

**The 'Fabulous' Fox Theatre and Atlanta, 1929-1975**

by

Michael James Zarafonetis

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama  
May 14, 2010

Keywords: history, culture, film, architecture, Atlanta, Fox Theatre

Copyright 2010 by Michael James Zarafonetis

Approved by

Lindy Biggs, Chair, Associate Professor of History  
David Carter, Associate Professor of History  
Larry Gerber, Professor Emeritus of History  
Carla Keyvanian, Assistant Professor of Architecture

## Abstract

The Fox Theatre, currently one of Atlanta's most prestigious performance venues and architectural icons, has stood at the corner of Peachtree Street and Ponce de Leon Avenue since its construction in 1929. Its fantastical aesthetic combines a monumental Arabesque exterior with various Middle Eastern interior decorative motifs. The opulence of the Fox was common to movie palaces around the country during their brief heyday in the 1920s. Relatively few of these palaces, however, have survived to become icons of their city like Atlanta's "Fabulous" Fox.

The Fox was originally conceived as a Shriners headquarters and community center, but spiraling construction costs forced the fraternal organization to lease the building's auditorium to William Fox, which he would operate as a first-run movie theater. Economic troubles during the Great Depression bankrupted both William Fox and the Shriners, casting doubt over the future of the theater, but under new ownership and stable management in the mid-1930s it performed strongly. Both Atlanta and the Fox boomed during World War II, with the city assuming major military and industrial importance during wartime. Highlighting the importance of movies and theaters to the American war effort, the Fox served as Atlanta's largest wartime community center. The war years served as the high watermark of the Fox's success as a movie theater.

During the postwar years, suburbanization sapped the vibrancy and vitality from central Atlanta, while at the same causing (along with organizational changes within the

film industry) declining box office numbers at the Fox. Desegregation in the early 1960s precipitated further “white flight” from the city’s central core, and although the Fox was desegregated peacefully, middle class whites abandoned the theater by 1970. In its final years, the Fox and much of central Atlanta had fallen into serious neglect. A grassroots campaign to “Save the Fox” in 1975 saved the theater from the wrecking ball, the first such preservation effort in Atlanta. The successful campaign reflected both the importance of the theater to many Atlantans, and the perceived importance of restored theaters to a lively central city.

## Acknowledgments

This dissertation, the beginnings of which date back to a graduate seminar during the fall of 2006, would not have been possible without the support of my friends and family. Undertaking such a large project for the first time is impossible without guidance, and I sincerely thank Dr. Lindy Biggs for her direction, encouragement, and candor.

I also thank my fiancé Stephanie who has been a cheerleader, editor, and critic throughout this process. Without Stephanie, Zoe, and Leigh, this would have been a very lonely undertaking, and I sincerely doubt my ability to have finished this project without them. I eagerly look forward to a new stage of my life with Stephanie and our ladies.

Finally, I thank my parents, James and Sharon Zarafonetis. They have given my brother and me all we could ever have asked, and I would not have had the opportunity to pursue my education without their love and support. I dedicate this dissertation to them, my family, and my friends.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1. Atlanta and the Rise of the Movie Palace Before 1929 .....	14
Chapter 2. “The Finest Gift That Any City Has Been Blessed With”: The Grand Opening of the Fox Theatre in 1929 .....	41
Chapter 3. “On the Lap of the Fateful Gods”: The First Fall and Rise of the Fox, 1930-1939 .....	73
Chapter 4. Atlanta and the Fox Theatre Mobilize For War, 1940-1945 .....	104
Chapter 5. “Song of the South,” CinemaScope, and Suburbia: Atlanta and the Fox During the Postwar Years .....	136
Chapter 6. “We Could Not Stop Sherman, But We Could Stop the Wrecking Balls”: The Second Fall and Rise of the Fox, 1960-1975 .....	176
Conclusion .....	214
Bibliography .....	222

## **Introduction**

Atlanta's Fox Theatre, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1976, is one of Atlanta's most iconic buildings. Built on the corner of Peachtree Street and Ponce de Leon Avenue (formerly Kimball Street) and opened on Christmas Day of 1929, the Fox Theatre served as Atlanta's premier movie palace for decades and was a source of civic pride for many Atlantans. Its striking exterior alone makes the Fox the most unique structure in all of Atlanta, but its interior—like that of many movie palaces of its day—is equally impressive. The exterior, constructed in Moorish style with alternating ribbons of cream and buff brick, creates the illusion that the city-block-sized facility is a cluster of medieval buildings. The illusion is carried inside as well; each room inside the massive structure is decorated in exotic fashion. Egyptian, Turkish, Moorish, Spanish, and Arabian motifs combine to make the Fox Theatre a masterpiece of illusion. The auditorium, which appears at first glance to be a medieval Arabian courtyard under the open sky, originally seated nearly 5,000 audience members. While the aesthetics of the theater are entrancing, it is also a very functional building. Much more than a movie theater, the Fox has also hosted musical performances, civic events, dances, banquets, and other special events throughout its history. Originally built by the Atlanta Shriners, the Fox has survived to the present day to become one of the city's most cherished landmarks.

The Fox is an iconic building in a city without many others. Atlanta's history as a major city is relatively short compared to others in the United States; as such, Atlanta's

boosters have always promoted their city as modern, fast-paced, and forward-looking. Although it was a small railroad junction and a sleepy Southern town until the late nineteenth century, it grew into a self-proclaimed “international” city, a major center of investment, and a massive transportation hub during the twentieth century. With such a relatively short history from which to draw the city’s identity, elites have often emphasized Atlanta’s future rather than its past. Unfettered by geographic or man-made barriers to development, Atlanta was a city of continuing growth throughout the twentieth century. Atlanta’s Chamber of Commerce has proclaimed it to be “a city without limits.” Indeed, from the late 1950s through the end of the twentieth century, Atlanta was consistently ranked among the fastest-growing urban areas in the country: a city that, Charles Rutheiser argues, has a “loving embrace of full-throttle development.”<sup>1</sup> Because of this, it is also a city without many tangible or authentic reminders of its history. Three of the city’s most historically-oriented attractions—the Stone Mountain Monument, the Atlanta Cyclorama, and Underground Atlanta—are at best reconstructions of an existing historical site (as in the case of Underground Atlanta) and at worst kitschy theme parks only loosely related to historical figures or events (like Stone Mountain). “Atlanta,” Rutheiser writes, “has always had a particularly intense forward orientation and a particular fondness for the bulldozer and the wrecking ball.”<sup>2</sup> As such, the Fox Theatre remains as one of Atlanta’s longest standing and most purely historical landmarks.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York: Verso, 1996), 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

This dissertation will explore the strong link between the history of the Fox Theatre and the history of twentieth-century Atlanta. Movie theaters like the Fox are constructive but underused avenues for researching recent social and urban history. The history of the movie palace is the history of the modern American city in three key ways. Firstly, the centrality of movies to American popular culture after 1915 made the movie theater one of the most democratic public spaces in the urban landscape. From the 1920s until after World War II, the movie theater provided an accurate cross-section of a city's population. Secondly, the two decades following the war brought significant changes to the urban landscape, including the abandonment of the central city due to massive suburban migration. Predominantly located within the urban core of American cities, movie palaces were devastated by this migration and postwar changes in the film industry; television provided major competition to these theaters, but American filmgoers increasingly spent their time and money at suburban theaters, which were often located in or around new suburban shopping centers and malls. Finally, urban revitalization efforts during the 1970s and 1980s often involved the restoration of still-standing movie palaces. Although many fell into extreme disrepair or had closed their doors by this time, the reclamation and restoration of downtown movie palaces were often seen as means to establishing vibrant urban entertainment districts. Movie palaces had been vibrant public spaces until the 1960s, and preservationists and developers hoped to recapture that vibrancy in the final decades of the twentieth century. Thus, the history of the urban movie palace has important implications for the history of its surroundings.

As one of the new public spaces created by the culture of consumption that arose during the nineteenth century, movie theaters offered new venues in which urban

residents could socialize and interact with each other. The movie theater, as James Forsher argues, “created an atmosphere for public gatherings, both in the theater and out on the streets bordering the entertainment district. Even if the cinema was privately owned, it adhered to a somewhat democratic openness in its audience makeup.”<sup>3</sup> The democratic nature of movie palace audiences made them a cross-section of a city’s urban population. In the earliest movie theaters the sample was much more limited. During the era of the nickelodeon, for example, moving pictures were predominantly a working-class pastime. By 1910, however, when nickelodeons charged more than a nickel and sometimes up to twenty-five cents, film began to attract an increasingly middle-class audience.<sup>4</sup> As the quality and comfort of new movie theaters improved dramatically over their storefront predecessors between 1910 and 1920, so did the quality of the on-screen product. Movies became more artistically and commercially sophisticated during this decade—the release of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 was a watershed on both accounts—and attracted middle-class audiences that had previously shunned the crudeness associated with the nickelodeon. As more middle-class Americans deemed moviegoing to be a socially acceptable leisure activity, exhibitors responded by building larger and more opulent theaters in the central business districts of major American cities. During the 1920s, thousands of movie palaces were built, and by 1926 nearly half of all film audiences around the country attended the 2,000 palaces in 79 cities.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the centrality of film to American popular culture and the cross-class nature of movie

---

<sup>3</sup> James Forsher, *The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Gomery, “The Picture Palace,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3 (1978): 26.

audiences make the movie palace one of the most democratic and representative public spaces in the American city after 1920.

The era of movie palace construction was short, ending with the stock market crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression. Although movie theater construction moved toward smaller auditoriums and less fantastical Art Deco aesthetic motifs during the 1930s, movie palaces remained the largest and most prestigious theaters in major cities until after World War II. Predominantly located in the central business district of the American city, movie palaces suffered from the same postwar abandonment as many urban centers during the 1950s and 1960s. Although still an essential part of the fabric of American culture, the movies suffered during this time as well. Television and suburban recreational activities increasingly substituted for time at the movie theater, and when Americans did attend a film they stayed closer to their suburban homes. Furthermore, between the early 1940s and the early 1960s, Americans married at a younger age and established larger families with a particularly strong commitment to family life.<sup>6</sup> Families kept to themselves in the suburbs instead of seeking entertainment in urban centers, which carried the (sometimes well-earned) stigma of crime and violence. In the South, the desegregation of public buildings, department stores, restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters further accelerated the abandonment of urban public spaces. This process was sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent, depending on both the city in which it took place and specific local circumstances. Regardless, both movie palaces and their surrounding urban cores were being deserted by the end of the 1960s.

---

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 9.

When urban revitalization efforts began in many cities around the country in the 1970s and 1980s, the preservation and restoration of the downtown movie palace was often at the center. Echoing and expanding upon the contention of James Forsher, Janna Jones argues that movie palaces have long served as “markers of the economic successes of their respective downtown areas.” In the two penultimate decades of the twentieth century, the movie palace “represent[ed] a step toward downtown revitalization, which included architectural renovation as well as an attempt to mend the social divisions that had plagued cities for a decade or more.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Forsher suggests that successful movie theaters are markers of urban vitality. Since movies were such an integral part of twentieth-century American culture, memories of seeing a movie at the movie palace was a cherished memory for several generations of Americans. Seeking to take advantage of their sentimental value, local leaders and preservationists in cities around the country saw movie palaces as potential catalysts for new or revived entertainment districts. The success of these preservation and restoration efforts has been mixed, but the fact that so many palaces have been saved and restored in the past three decades is indicative of their perceived importance to the city’s landscape. Thus, many urban revitalization efforts during the final decades of the twentieth century have been inextricably linked to the movie palace.

