

# MARQUEE

THE JOURNAL OF THE THEATRE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA • FIRST QUARTER 2006

## LOST THEATRES OF SOMERVILLE

BY DAVID M. GUSS • WEISS COMPETITION FIRST PLACE PRIZE (2004)

## SO THE PUBLIC MAY KNOW

BY PAUL S. MOORE • J. M. SESSIONS ADS FOR BALABAN & KATZ





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## CLARIFICATION: FOR THE RECORD

The Aeolian-Skinner organ in Symphony Hall, Boston (*Marquee*, Vol. 37, No. 4, p. 22) was later rebuilt by the Foley Organ Company.

## ABOUT THE COVERS

### FRONT COVER

Auditorium view, proscenium and stage of the SOMERVILLE THEATRE, Somerville, Massachusetts. Photograph by Stefanie Klavens.

### BACK COVER

Balaban & Katz (Chicago) "institutional" advertising with art work by J. M. Sessions.



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### The Editor's Comments

The first *Marquee* of 2006 is a potpourri of theatre history, a revealing look at theatre advertising 1920s-style, and a good old-fashioned ghost story.

Our cover story is the 2004 Jeffrey Weiss First Prize winner, "Lost Theatres of Somerville." One look at an evocative photograph sent author David M. Guss on a quest to document the astonishing number of theatres in one Boston suburb. Sadly, only one theatre still remains, which we'll visit during the conclave.

Paul Moore's article about theatre ad campaigns in Chicago in the 1920s is a fresh take on how one chain, Balaban & Katz, promoted their theatres almost more than the movies they were playing. Some multiplexes today try to advertise their new amenities whether it's VIP screens or gourmet snacks, but they have a long way to go to equal the elegance and sophistication of those ads and the drawings of James M. Sessions.

Several issues ago, "Annie Get Your Mop" gave us a backstage look at a

volunteer's experiences at what is now called the PROVIDENCE PERFORMING ARTS CENTER. Longtime THS member Bob Foreman weaves a different tale on that same period of time there — but with an additional cast member. The conclave will be visiting that theatre — during daylight hours!

Thanks again to Boston theatre maven Ron Salters, who has provided us with more profiles of New England theatres. These particular theatres are not included on the Boston conclave schedule — some are mere shadows of their former selves. But we thought readers would relish the additional information, and maybe the more adventurous conclave attendees would venture forth to seek them out.

*Marquee* is recently experiencing a dramatic upswing in article submissions and proposals. Many thanks to everyone who has made a contribution, or is considering making one — keep 'em coming!

Suzanne Bowers Leworthy

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# LOST THEATRES OF SOMERVILLE

*The discovery of Somerville theatre photographs at an ephemera show sparks the author's interest in documenting the social history of the local theatres and in curating an exhibition that leads to the Lost Theatres of Somerville Project.*

By David M. Guss  
Member, Theatre Historical Society of America



PEARSON'S PERFECT PICTURES during President Taft's 1910 visit to Somerville. This photo originally appeared in *The Film Index*, one of many early trade magazines.

"I would say that Somerville is noted for its beautiful and well-equipped play houses and our people patronize them because always the show and the surroundings are of the best, and the comfort of the patrons is the first consideration of the managers. Where else is there a gathering point where all may enjoy a few hours of pleasure and recreation?"

Arthur G. Pearson, 1929

In 1904, just eight years after Edison showed his first Vitascope film, a young confectioner and ice cream maker named Arthur G. Pearson brought movies to Somerville, Massachusetts. He rented the second floor above his shop in the Odd Fellows Hall on lower Broadway, not far from the Charlestown line. At the time, Somerville was just about to become one of America's most densely populated cities, four square miles with what would eventually be 110,000 people. It was a solidly working-class community, packed with immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and Greece. It was the perfect place to introduce the young century's newest form of popular entertainment. But Pearson, who had already shown a flair for entertainment through his elaborate advertising, was unsure whether it would work.



Here's how he recalled the premier twenty-five years later:

With fear and trembling, we started with a children's show one afternoon in October. It was very crude, the two pictures each consuming about ten minutes and the illustrated songs about one-half hour. The price was seven cents and each child received a bag of candy. As it was a new venture and children wanted to be sure of getting their seven cents' worth, we had but one half the capacity of the house, which was fortunate as the show was so very bad, the films breaking every minute or so and the singers were so awful that it was ten days or so before we tried it again. That show was good if short. We had a different machine and the very latest pictures, and the finest pianist we could secure. The great difficulty at the time was to persuade your citizens that pictures were moral and good for our people, but after personal invitations to our prominent officials, who kindly attended, many came feeling that it must be alright. (*Somerville Journal*, May 10, 1929)

Before long, Pearson was showing films regularly in what became Somerville's first movie theatre. It operated until 1927 when bigger and more comfortable theatres, such as the CAPITOL

across the street, finally forced it to close. Pearson did what he could to compete, installing a sloped floor, new seats and a large marquee. He even changed the name to THE WINTER HILL. But it was of little use; movie-goers preferred the luxury of brand new picture palaces. With the theatre gone, the Odd Fellows Hall became a rental space for weddings and dances. A wonderful stone structure with dramatic turrets climbing up its side, the building had originally opened in 1885, designed by George Loring, Somerville's most important architect. Now, with its original occupants, the Paul Revere Lodge, also gone, the building soon became known as Marshall Hall, after the side street it faced. Over the years, the building slowly decayed. Tenants left and windows were boarded up. In the one story garage tucked behind it, the notorious Winter Hill Gang held its meetings. Then, in May 1974, the building mysteriously caught fire and burnt to the ground. While the local paper ran a story about the fire, no mention was made of the fact that the hall once housed a movie theatre. PEARSON'S PERFECT PICTURES had been all but forgotten and its last physical trace destroyed.

Twenty-five years later, almost all of Somerville's theatres had met similar fates, with any physical remnants, where they existed, well covered up

and disguised. It was with considerable surprise, therefore, that I discovered a set of photographs at one of the semi-annual ephemera shows held in the Boston area. They were part of a large collection of black and white images of theatres throughout eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, exterior as well as lobby, balcony, and orchestra shots. Some of them reminded me of the work of THS member Sugimoto, the contemporary Japanese photographer who has shot theatre interiors with screens illuminated throughout the United States. But these were the work of an amateur photographer, a salesman of some sort who was making a complete record of all his accounts. Each photo, with holes punched for a three-ring binder, was labeled with the name of the theatre, its location, the number of seats, and the price of admission. They were "nabes," as neighborhood theatres were commonly called, the equivalent of Mom and Pop groceries, and just the sort of vernacular architecture rarely acknowledged or photographed. While their names — STRAND, ORPHEUM, CAPITOL, CENTRAL, and BROADWAY — mimicked those of urban picture palaces, these were more modest theatres, seating around a thousand and owned and operated by families who lived in the community. Having only moved to Somerville in the early 1990s, none of them were theatres I had ever known. But I decided to buy one of the photos — the BROADWAY in 1945 with Roy Rogers starring in "Utah" on the marquee.

