

*A Theatre near You: 150 Years of Going to the Show in  
Ottawa-Gatineau.* By Alain Miguelez

Chris Ernst

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attention to the clarity of the map (p. 50) illustrating the route and the various places on the Opeongo Road. The principal problem is its small scale, approximately twelve miles to the inch, which springs from its being squeezed into a single page. Had a double page been used here the lettering would have been more easily legible and more detail might have been included. Many places mentioned in the book are not labelled, frustrating for the keen reader who may wish to visit such spots. Another map (p.vii) is a monochrome copy of part of a federal government coloured topographic map, and it lacks a title, legend and scale-bar. Its complex content is almost a blur and the Opeongo Road is indistin-

guishable. I would have welcomed a fuller table of contents, listing chapter subsections. These are often quite diverse, and draw attention to the subjects of the oral histories or to specific localities. Also I note three different renditions of the Opeongo Road's starting point: "Farrel's Landing" (p. 50), "Farrell's landing" (p. 174) and, on the back cover, "Farrell's Landing!" Still, the entire book is very well researched and provides a fascinating history of one of the most famous – if not *the* most famous -- of Ontario's colonization roads. I can hardly wait to explore its byways.

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## *A Theatre near You:*

*150 Years of Going to the Show in Ottawa-Gatineau.*

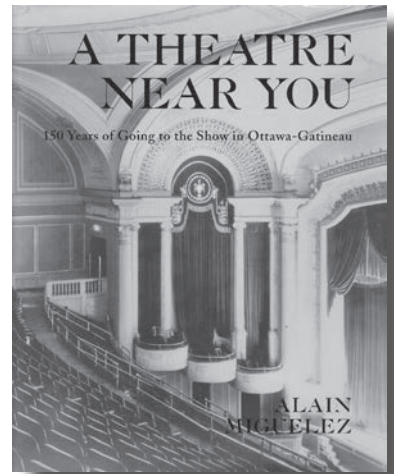
By Alain Miguélez. Manotick, Ontario: Penumbra Press, 2004. 370 pp. Illustrations. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN 1-894131-38-X.

Reading Alain Miguélez's *A Theatre near You: 150 Years of Going to the Show in Ottawa-Gatineau* put me in mind of a concept from urban planner Jane Jacobs. In her most recent work, *Dark Age Ahead* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2005) Jacobs refers to a kind of "mass amnesia" in which key aspects of culture and memory are irretrievably lost to a people. In attempting to understand the phenomena of Dark Ages, she asks "how and why can a people so totally discard a formerly vital culture that it becomes literally lost?" (p. 4) Much the same sentiment undergirds Miguélez's moving tome to the local cinema. A virtual rise and fall of going to the show, his work charts the changing course of movie-going from its early days in the Nickelodeons to its postmodern

incarnation in "big box" megaplexes. Spiced with the author's own stories of going to the show,

Miguélez justifies his present work as an effort to catalogue the remaining evidence of neighbourhood movie houses before, like the actual buildings themselves, they are lost completely under the wrecking ball of our society's tendency to dismantle the old. The reader cannot help but sympathize with Miguélez's lament for a lost culture.

The structure and organization of *A Theatre Near You* are straight-forward, if a little uninspired. It is divided into nine



parts: Stage and Vaudeville, Park Shows and Nickelodeons, Early Legitimate Cinemas, Downtown Picture Palaces, Talking Picture Theatres, Post-War Theatre Boom, Porno Theatres, Theatres in Malls and Office Complexes, and finally, The Megaplexes. Each of these parts is made up of relatively short sections focused on individual theatres and cinemas. Miguelez takes his reader through the history of these houses of entertainment in a brisk and at times playful manner. If there was a villain in Miguelez's narrative, it would have to be the television, whose small screen stole audiences away from the public space of the movie house and locked them in the isolation of their own homes. "There have been four waves of theatre closings," he laments, "since television appeared." (p. 20). In the 1950s, some cinemas felt the pressure of TV immediately. During the 1970s, the downtown palaces in Ottawa succumbed not only to the mass-marketing of television but also to land speculators anxious to capitalize on sizeable chunks of prime real estate in the city's core. With the 1980s, Cineplex, followed by Famous Players, restructured the movie theatre away from individual screens to multi-screen complexes frequently located in malls. Miguelez notes this shift "actually saved the movie chains from the continued onslaught of cable television and VCRs." (p. 21). While the number of actual cinemas decreased significantly, the number of screens increased, especially in the suburbs. Toward the end of the 1990s these shopping-mall multiplexes came under increasing criticism for their small size and poor acoustics. The emergence of big-box megaplexes, housing as many as twenty-four large screens, initiated another round of closings. Under this kind of sustained pressure, the downtown movie palaces

that inspired Miguelez to undertake this work could not survive.

Serious scholars of public entertainment, theatre history or cinema studies will find Miguelez's work both exciting and, I suspect, a little frustrating. Trained and employed as an urban planner, the author does not always adhere to the niceties of academic writing. There are too many places where a reader, anxious to pursue one of the author's many interesting lines of inquiry, will find no endnote or other reference. Miguelez also privileges high-brow, or so-called "legitimate" fare, over its more popular cousin. This bias toward high over low will strike more academically inclined readers as awkward and uncritical. There are too many generalizations, particularly with regards to Victorian attitudes, that are both anachronistic and unscholarly. The reader would also benefit from some kind of conclusion, which would bring the work together as a whole. Finally, for a work seeking to preserve memory, it is a shame that Miguelez does not pay much attention to the way cinema usurped theatre's position as the community's collective entertainer, most tellingly symbolized by his reference to cinemas or movie houses as "theatres." To many, those aspects of "lost" community that the author laments are little more than the simulacra of "neighborhood" produced by the spread of mass-consumption on the heels of moving images. Having said this, however, *A Theatre Near You* is an intriguing work with exceptional photographs and illustrations. Miguelez has assembled a treasure-trove of stories and anecdotes that will inspire the lay-person as well as the serious scholar interested in this important part of our cultural heritage.

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