This dissertation argues that since its construction in 1929, the Fox Theatre has served as a bellwether or indicator of the prosperity and urban vitality of central Atlanta. The history of the city and the theater itself have been inextricably linked since 1929, and

---

<sup>7</sup> Janna Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), 261; Forsher, *Community of Cinema*, 5.

by examining the history of the Fox, one can understand a great deal about Atlanta, including its economic, social, and racial history. In many ways, the history of the Fox is the history of central Atlanta, from the grand opening of the theater on December 25, 1929 to the successful “Save the Fox” campaign and restoration of the theater in the late 1970s. When the central business district of Atlanta was a thriving and vibrant area, the Fox was at the center of it. Both the city and the theater experienced economic boom and depression, wartime prosperity, steady postwar decline, and racial desegregation. When Atlantans had largely abandoned the central business district as a recreational area in the 1960s and 1970s, they also abandoned the Fox. Throughout the twentieth century the history of the theater and the history of the city intersected on a regular basis.

Using primarily local evidence, this dissertation explores the cultural and civic role that the Fox Theatre played in Atlanta’s history. Newspapers are an extremely valuable primary source for a study of this kind. Atlanta had two major daily newspapers, the *Atlanta Journal* and the *Atlanta Constitution*, and a daily African American newspaper, the *Atlanta Daily World*. Because newspapers paid the movies a great deal of early attention, they provide a window to the film and entertainment scene in a particular location. Movie listings, film reviews, advertisements, and entertainment columns, in addition to editorials and letters to the editor, provided valuable information about events at the Fox and the place it held in Atlanta culture. Additionally, *Boxoffice* magazine, a film industry periodical, provided film exhibition news from a national perspective. Archival sources from the Fox Theatre Archives, the Georgia State University Archives, the Emory University Archives, and the Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, including personal correspondence from theater management,

customer comment cards, newspaper clippings, and other documents, were also examined.

Chapter one discusses the growth of Atlanta during the early twentieth century, which included a burgeoning entertainment district near the Five Points area, and the rise of the movie palace in the United States. Although scholars ascribe the “golden age” of the movie palace approximately to the fifteen-year period between 1915 and 1930, the historical forces that gave rise to them were at work for much longer. That movie palaces like the Fox were often built using Oriental, Islamic, Egyptian, and other exotic motifs was no accident. A pronounced interest in the exotic and the foreign, particularly in the cultures of the Middle East and Egypt, is apparent in American popular culture as far back as the eighteenth century. The discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922 also created a temporary spike in American exoticism. At the same time, the maturation of the film industry resulted in a vertically integrated system in which Hollywood studios controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures. With vast amounts of capital at their disposal, the major studios either bought out local movie palaces or built their own. Using the same elements of conspicuous and exotic (often Oriental) architecture and spectacle seen in earlier movie theaters, movie palaces also added refinement to the moviegoing experience in order to attract affluent patrons. Atlanta demonstrated an early enthusiasm for motion pictures, particularly amongst the middle class, and as larger and more opulent theaters were built, they were frequently filled to capacity.

Chapter two examines the actors who shaped the design, construction, and opening of the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, and the city’s reception of the theater. Although

the Yaarab Temple Shriners originally conceived the Fox as the Shrine Mosque, a headquarters and recreational space complete with its own massive performance hall, climbing construction costs forced the fraternal organization to find a regular tenant for the building's proposed auditorium. William Fox, seeking a Southeastern foothold for his growing theater empire leased the theater from the Shriners, allowing them to complete the building project and to establish the largest motion picture theater in the region. Although some architects criticized its unique architectural style as gaudy and inappropriate, most Atlantans praised its beauty and magnificence. The opening gala was a rousing success, presenting a spectacle so full of pomp and pageantry that the feature film presentation was almost a footnote. Although it was the last of the new movie palaces in Atlanta, the Fox was a symbol of the rapid growth and modernization of Atlanta in the first decades of the twentieth century. Capping a major downtown building boom and the "Forward Atlanta" publicity campaign, which local leaders hoped would spur investment and development in the city, the Fox was proof to its residents, the South, and the nation that Atlanta was a modern and important city.

Chapter three explores the tumultuous decade experienced by the Fox and the city of Atlanta during the 1930s. After only 125 weeks, the Fox Theatre was forced to close its doors in June of 1932. Both William Fox and the Yaarab Temple Shriners were forced to enter bankruptcy proceedings, beginning a three-year period that jeopardized the future of the building. Although another management group operated the theater for a several months, it appeared as though time had run out on the Fox. When the new owners of the Fox, in the wake of Yaarab Temple's bankruptcy, decided to sell the building, several proposals for its future were advanced. It was offered to the city for use

as a municipal auditorium, a plan that elicited both enthusiastic support and vehement opposition. By 1936, yet another ownership group assumed control of the building, and the theater management team of Lucas and Jenkins Theatres put the Fox back on sound footing, beginning one of the most stable periods in the theater's history. During this decade, the Fox also demonstrated its versatility to the city, hosting social functions, musical performances, and civic events—including the visit of presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although the Depression was a difficult period for Atlantans, they still turned out in large numbers at the city's movie theaters for cheap entertainment, and likewise returned to the Fox once Lucas and Jenkins brought stable management to the theater.

Chapter four discusses the Fox's cultural and civic importance to Atlanta during World War II. The Fox and other downtown theaters served a multiplicity of roles during the war years. Serving as both a safe haven for escapist entertainment *and* a wartime informational and events center, the Fox's civic profile reached unprecedented heights. Meanwhile, the city of Atlanta boomed as wartime manufacturing provided jobs and attracted new residents, and as soldiers from military encampments all around Georgia came to the city on furlough. Atlanta was a hive of wartime activity, and Atlantans and visitors alike attended the Fox in record numbers. As one of the cheapest and most readily available forms of entertainment, movies enjoyed a steady increase in nationwide attendance. Wartime shortages and the exigencies of war caused some disturbances at the Fox, but the theater emerged from World War II at the height of its cultural and civic importance to Atlanta.

Chapter five explores the postwar history of the Fox and Atlanta to 1960. During this fifteen-year period, the Fox hosted the biggest premiere in its history for Disney's *Song of the South*, but later experienced a steady decline as Atlantans moved into the suburbs and away from the central business district. Major changes in the film industry also contributed to this decline. The 1948 Supreme Court decision in the Paramount antitrust case broke up the Hollywood studio system, which forced the major studios to divest themselves of their theater chains and abstain from the discriminatory booking practices that favored downtown theaters. This eventually opened the door for smaller neighborhood theaters, conveniently located near new suburban developments, to obtain first-run films. The rapid expansion of the Atlanta metropolitan area into the suburbs in north Fulton and neighboring Cobb and DeKalb Counties continued to draw Atlantans away from the city's core and the downtown theater district. New forms of film exhibition like the drive-in theater and the rise of television in the mid-1950s also contributed to a slow but steady decline in movie viewership. Fox management and the film industry attempted to adapt to the changing postwar order with new exhibition technology, but nationwide box office numbers steadily declined during the 1950s. The Fox's cultural importance to the city of Atlanta had declined during this period, but it was still the venue for some important performances, including those of the New York Metropolitan Opera Company and Elvis Presley.

Finally, chapter six examines the sharp decline of the Fox Theatre during the 1960s and 1970s, and the "Save the Fox" campaign that rescued the theater from demolition in the mid-1970s. Like the desegregation of other public spaces in Atlanta during the 1960s, theater desegregation in 1962 was a relatively peaceful process that

occurred without any major or violent incidents. While other Southern cities experienced violent confrontations when African Americans attempted to desegregate movie theaters, cooler heads prevailed in Atlanta as student leaders worked with city officials and theater owners to reach an arrangement that satisfied each party. Although this occurred without major incidents, white Atlantans continued to abandon urban public spaces after they were desegregated, and accelerated their withdrawal into the surrounding suburbs. The Fox was somewhat stable throughout the 1960s despite lower box office numbers under the management of J. Noble Arnold, but a change in management in 1970 also brought a change in entertainment policy. During the early 1970s, the Fox showed exploitation films to dwindling audiences, and the theater closed its doors again in 1975. When the building's owners decided to sell the property to Southern Bell (which planned to demolish the Fox in order to build a new office building), a strong grassroots preservationist campaign emerged in an effort to "Save the Fox." In the hopes of saving the theater and beginning a revitalization effort in central Atlanta, a non-profit corporation named Atlanta Landmarks stepped forward in 1976 and saved the Fox from the wrecking ball. Atlanta Landmarks has operated the Fox to the present day as a successful multi-purpose performance venue and events center.

The history of the movie palace and the history of the American city are closely intertwined. Both the Fox Theatre and the city of Atlanta have concurrently experienced economic prosperity, urban decline, and recent revitalization attempts. "As a concrete representation of these economic and cultural shifts," writes Janna Jones, "the movie palace has many stories to tell, and its history is contained within a building that is

engaging to the public because of its fascinating architecture and its function as a place of entertainment and fantasy.”<sup>8</sup> By looking closely at the history of the Fox, then, one can see the history of Atlanta contained within the walls of one of its longest standing landmarks. By examining the theater one can learn—at any point in its history—how Atlantans lived, how they entertained themselves, and how they interacted with each other.

---

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 231.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Atlanta and the Rise of the Movie Palace Before 1929**

The arrival of the Fox Theatre in 1929 was a product of Atlanta's rapid growth over the previous century, during which the small railroad junction quickly became the largest city in the state of Georgia (and its capital) and the most influential city in the Southeast. Located at a geographically disadvantageous location for a natural settlement, Atlanta owes its existence to the Western & Atlantic Railroad, founded in 1836. The zero mile marker of the railroad was placed in 1837 at what is now the center of Atlanta, and the surrounding area was named Terminus. After two name changes (the settlement was briefly named Marthasville, and then renamed Atlanta shortly after) and the arrival of two other railroads, Atlanta had become the major transportation hub of the Southeast and the self-proclaimed capital of the New South. Known for the enthusiastic boosterism of its local leaders, not even its destruction during the Civil War prevented Atlanta from rapidly becoming the most influential city in the Southeast. By the early twentieth century, the city's population reached 100,000, and by 1929 the population had exploded to 285,000 with another 75,000 residents living in the surrounding metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup> Skyscrapers constructed downtown during the 1920s were proof positive of Atlanta's aspirations to match their boosters' bold rhetoric with tangible markers of the modern American city.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 29.