Running all the way from Charlestown in the east to Arlington in the west, Broadway is the city's longest thoroughfare. And while they were torn up years ago, the street was once lined with trolley tracks, bringing passengers within easy reach of nearly every one of the city's many squares. The BROADWAY THEATRE, with its dramatic recessed stained glass window, could have been anywhere. So I went up to the library to look at old directories, and not only discovered its exact address, but the names and locations of 13 other theatres that had once existed in the city as well, only one of which still remained. With photo in hand I went to the indicated address, and although the stained glass had been replaced by a somewhat dismal porthole, it was clear that the building in front of me was the original BROADWAY THEATRE. Of course the marquee was also gone, and other than a Libyan dentist in one of the cor-



David M. Guss Collection

The anonymous photograph of the BROADWAY THEATRE (1945) that inspired the Lost Theatres Project.



ner storefronts, the theatre was entirely abandoned. I walked across the street and asked two people if this had indeed been the BROADWAY THEATRE. "It sure was," one of them replied. "I went there every week. There was a pool hall on the second floor and a little luncheonette by the side. And if we weren't at the movies, it was where you used to meet your friends, hanging around outside. It was a wonderful place." In fact, everybody I spoke to had a story — a date, a job, a prank, a raffle, a contest — some deep emotional memory and attachment. I even met the 90 year old woman who had owned the restaurant next door, and who broke down in tears when she saw the photo, claiming that the man in the apron was her husband Eddie on his way in to check on their two young children. The theatre, she explained, had been their daycare center.

Six months later when the paper show returned to Boxboro, I rushed out and bought all the remaining Somerville theatre photos I could find. I now began visiting each of the sites. In some cases, nothing remained. The theatre had been torn down and replaced by a supermarket, garage, or even a parking lot. Just as often, however, the building was still there, redesigned as offices or luxury condos. But in each place it was the same story — people remembered the theatres fondly, even passionately. It was obvious that they had served a much greater function than simple entertainment. The theatres, dotted as they were throughout the city, had formed reference points for each of the neighborhoods they were located in. Hearing people speak about them made it clear just how important they had been in defining peoples' sense of place and community. They were like memory banks where personal and cinematic memories joined people together, experiential as well as architectural landmarks. Not only did they define neighborhoods but they also structured emotional experiences, marking life's most important social transitions as well as its simple daily rhythms. They also served as important economic anchors around which a multitude of small, family-run businesses had flourished. A social history of these theatres would not only provide a record of Somerville's rich cultural and architectural past, but just as important, demonstrate how essential cul-

tural institutions are in the creation of neighborhoods and communities.

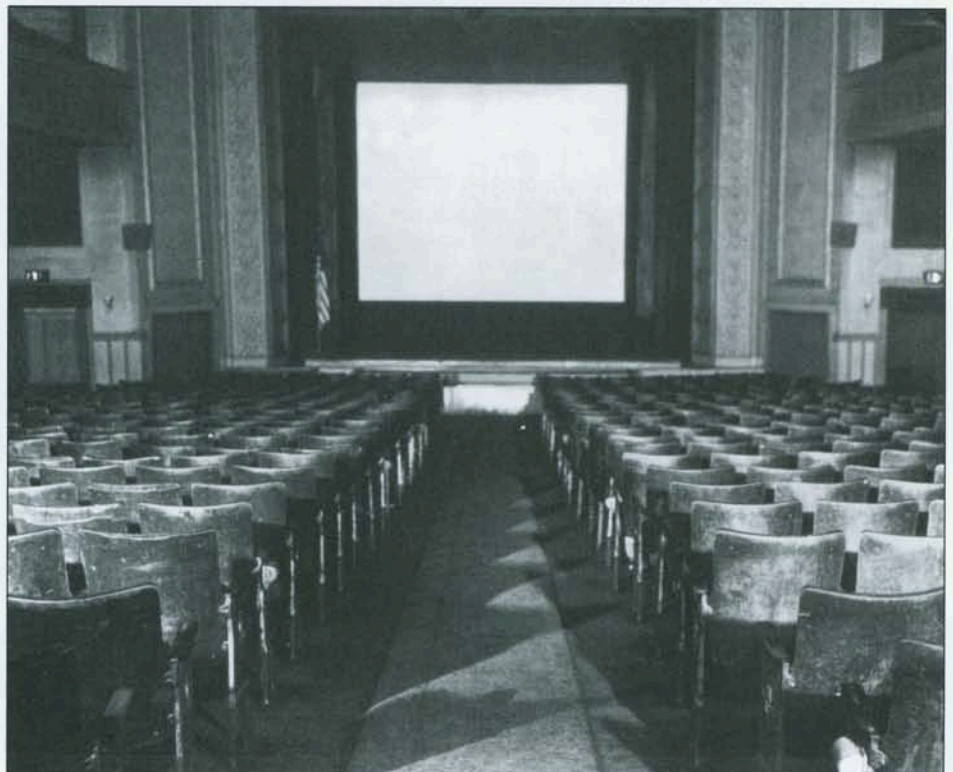
The opportunity to do this appeared quite soon when I visited the Somerville Museum in search of more information. The Museum, which also houses the Somerville Historical Society, had very little material but was as eager as I was to gather more. After

just several meetings, they asked if I would be interested in curating an exhibition, and so the Lost Theatres of Somerville Project was born. One of the first goals was to create an oral history archive of the movie-going experience. This was particularly important since most of the theatres had closed in the 1950s or early 1960s, rendering those who remembered them



David M. Guss Collection

STRAND THEATRE, Union Square (1945) (above).  
STRAND THEATRE stage and seats (1945) (below).



David M. Guss Collection



rather elderly. I wanted to record their memories as soon as possible, and with the help of a grant from Tufts University where I teach Anthropology, I designed a course in which university and local high school students would work together interviewing both patrons and former employees. The course was called "Theatres of Community and the Social Production of Space," and after two years (2002-2003), nearly a hundred people were interviewed. The range of interviewees was enormous, including actors, ushers, ticket-takers, managers, those who had owned the stores next door, and of course, those who had owned the theatres themselves. There were also the patrons — the women who had collected full sets of dishes, the kids who had snuck in the back, the girls who recalled their first kiss in the balcony, the nonagenarian who remembered silent movies at PEARSON'S PERFECT PICTURES, and even a blind man who regularly went just to listen and who often couldn't tell whether the fights were on the screen or in the seats nearby. In addition to forming a permanent archive of the movie-going experience, the interviews also became the basis for two films and two CDs, all of which were eventually included in the exhibition itself.

