

December 9, 2014  
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### CIN230 Case Study #3: The Royal Cinema

The recent history of a Toronto repertory theatre, operating for 75 years at 608 College Street in the heart of Little Italy, reveals the history of a cinema that repeats itself. The Royal Cinema was opened by Peter McQuillan as The Pylon in 1939, a year widely considered to be the greatest of Classical Hollywood cinema (*Turan*). British screen star Anna Neagle, star of *Victoria the Great* (1937), graced the foyer, leaving her high heeled footprints in a slab of cement only to have them re-discovered under layers of renovations sixty-seven years later. For a city once-burgeoning with Little Cinemas at the height of Classical Hollywood, by the end of 2006, Toronto's repertory theatres had been reduced by almost half, following the closure of eight independent cinemas in seven years. In spite of declining box office returns, The Royal survives, having adapted with changing technologies and on the basis of a different business model.

The announcement of the Royal's closure came on May 19th, 2006. Two years following the death of McQuillan, a CBC News story announced the family's decision to close by June 30th, citing financial difficulties and "the shortened time between a film's commercial release and its release on DVD" as a factor "continuing to squeeze the window in which repertory cinemas can show Hollywood films" (CBC News). A community protest and the intervention of the Festival Cinemas chain had, ironically, saved the Royal from demolition only two decades prior. By July 28th, a Globe and Mail article announced new owners, proclaiming "Landmark cinema gets a new life" (Mick), but as construction began on renovations at The Royal, plans were being made for a new threat, not far away.

The Royal Cinema was purchased in 2006 by a film and television post-production company known as Theatre D, led by John Hazen, Dan Peel, and Carlos Herrera. The new owners pledged to support Canadian independent and foreign cinema, and set up a permanent post-production facility that would build on a model created at the Regent uptown. Purchased for \$2.2 M and with \$1 M in renovations, the cinema was the first in the city to install a Christie High Definition Projector (Young). The Royal became a boutique screening venue with state-of-the-art post-production and exhibition facilities, serving star Canadian directors like Atom Egoyan, Deepa Mehta, and Bruce McDonald. With a business model that does not rely on classic film screenings as a primary revenue stream, the owners built a “premier exhibition site [...] encompassing every aspect of the cinema experience” (Wong). The facility features 4K Christie Digital Projection, 3D Projection, in-theatre Colour Correction, and facilities to project “all common formats” including 35mm, with a Dolby-approved 7.1 mixing facility to boot. For live events, there is a retractable screen, lighting grid, plus optional 2D or 3D video production, audio recording, streaming, and broadcasting. The theatre seats 400, has a 40’ screen, and beautifully-restored art deco features (Theatre D, web). The post studios include Avid, Final Cut Pro, and Pro Tools (Young). Billing itself as a “second-run indie/art house cinema” and a “digitally-equipped screening and live event venue” catering to “live concerts, screenings, film festivals, corporate events, multimedia exhibition, and more” (The Royal, web), the Royal aims to reach a wide audience spectrum. But as the Royal opened its doors, shovels broke ground at the site of the Bell Lightbox theatre, where the new home for TIFF and the Cinematheque would soon become a strong competitor, attracting Toronto’s TIFF-crazed audiences and tourists everywhere with five theatres, special exhibitions, and more at its popular King Street West location.

Walking past the Royal Cinema today, the theatre marquee and box office window displays the current offerings, and (for those not in the neighbourhood) the monthly calendar is posted to Facebook and Twitter, where their strategy is to entice audiences with graphics, stills, film posters, blurbs, quotes and movie trailers. Special events open to the public include a presentation of the Canadian holiday classic A Cosmic Christmas (1977), featuring an introduction by Canadian animation icon Clive Smith, co-founder of Nelvana. Other features include the “Royal Mystery Movie” and a line-up of ‘80s Hollywood favourites like Gremlins (1984), Trading Places (1983), and Scrooged (1988). The go-to publication for repertory cinema movie listings has always been the movie listings section of NOW Magazine, and for as long as the Royal (and NOW) live on, screening information will be included there. However, many audiences are more likely to turn to rottentomatoes.com for film ratings and information. In addition to second-run films, the Royal screens independent Canadian and foreign films, and plays host to local and traveling film festivals. This past November, the Royal hosted the 2014 European Union Film Festival. With films selected by in-house curator Colin Geddes, a Toronto industry veteran and past-TIFF programmer, the coming week’s offerings include: the Keanu Reeves action thriller John Wick (2014); Cronenberg’s latest drama, Maps to the Stars (2014); the US drama Whiplash (2014), recipient of three 2015 Film Independent Spirit Awards nominations; and Life After Death From Above 1979 (2014), a Canadian documentary about the band Death From Above 1979, directed by Eva Michon.

But with competing forces driving against theatres everywhere, no online marketing presence nor TIFF-seasoned programmer is enough to deliver audiences to theatres on its own. The theatre relies upon \$2500 per night special event rental fees to boost what little box office

revenue is generated by screening repertory and independent or foreign films. Last April, Paul Schrader, screenwriter of Taxi Driver (1976), was in attendance at a “Seventh Art” Live Directors Series at the Royal, where he presented a newly restored print of the Scorsese film. Another live event sought to attract local cinephiles: Ingrid Veninger’s 1K Wave, a valiant attempt to support new Canadian filmmakers and foster the production of new independent films. Funds to produce the 1K Wave were to come from ticket sales of her screening of i am a good person/i am a bad person (2011) at The Royal, yet while the box office estimate was \$5000, only \$2000 came in through the gate (Everett-Green). Funds to support future Waves were to be generated by ticket sales from the first 1K Wave, but box office revenues for the Wave did not reach expectations either. As Acland states, with domestic films occupying only 2-3% of exhibition market, the problem remains a “lack of audiences” (168) and, arguably, the difficulty of film financing in a landscape with dwindling economic resources.

The mass closure of repertory cinemas in the first decade of this century occurred as a result of new technologies that once again changed the theatrical exhibition landscape. Besides the astronomical cost of digital upgrades, repertory theatres have faced multiple competing forces in the theatrical market: the introduction of Dolby sound, the home movie market, digital cinema projection, movie piracy, and 3D, in addition to the rising costs of theatre attendance, higher property taxes, increased competition with multiplex attractions, and changing viewership habits. With the loss of so many historical sites, the intellectual culture and community of the cinephile is disappearing. The Royal Cinema has made every effort to keep this culture alive, but without audiences to support it, they will continue to struggle and possibly die, along with every independent who struggles to finance, produce and exhibit independent Canadian films.

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