When motion pictures made their Atlanta debut in September 1895, the American film industry was still in its formative stages. Feature-length films with sophisticated narratives and production values were still over a decade away, and the very short films available to the public were mainly shown in converted storefront or warehouse theaters. These theaters were often dark, stuffy, and crowded, attracting a predominantly working-class audience in most areas of the country. As the film industry and exhibition techniques matured, shoddy storefront theaters and nickelodeons gave way to larger, cleaner, and more luxurious theaters by the 1910s. By the last half of the 1910s, theater chains began building “movie palaces,” which could seat audiences of several thousand, and did so in an opulent and full-service setting. Many of these palaces were directly owned by Hollywood studios, which had vertically integrated the film trade by acquiring control of the production, distribution, and exhibition arms of the industry. The amount of capital available to the major studios allowed them to assemble empires of movie palaces and smaller theaters spanning the country, and it allowed them to build the largest and most opulent theaters in any given city. By the 1920s, movies had gained an increasing level of cultural acceptance amongst the American middle class, and nearly 2,000 movie palaces stood across the country.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these movie palaces stood at the center of urban entertainment districts forming in American cities. In Atlanta, an entertainment district began to emerge in the 1910s and 1920s on Peachtree and Whitehall Streets near the Five Points area. “Atlanta,” writes Steve Goodson, “had become a big city, with a burgeoning population that was increasingly inclined to accept commercial entertainment for the pleasure and excitement

---

<sup>2</sup> Gomery, “The Picture Palace,” 26.

it offered.”<sup>3</sup> With the city’s rapid population increase and its growing entertainment district, Atlantans could be satisfied in knowing that their city shared common features with other modern American cities, including a central entertainment district. As a new and modern form of mass entertainment, movie theaters were markers of urbanity and modernity. Between 1900 and 1929, the city of Atlanta demonstrated a strong interest in motion pictures, resulting in a thriving theater district featuring ever larger and more opulent movie theaters.

The geography and history of Atlanta is largely born of circumstance. Its origins are not traced to a mining settlement, agricultural center, or center of trade. It has no coastline, and the nearest navigable waterway is the Chattahoochee River, nearly six miles from the original center of the city. During the early nineteenth century the area was, in the words of Timothy Crimmins, “a landlocked location which heretofore would have had almost no city-building potential.”<sup>4</sup> By the 1830s, however, merchants in two major coastal cities—Savannah and Charleston—engaged in a fierce competition to unlock new areas of trade in the rural hinterland through the construction of railroads. Atlanta sprouted at the junction of three of these railroads—the Western and Atlantic Railroad, the Macon and Western Railroad, and the Georgia Railroad—eventually eclipsing Savannah and Charleston in its influence and importance to trade. In 1837, the zero mile marker of the state-chartered Western and Atlantic Railroad, which ran from the east side of the Chattahoochee up to Chattanooga, was established at the crossing

---

<sup>3</sup> Steve Goodson, “‘This Mighty Influence for Good or for Evil,’: The Movies in Atlanta, 1895-1920,” *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy J. Crimmins, “The Atlanta Palimpsest: Stripping Away the Layers of the Past,” *Atlanta History* 26, 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1982): 15.

point for existing Creek Indian trails and crude wagon roads, at least five miles away from the nearest pioneering white or Creek settlements. The site provided easy access to nearly grade level routes running in all directions, and the surrounding area was named Terminus. The initial settlers of Terminus were primarily Irish laborers brought in to build the railroad. In 1842, before the railroad had been completed, the zero mile post was moved to a more advantageous location for the building of the train shed and other facilities, and the settlement was renamed Marthasville in honor of Governor Lumpkin's daughter Martha.<sup>5</sup> Over the next several years, two other railroads arrived to form a major transportation junction at Marthasville. The Georgia Railroad, which ran between Augusta and Charleston, arrived in 1845. In the following year, the Macon and Western Railroad arrived, connecting the settlement to Macon and Savannah. Thus, by 1846, three pioneer railroads intersected near the zero-mile marker in Marthasville.<sup>6</sup> The town, which hardly contained any inhabitants and not a single tavern in 1847, was again renamed "Atlanta" (the feminine form of "Atlantic" from the "Western and Atlantic Railroad") and incorporated as a city, with its boundaries extending in a one-mile radius from the zero mile marker.

Atlanta has been described as a "rough and rowdy frontier town" featuring numerous taverns and tawdry houses during this period.<sup>7</sup> As the railroads were completed in the late 1840s and early 1850s and the city's population rapidly increased, a more "respectable" element settled in the area, bringing with them churches, schools, and "other associations for civic betterment." Between 1848 and 1854, Atlanta grew from

---

<sup>5</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Crimmins, "Atlanta Palimpsest," 15.

<sup>7</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 18.

only 500 inhabitants to over 6,000.<sup>8</sup> Several other rail lines and spurs were constructed in the 1850s, creating an extensive Southeastern rail network with Atlanta as its hub. During that decade, the three major Georgia lines intersecting in Atlanta were connected with new lines to Knoxville, Montgomery, Louisville, Memphis, and Pensacola. The budding rail network's connection with Knoxville was soon extended to Lynchburg, and through other lines was connected to Richmond and the Northeast. By the 1860s, the rail network had expanded significantly across the Southeast, and merchants with railroad connections descended on the city, dubbing it the "Gate City of the South."<sup>9</sup>

Atlanta's population doubled again between 1861 and 1864, and the city became an industrial, medical, and logistical center for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Union armies moving southward from Tennessee strategically targeted the city, cutting its connecting rail lines and battling with Confederate armies around the city's periphery. The devastation left by the fleeing Confederate armies in September 1864 and Sherman's march to the sea in November (immortalized in Atlanta mythology on the movie screen by *Gone With the Wind*) was severe, but no worse than that in other Southern cities like Richmond or Columbia. Still, this destruction and subsequent rebirth (the city adopted the phoenix as its symbol along with the motto "Resurgens") was incorporated into Atlanta mythology after the war. In 1867, Atlanta was made the state capital, attracting politicians, merchants and businessmen (many of them from the North), and industry over the next several decades. "With its economy buoyed by the influx of Northern capital and local sweat equity," Rutheiser writes, "the population of Atlanta grew more than fivefold in the thirty years after the Civil War." By 1890, the city's population had

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>9</sup> Crimmins, "Atlanta Palimpsest," 16-17; Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 19.

reached over 65,000, including a substantial African American population that made up between 40 and 45 percent of this number.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, the physical growth of Atlanta was heavily shaped by the location of the railroads and the topography of the area. It was a completely unplanned city; as such, its original street layout was created by merging three different grids (which first followed wagon roads and then railroads) on three separately owned lots. A 1000-foot ridge extending from the southwest to the northeast of the area already provided the path of least topographical resistance to Indians and early settlers; footpaths and wagon roads followed this ridge. The relatively weak locomotives of the mid-nineteenth century required a mostly-level grade to haul large loads through Atlanta, so the railroads followed the already-existing roads. The first street grid formed in the 1850s south of the three-way junction between the major railroads (specifically, on the south side of the junction of the Macon & Western and the Georgia) with a slight northeast-southwest orientation. Two other separate grids formed in the 1840s and 1850s northeast of the Georgia and Western & Atlantic Rail Roads, one on each side of the old Peachtree Creek road. In 1853, Atlanta officials superimposed a North-South, East-West street grid arrangement in the yet unplotted areas. While this would ultimately bring order to the growth of the city, it also brought that growth into direct contact with two major obstacles: the gulch formed by the triangle of tracks to the west of Union Station and the tracks of the Georgia Railroad, which split the quickly growing north and south

---

<sup>10</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 20.

sides of town.<sup>11</sup> The tracks were soon bridged over by the 1860s for foot and wagon traffic, and then for horse-drawn trolleys in the 1870s and 1880s.

With a burgeoning commercial district located near Union Station, the rail passenger terminal located east of the triangular junction of Atlanta's three major railroads, the city also boasted increasingly stylish residential areas by the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The first affluent neighborhoods arose in the 1870s and 1880s in West End, south of the rail station on Washington Street and what would become Capitol Avenue, and on Peachtree Street to the north.<sup>12</sup> Both were North-South avenues constructed outside of the original Northeast-Southwest oriented city grids, and were populated by large Victorian-style houses. In the following decade, other suburban developments sprouted around factories located on the railroad tracks including Edgewood, Kirkwood, and Clarkston to the east, and East Point and Manchester (later College Park) to the south. Still more developments and neighborhoods continued to radiate out from the commercial district at the center of town.<sup>13</sup> When Atlanta's horse-drawn trolley system arrived in the 1870s, affluent residents began to move beyond a convenient walking distance from the city, extending the limits of the metropolitan area. The northern section of Peachtree Street had developed into a particularly exclusive neighborhood in the 1880s. In fact, the stretch between the Governor's Mansion to the south and Kimball Street (later renamed Ponce de Leon Avenue) to the north was *the*

---

<sup>11</sup> Crimmins, "Atlanta Palimpsest," 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Crimmins, "Atlanta Palimpsest," 28; Darlene Roth and Andy Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers: A Short History of Atlanta* (Marietta, Ga.: Longstreet Press, 1996), 65-70.

prestige residential avenue in Atlanta.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the future site of the Fox Theatre—which would stand at the northern edge of Atlanta’s theater district after its construction in 1929—was strictly an exclusive residential area in the late nineteenth century.

A city known for its vocal group of boosters, Atlanta had passed through two phases of boosterism by the end of the century. Firstly, local elites hoped that the city would become the largest and most influential in the state. This goal was achieved after the Civil War, when the capital was moved to Atlanta, and when its population had surpassed Savannah’s. Secondly, boosters hoped to make Atlanta into the “metropolis of the South.” In 1895, the city of 75,000 celebrated its rising status in the region by hosting the Cotton States and International Exposition. “With much hullabaloo and exaggeration,” writes Bradley Rice, “the exposition hailed the creed of the New South and proclaimed Atlanta as the capital of the emerging section.”<sup>15</sup> The exposition, like two similar festivals hosted by Atlanta in 1881 and 1887 and the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, was a showcase of industrial and mechanical achievement, and a celebration of sectional reconciliation less than two decades after the end of Reconstruction. Like the Columbian Exposition’s Midway, the Atlanta festival included international “villages” of exotic cultures from faraway lands, which emphasized the racial and cultural otherness of foreign peoples. Although the Cotton States Exposition was a grand undertaking and a major event in early Atlanta history, it was an economic failure. Facing bankruptcy halfway through its three-month run, the Exposition was saved only by influential

---

<sup>14</sup> Crimmins, “Atlanta Palimpsest,” 29.

