

## The Golden Age of Neighborhood Movie Houses



Before people began running out to Wehrenberg's Ronnies 20 Cine for a "cattle-call" movie experience, there were local, single-screen theatres. Before the pre-fab, shopping-mall "architecture" of today's cines, there were theatres with imaginative interior and exterior design, often as interesting as the featured movies themselves, comfortably nestled into the neighborhoods. Before trucked-in, pre-cooked popcorn and a yellow grease called "Golden Topping," there were places to get fresh-cooked popcorn and real butter while watching a picture show. Before highways carved up the city, movie patrons could walk to the show--welcome to the neighborhood movie house. It was a great era that ran from the 1920s mainly through the 1970s.

The Southampton Neighborhood had two area theatres; the Avalon Theatre and Roxy Theatres. (Close by, in the Bevo Neighborhood, there was the mighty Granada Theatre.)



The Avalon was larger of the two SoHa movie houses. It was located at 4225 S. Kingshighway on west side of South Kingshighway, between Chippewa and Winona streets. The front, lower exterior of the building featured a black-glass Vitrolite design with applied Art Deco aluminum patterns. Fanciful brickwork and decorative terra-cotta graced the building's top half. Inside, multi-colored Art Deco lighting fixtures provided a full spectrum of illuminating hues. There was seating for about 1,000.

Considering the complexity of the building's exterior and interior design, not to mention its very latest heating, cooling and electrical systems, Stamm Construction built it quickly. It was begun in Feb. 1935 and ready for its grand opening on Sept. 11, 1935.

The Avalon opened with a regular double featuring, showing *Escapade*, a romantic comedy film starring William Powell and Louise Rainer, and *Sanders of the River*, an adventure movie set in Nigeria, starring Paul Robeson. In the old days, once you got in, a patron could sit there and re-watch the movies as often as he or she wanted!



The Avalon, as were most of the neighborhood houses, was a "second-run" house, showing movies that first opened in the big Downtown and North Grand Avenue theatres such as the Ambassador and Fox Theatres. If the movie was popular, the crowds still came to watch *Gone with the Wind*, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *On the Waterfront* or *The*

*Sound of Music*. It was a very nice, popular place to go. There was no crime to worry about if you were walking to the movies.

In the 1950s and early 60s, the Avalon hosted double-feature kiddie matinees on Wednesday afternoon. The movies were often Abbott and Costello, Jerry Lewis, a Disney film or some monster or science fiction feature such as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* or *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. (If you want to experience a bit of that rollicking atmosphere, watch the movie *Matinee* with John Goodman.)

I personally recall seeing Elvis Presley and Ann Margret (Wow!) in 1964's *Viva Las Vega*. The ticket line stretched north on Kingshighway and up Chippewa. It was a young crowd and the old joint was jumping.

Very unfortunately, in the 1970s, the then-current owner, Author Enterprises, decided to modernize the Avalon to look like a suburban cinema. (Why?) They bricked over the Vitrolite lower exterior, painted the upper-exterior bricks and gutted in the interior, replacing the Art Deco features with a dropped ceiling and wallboard.

The Avalon closed in 1999 and was essentially left to rot over a 13-year period by its negligent, then-ownership. There were protracted legal battles during those years to either fix it up or tear it down. The identity of the theatre's actual ownership became convoluted. The Avalon's ignominious end came in 2012 as wrecking crews quickly tore down this neighborhood icon. Thankfully, after years of legal entanglements, it looks like the vacant lot may be up for redevelopment. (Author's request: No Pay-Day Loans joints—Please!)

The \$65,000 Roxy Theatre, designed by J.B. Catanzaro and located on 5500 Lansdowne (at Wherry), was built in 1925 and opened for business in 1926. Its original name was the Southampton Theatre. Dark-red, nicely-executed brickwork, accent terra-cotta and a Spanish-style, green-tile roof adorned the building's exterior. It fit nicely into the neighborhood. The Roxy was a cozy neighborhood movie house seating about 650 patrons, which was considered small for the 1920s. Its opening-night movie as the Southampton Theatre, accompanied by some live vaudeville acts, was a silent film called *If Marriage Fails* starring Jacqueline Logan, a popular 1920s actress.

The Southampton apparently closed down twice before reopening as the more-familiar Roxy Theatre on October 7, 1931. The Roxy's premier movies on that October night were *Smart Money* with James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson and *Politics* with Marie Dressler. Of course, the movie goer always got a double feature in those days.

The Roxy flourished during the World War II from 1941 through 1945. Patrons could get in for free with 10 pounds of paper or 25 pounds of scrap metal, often in the form of old pots and pans. This was part of the great scrap drives during those War years, when America "backed the attack" with true patriotism.

Despite business problems and ownership changes, The Roxy continued to dish out the fun as the years rolled by. Friday nights at the Roxy during the 1950s and early 60s attracted grade-school kids and teenagers to watch a double-billed Western or adventure feature. Saturday night was a big date night for teenage couples going to the movies. The guys would be decked out in high-school letter jackets and girls sported the long-dress and bobby-sox look.

The Roxy really started jumping at its annual summertime, all-day Kiddie Matinee. This was an all-cartoon event, featuring old and new Warner Brothers, Tom & Jerry, Popeye and Woody Wood Pecker to name a few. Free attendance prizes were passed out to the lucky ones holding the winning tickets. Winners were cheered and envied. Kids gobbled up fresh-popped popcorn with real butter and got jet-propelled on those little bottles of Coca-Cola. The Roxy lobby also tempted kids with caramel and strawberry sundaes, frozen candy bars and Neapolitan ice cream sandwiches. All in all, a great kids' day in SoHa for about 50 cents.

The Roxy shut down in 1965. There was talk of opening a coffee house there, but the 1960s/70s social turbulence combined with neighborhood fears caused that to be shelved. October, 1975 saw a crowd outside the Roxy, not to see a John Wayne movie, but to watch a significant part of Southampton's charm and history be demolished. Wrecking equipment and crews stood ready to bring down the Roxy's still-sturdy, handsome brick walls and friendly interior. It was all gone in the wink of an eye. Too bad.

The Avalon and Roxie Theatres should be remembered as they was in their "heyday," still sporting their original designs, with the promise of fresh popcorn and a good movie, all served up in the classic beauty of a 1920s/30s neighborhood theatre—usually for a buck or less. What a deal! I'm glad I was there.