Another important part of the project was to document all the sites as they are today. In order to do so, we obtained a grant from the LEF Foundation which enabled us to commission some of the area's best contemporary photographers. They worked in a range of styles from color and black and white to hand-tinted prints and innovative 360 degree panoramas. As suspected, the results provided a dramatic contrast to the archival photos of the 30s and 40s. They also created an important record of the different street-scapes, permitting us to complete the life histories of not only the theatres but the neighborhoods they so clearly defined. This was a common theme in our interviews where women still identified themselves as "CENTRAL" or "STRAND" girls and men vividly recalled the risks of going to a theatre outside one's area. The theatre was the heart of one's turf and to be caught inside someone else's could be dangerous to one's health.

For many years the toughest of all Somerville neighborhoods was the Winter Hill section, home to a notori-

ous gang of the same name and the site of several grisly murders. But it was far from being so when Arthur Pearson opened his theatre there on the second floor of the Odd Fellows Hall in 1904. Like most American cities, Somerville was just emerging from the rigid morality of the Victorian era, when public entertainment was dominated by men's clubs and fraternal orders, and women and children's activities were restricted to the home. But "the twentieth-century entertainment revolution" was just about to begin (Nasaw 1993:3). Sports stadiums, amusement parks, world's fairs, and movie theatres were all part of a new public arena in which different classes, genders, ethnicities, and age groups joined together in celebration and fun for the first time. As David Nasaw noted in his book, *Coming Out, The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*, a new urban-based economy fueled by workers and immigrants with leisure time and disposable income was essential in permitting these changes to occur. So was the development of new technologies, especially electricity which allowed for safe and well-lit nighttime activities. Entrepreneurs were encouraged to invest in these new entertainment opportunities, particularly theatres as equipment makers and film producers needed outlets for their products. Brochures and ads appeared everywhere guaranteeing immediate returns on minimal investments.

Arthur Pearson was the perfect candidate for this new enterprise. A popular businessman with a flair for publicity, he was already well known to families and children through his ice cream and candy store. In addition, his landlords at the Odd Fellows Hall were looking for a way to increase revenue from the second floor meeting hall located directly above him. From the moment he opened, Pearson advertised widely with catchy alliterative jingles such as "Pearson's Particular Patrons Go to See Pearson's Perfect Pictures and To Hear Pearson's Peerless Players." He also installed the first organ in any New England theatre. His business flourished and within five years he had opened two additional theatres: the MEDFORD OPERA HOUSE in the adjacent city and the UNION SQUARE THEATRE. The UNION SQUARE was located on the third floor of a large multipurpose brick building in Somerville's oldest commercial center. Union

Square itself, which had originally been known as Liberty Pole Square, had been the scene of intense fighting in the first days of the American Revolution, and then at the beginning of the Civil War, the site of a major recruiting post. It was now the intersection of numerous trolleys and commuter rails and already the home of another theatre. The STAR had opened in 1908 in a simple two story brick building constructed twenty years earlier. From all accounts, and there are not many, it was a typical nickelodeon, an impromptu theatre set up in a dark storefront that attracted a somewhat unruly crowd and the objections of various neighbors:

On account of numerous complaints from property-owners and citizens in the vicinity of the STAR theatre, Mayor Woods ordered the place closed Wednesday evening. The mayor and chief of police recently paid a visit and were not satisfied with what they saw and heard. A large proportion of the audience was children. (*Somerville Journal*, May 7, 1909)

The STAR limped along until 1914 when it was closed for good. The building itself, however, is still standing, and while hidden behind an enormous decorative screen, is currently the home of a Brazilian restaurant and car glass repair shop. Of course Pearson faced similar problems to those of the STAR. Winning public acceptance for this new medium was not easy. In addition to moral and health concerns, Pearson and others faced the reaction of established legitimate theatres. Pearson recalled this resistance in 1929 in a speech commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the introduction of film to Somerville:

The greatest handicap the first movies encountered in the early period was the strict enforcement of the so-called "five-minute law of Massachusetts," which decreed that all motion picture houses must, after twenty-minutes showing of a picture, give a recess of five minutes to relieve eye strain. As you may know, the so-called legitimate theatre threw every obstacle they could in the way of this new form of amusement. This rigid law compelled the use of singers for illustrated songs. The audience not



quite as tolerant as today very often showed their disapproval. With the repeal of this unfair law the movie theatres all over the state took on a new lease of life and with a continuous showing of a drama or comedy in motion pictures became more orderly and the opposition to the movies gradually subsided. (*Somerville Journal*, May 10, 1929)

By 1912, the Somerville Board of Trade proclaimed Pearson's theatres "suitable and inviting for women and children, where nothing but instructive, entertaining, and proper pictures are displayed" (1912:107). Pearson, who bore a remarkable resemblance to Herbert Hoover, was by now a pillar of the community, serving several terms as alderman. In 1933, however, he lost his bid for reelection, and the following year died at the age of 67. Ironically, it was the same year the UNION SQUARE THEATRE was torn down in an act of questionable moral renewal. The theatre itself had changed hands several times eventually becoming part of Nate Gordon's Olympia circuit. But in 1925 a new theatre named the STRAND opened just several blocks away. With comfortable seating for 960, a balcony, and access to the finest first run films, the UNION SQUARE could no longer compete and soon went out of business. Once again it reverted to becom-

ing a function hall. With the advent of the Depression, it found a new use as a site for marathon dances. Between December 1932 and June 1933, it hosted the longest marathon in history lasting 3,780 hours or 22 weeks and 3 ½ days (Powers 2002). While the event may have been a financial success, local residents were scandalized. Newspapers wrote articles condemning it and when it finally ended, called for a ban to all similar activities under the headline: "Good Riddance to The Marathon" (*Somerville Journal*, June 6, 1933). Such sentiments were clearly at work when, only weeks later, it was decided to demolish the building. Today, in place of the elegant brick structure with its mansard roof and floor to ceiling arched windows are the squat one-story garage bays of a Mr. Goodwrench.

In the meantime, theatres were starting to open in other parts of the city. Following the same pattern as elsewhere, churches and men's clubs were the first sites to be converted. In the Davis Square area, the West Congregational Church decided to abandon the building they had moved by wagon from Cambridge in the 1870s in favor of a new building further up College Avenue. The National Amusement Company purchased the church for \$3000 in 1909 but due to public opposition did not open until four years

later. Called the DAY STREET OLYMPIA, it was part of the same circuit that would eventually include Pearson's UNION SQUARE. Like Pearson's Odd Fellows Hall theatre, it had a capacity of 650 and was located on the second floor. On the first floor, which had been used for weddings and other functions, a bowling alley was installed and on the front a new entryway disguised its religious past. Eventually E. M. Loew purchased the theatre, changing its name to LOEW'S DAVIS SQUARE.