<sup>15</sup> Bradley R. Rice, “Atlanta: If Dixie Were Atlanta,” in *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II*, ed. Richard Bernard and Bradley Rice. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 31.

businessmen on the board of directors who funded the event out of their own pockets. Additionally, contrary to the hopes of the Exposition's organizers, it failed to attract new investment in the city. The fiasco was a reflection of Atlanta's still weak economy. "Despite a third of a century of New South boosterism," Rutheiser argues, "the economy of Georgia and the greater Southeast was still overly dependent on the monocrop production of cotton and a series of industrial-extractive activities... largely controlled by Northern interests."<sup>16</sup>

In this setting, moving pictures made their inauspicious debut in Atlanta. In September 1895, two inventors paid five hundred dollars for one of the last concessions granted by the Exposition in Piedmont Park. There, Thomas Armat and C. Francis Jenkins built the world's first commercially operated movie exhibition in a one thousand dollar shed. While local reporters gave the movie house positive reviews, fairgoers were underwhelmed. When the expected crowds did not materialize, Armat and Jenkins dropped the twenty-five cent admission charge and simply encouraged tired fairgoers to come into the theater to rest during a film presentation. After several weeks, a fire severely damaged the shed, and both entrepreneurs pulled out of the operation. A city clerk later estimated that less than one person in a thousand knew the theater existed. He remembered feeling sorry for Armat and Jenkins, but he "never once thought that we would be looking back on that unsuccessful little venture as the most significant thing on the midway."<sup>17</sup>

Atlanta's future theater district on Peachtree had yet to evolve at the end of the nineteenth century. As an entertainment medium, motion pictures had not yet found

---

<sup>16</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Goodson, "This Mighty Influence for Good or for Evil," 28.

permanency in American popular culture, and had a distinctly working-class identity. In its early years, one could find motion picture entertainment in a variety of venues.

Vaudeville houses and penny arcades were the first venues of personal or small-audience motion picture exhibition. Edison's single-viewer kinetoscope peep show debuted in 1894 and widespread large-screen motion picture projection followed in 1896, enabling exhibitors to exponentially boost their revenue. Within a decade, motion pictures had become firmly and profitably entrenched in neighborhood storefront theaters. "The urban workers, the immigrants and the poor," Robert Sklar writes, "had discovered a new medium of entertainment without the aid, and indeed beneath the notice, of the custodians and arbiters of middle-class culture."<sup>18</sup>

Around the country amusement parks and traveling shows were instrumental in bringing movies to the masses, but vaudeville allowed the fledgling motion picture industry to gain a toehold in American popular culture, providing permanent venues that itinerant exhibitors could not. Vitascope and cinématographe projection systems and films made their respective debuts in New York vaudeville theaters during the 1896-97 season. During this season, film entertainment was only one of many acts listed on vaudeville playbills. Although they occupied a mere fifteen minutes of the program, moving pictures were a big hit with vaudeville audiences. The Lumière brothers, the famous French duo who promoted and created films for the cinématographe projection system, tailored their product to vaudeville houses, packaging films along with their projectors and even providing technicians to train exhibitors or service equipment. By 1897, motion pictures were more than just novelty acts; they had assumed top billing at

---

<sup>18</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3-4.

vaudeville theaters. Between 1897 and 1899, motion pictures dominated vaudeville programs so much that film exhibition appeared to have found its permanent home.<sup>19</sup>

Although Atlanta lacked the sheer number of vaudeville houses found in other (especially Northern) cities, this did not preclude the city from an early interest in motion pictures. After their underwhelming debut at the Cotton States Exposition, motion pictures reappeared in Atlanta later in the same year. In a November 1896 engagement in the city, the Florence Hamilton Repertoire Company incorporated a vitascope presentation into its performance, featuring “a ‘skirt dance’ by an Atlanta girl who had made good in New York, a scene of firemen rescuing children from a burning building, another sequence featuring ‘two Irishmen discussing politics over their beer,’ and finally the famous ‘May Irwin Kiss,’ which showed a man and woman exchanging a brief peck on the lips.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike Atlanta’s first encounter with moving pictures, the one-week engagement at Laurent DeGive’s Columbia Theater drew immense interest. The “May Irwin Kiss” film, in particular, was encored several times for its audiences. Shortly after the vitascope’s November engagement, the Eidoloscope (a rival technology to Edison’s vitascope) made its Atlanta debut at the Lyceum Theater as part of Rosabel Morrison’s production of *Carmen*. In this production, the film (ten minutes of footage from a Mexican bullfight) was integrated into the play. In the following years, other projection systems like veriscope and cinématographe came to Atlanta, presenting films of various subjects at vaudeville theaters, including boxing footage and the recreation of a Spanish-American War naval battle.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 13-15.

<sup>20</sup> Goodson, ““This Mighty Influence for Good or for Evil,”” 30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

Vaudeville theaters, however, could not provide a permanent home for motion pictures. Nickelodeons, which had existed since the beginning of public film exhibition, did not gain widespread acceptance until at least 1905, but they effectively solved the problems presented by other forms of exhibition—the seasonal limitations of the amusement park, the transient nature of the traveling show, and the higher prices of vaudeville theaters—and transformed film exhibition into a big business. A far cry from the massive palaces built just decades later, most nickelodeons were simply converted cigar stores, pawnshops, restaurants, or skating rinks retrofitted for film projection. Their programs consisted entirely of motion picture entertainment and included news, documentary, comedy, fantasy, and dramatic shorts that lasted about an hour in total. Nickelodeon interiors were often dark, stuffy, sparsely furnished, and poorly ventilated, and seating consisted of little more than wooden chairs or benches. Although theater interiors were less than inviting, nickelodeon owners took drastic measures to draw customers from the street. Elaborate facades complete with flashing lights, melodramatic poster art, and electric signs drew the eyes of passersby, while barkers attempted to catch their ears and vocally advertise the entertainment inside. Cheap admission prices generally took care of the rest. Nickel fever had struck the United States by 1910, as an estimated five to ten thousand nickel theaters were in operation from coast to coast.<sup>22</sup>

Nickel fever struck Atlanta in 1907. Twenty-one storefront theaters opened in the first six months of that year, an astounding ten in the month of March alone. While some Atlantans railed against the noisy nickel theaters—they employed gramophones, electric pianos, and barkers to attract attention on the sidewalk—most could not resist their allure.

---

<sup>22</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 19.

Movies in Northern cities appealed mainly to a working-class or immigrant audience because the earliest storefront theaters were often built in working-class or immigrant neighborhoods. Southern theaters, however, catered to a more affluent audience, and movies took on a more respectable quality than in the North. In Atlanta, movies escaped the working-class/immigrant stigma in part because the city had such a small immigrant population (only 3 percent of Atlantans were foreign-born), but also because middle-class Atlantans were serious movie enthusiasts. According to Randy Gue, “Movies and storefront theaters were respectable and popular from the beginning. Middle-class audiences, in Atlanta and throughout the South, gladly patronized nickel theaters that operated in urban business districts.”<sup>23</sup>

Nickelodeon owners around the country owed a great deal to the surging U.S. economy at the start of the twentieth century. Mass entertainment had become big business, and nickelodeons were a particularly popular form of entrepreneurship. An important reason for this was low overhead—the cost of purchasing space to convert to a theater was generally scant, as was the cost of operation.<sup>24</sup> Atlanta’s first nickelodeon opened in April 1906 with little publicity and no attention from local newspapers. The Theatorium, located at 116 Peachtree Street, occupied space in the Piedmont Hotel and had a monopoly on motion pictures in the city for nearly two months until Ezekiel Wall’s Electric Theater opened on Whitehall Street. In September 1906, the Dreamland Theater opened on Peachtree, giving the city three nickelodeons in the central business district. Others like the Nickel Theater opened six blocks west of Five Points in a working-class

---

<sup>23</sup> Randy Gue, “Nickel Madness: Atlanta’s Storefront Movie Theaters, 1906-1911,” *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 35.

<sup>24</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 29-30.

area of the city, but the location of the Theatorium, Electric, and Dreamland theaters suggested a pronounced effort on the part of theater owners to reach a middle-class audience. Rental rates on Whitehall and Peachtree were some of the highest in the city. Whitehall was the center of Atlanta's shopping district and featured many of the city's department stores and fine retail establishments, while Peachtree featured newly constructed office buildings like the English-American and Candler buildings, housing the regional offices of several major corporations. Despite the higher costs of operation in this area, Atlanta theater owners sought out these locations to reach affluent audiences with deeper pockets than their Northern counterparts. These theaters drew in many shoppers and office workers, and laid the foundations for a growing entertainment district in the area.<sup>25</sup>

Nickel fever also struck Atlanta in the midst of the most violent outbreak of racial violence in the city's history. In late September 1906, an armed mob of 5,000 white Atlanta residents, enraged by false press reports of black men assaulting white women in the city, attacked, battered, and murdered defenseless African Americans, primarily in the area east of Five Points. The violence, which took place between September 22 and 25, spread from the Five Points area with outbreaks and attacks occurring all over downtown. Casualty estimates varied for the three days of violence, but it is believed that over fifty black men and ten white men were killed between September 22 and 25, with hundreds more wounded.<sup>26</sup> The violence even spilled into the city's entertainment district, with

---

<sup>25</sup> Gue, "Nickel Madness," 36.

<sup>26</sup> David Godshalk notes that there are wildly varying estimates of the riot's casualties. No official count was ever taken, and many bodies that were laid in the street to be handled by the coroner "disappeared" overnight. Almost all of the disappearing corpses were those of black victims whose family members or friends interred their

Bijou Theater manager J.B. Belser defending three black draymen from an angry mob with only a pistol inside the barricaded theater doors.<sup>27</sup> In the wake of the violence, Jim Crow segregation intensified in Atlanta, and the city's black residents were increasingly confined to black-only neighborhoods and business districts, most notably the neighborhood surrounding "Sweet Auburn" Avenue to the east of Five Points.

In the wake of the riot, Atlanta's nickelodeon boom quickly turned into a bust. The story was a similar one in cities around the country. In Atlanta alone, a staggering 90 percent of movie theaters that opened in 1907 closed within six months. Eight motion picture theaters opened in the following year, nearly all of them in the Whitehall-Peachtree district.<sup>28</sup> In Northern cities, the market was flooded by nickelodeons that targeted lower-income audiences, and ambitious entrepreneurs soon set their sights upon a more middle-class clientele. Nickelodeons began charging ten, fifteen, or twenty-five cents for admission, but newer theaters provided cleaner and more comfortable interiors that could accommodate larger audiences. These larger theaters were at the heart of the new chain model of the film industry, and would ultimately lead to the death of the nickelodeon and the birth of the opulent movie palaces of the 1920s. "The nickelodeon

---

remains to ensure that they were handled properly. Because of the underreporting of casualties (in part to protect Atlanta's image), there are no official figures for those killed or injured in the riot, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 105-6. See also Mark Bauerlein, *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001) and Rebecca Burns, *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Race Riot* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> Gue, "Nickel Madness," 39.

would disappear within [the 1910s],” writes Douglas Gomery, “but not before it provided the platform that seduced a nation.”<sup>29</sup>

While larger and more luxurious theaters were built in the North to attract a middle class audience to motion pictures, they were built in the South instead as “a belated nod to the tastes of their already-existing audiences.”<sup>30</sup> The first deluxe theaters to open in Atlanta were the Alcazar Theater on Peachtree Street in 1909 and the Vaudette Theater (which replaced a smaller theater of the same name) just south of Five Points in 1911. Both were owned by local businessmen—the Alcazar by R.C. Howard, owner of the Howard Safe and Vault Company, and the Vaudette by John and Gus Evins, owners of a local furniture business.<sup>31</sup> Although the Alcazar was built from an existing storefront, it lacked some of the cruder appointments of the nickelodeon—it did not feature a pianola in the arcade or a loud phonograph outside—in order to project a more dignified image. It also featured a more elegant interior design and charged ten cents for admission, attracting the “‘best’ class of patrons since Atlanta’s other theaters still charged five cents.”<sup>32</sup> The Vaudette, which opened as Atlanta’s largest theater at the time, comfortably seated 500, and quickly supplanted the Alcazar as the city’s premier theater. These theaters set the standard by which others in Atlanta would be judged, but the Montgomery Theater, named after its owner and opened in late 1911, further raised the bar. Although it did not show first-run films, Randy Gue describes the appointments of the Montgomery Theater as surpassing all others in the city:

---

<sup>29</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Gue, “Nickel Madness,” 40.

