

film won't last forever

The Florida Theatre celebrates 80 years of their silver screen

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The Florida Theatre opened its doors in 1927 and presented the film Let It Rain. This forgotten silent film starred Boris Carloff as a crook, Shirley Mason as "the girl" and Douglas MacLean as "Let-It-Rain Riley." Called a military comedy by the New York Times, the film was about a marine and his pal competing for the affections of a switchboard operator. In its happy conclusion, the marine is a hero with the love of the girl and a promotion to lieutenant to boot.

That is what Hollywood movies were about once (and some may argue that they still are), they were about making you feel good when you left the theatre. It was movies like these that helped our country escape the Great Depression. But depressions aren't so great these days. To fill movie seats, megaplexes rely on intergalactic battles, preposterous explosions, irrational sex, and the lure of celebrity, but that wasn't always the case. The Florida Theatre wants to help revive that golden age of cinema when the women were beautiful because of good lighting, soft focus and excessive makeup, not plastic surgery.

"I can't recall the last time I saw a film I liked. I seldom go to the movies these days. Maybe once or twice a year," says Robert Christopher, and practically grew up in the Capital Theatre at the corner of 8th and Main Street, just North of downtown.

His father, Fred Christopher, was a projectionist for more than 40 years in this town, so the Christopher family has been presenting films in this town pretty much since the beginning. The first movie projector was made in 1897 and Fred Christopher was operating them professionally by 1915. Robert started in 1947 at the Pix Theatre on Florida Avenue and worked as a career projectionist in this town until 1985 when the United Artist theatre in Regency got rid of union projectionists. After that he turned to staging work and has been an integral part of more shows that you've seen around town than you'll ever know. But he didn't give up the celluloid entirely.

"My father never would have imagined a day when one person could run ten projectors," Robert says thoughtfully.

Although he has been presenting films for more than 60 years, he climbs the innumerable steps up to the Florida Theatre's projection booth without pause, while I, at least thirty years his junior, panted along behind him. He still loves that frigid little booth and his fingers deftly sling a piece of film through the internal guts of one of the pair of classic reel-to-reel Super Simplex projectors in the Florida Theatre's booth.

"There are probably only three of the old-timer reel-to-reel projectionists left in town," Robert said with a slight grin.

The old reel-to-reel system requires a pair of projectors. The projectionist's job was to thread the first canister of film through the first projector, fire up the bulb, and start the movie. Then they would thread the second canister of film through the second projector. When the cue showed in the corner of the screen, the projectionist would switch one projector off and simultaneously switch the other one on, allowing the audience a seamless



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transition, if the projectionist was good. Then they unloaded the first canister and thread up the third one, preparing for the next reel change. The standard movie has six canisters of film, so the projectionists didn't get much time to watch the movies.

United Artists may have seen the lucrative future that automation would bring about, but Erik Hart, the president of The Florida Theatre, saw the value in Robert's unmatched skill.

"Distributors will only let these prints go to the theatres with experienced projectionists running reel-to-reel projectors," Erik Hart explained, "Last year I sent Warner Brothers Bob Christopher's credentials...They have to be careful with these old prints - they're so fragile."

In an age when film is becoming less and less about actual film and more about digital technology, Erik Hart and the people at the Florida Theatre are trying to provide an experience that is becoming increasingly rare. As new films are made and older films age and get damaged from traveling around the country, the number of these films is drastically reduced.

"The print we showed of My Fair Lady last year was the only one left in the country," Erik laughed.

In many cases films are retired to a vault and the owner of that vault is not eager to risk sending the film out and relying on strangers for its safekeeping. But in the hands of Robert Christopher and the Florida Theatre, these gems are as safe now as they were fifty years ago.

"What we want to do is recreate the same experience that your grandparents and parents had. We show the films in their original format, the way they were made to be seen, and often even in the same theatre that they were originally seen in," says Hart.

Whether it was the premiere of Snow White in 1932 or the premiere of Lonely Hearts at last year's Jacksonville Film Festival, the Florida Theatre is still making those memories. This June begins the 13th annual Summer Movie Series at the Florida Theatre. This may be your last chance to catch some rare films in their original context, so get a movie card and catch every one of them this summer.

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