No relation to his famous namesake Marcus, Elias M. Loew (1898-1984) came to the U.S. from Austria in 1911. Alone and penniless, he worked in various jobs before opening his first cinema at the age of 18. He eventually became the largest theatre owner in New England with 70 movie theatres and 17 drive-ins. He also owned the Bay State Raceway in Foxborough, a chain of hotels, and with Lou Walters, the Latin Quarter Night Club which operated in Boston, New York, and Miami. His DAVIS SQUARE Theatre was typical of many of his locations, with cheap tickets and a decidedly grade-B fare. Locals called it "the dust bowl," a reference to both the Westerns it showed and the filthy conditions that left one's clothes covered with dust. Constructed of wood, the theatre was extremely vulnerable to fire and even-



Theatre Historical Society

E. M. LOEW'S DAVIS SQUARE (1941). Opened as the DAY STREET OLYMPIA, the theatre occupied the original West Somerville Congregational Church.





PETERSON'S ORPHEUM, corner of Cross and Tufts (1945).

David M. Grass Collection

"Old Heidelberg." The 773 seat theatre changed hands several times until Wilbur Peterson purchased it in the mid-1930s. Known by various nicknames such as the "bughouse," "scratch house," and "Cross Street Orphanage," the ORPHEUM was a mecca for children from Brickbottom and other poor neighborhoods who often bargained with the manager for the price of admission. When it closed in the 1950s it became Bennett Plumbing and Heating Supply and in 2001 was turned into a luxury condominium called the Sanctuary. A classic story of architectural reuse, the 19th century church is still visible under the 20th century theatre and 21st century condominium.

These converted churches and men's clubs would find it increasingly difficult to compete once new theatres were constructed with the sole purpose of presenting films and live entertainment.<sup>1</sup> More comfortable and with better acoustics, these new structures were also larger and more luxurious. With dramatic marquees and marble lobbies, they promised the local moviegoer all the amenities and glamour of the big city. The first of these new picture palaces was the SOMERVILLE THEATRE, opening in May 1914 just one month after New York's 3,500 seat STRAND THEATRE, which is often credited with being the nation's first great film emporium. Located just two blocks from the DAY STREET OLYMPIA in Davis Square, the theatre was designed by Boston architects Funk and Wilcox as part of a much larger structure known as the Hobbs Building after the theatre's original owner Joseph Hobbs.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the 1,200 seat theatre (615 in the orchestra, 537 in the balcony, and 48 in 8 boxes), the three-story building also housed a dance hall, bowling alley, billiards parlor, restaurant, drug store, and various offices. Advertising itself as "The House of Quality," the theatre boasted fine plaster-work above the proscenium arch and an elegant mural of muses and cherubs on the ceiling. It also had its own stock company, the Somerville Players. Recruited in New York each fall, the company presented matinee and evening performances every day but Monday. It was a grueling schedule but many, such as Busby Berkeley, Tallulah Bankhead, and Ray Bolger used it as a training ground to launch their careers. Popular plays

Mary Kocot (2002)



The Sanctuary Condominiums, once a church and later the ORPHEUM THEATRE.

usually burned down in May 1942. Today, the corner of Day and Herbert Streets is a parking lot that also serves as an open-air farmer's market on Wednesdays.

The DAY STREET OLYMPIA was not the only church to be converted to a movie theatre. On the other side of town on Cross Street, Charles Tufts had donated land to build the First Universalist Church in 1854, just two years

after helping found the university named for him. After burning in 1869, the wooden structure was replaced by a brick one with four large stained glass windows on each side. But changing demographics and the noise from nearby trains led the congregation to relocate, and in 1915 the building was sold to house a theatre. It was rechristened the ORPHEUM and opened the following year with Dorothy Gish's



such as "The Old Homestead," "Unexpected Husband," "The Unkissed Bride," "Charley's Aunt," "The Wooden Kimona," and "Why Women Leave Home" were presented along with one-reelers and a live musical interlude.

In 1926, the theatre was sold to Arthur Viano who had already built his own movie house in nearby Teele Square. In partnership with his sons Arthur, Jr. and Robert, the Vianos would eventually purchase the BROADWAY, as well as the CAPITOL and REGENT in nearby Arlington, making them the area's most important theatre owners. The SOMERVILLE, however, would remain their flagship theatre. They continued to support the stock company until a worsening economy forced them to dissolve it in 1932. It was not easy, however, to get good films as Paramount, MGM, and others preferred to distribute through their own affiliates. Like many independent exhibitors, they turned to giveaways such as dish and bank nights.<sup>3</sup> Everything including plateware, turkeys, refrigerators, radios, and fur coats was offered in order to attract the working-class audience they depended on. One could also be assured any number of non-filmic activities, such as vaudeville, sing-alongs, beauty contests, and even cooking classes. Newsreels, cartoons, and the latest installment of a popular serial were also included with the double feature. Like local theatres elsewhere, the movie-going experience offered by the Vianos was a varied, multi-media one, to be shared in the company of neighbors and friends.

In 1984, the SOMERVILLE THEATRE was sold again for only the second time in its history, this time to Mel Fraiman who had also purchased the Vianos' Arlington CAPITOL. During the 1980s, it was managed by Garen Daly who brought live music and theatre back. After a period of uncertainty about its future, the theatre underwent a million dollar renovation in which four small screening rooms were added. New seating also reduced the capacity in the main auditorium to