<sup>31</sup> Goodson, “‘This Mighty Influence for Good or for Evil,’” 31.

<sup>32</sup> Gue, “Nickel Madness,” 40-41.

Because he couldn't offer first run films, Montgomery hoped that the theater's luxurious interior would entice a more sophisticated audience. The theater featured large fans to combat Atlanta's sweltering summers, ushers dressed in evening wear all day long, and draperies were tastefully monogrammed with a single "M." The theater's marble floor yielded to cork in the aisles to help silence the sound of patrons moving to and from their seats. The Montgomery Theater's entertainment reflected the theater's genteel interior... The Montgomery reflected not only a new era of theater construction and entertainment, but also a conscious effort to reach and attract Atlanta's sizable middle-class audiences.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, theaters in Atlanta had taken major steps toward distancing themselves from the days of the shoddy, dark storefront theater. Movies in the city had attained, in the words of Steve Goodson, "a striking degree of respectability and popularity" by 1910. Five years later, with the introduction of feature-length films like D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (which was a roaring success in Atlanta—reporters believed that twenty-five to thirty thousand Atlantans attended the theater each day during its run), "the movies had established themselves for both their persuasive power and for being the predominant form of commercial entertainment in Atlanta, appealing to men, women, and children of all social classes."<sup>34</sup> In 1914, it was estimated that between twenty-five and thirty thousand white Atlantans attended the movies daily, and as the 1920s began, Atlanta's

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>34</sup> Goodson, "This Mighty Influence for Good or for Evil," 33, 44.

enthusiasm for film entertainment was rewarded with the construction of newer and larger movie palaces in the central business district.<sup>35</sup>

A revolution of production, distribution and consumption took place in the nascent film industry during the 1910s and 1920s that altered the predominant form of exhibition from storefront theaters, to nickelodeons and deluxe theaters, and finally to movie palaces. Alfred Chandler has vividly illustrated that many businesses and industries took advantage of scale economies and drastically larger consumer populations to increase revenue.<sup>36</sup> Entrepreneurs looking to expand from ownership of a single theater had, by the 1920s, firmly adopted what Chandler refers to as the “chain store” model. Adopted by grocery stores, drug stores, gas stations, and other businesses to great effect, theater chains emerged in the same fashion as Kroger and A&P grocery stores or Woolworth’s department stores. Using principles of scientific management and standardizing procedures and costs amongst all branches of the chain, theater owners could dramatically increase their revenues, improve the quality of their theaters (and thus attract a more “respectable” and affluent customer base), and create brand identity. One of the nation’s most successful movie theater chains formed in Chicago under the Balaban and Katz (B&K) Theaters brand. Although they did not build the first movie palace (that distinction goes to Samuel Rothapfel’s Roxy Theatre in New York), B&K

---

<sup>35</sup> Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 106.

<sup>36</sup> Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1977).

pioneered the model upon which large chains of movie palaces would base their day-to-day operations.<sup>37</sup>

B&K quickly established several successful theaters in residential areas of Chicago, and opened their first downtown theater in the early 1920s. By 1925, B&K had essentially monopolized theater exhibition in Chicago. To achieve this, B&K strove to set its theaters apart from the competition, both inside and outside. Drawing from previous traditions in theater construction and amusement aesthetics, B&K commissioned architects that developed attention-grabbing and fantastical designs. “Like builders of libraries, railway stations, hotels, and office buildings,” Gomery states, “theatre architects utilized the ornaments from the dominant styles of other eras to beautify their structures.”<sup>38</sup> The first B&K palaces relied on a French motif. The Chicago Theatre, for example, featured a stud-lighted Arc de Triomphe façade on its exterior, and the lobby was built to mirror the style of the Paris Opera. At a time when electricity was still a novelty, B&K theaters made use of large and flashy marquees to attract passers by. For the Tivoli Theatre, B&K architects used the Palace of Versailles as inspiration. “The association with the icons of European culture attracted the public for the splendour and design, as well as the attractions inside.”<sup>39</sup>

Efforts to set B&K theaters apart from other movie houses extended to the services within the theater. The implementation of premium services and amenities enticed customers who might have felt uncomfortable in the stuffy and dark theaters of

---

<sup>37</sup> The connection between Chandler’s chain store model and the Balaban & Katz theater chain is emphasized in Gomery, “Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19 (January 1984): 89-103.

<sup>38</sup> Gomery, “Film and Business History,” 92.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

old. In the auditorium, unobstructed sight lines and comfortable seats ensured an optimal viewing environment. A large team of ushers (which made up approximately one third of a given theater's staff) helped people in and out of the theatre to minimize time between shows and to assist patrons with any of their needs. Most ushers were white male college students dressed in military-style red uniforms with white gloves and yellow epaulettes. Restrooms were spacious and clean, and decorated in the same motif as the rest of the theater complete with paintings, sculptures, and artisanal furniture. B&K theaters also provided free babysitting by a trained attendant and a nurse.<sup>40</sup> Like deluxe theaters in other cities throughout the country, B&K's theaters were among the first buildings to offer air-conditioned interiors in Chicago. The cooled interiors were a boon to box office numbers during the hot months of summer. "During the summers," Gomery notes, "B&K frequently experienced larger attendances than during the then normal movie season, October through April."<sup>41</sup> These amenities, along with the flashy stage shows and vaudeville performances that preceded feature films, made B&K the most successful theater chain in the country by the 1920s. It was so successful that major Hollywood producers bid against each other for the opportunity to show their films in B&K theaters. In 1925, the chain was bought out by Famous Players (soon renamed Paramount), and became the Publix chain of theaters. By 1930, it had become the world's largest theater circuit, and the model that all other theater chains followed.<sup>42</sup>

The "Big Five" Hollywood studios—Paramount, Loew's/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Warner Brothers, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), and Fox—all built up major

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 95.

theater chains of their own during the 1920s. Each chain pursued slightly different growth strategies. Paramount opted for sheer numbers in its theater chain, controlling over one thousand theaters by 1930. Loew's/MGM opted instead for fewer but strategically-placed theaters in major urban centers around the country, including Loew's Grand Theatre in Atlanta (which replaced DeGive's Opera House). Warner Bros. dominated the mid-Atlantic region of the country with its takeover of the Stanley Company, owning nearly 700 theaters at its peak, and RKO operated a chain of nearly 200 theaters cobbled together through the acquisition of various regional chains.<sup>43</sup> William Fox built his theater empire through the return on his investments in the development of sound technology (although the Warner Bros. picture *The Jazz Singer* was the first film with talking sequences, Fox had developed the Movietone sound-on-film format used by the popular Fox Movietone newsreels), funneling these returns into the acquisition of several theater chains. Setting out to build or acquire the greatest movie palaces in each major city, Fox acquired the West Coast Theatres chain, and built massive palaces in Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco, St. Louis, and owned a controlling interest in New York's Roxy Theatre. William Fox's eventual lease of the Shrine Mosque in Atlanta provided a long sought-after Southeastern foothold for his nationwide theater empire.<sup>44</sup>

These large and opulent theaters came about as the film industry matured in the 1910s and 1920s, but their aesthetics and architectural style have their roots both within and outside the entertainment industry. Nearly every movie palace in the country adopted an exotic aesthetic, but this was a tradition carried on from earlier entertainment

---

<sup>43</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 60-62.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

venues. Vaudeville theaters, traveling shows, the circus, the penny arcade, the dime museum, and the Kinetoscope parlor all lent architectural and aesthetic features to the movie palace, including their fantastical and conspicuous architecture. Additionally, popular interest in the foreign and exotic (particularly in lands of the Near East and the Islamic world) shaped the architecture of commercial, fraternal, and civic structures all over the United States. These two trends merged in the 1920s to give movie palaces their unique and exotic style.

Charlotte Herzog argues that the architectural roots of the movie palace lie in its “low brow” entertainment and amusement predecessors, stating that the movie palace “incorporated many of the functional and iconographic motifs of these earlier, more ‘primitive’ exhibition contexts.”<sup>45</sup> Vaudeville theaters featured most of the exterior elements of later movie palaces, including an enclosed ticket lobby, complex and decorative canopies over the entrance, and prominent electrical displays (which later evolved into spectacular theater marquees). Furthermore, vaudeville theaters had already established a tradition of being “designed and decorated in accordance with some style of the past.” Most of these theaters, built in the 1890s, “had classical facades that demonstrated an adroit manipulation of academic forms and details.”<sup>46</sup> Romanesque and Renaissance features were common, which were used in an attempt to lend the vaudeville theater an air of respectability. Interior designs matched the style of the exterior, and exploited the same academic forms.

---

<sup>45</sup> Charlotte Herzog, “The Movie Palace and the theatrical Sources of Its Architectural Style,” *Cinema Journal* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Nickelodeons also incorporated similar elements, employing a crude architecture of spectacle to draw in curious passers-by. They combined features of the storefront theater including the box office, open front, gaudy poster and light displays, and the aggressive sales techniques of less permanent motion picture theaters, creating “an architectural form which was to identify the exterior of the movie palace and the movie theater in general.”<sup>47</sup> If nickelodeons incorporated earlier architectural forms, the grand palaces of the 1920s gave the movie theater a distinct architectural language.

Experimentation with other styles from around the world continued as theaters increased in size and became more elaborate. Greek revival, Italian rococo, and Spanish baroque styles, along with Gothic churches and even Mayan or Buddhist temples served as architectural inspiration for movie palaces. According to Forsher, “A combination of popular and highbrow culture created environments that were unique blends of each.”<sup>48</sup> This was a direct result of the film industry’s original reliance on a working-class audience, and its evolution into a more “respectable” industry. Thus, as Herzog argues, the changes in the movie industry were also reflected through theater architecture:

[T]he old brashness of the movie theater’s huckster days was not lost in the movie palace, but rather absorbed in a new pseudo-elegance. The exterior vestibule, box office, marquee, lights and posters functioned even more aggressively than before to attract the public’s attention, but the elaborateness of their design and decoration in the style of some well-known building of the past, gave the theater in general a broader appeal.

