no accident, as Monk goes on at length about this dreadful film in her chapter on "Survivors & Surviving." It's a good place to look to find what is wrong with her approach. She uses *Survival*, Margaret

Atwood's 30-year-old-plus dissertation on Canadians as "victims," as her launching pad to dissect Jutra's misguided adaptation of what is probably an unfilmable Atwood novel. Monk explores the victim motifs found in *Surfacing* and compares the film and its characters to John Boorman's enormously popular *Deliverance*, which is odd in itself, and concludes that we, as Canadians, "are allowed to have a more humble approach to life instead of constantly feeling the need to assert ourselves." She then follows this rather convoluted argument with an apology for subjecting the reader to a "drawn out discussion on *Surfacing*," which, she concludes, is a better book than a movie. The question seems to be why she bothered. Whatever the relative merits of her argument, she builds it around a stinker of a movie that is so bad nobody wanted to see it in the first place.

Monk's credibility is further damaged by her condescending voice – she uses the royal "we" a lot – and her sloppy fact-checking. Her most blatant error comes in the first (and weakest) chapter on realism in Canadian cinema, with this stunning paragraph: "In 1949, it was official. After the Massey Commission concluded...there was a...desire to get behind Grierson's vision, and the National Film Board was born." The NFB was created by an act of Parliament in 1939, the Massey Commission submitted its report in 1951, and the proper name for the NFB is the National Film Board of Canada. And the errors just keep coming, samples of which include: Louis B. Mayer was born in Russia, not Canada (p. 10); Grierson was labeled a "commie" because his secretary's name appeared in the Gouzenko spy papers not because of his "pronounced socialist values" (p. 12); *Pour la suite du monde* first aired on Radio-Canada in 1963, not 1964 (p. 17); *Seul ou avec d'autres* was not produced by Denys Arcand (p. 172), but by the student union at the University of Montreal and directed by Arcand, Denis Héroux and Stéphane Venne; and Patricia Rozema was born in Kingston, Ontario, not Sarnia (p. 149).

However, factual errors, large or small, are not the main drawback to *Weird Sex & Snowshoes*. From the title to her 10 overly earnest essays, Monk somehow misses the boat. The title is particularly offensive since the issue of "weird sex" in Canadian film is a red herring at best, applicable to only a handful of films. Her reliance on out-of-date analysis and her constant references to Atwood, Carl Jung and René Descartes, suggest that she is an educated critic but not current with the latest thinking with regard to Canadian film. She ignores the up-and-coming Vancouver filmmakers – Bruce Sweeney, Mina Shum, Lynne Stopkewich – in her director profiles, odd since she comes from Vancouver, and makes no reference to the group of Toronto filmmakers who radically transformed English-Canadian cinema in 1980s. It's as if she has never read a copy of *Take One*.

Monk also ignores the overwhelming fact that our cinematic identity has been historically distorted by American distributors and exhibitors, who for many years actively discouraged the growth of a viable Canadian film industry. That's why we've got the NFB and not a commercial movie industry; that's why we became a nation restricted to producing art-house films – "condemned to originality," in the words of one of our greatest cineastes, Gilles Carle, who, by the way, didn't make it into Monk's book. With friends like Monk, Canadian cinema need never worry about its detractors.

TAKE ONE

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