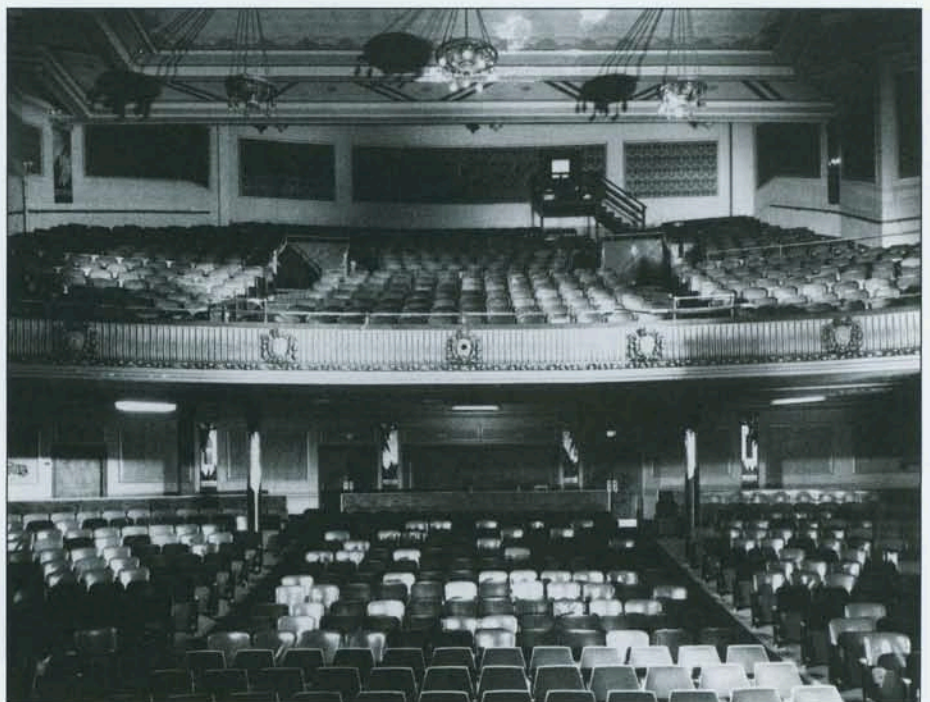
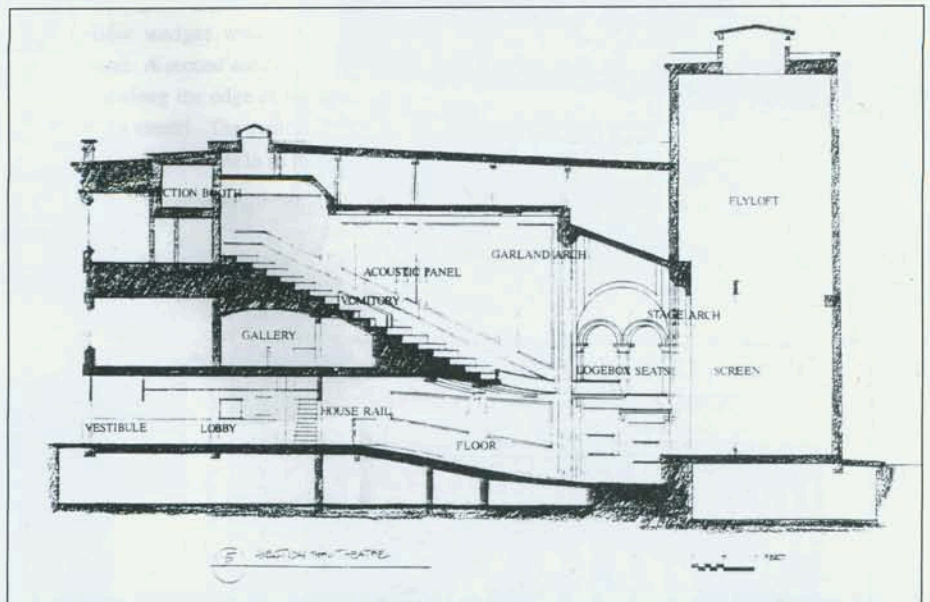
SOMERVILLE THEATRE, the week it opened, May 1914 (top).

SOMERVILLE THEATRE cross-section (middle).

SOMERVILLE THEATRE interior (1989). Photo commissioned by Robert Viano for the 75th anniversary of the theatre. Courtesy Garen Daly.



Somerville Museum Collection



Toshio Tamaki



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TO THE

**SOMERVILLE BROADWAY**  
AT DAVIS SQ. AT 81 BROADWAY

**TEELE SQ.**

THEATRES — — — SOMERVILLE

Week Starting Sunday, April 26

**GOOD WILL NIGHT**  
EVERY MONDAY EVENING  
AT THE SOMERVILLE THEATRE

EVERY SATURDAY EVENING  
AT BROADWAY and TEELE SQ. THEATRES  
Be Sure to Get Your Ballot! Don't Miss This!

EVERY SUNDAY EVENING  
AT SOMERVILLE and BROADWAY THEATRES

**BIG TIME VAUDEVILLE** **ON OUR STAGE**

**5 - Professional Acts - 5**  
Ample Parking Space

Courtesy Arthur A. Viano Family

Viano Film Weekly, April 26, 1936.

**BIG GALA WEEK**  
**TEELE SQ. THEATRE**  
ENTIRE WEEK STARTING  
**Sunday, AUG. 7**  
Engagement Extraordinary!!  
**DR. KARR**  
MENTALIST SUPREME & CO.  
PRESENT  
**A NIGHT IN SPIRITLAND**

**HE** SEES THE UNSEEN  
TELLS THE UNTOLD  
KNOWS THE UNKNOWN

**FREE! FREE! FREE!**  
On Monday Evening, at 7 p. m. Dr. Karr will bury a man alive in front of this theatre  
**DON'T MISS THIS IMPOSSIBLE FEAT!!**

SPECIAL MATINEE FOR LADIES FRIDAY	ASK DR. KARR	SPECIAL MATINEE FOR CHILDREN SATURDAY
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Sun. Mon. Tues. — August 7-9  
 "THE MIDNIGHT PATROL" with REGIS TOOMAY and BETTY BRONSON  
 — 4:00 —  
 "SEAWAY" with FAY WRAY  
 Wednesday, Thursday — August 10-11  
 "YOUNG BRIDE" with Hazel Trenchard  
 — 4:00 —  
 "NO ONE MAN" with LILLIAN  
 Friday, Saturday — August 12-13  
 "THE WIDOW IN BEARLY" with DOROTHY RYDER  
 — 4:00 —  
 "DARING DANGER" with TIM MCCOY

David M. Guss Collection

TEELE SQUARE poster for the week of August 7, 1932.



**ARTHUR F. VIANO • VIANO'S THEATRES • SOMERVILLE, MA**



Courtesy Arthur A. Viano Family

Arthur F. Viano with his sons Arthur A. (left) and Robert (right). Robert's wife, Florence, who worked in the theatres for many years, is on the porch.

**TO OUR LADY PATRONS**

Due to the overwhelming success of our "GIVE-AWAY" tonight, we are compelled to give you this

**SHORTAGE CARD**

Present this card ..... and  
Day  
you will receive your Missing Article.

**Broadway – Teele Sq. – Somerville**  
Theatres

**Who Wants A Baby  
FREE?**

A Beautiful Baby two months old, in perfect health, with blue eyes, offered to some family who can provide and care for it. Child is white, reason, the family has more than it can take care of at present.

THE ABOVE MENTIONED BABY WILL BE GIVEN AWAY FROM THE STAGE OF THE

**BROADWAY THEATRE**

ON THE EVENING OF

**Friday, October 24th**

Flier announcing one of the many giveaways at the BROADWAY THEATRE, this one for what seems to be a baby, though in reality it was a pig.

Courtesy Arthur A. Viano Family



Theatre Historical Society

TEELE SQUARE THEATRE (1941).



900. Today it is the site of both films and concerts, much as it was when it opened over ninety years ago. Bruce Springsteen, Tracy Chapman, Rickie Lee Jones, the Alloy Orchestra and a host of other top names have made this landmark theatre a magnet for audiences throughout New England, and the neighborhood it anchors one of the most thriving in the country.

