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BETTY
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Theater's return recalls the glory of yesterday's movie palaces

Detroit's newest movie theater doesn't have rocking chairs or chicken fingers or floor lights that guide you to your darkened seat. It doesn't have rows of video games either so people can behead half a dozen villains before seeing a show.

Still, I hurried to the Renaissance Center last week to watch the latest Star Wars movie, Episode III: Revenge of the Sith, and welcome back an old friend — the Renaissance 4 Theater. It is now one of only two movie houses in Detroit, the Phoenix Theater, at 10100 E. Eight Mile being the other.

I would never have believed I'd be so happy to step inside a little tissue box of a theater without any of the marble, crystal or velvet-draped trappings of those movie palaces of my youth. I didn't realize I'd so missed being able to see a first-run movie within walking distance of my home.

Detroit once had scores of movie theaters, some downtown and some tucked inside communities. Some theaters, like the Cinderella, were built in Spanish Colonial style with red tile roofs. The Hollywood Theater had a "crying room" where mothers could take squalling infants and still see and hear the movie. They also could get baby formula warmed.

Frequently, theaters changed their names and their missions. The downtown Family Theater became The Follies when it began showing porn. The Oriole at Linwood and Virginia closed in 1951, sat vacant for over a decade and eventually became a church. Detroit's flamboyant and charismatic minister, the Rev. James E. (Prophet) Jones, spent \$300,000 redecorating the Oriole: new features included a \$5,000 crimson and gold throne.

Even for a dream palace, my neighborhood theater had a high-sounding, toot-your-flute kind of name, The Castle. Management followed the common practice of giving dishes to patrons sometimes, hoping they'd return each week for other pieces so they'd have a set. I still remember those plates and glasses trimmed with gilt. I also remember Saturday matinees where I sat through snarling tough-guy movies, cartoons where a mouse outwitted a cat and westerns in which the good cowboys sang and the bad ones died in agonizing slow motion. Boys dumped popcorn in my hair, and everyone shouted and stomped when the picture occasionally blacked out.

One by one those old theaters died, victims of population shifts, television, neighborhood decay and malls with multiple screens. But their names still echo: the Adams, Admiral, Alger, Alhambra, Beechwood, Carver, Clay, Civic Detroit, Colonial, Columbia, Delthe, Eastown, Esquire, Fine Arts, Forest, Fox, Grand Circus, Guild, Lincoln, Mayfair, Music Hall, National, Nor-town, Norwest, Palms, Ramona, Rialto, Riviera, Roxy, Stratford, Summit, Telenews, United Artists, Van Dyke, Vogue, Willis, Warfield and too many others to recall.

No, you can't turn back the clock, and yes, watching pay-per-view is easier and cheaper than gassing up your SUV, spending \$15 on snacks and worrying that someone's cell phone will shatter your peace.

All the same, there is nothing like seeing an epic on a wide screen while surrounded by popcorn smells so strong you might get drunk sniffing them. Now, more than ever, we need places where we can come together and dream.

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