

The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection. *By Janna Jones*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. xii + 291 pp. Photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$24.95. ISBN 0-813-02605-9.

Reviewed by Tom Hanchett

Janna Jones fell in love with 1920s movie palaces, and she wants you to share that enthusiasm. Her book, which chronicles the heyday of these enterprises, their subsequent slide into obscurity and neglect, and their recent comeback, approaches the subject more from a social perspective than as a purely business history.

Six case studies form the heart of the book. Jones visited the well-known Fox Theater in Atlanta, Georgia, the Carolina in Durham, North Carolina, the Alabama in Birmingham, Alabama, the Saenger in Biloxi, Mississippi, the Orpheum in Memphis, Tennessee, and the Tampa in Tampa, Florida, where she got her start as a volunteer. All followed a path from 1920s glory to decline by the 1960s. In recent years, they have been restored and given new identities as not-for-profit theaters of various kinds. Jones looked into archives for historic background, interviewed the citizens who spearheaded the buildings' rehabilitation, and talked with current staff.

Movie palaces sprang into being during the exuberant 1920s. Many were owned and operated by the film studios themselves, a hammerlock that was broken by antitrust legislation in 1948. In their glory days, the lavish facilities became icons in the downtown districts of nearly every American city. Visitors marveled at faux interior re-creations of Spanish courtyards, Versailles stairways, crystal chandeliers and gold-leafed candelabras, often under ceilings canopied with twinkling electric stars.

After World War II, however, the theaters ran into hard times. Competition from television, from drive-ins, and especially from suburban multiplexes with free parking compounded the problems of aging facilities. During the 1950s and 1960s, promoters added wider screens and "updated" the auditoriums by draping or destroying the faded plaster ornaments. But to no avail. By the 1970s, most downtown movie palaces had rung down their final curtain.

But then, just like in the movies, heroes arrived to save the day. The fresh cavalry included art-film buffs, downtown revitalization officials, and young members of the

fledgling historic preservation movement. They swept out the fallen plaster, learned to restore the glazed and gilded finishes, and set up not-for-profit entities to reopen the brass-handled doors for a new generation of theatergoers.

Business-minded readers will be interested in the variety of nonprofit organizations that breathe life into these buildings today. An historic preservation group presides over the Fox in Atlanta, whose savvy hired manager brings in acts that produce revenue to maintain the structure, while the preservationists fret over the wear-and-tear the acts create. The Carolina in Durham, in contrast, is city owned. Municipal officials allowed a heavy-handed renovation that stripped the edifice of historic detail, but the theater has achieved financial success as a specialty cinema. In Birmingham, concerts by touring pop musicians, plus private rentals for weddings and corporate events, pay the bills. In Memphis, Broadway road productions are the ticket to the Orpheum's success. In tiny Biloxi, the town runs its theater as a community hall, where hometown folks make music and put on shows for their neighbors.

By looking at examples only in the South, Jones paradoxically forfeits the opportunity to dig into the question, What is southern about these stories? This becomes more of a problem when the book tackles the important issue of race. Jones performs a valuable service by chronicling how tensions stirred by the Civil Rights movement played out in her southern theaters. But she may go too far in attributing their decline largely to the battles over integration. During the 1960s and 1970s, downtown film houses in every part of the United States were in a tailspin. During those years, I lived in Cortland and Ithaca, New York, and in Salt Lake City, Utah, where black populations were tiny and downtown racial change was nil. In all three places, center-city movie theaters closed, and, in both Ithaca and Salt Lake, eager young activists revived them. So I am skeptical of Jones's assertion that race played a big role in the demise of southern movie palaces, or that a desire to reclaim downtown for whites was a major motivator in the facilities' rebirth.

With this book, Janna Jones reminds us that business history is never solely about dollars and cents. The story of America's movie palaces suggests the mixture of social and class concerns, popular fashions, and noncommercial passions that have always combined with entrepreneurship to shape American business.

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