Unfortunately, the Vianos' other two Somerville theatres, the TEELE SQUARE and BROADWAY, did not fare so well. Located less than a mile from Davis Square at the western end of Broadway, the TEELE SQUARE was the only

theatre the Vianos actually built. The architect was Walter Littlefield, who had designed the city's principal fire station. The modest entrance was located in a row of storefronts with the auditorium at a right angle behind them. But the interior was decidedly elegant as noted by the local paper:

The new theatre seats 1,100 people in comfortable leather-covered spring cushion chairs. The walls and ceiling are in gray and blue with plaster ornaments and medallions in gold... The lobby is very attractive with a mahogany booth in

the centre of the entrance for the sale of tickets. Italian marble with finishings in carmine and gold make a brilliant effect, and there is an artistic fountain in the form of a lion's head from which drinking water may be obtained... Everything is designed for the comfort of the patrons. (*Somerville Journal*, January 13, 1922)

It opened in January 1922 with "The Iron Trail," "Don't Tell Everybody," and "Love and Doughnuts," as well as several musical acts and a Pathé news. Of particular interest was the mighty Wurlitzer played by noted organist Chester Brigham. Today many locals still recall the irascible manager Bob Schoonover as well as John Cochios's Sweet Shop next door where for 50 cents you could get the "Tufts Special," a cheeseburger with an extra grilled ham and cheese on top. When the TEELE SQUARE closed in 1967, Stanley Stewart moved his theatre back-drop company in. Thirty years later it was declared a "health hazard" and razed. It is now a parking lot.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the city just blocks from Charlestown, a man named Hurst began construction on a similarly sized theatre in the summer of 1915. In order to finance it, he offered shares to the public at \$10 each, with the added incentive of free weekly admissions for a full year. Despite a grand opening attended by the mayor and other dignitaries, the new BROADWAY THEATRE went bankrupt within months. It then became part of the Hoffman circuit which in turn sold it to the Vianos in 1929. After several years of selling tickets for a dollar, the BROADWAY finally closed in 1982, driven out of business by a nearby multiplex. But for over fifty years it was the cultural center of east Somerville, one of the poorest areas of the city. With restaurants and stores on either side, residents still recall how they would gather at the theatre even if they had no intention of going in. Its 1,040 seats removed, the theatre served as both a prop and rug warehouse until the city finally purchased it. It is currently awaiting a new life as the home of Mudflat Pottery Studios, a group that plans to restore its wonderful palazzo front as well as its mosaic tile work where the name BROADWAY is still visible just beyond the footprint of the former ticket booth.

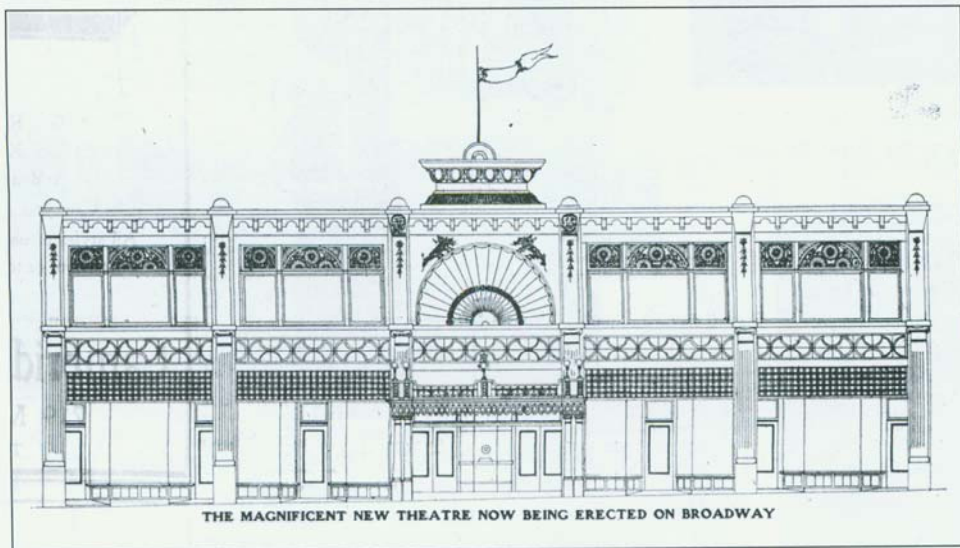


Illustration promoting stock in the new BROADWAY THEATRE. Each share cost \$10 with investors not only sharing in the profits but also getting "52 Free weekly admissions." (August 27, 1915).



BROADWAY THEATRE interior (2002).

Somerville Journal

Stefanie Klavens



The Vianos were not the only theatre family in Somerville. John Locatelli, an Italian immigrant who had worked as a laborer in East Boston, opened the CENTRAL THEATRE in 1921, soon followed by the BALL SQUARE, and the CAPITOL in neighboring Arlington. The CENTRAL, as its name implies, was located in the city's geographical center, where for years various men's clubs and fraternal orders were found. The 910-seat theatre, designed by Frank Bignotti, was encased inside an apartment house with storefronts flanking the entrance. Referred to as "Somerville's photoplay theatre de luxe," the interior was as elegant as the facade, featuring murals on each side of the stage and false boxes to disguise the organ pipes. Its innovative design made the space easy to readapt when the theatre closed forty years later. Between 1989 and 1993, the Boston Rock Gym made use of the brick wall behind the stage and after that it became a bottle redemption center. The theatre has now been carved up into offices but on the corner a tango school operates where Valentino once performed.

The BALL SQUARE, not far from Tufts, was even more ambitious. With a large balcony and a capacity of nearly 1,500, the theatre was attached to a row of stores called the Hilson Block. It was advertised as the region's most "pretentious and capacious" new theatre, opening with great fanfare in April 1923. As the *Somerville Journal* described it:

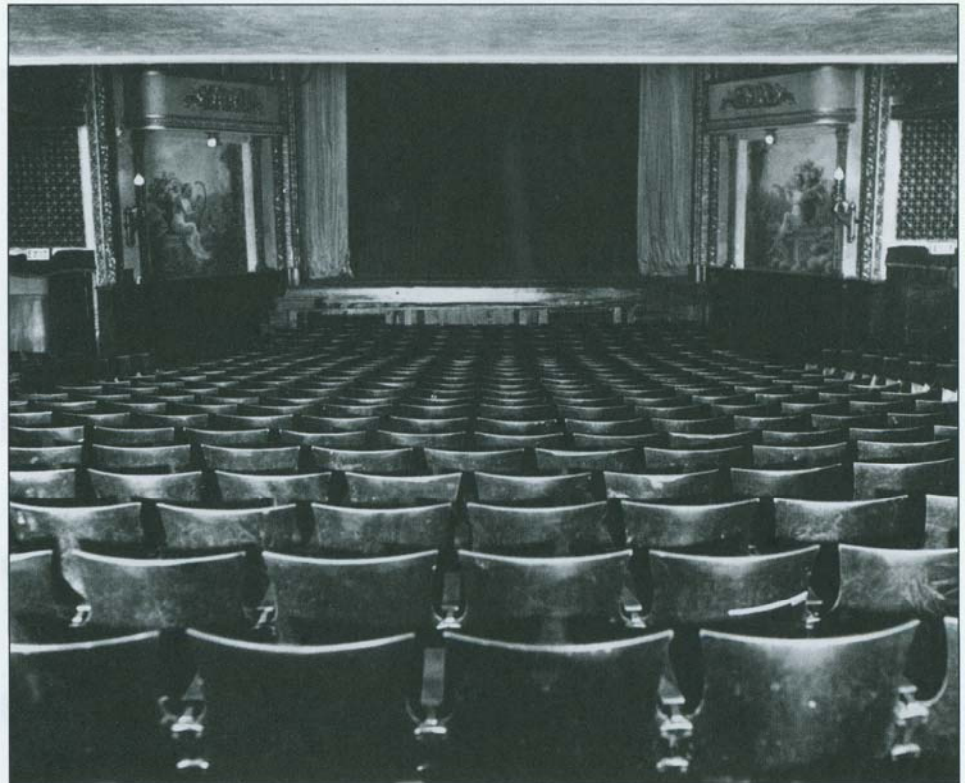
The BALL SQUARE is strictly modern in its construction and the last word in fire-proof...The entrance to the theatre is of appealing beauty, the floor of the lobby being of Italian mosaic, while the panels are of the finest Terrazzo marble. Beautifully gilded frames are generously distributed that will serve to announce attractions.

