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Volume 20, Number 2, October 1991

URI: id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019260ar
https://doi.org/10.7202/1019260ar

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Cite this article


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In 1913 the Marcus Loew theatre circuit of New York City began construction of a theatre complex in Toronto. Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, it boasted two proscenium stage theatres under one roof and cost approximately $500,000 to build. The Loews Yonge Street (capacity 2149) and Winter Garden (capacity 1410) theatres opened in 1913 and 1914 respectively. The theatres entertained patrons with the same programmes of vaudeville acts and short movies booked by the New York office of the Loew circuit. The Loews Yonge Street, the lower theatre, ran continuous performances during the afternoon and evening. Its patrons were entertained in surroundings that included red brocade, plaster painted to look like marble, and extensive use of gold draperies and elaborate gilded ornamental plasterwork. In the Winter Garden, only one evening show was performed daily. For a slightly higher admission fee, its patrons were treated to reserved seats amid surroundings meant to imitate the outdoors. Plaster painted to look like tree trunks, a profusion of floral murals, and real beech leaves interspersed with cotton flowers and hung from wire grids created a garden atmosphere.

In Double Take: the Story of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres, author Hilary Russell describes the original Loews Yonge Street and Winter Garden theatres and their place in both theatre history and the empire of Marcus Loew. She concludes with their transformation into the Elgin and Winter Garden theatres of 1989.

The decline of vaudeville and the rising popularity of the sound film clearly influenced the history of these two theatres. The Winter Garden theatre closed and reopened periodically during the 1920s, and closed permanently on June 16, 1928. The Loews Yonge Street was wired for sound in April, 1929, and on October 3, 1930, it began to show films exclusively. From then on its fate was determined by the popularity of film. The advent of television and the concurrent movement toward smaller movie theatres thus meant hard times for this large capacity theatre that had prospered during the era of the movie palace.

The Loews Yonge Street was sold to 20th Century Theatres in August, 1969. It was renamed the Yonge in February, 1970, and the Elgin in March, 1978. Changes in ownership, name, and program direction failed to revive the faded theatre. It closed in November, 1981.

In December, 1981, the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications bought the Elgin and Winter Garden theatres and made plans to restore them. The government’s aim was to add a mid-sized commercial theatre in Toronto. The federal government’s designation of the complex as a National Historic Site confirmed the wisdom of the province’s action.

At first glance, the quantity and quality of the illustrations lead the reader to think that this is a coffee-table book. However, a reading of the text alters that assessment. Nor is it a how-to guide to theatre restoration or a step-by-step description of the $29,000,000 restoration. The few specific details of the restoration Russell includes and illustrates are, however, quite interesting. Rather, Russell thoroughly describes the original Loews Yonge Street and Winter Garden theatres and documents how developments in the entertainment industry affected them.

The book creates a desire for a personal tour of the restored Elgin and Winter Garden theatres.