The popular flavor of the theater enjoyed a new distinction, thanks to the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>48</sup> Forsher, *Community of Cinema*, 37.

vener of a certain kind of respectability. The fantasy and sensationalism of the formative years of the movie theater were distilled and tempered by the endorsement of approved cultural models. This blend of influences, both popular and legitimate, projected an aura, a certain ambience one could describe as “tastefully tacky” or “refined vulgarity.”<sup>49</sup>

Non-Western forms of “refined vulgarity” were popular amongst movie palace architects, but the foreign and exotic, already a common subject of movies, was not unique to movie palace construction. Orientalism and exoticism had long been a part of Western popular culture. International expositions of the nineteenth century (like the Cotton States Exposition) featured “typical” Arabic, Saracenic, Indian, North African, or Persian buildings along with “oriental” streetscapes, and American architects demonstrated an increasing interest in Moorish or Islamic architecture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Moorish and Arabesque style in which the Fox Theatre is designed was evident in residential and commercial structures, including county estates, city residences, country clubs, and commercial plazas all over the country.<sup>50</sup> Some of these buildings, but particularly many movie theaters, incorporated Egyptian motifs into the Islamic aesthetic. That so many movie theaters, including the Fox, adopted this *mélange* of these styles in the 1920s is not surprising. Popular interest in Egypt had been prominent in Western culture since the French Revolution, and was manifested in lantern shows, panoramas, dioramas, photographs, and photographic

---

<sup>49</sup> Herzog, “The Movie Palace and the Theatrical Sources of Its Architectural Style,” 33.

<sup>50</sup> Omar Khalidi, “Fantasy, Faith, And Fraternity: American Architecture of Moorish Inspiration” (Unpublished Essay, 2004), 2-3, 7.

criticism throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> Images of Egypt and related themes and motifs also permeated early cinema.<sup>52</sup> The flourishing of feature-length narrative film style in the early 1920s coincided with the “triumphs” of Egyptology, the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb by Howard Carter in 1922, and the one-hundredth anniversary of Jean-Francois Champollion’s unlocking of the Rosetta Stone. Thus, according to Antonia Lant, filmmakers and film audiences alike were drawn to the mystical qualities of ancient Egypt.<sup>53</sup> Riding the wave of popular Egyptomania, film studios released a barrage of Egypt-centered films like *The Mummy*, *The Mummy’s Hand*, and *Tut-ankh-Amen’s Eighth Wife*. These films were often shown in theaters with matching motifs, like Grauman’s Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, enhancing the exotic and mystical nature of the cinematic experience.

In Atlanta, the era of the movie palace coincided with a period of major expansion for the city. The city’s newer and larger theaters of the early 1920s like the Howard Theatre (later acquired by Paramount-Publix), Loew’s Grand (which was the old DeGive’s Opera House converted for permanent film exhibition), and Keith’s Georgia Theatre (later named the Roxy) were constructed in the emergent business and entertainment district just north of the railroad tracks at Five Points. This area was already one of the principal public areas of the city, which lacked any other significant open spaces downtown. The construction or opening of these movie theaters was part of

---

<sup>51</sup> Antonia Lant, “The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania,” In *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*. ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 71.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

a wave of development in the downtown area. A throng of Neo-Gothic, Italianate, and “Chicago-style” office buildings housing banks and insurance, accounting, and legal firms was built in the Five Points area, and was closely followed by upscale hotels to accommodate the city’s business travelers and budding convention industry. Theaters and retail establishments accompanied this burst of construction, creating a multifunctional commercial, entertainment, retail, and financial center at the very heart of Atlanta. Various promotional publications and guidebooks touted Five Points as the “Times Square, the Hollywood and Vine, the Singapore of the South.”<sup>54</sup> They also included photographs of densely crowded streets and sidewalks, promoting Atlanta as a modern, productive, and fast-paced city of the new century. By the 1920s, the central business district at Five Points served as a visual metaphor for the entire city.<sup>55</sup>

Attempting to capture the vitality of early twentieth-century urban Atlanta, the city’s leaders embarked on a nationwide public relations campaign in the 1920s extolling the city’s unique features to potential investors and visitors. In 1925, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce launched “Forward Atlanta,” a four-year campaign in which over 125 million impressions of advertisements were placed in trade and financial publications, newspapers, and other periodicals. All of these ads touted Atlanta’s vitality, strategic location on the national rail network, and its abundant and non-unionized supply of white laborers (the ads failed to mention African Americans, who now made up 35 percent of the city’s population). Forward Atlanta also subsidized the publishing of Ivan Allen, Sr.’s book *Atlanta From the Ashes*. According to Rutheiser, Allen’s book

---

<sup>54</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> See K. Luehrs and Tim Crimmins, “In the Mind’s Eye: The Downtown as Visual Metaphor for the Metropolis,” *Atlanta History* 26, no. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1982): 177-97.

“provided an elaborated exegesis of the themes in the ads (Atlanta’s strategic location, transportation infrastructure, low taxes, intelligent non-unionized Anglo-Saxon labor) mingled with the by now familiar mythistory of an energetic, industrious people raising the city up out of its own ashes into a modern metropolis.”<sup>56</sup> Whether new business arrived as a direct result of the Forward Atlanta campaign is unclear, but between 1926 and 1929 over 700 new businesses established operations in Atlanta. Most of them involved warehousing, distribution, or branch office space, anticipating the service orientation of the U.S. economy in the second half of the twentieth century. With this growth also came the South’s first radio station, WSB (the self-proclaimed “Voice of the South”), further helping to “reinforce Atlanta’s role and image as regional capital.”<sup>57</sup> The city had roared into the last half of the 1920s on a wave of significant expansion and economic development, and in the meantime ground had been broken at the corner of Peachtree and Ponce De Leon in 1927, future site of the Fox Theatre. In two years, the regional capital of the South would also boast the “South’s Finest Theater.”

---

<sup>56</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 31.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

## **Chapter 2**

### **“The Finest Gift That Any City Has Been Blessed With”: The Grand Opening of the Fox Theatre in 1929**

The Fox Theatre was the only movie theater of its kind in Atlanta. While the beginning of the era of the movie palace is somewhat nebulous (some scholars mark the beginning as early as the early 1910s while others point to the early 1920s), the end is much more concrete—1929 is undoubtedly the end point of the ten- to fifteen-year era of the movie palace. While the Roaring Twenties begat the most architecturally spectacular movie theaters to date, the stock market crash in October and the ensuing Great Depression during the 1930s placed a new premium on simplicity and frugality. Furthermore, the economic state of the film industry during the Great Depression forced theater designers to think on a smaller scale. Massive three- to four-thousand seat theaters were no longer sustainable in a period of such economic hardship, so theater sizes were dramatically reduced. By the early 1930s, theater designers eschewed ostentation and spectacle, adopting Art Deco and Streamline Moderne aesthetics like their more mainstream architectural counterparts. While both the scale and the ostentation of the Fox were unrivaled by any of the already-existing theaters in the city, the economic realities of the 1930s essentially eliminated any potential future rivals.

Atlanta already boasted four deluxe theaters before the construction of the Fox in 1929; three of these stood on Peachtree Street. Loew’s Grand Theatre, the city’s largest and most impressive entertainment venue (later famous for hosting the 1939 world premiere of *Gone With the Wind*), stood a half-mile south of the future site of the Fox at

Ponce De Leon and Peachtree since 1893. It was originally known as the DeGive Grand Opera House, which hosted opera and live theater performances. By the 1910s, the DeGive Grand also offered vaudeville and moving picture entertainment along with other live performances. In 1923, theater chain magnate Jack Loew acquired the 2,000-seat DeGive Grand, undertook the first of several extensive renovation projects, and renamed it Loew's Grand Theatre. Loew's Grand was Atlanta's premier movie palace throughout the mid- and late-1920s. The Howard Theatre (later acquired by Paramount Theatres and renamed eponymously), a 2,500-seat movie house, opened in 1921 next to the DeGive Grand, and a theater of comparable size, Keith's Georgia Theatre (later renamed the Roxy), opened across the street in 1926. The Rialto Theatre, located to the south and west of Peachtree on Forsyth St., seated almost 1,000 and hosted vaudeville shows and film presentations beginning in the mid-1910s as well. These four theaters were considered the premier movie houses of 1920s Atlanta before the arrival of the Fox. Although three of the four existing movie palaces—the Howard, Keith's Georgia, and Loew's Grand—boasted seating capacities over 2,000, the Fox would more than double that figure. The sheer size and magnificence of the Fox immediately made it Atlanta's premier theater and entertainment venue once it opened.

Since the Howard and Keith's Georgia were newly built deluxe theaters and Loew's Grand was converted for film exhibition after decades as an opera and vaudeville house, their origins are firmly planted within the film industry. The Fox Theatre, however, initially had no such connection to the entertainment world. At first conceived by the Shriners fraternal order as a meeting hall, headquarters, and community center, the structure that would become the Fox Theatre was originally named the Shrine Mosque.

As a prestigious fraternal organization that co-opted the aesthetics and mysticism of the Near East, the Atlanta Shriners wished to build an opulent structure in a Moorish or Middle Eastern motif like their counterparts in other cities while also providing the city of Atlanta with a civic auditorium and events center. Planning for this project began nearly fifteen years before the Fox opened on Christmas of 1929, but the Shriners were forced to overhaul their original plans several times during that fifteen-year span. When construction costs spiraled out of control in 1927, the Shriners enlisted the aid of film mogul William Fox, who expressed his desire to lease the Shrine Mosque's proposed auditorium and operate it as the Fox Theatre, enabling the Shriners to continue their ambitious project.

The city watched with great anticipation during the Shrine Mosque's construction. The *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed that it promised to be "one of the most elaborate Shrine mosques in America and the outstanding architectural feat of this section," rivaling New York's Roxy Theatre for beauty.<sup>1</sup> Most Atlantans were enthralled with the building that seemed to be transported to Peachtree Street from another world. Once the Fox opened, Atlantans appreciated the building not only for its aesthetic and exotic qualities, but also for its modernity and technological advancement. It immediately became a revered symbol of the city that had grown at a breakneck pace since the turn of the century. No other building in Atlanta better captured the city's ethos during 1920s—its vitality, its prosperity, its boldness, and its desire to ascend to the exclusive ranks of major American cities.

---

<sup>1</sup> "\$2,000,000 Shrine Mosque to House Huge Theater," *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 January 1928.