A huge pipe organ of multiple instruments is an outstanding feature...Tapestries adorn the walls of the theatre which are finished in lined stone effects. The building is of brick, with a cast stone front. The color scheme of the theatre is old rose and French ivory and there are numerous exits.

No expense has been spared by the builders in providing a theatre that will serve not only as a means of education and entertainment to



CENTRAL THEATRE, Highland Avenue (1952). Just beyond the theatre on the right is the Central Club.



CENTRAL THEATRE (1945). Murals on either side of the stage and false boxes conceal the organ.



Somerville Journal

the community, but will also stand as one of the most beautiful edifices in the city. (*Somerville Journal*, April 6, 1923)

Despite its claims to being the “last word in fire-proof,” the BALL SQUARE was the scene of several fires, including a massive one in 1939 that convinced Locatelli to quit the business.<sup>4</sup> By now Locatelli was much less interested in theatres than he was in real estate. In subsequent years, he and his son Albert would go on to develop the downtown areas in such exclusive suburbs as Winchester and Belmont. As for their theatres, they sold the Arlington CAPITOL to the Vianos, and the BALL SQUARE and CENTRAL to the M&P circuit. M&P, which stood for Mullins and Pinanski, was already Boston’s largest chain having taken over Paramount Publix’s local theatres when the latter was threatened with bankruptcy in 1933. They now consolidated their position in Somerville by purchasing the STRAND as well. Their continued relationship with Paramount and other studios gave them access to the best films. The Vianos, on the other hand, depended on studios such as Columbia and Universal which did not have their own theatres. They also reduced costs by showing the same pictures on all their screens, often rushing reels from one location to the next. The DAY STREET and PETE’S ORPHEUM were even less fortunate. They were last-run theatres offering cheap tickets and catering to kids with Westerns and serials.

At the top of this hierarchy was the CAPITOL, the closest thing that Somerville had to a true picture palace. It was even built in 1927, that magical year when Lindbergh flew to Paris, movies spoke, the first Oscar ceremony was held, and some of the world’s greatest theatres were built. Located on Broadway across the street from PEARSON’S PERFECT PICTURES — which it quickly put out of business — the CAPITOL was an enormous theatre seating 1,732 people. It was so deep that the projection system had to be



David M. Gruss Collection

BALL SQUARE THEATRE opening day announcement (April 6, 1923). While the crowds may be exaggerated, the depiction of the theatre itself is quite accurate. (top).

BALL SQUARE THEATRE lobby (1945) (above)

BALL SQUARE THEATRE main floor and balcony (1945) (right).

#### JEFFREY WEISS AWARD COMPETITION

The competition is intended to stimulate interest in research and writing on historic theatres and to publish the results in *Marquee*®, the quarterly journal of the Society. Certificates and monetary prizes are awarded for the winning entries.

Mr. & Mrs. Elias Weiss of New York inaugurated the Jeffrey Weiss Award Competition in 1984. Their son Jeffrey had a lifelong interest in theatres and was a member of the THS from 1974 until his death in 1982. The Weiss family endowed an annual competition to honor and perpetuate their son’s memory.



David M. Gruss Collection



located inside a dome above the main floor. With its own orchestra and art deco murals lining the entrance, the theatre was predicted "to be the centre of attraction at all times" (*Somerville Journal*, March 4, 1927). Its beginnings were not auspicious, however. An Armenian immigrant named Vartigian had gone into heavy debt to build it, and only three years after it opened the Union Realty Company foreclosed on the mortgage. A nasty suit followed and by 1931 it was part of the Interstate Theatre circuit.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, M&P took it over, dominating the market in Somerville even further.

In 1963, the CAPITOL, like many theatres, closed. After various proposals for reuse failed, it was torn down to make way for a grocery chain called Star Market. But there were no stars, and the side that faces the street is a windowless wall of brick. Before this happened, the theatre took one last curtain call. The Winter Hill Gang, who haunted the bars that surrounded the theatre, had been at war with the McLaughlin Brothers from Charlestown for four years. Already twenty-four people were dead. At one in the morning on October 30, 1965, the gang's boss, Buddy McLean, left the Winter Hill Lounge with two friends, crossed Broadway to his Cadillac parked in front of the shuttered CAPITOL, and was blasted with five rounds from a 12 gauge shotgun. A policeman chased the assassin into the abandoned theatre but lost him as he disappeared out the back. The end to another great movie.



CAPITOL THEATRE (1941).


Courtesy Anthony Matarazzo



CAPITOL THEATRE entrance (1945). Note the Art Deco mural as well as the M&P logo between the ads for war bonds.

David M. Guss Collection

**HOME OF VITAPHONE**



**CAPITOL THEATRE**  
BROADWAY SOMERVILLE  
WINTER HILL

MATINEE DAILY AT 2.15 SOMERSET 2700 AND 2701  
EVENING PERFORMANCE AT 8 P. M.

MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, MAY 13, 14, 15

Very Unusual Program  
2 BIG TALKING PICTURES ON THE SAME PROGRAM  
DOORS OPEN AT 7.30

Pathe presents  
**William BOYD**  
IN  
**"The Leatherneck"**  
with ALAN HALE  
ROBERT ARMSTRONG  
and FRED KOHLER

THIS IS A 60% TALKING PICTURE

— ALSO —

PERFORMANCE STARTS AT 8 P. M.

**Chester Conklin**  
IN  
**"TAXI 13"**

2 VITAPHONE ACTS  
HARRINGTON SISTERS  
UNDER SEAS REVUE  
COMEDY, NEWS ORGAN

THURSDAY, FRIDAY, SATURDAY, MAY 16, 17, 18

ON THE SAME PROGRAM  
2 VITAPHONE ACTS  
HARRY CONLEY  
MAYER & EVANS  
COMEDY NEWS AND ORGAN  
NOVELTY

**SEE and HEAR**  
WARNER BROS.  
**Dolores Costello**  
in  
**"The REDEEMING SIN"**  
with Conrad Nagel  
LIONEL BELMORE PHILIP DE LACY  
GEORGE STONE KENNY QUARANTINO  
Directed by HARVEY SATES Produced by HENRIK ANTONSSON  
BROS. VITAPHONE PRESENTS

ADDED ATTRACTION SATURDAY  
MAT. & EVE. 4 BIG ACTS  
VAUDEVILLE AND SERIAL

— ALSO —

**Glenn Tryon in 'IT CAN BE DONE'**

Somerville Journal



CAPITOL THEATRE main floor and balcony (1945).

David M. Guss Collection

CAPITOL THEATRE ad (May 10, 1929)



## The Author

**David M. Guss** is a poet, translator, editor, folklorist, and anthropologist who has lived and worked in various parts of Latin America. A professor of anthropology at Tufts University, his most recent book was *The Festive State: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance*, which explores the ways in which festive behavior is used to negotiate, challenge, and constitute identity. He is also the author of a study of the Yekuana Indians of Venezuela entitled *To Weave and Sing: Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rain Forest*. This work was based on over ten years of research in the Orinoco rain forest. During this time he also translated the Yekuana's creation epic into English. Now in its third edition, *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle* has also been made into an award-winning film as well as two NPR radio broadcasts. In addition to his anthropological work, Guss is a published poet and translator. His edited collection *The Selected Poetry of Vicente Huidobro* was published by New Directions Press and his own book of poems entitled *Walky-Talky* by Pendu Femelle. In 2003, Guss curated an exhibition entitled "Lost Theatres of Somerville" which traced the life-histories of the city's fourteen movie theatres. It was installed at the Somerville Museum for an entire year. He is currently developing a complementary project titled "The Architecture of Utopia and the College Campus" which focuses on college campus design and the various strategies used to create temporary communities. He is presently completing a book on the Fiesta del Gran Poder in La Paz, Bolivia where along with his wife, Kate Wheeler, he has danced as a devil since 1998.

## Endnotes

1. There were two more theatres during this formative period located in converted buildings: The Highland (1916-1920) which was located in a Knights of Columbus hall and the Winter Hill (1910-1917) which operated in a storefront a block away from Pearson's Perfect Pictures. Both buildings are still in existence, the first a banquet hall and the second the home of a U. S. Post office and bakery.
2. Funk and Wilcox also designed the landmark Strand Theatre in Dorchester four years later in 1918.
3. The Depression was particularly hard on movie theatres, forcing nearly a third of them to close. To lure patrons back, they began giving away pieces of china on the slowest nights of the week. Salem and other Ohio Valley manufacturers began competing for this new market and within a couple of years thousands of theatres across the country were offering everything from soup bowls to washing machines and fur coats. At the Vianos' Somerville theatres, the giveaways lasted well into the 1970s. Among the most popular of all giveaways, however, was Bank Night, originally introduced in Colorado in 1932. Anyone could sign up for the drawing in which a new bank account was awarded. But they had to be in the theatre to claim it. If not, the pot continued to increase similar to a lottery. By 1936, 6,000 of the country's 15,000 theatres were using it, with pots often reaching several thousand dollars (Parkhill 1937).
4. After closing in 1956, the Ball Square was the site of frequent vandalism leading to fires in 1969 and 1970. The lobby eventually became the home of Leo's House of Pizza which caught fire in October 1986. After renovations, Cambridge Lock moved in. But the city forced the owner to take down the beautiful facade for dubious reasons of safety. The auditorium behind it was removed and is now a parking lot.
5. Interstate Theatres were owned by the Stoneman family and stretched from Cape Cod to Maine. They eventually merged with General Cinemas which became part of AMC in 2001.

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**Organization**  
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Balaban & Katz organization has no parallel in theatrical history, and is not surpassed in any other line of industry. This organization was made possible only by the great size and capacity of the Chicago, Tivoli, Riviera, Central Park and Roosevelt theatres, which enjoy over 18,000,000 paid admissions yearly.

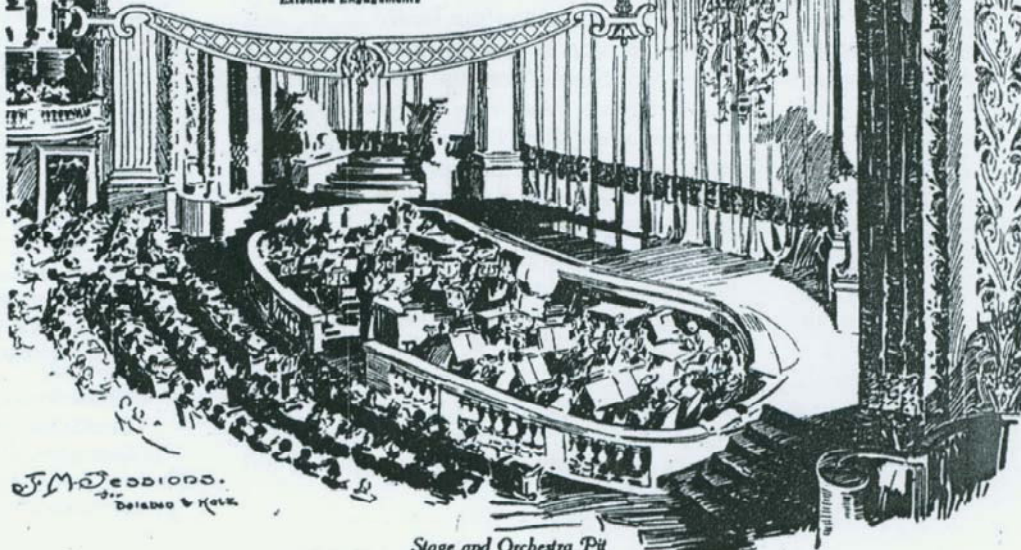
*With this organization* Balaban & Katz have no difficulty in presenting the finest entertainment possible for the people of Chicago. They can produce anything that is possible on the stage—GRAND OPERA, because they have trained operatic producers—HIPPODROME, because they have men skilled in the promotion of vast spectacles—MUSICAL COMEDIES, because they have the best theatrical specialists—THE BEST MOTION PICTURES, because they have men who have been producing and selecting pictures since the industry began—THE BEST MUSIC, because they have the best conductors, the best organists and the best musicians that the theatrical world affords.

This great organization has not only given Chicago the best entertainment that master-minds can conceive, but has brought the cost down to a popular basis so that *all* the people, regardless of class or condition, can afford it. This is but another result of size, capacity and *volume of patronage*.

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*Exclusively Super-films—*  
*Extended Engagements*



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