The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, an appendant body of the Freemasons commonly known as the Shriners, is a fraternal and charitable organization steeped in Orientalist mystique and symbolism since its inception. First established in 1870 in New York City, the Shriners organization started small, but within the next several decades had established chapters around the country, and several in the South. These local chapters (referred to as “temples”) adopted Arabic names, such as the Kerbela Temple in Knoxville, Tennessee; the Oleika Temple in Lexington, Kentucky; the Alcazar Temple in Montgomery, Alabama; and the Al Shihah Temple in Macon, Georgia. Atlanta’s Yaarab Temple, established in 1889 by thirty-two Knights Templars and Scottish Rite Masons, experienced significant growth in its first twenty years. Originally headquartered at the Masonic Temple on Peachtree and Cain Streets, Yaarab Temple outgrew its accommodations by 1911 and began planning for the construction of a new meeting hall (Shriners referred to their meeting halls and headquarters as mosques). Although the members of Yaarab Temple formed a committee in November of that year to explore the project, the plan was shelved when committee members ruled that the chapter would not be able to afford construction costs.<sup>2</sup>

During this time, the members of Yaarab Temple—whose membership was exclusively white and male—had entered into a protracted legal battle with their black counterparts, the Rabban Temple of black Shriners in Atlanta. Fraternal orders were the most popular form of secular association amongst African American men at the turn of the century. Because black men were barred from national white fraternal orders like the Shriners, the Knights of Pythias, the Elks, and the Odd Fellows, they established

---

<sup>2</sup> James C. Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre: The Survival of a Dream,” *Atlanta History* 39 (Summer 1995), 5.

corresponding black orders in cities around the country. “When faced with white rejection,” according to Ariane Liazos and Marshall Gans, African American men “obtained the secret rituals by surreptitious means and formed parallel organizations.”<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1904, the leaders of three major white fraternal organizations embarked on a nationally coordinated legal campaign to wipe out “parallel” (black) organizations. Ten years later, this campaign pitted the white Shriners of Yaarab Temple against the black Shriners of Rabban Temple in Atlanta. In 1914, Yaarab Temple sued for an injunction against the black Shriners, whose organization had existed for approximately eight years. The Georgia Supreme Court ruled against the Rabban Temple in 1915, and again after an appeal in 1918. The protracted legal battle forced Atlanta’s black Shriners into bankruptcy, and they were only able to sustain their legal defense because of a relief fund established by the black Imperial Council (the black Shriners’ national leadership) in 1917. Thus Yaarab Temple, after considerable effort and expenditure, had won a victory over its black counterparts in Atlanta that would last until the late 1920s, when a similar decision in a Texas case between white and black Shriners was overturned by the United States Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup>

With their protracted and expensive legal battle against the black Shriners at an end, Yaarab Temple revisited the idea of building a new headquarters in 1919. By that time, membership had reached over 4,000 (including over 1,000 new members added during the previous year) and it was clear that a new mosque would be necessary to accommodate their burgeoning ranks. Two lots, one on Ivy Street and one on Baker

---

<sup>3</sup> Ariane Liazos and Marshall Gans, “Duty to the Race: African American Fraternal Orders and the Legal Defense of the Right to Organize,” *Social Science History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2004), 493.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 510, 513.

Street, were purchased as potential building sites.<sup>5</sup> Three years later, the Shriners deeded those lots and purchased another at the corner of Peachtree and Kimball (later renamed Ponce de Leon Avenue) for \$225,000. It took Yaarab Temple nearly two years to pay off the purchase, and planning began in 1925 to design the new Shrine Mosque. As they continued to discuss the project, many Shriners came to believe that the new mosque should include an auditorium or theater large enough to accommodate non-Shriner community and civic functions like concerts and plays. If the Shriners did not build such an auditorium, one member argued, surely some other private club would. Furthermore, other members argued that the construction of such an auditorium could provide a consistent stream of revenue to offset construction and operating expenses. At the same time, the city of Atlanta would have a spectacular new facility that would be available for community use.<sup>6</sup>

Having now decided to include a large auditorium and performance hall in the plans, the Shriners conducted a successful million-dollar building fund campaign during October 1925. A victory celebration held on the roof garden of the Ansley Hotel, however, proved to be premature—the Shriners had severely underestimated construction costs by at least another million dollars—but the \$1 million raised during the month of October allowed Yaarab Temple to proceed with the project. In November, the group broke ground for the new mosque.<sup>7</sup> A limited competition was held in January 1927 amongst Atlanta architectural firms for the design of the Shrine Mosque, and the winning firm was that of P. Thornton Marye, Richard W. Alger, and Olivier J. Vinour.

---

<sup>5</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Of the three partners, Marye was the most established architect and had built an impressive portfolio during his career in Atlanta. A Virginia native by way of Washington, D.C. and Savannah and a veteran of both the Spanish-American War and World War I, Marye was most well known for designing the city's famed Spanish-style Terminal Station in 1904. Given the centrality of the railroads to Atlanta's history and commerce, this was a prestigious project that garnered him substantial praise. In the following ten years, Marye worked on the design of the Gothic revival St. Luke's Episcopal Church with fellow Atlanta architect A. Ten Eyck Brown (1906), the Walton Building (1910) where he eventually located his practice, the Capital City Club (1911), and the private residences of several prominent Atlantans. During the 1920s, Marye partnered with Barrett Alger and his son Richard to build the Joseph E. Brown Junior High School (1922-24) and the Georgian revival Randolph-Lucas House (1924).<sup>8</sup>

Olivier Vinour, a French native trained at the renowned *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, moved to Atlanta in 1926. Upon his arrival, he partnered with the younger Alger and Marye to form the new firm of Marye, Alger, and Vinour. The Frenchman would achieve local distinction with the new firm for his work on the Fox and as the lead designer of another of the firm's 1929 projects, the Southern Bell Telephone Building on Ivy Street. The trio of Marye, Alger, and Vinour entered Yaarab Temple's limited competition for the design of the Shrine Mosque in early 1927 with several other prominent Atlanta firms—Hentz, Reid, and Adler; A. Ten Eyck Brown; Pringle and Smith; and G. Lloyd Preacher.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, given the exclusive nature of most

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert M. Craig, *Atlanta Architecture: Art Deco to Modern Classic, 1929-1959* (Gretna, La: Pelican, 1995), 145.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

fraternal organizations, the partners of the winning firm had strong Shriner connections. Thornton Marye had been a member of Yaarab Temple since May 1917, and Richard Alger was also a member—his membership was transferred from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Yaarab Temple in May 1927. As a French native, Vinour was the only one of the three who was not a member of the fraternal order.<sup>10</sup>

The design for the Shrine Mosque was predominantly the work of Vinour, who drew inspiration from various postcards collected by a friend on his travels in the Middle East and two picture books: *Nubia* and *The Holy Land*.<sup>11</sup> The exterior design of the building included a large copper-plated onion dome on Kimball Street (later renamed Ponce de Leon Avenue) and two minarets, one rising from each side of the Peachtree entrance, resembling a Moorish village with pointed archways and entrances on the east side. The entire exterior featured alternating bands of cream and buff brick, and the 140-foot loggia which led visitors to the lobby featured a terrazo and tile floor resembling an Arabian carpet, as well as filigreed lighting and elaborate plasterwork. The exterior was peppered with pointed archways, balconies, parapets, and arrow-slit openings. The interior design featured decorative styles from various parts of the near East—Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Persia, Spain, and Arabia—and kept them largely separated, so each chamber, hall, or room was finished in a different motif. The interior, according to Marye, was to resemble a group of buildings connected by open courts. This illusion was achieved by using sky-like ceilings flanked by arcades of masonry. It was an ambitious plan, and it would cost no small amount to execute. The only major adjustment to the structure's blueprints made by the Shriners at this point was the substitution of a

---

<sup>10</sup> Bryant, "Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre," 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

proposed three-story building (which would house office space) on Peachtree Street by a row of temporary storefronts that could be leased to businesses to generate further revenue. With so many architectural styles and interior motifs in a building of such scale, at least thirty draftsmen and engravers were required to produce full-scale drawings and working plaster models over a period of several months. By this time, it had become abundantly clear that the cost of this massive project was far higher than anticipated. In fact, by 1928 estimated costs for the construction of the Shrine Mosque had surpassed \$2 million. It appeared that the Shriners' ambitions had outgrown their resources.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime, thousands of miles to the West, a Hungarian immigrant who had made a fortune in New York was building a movie theater empire in his adopted home state of California. Up from his childhood days as a street peddler and cloth sponger, William Fox in adulthood had assembled a vast empire of movie theaters and built a new studio complex outside of Hollywood by the end of the 1920s.<sup>13</sup> In July 1925 Fox took one of his first major steps toward building this theater empire with the acquisition of West Coast Theaters, a prosperous regional movie theater chain that dominated the film exhibition market in California and several other western states. By 1928 he had either built or planned to build grand movie palaces in Brooklyn (1928), Detroit (1928), St. Louis (1929) and San Francisco (1929), and he owned a controlling interest in New York's largest and most famous movie palace, the Roxy.<sup>14</sup> Even with his successes on

---

<sup>12</sup> Kathy Roberts, *The Fabulous Fox Theatre: The History of an Atlanta Icon* (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta Metropolitan Publishing, 2002), 6, 8, 10, 12; Bryant, "Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre," 8.

<sup>13</sup> Gene Fernet, "Fox – With and Without 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *American Film Studios: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 1988), 86-88.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Eyman, *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution, 1926-1930* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 65.

both the West and East coasts, Fox had not yet found a foothold for his empire in the southeastern United States. In the Shrine Mosque of Atlanta, he saw a golden opportunity to expand into the Southeast. Atlanta had already proven to be a lucrative market for the family of now-deceased theater rival Jack Loew, as well as competitor Paramount-Publix Theatres.

Preliminary negotiations between Yaarab Temple and Fox Theatres Corporation actually began in the spring of 1927. As building costs rose, the Shriners became increasingly hesitant to proceed without a tenant for the auditorium. Yaarab Temple even considered scaling back its plans for the original building, instead entertaining the idea of building two separate structures, a stand-alone auditorium and a “Shrine activities building.” As the finances of the project became increasingly strained, the Shriners stepped up negotiations with the Fox Theatres Corporation.<sup>15</sup> Members of Yaarab Temple grew optimistic that, if an agreement could be reached with Fox Theatres Corp., then the income from the auditorium would be sufficient to allow construction to continue as planned. To the relief of the Shriners, the contract with Fox was officially signed in January 1928. The agreement “covered a lease period of twenty one years, during which time the Yaarab Temple Building Company was to receive annual rental for the auditorium plus income from retail businesses fronting Peachtree Street. The estimated amount of this income was about \$3 million.”<sup>16</sup> Fox agreed to pay Yaarab Temple \$105,000 per year for the first seven years, \$115,000 per year for the second

---

<sup>15</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10; Reprint of February 1928 *City Builder* article in an invitation to the June 14, 1928 cornerstone laying ceremony, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

seven years, and \$125,000 per year for the final seven years of the original lease.<sup>17</sup>

Although Fox Theatres did not provide direct funds for the construction of the Shrine Mosque, the company insisted that the auditorium be slightly modified and furnished to its specifications. The only other major alteration to the plans demanded by Fox was the relocation of the theater entrance. The original main entrance to the Fox was drawn up facing Ponce de Leon Avenue, beneath the theater's massive onion dome. There, patrons were meant to pass through a large pointed archway into the theater. Since Peachtree Street was still Atlanta's most exclusive thoroughfare, Fox placed his marquee and entrance on the east side of the building where two minarets framed the 140-foot open air arcade that led to the lobby doors. In exchange for these accommodations Fox guaranteed the Shriners he would book and promote movies and stage shows in Atlanta to keep people coming back. Fox proclaimed, "If Atlanta wants Roxy presentations, they will be produced in the same elaborate fashion that characterizes them in New York. If it's vaudeville and high type pictures that are desired by the Atlanta public, we will give them the best."<sup>18</sup> Yaarab Temple, as part of the agreement, was allowed to use the main auditorium for their ceremonials and initiations six times per year.<sup>19</sup>

The Fox is one of Atlanta's last examples of eclectic architecture. From the 1870s to the end of the 1920s eclecticism was a significant trend in American architecture; put simply, eclectic architects recreated and reproduced historic architectural forms in the designs of new structures. Most often, the form chosen by the architect had

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Butcher, "The Fabulous Fox," *The Georgia Tech Engineer*, January 1957, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *City Builder*, March 1928, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Butcher, "The Fabulous Fox," 27.

a historic association with the type of structure in question—houses would be designed with an Anglo-Saxon home atmosphere in mind (in Georgian or Tudor style, for example); churches were designed appropriately for each sect (Gothic for more traditional sects or classical for newer sects); and various forms of classicism, according to Walter Kidney, “clothed the museum, the library, [and] the memorial structure in cool eternal beauty, but broke into rustications, ressauts, and swags, giant orders and Renaissance cornices for the more worldly office buildings, the bank, the apartment house, the theater, the clubhouse, and the town mansion.”<sup>20</sup> By the 1920s, however, eclectics found their approach to architecture in conflict with the realities of the twentieth century. The popularity of skyscraper construction and the changing architecture of modern transportation, for example, confronted eclectics with a new set of problems that called into question the appropriateness of a historically designed structure in a modern setting. By 1925, ferment had set in amongst the eclectic community, and a new generation of modern architects criticized eclecticism for being intellectually stagnant or insipid. Eclectic architects, understanding that the arrival of at least *some* elements of modernist architecture was not far away, sought to prove that “even though the styles might be historical, the works themselves were vital and in the spirit of a living tradition.”<sup>21</sup>

Atlanta’s younger architects began to join their counterparts in other architecturally progressive cities like New York and Chicago in eschewing the most literal reproductions of historical architecture. As a relatively young city without the

---

<sup>20</sup> Walter Kidney, *The Architecture of Choice: Eclecticism in America, 1880-1930* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974), 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

deep traditionalist roots resistant to modernism in more historic urban centers of the South like Savannah or Mobile, Atlanta embraced Art Deco and avant-garde Modern styles as a way to combine historicist and decorative elements with the modern world. As Robert M. Craig writes, “Art Deco and Modern Classic design may be viewed as an effort of traditional, often Beaux-Arts-trained architects to be progressive.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the decade before the Great Depression is considered the last throes of historic eclecticism, and the beginnings of Atlanta’s Art Deco period in which designers made conscious efforts to present a modern style with populist appeal while also retaining the ornamentation of historical forms.

It was in this stylistic milieu of the 1920s that the Fox and other movie palaces were designed and built. While the film industry gradually shed its huckster image and movies had gained cultural legitimacy, the movie theater was still a relatively young architectural form and the grand movie palace was a very new development. As discussed in the previous chapter, movie palace designers took architectural cues from stage theaters, vaudeville houses, and storefront or nickelodeon theaters, but their design had matured to what Charlotte Herzog describes as “tastefully tacky” or “refined vulgarity.”<sup>23</sup> Having largely shed its working-class stigma by the final years of the Roaring Twenties, moviegoing had gained cultural ascendancy and widespread acceptance as a legitimate leisure-time recreational activity. Likewise, the movie theater was an increasingly accepted architectural form, but its various forms were still more daring and fantastical than any other type of building. The Fox, bold and exotic in

---

<sup>22</sup> Craig, *Atlanta Architecture*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> Herzog, “The Movie Palace and the Theatrical Sources of Its Architectural Style,” 33.

design, actually shared a great deal with other structures of the Deco era. Its design appealed to the senses in a populist manner; it was highly ornamental, and made effective use of color and cosmetic surface effects.

The Fox Theatre's populist appeal was apparent shortly after the cornerstone was laid in June of 1928, and it was highly publicized in the local press. The public responded with considerable excitement as the local newspapers gushed about the exterior's imposing scale, exotic style, and architectural beauty. Not all who laid eyes upon the plans for the Fox, however, were so impressed. For the same reasons the structure excited many of Atlanta's residents, it also offended the aesthetic sensibilities of the more conservative elements of the city's architectural community. The editor of the *Southern Architect and Building News* took particular offense to the plans on grounds of "civic artistry." In the February 1928 issue of the *SABN*, he disparaged that "[t]here is about to be constructed in one of our Southern cities a monumental building that violates every law of architectural propriety." He believed that the Shrine Mosque was "an atrocious thing" built to "satisfy a building committee that has no regards for civic artistry." Thus, the editor criticized the building's architecture not on its own merits, although one can deduce from his tone that the building design also offended the editor's sensibilities, but rather from the standpoint of civic architecture. The building did not appropriately fit into the surrounding area at the intersection of Ponce de Leon and Peachtree. He continued:

Some years ago W.L. Stoddart, then practicing in Augusta, Georgia, now a prominent architect of New York City, designed two noble and beautiful buildings [the Georgian Terrace Hotel and the Ponce De Leon

Apartments], after the Italian renaissance in style, in this city. One a hotel, the other a residential apartment. The hotel erected fronting the main thoroughfare and the apartment just across the street fronting one of the city's finest avenues, which leads off to the right of the main street. And only two years ago just beyond this hotel there was erected a bachelor apartment building of the same style and in perfect harmony with the two previously erected buildings.

The Fox, however, clearly did not fit the classical motif of the neighboring structures. This, according to the editor, was an offense to the architectural community. He cited William Greeley's *The Essence of Architecture* and the idea of "propriety of location" in his criticism of the Fox. According to the excerpt of Greeley's work in the editor's essay, a building that is not in harmony with its surroundings in terms of materials, style, and scale is "an affront to the whole neighborhood," is "a cruel insult to the city's taste," and is like a "cabbage in a pansy bed." It is "an architectural bull in a china shop, smashing all values to show its own brutal exuberance of power." Thus, the Shrine Mosque "cannot have the stamp of good architecture placed upon it." The editor softened his criticism of the "poor architect" by suggesting that he had been "sacrificed upon the alter [sic] for the crime of just another overpowering building committee," but it is clear that he disapproved of the design by Marye, Alger, and Vinour.<sup>24</sup>

As a widely read architectural trade publication in the Southeast, *Southern Architect and Building News*'s criticism quickly reached the Fox's trio of designers. Three months later, Richard Alger penned a response to the editor's "Architectural

---

<sup>24</sup> "Architectural Propriety," *Southern Architect and Building News*, February 1928.

Propriety” column, and this response appeared in the May issue of *SABN*. In the letter, Alger chastised the publication for criticizing the building committee, part of one of the largest and most prestigious fraternal organizations in the country of which he was also a member, and noted that the building committee worked closely with the Georgia chapter of the American Institute of Architects to ensure architectural propriety. In defense against the editor’s criticisms Alger wrote, “The materials will harmonize both in texture and color with the surrounding buildings.” This was, he stated, a fundamental requirement of the building committee when it announced the limited design competition. After reprinting Alger’s letter in full, the editor apologized for any offense he might have caused, but also added a final jab: “I do not believe, however, that any building whose design is derived from the Sarasenic [sic] style can ever be made to harmonize with the surrounding buildings which stand out so prominently as those referred to above.”<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, on the next page of the May issue of *SABN*, consulting architect F.W. Fitzpatrick made a plea for more creativity from Southern architects:

I am not clamoring for the weird absinthe and cigarette dreams of originality that some of our French friends and Frank Lloyd Wright and his cohorts perpetrate in the name of Architecture, but it does seem to me that we could get up a wee bit less of a monotonous run of stuff than we have been giving our cities, or else frankly throw up the sponge and admit we have been taking money under false pretense and that there really is no sense in a man’s employing an architect.

---

<sup>25</sup> *Southern Architect and Building News*, May 1928.

The editor was correct, then, in closing his response to Alger's letter by saying that his was "only a personal opinion and after all it's the majority of opinion that rules."<sup>26</sup> This professional disagreement was a debate that surely played out in many American cities during this time period. Marye, Alger, and Vinour had provided "something different" in their design of the Fox, but the populist nature of the design clashed with the more academic classical style of the Georgia Terrace Hotel and the Ponce de Leon Apartment buildings across the street. Peachtree was still Atlanta's most exclusive residential thoroughfare, especially further north from the growing entertainment district, and thus featured many homes and older buildings designed in a more traditional style. It was no doubt jarring to the more traditional elements of the architectural community to see a building of such scale and architectural flamboyance being erected on old Peachtree, but the Fox's construction was a sign of the modernity of 1920s Atlanta.

Criticisms of more traditional architects aside, a great deal of excitement buzzed throughout Atlanta as the building neared completion. The exotic nature of the Shrine Mosque's architecture and its contrast with the surrounding structures did not bother the general populace in the same way as it had the conservative elements of the architectural community. In a letter to the *Atlanta Journal* one Atlantan wrote, "This wonderful reproduction of the Mudejar art in the heart of modern Atlanta" was "a rhapsody in stone." The writer felt that the architecture of the Shrine Mosque *complemented* instead of conflicting with the classical design of the surrounding buildings, and that it excited the imagination:

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

This mosque with its mellow beauty, though new, seems like a priceless jewel of rare antiquity encircled in a modern mounting, when one observes the buildings surrounding it. The beautiful Georgian Terrace, the imposing Ponce de Leon Apartments, the handsome mansion of the Inmans, all lending an air of dignity and charm to emphasize the meeting of the beauty of the east with that of the west.

Walking out Peachtree Street, at that hour of the day, when the western sun lingers in dazzling radiance, making a golden background against which the minaret, the tower, the domes, and the broken outlines of the massive proportions of the Shrine Mosque rise in magnificent splendor, one is lost in admiration and stilled in reverential wonder at its lavish beauty.

‘Like the shadow of a tree on snow, the memory of minarets lay on the imagination.’ Looking toward the southwestern corner of the handsome mosque where its slender minaret towers high against the golden sunset, the inward eye visions the familiar muezzin from its balcony calling the faithful to evening prayers. And the hush in the heart of an Occidental attests the power of the beauty of worship... There is a wealth of opportunity to those lovers of romantic beauty who have never visited the

Orient, when they can stroll leisurely out Peachtree Street and view this magnificent mosque—a hostage of the present to the past.<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after the completion of the exterior in 1929, the interior began to take shape. The official decorator for the Fox was none other than Eve Fox, William's wife. She had already decorated the Fox movie palaces in St. Louis and Detroit, and saved her husband a good deal of money in the process despite her penchant for the expensive and exotic. She had no other significant professional experience, but she took an active role in the design process and kept abreast of any and all problems that arose with the interior decoration. She supervised the installation of most of the décor, and selected the fabrics and furnishings inside the auditorium.<sup>28</sup> On opening night, most of the theater patrons were awed by the results of Mrs. Fox's efforts, although some could have characterized her style as overly extravagant. One historian has described her as having "the business acumen of Hetty Green combined with the decorative flair of a demented Elsie DeWolfe."<sup>29</sup> Regardless of one's opinion on the merits of Mrs. Fox's style, her finished product was no more excessive than other grand movie palaces of the time. After all, excess and opulence were the norms for movie palaces.

The lobby was rather restrained by movie palace standards. It was Spanish-Moorish in style, a sharp contrast to some of the more spectacular lobbies of other movie palaces (including other Fox Theatres around the United States). The Atlanta Fox featured several lounges in which patrons found distinct motifs and décor. The Ladies'

---

<sup>27</sup> Letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 24 December 1929.

<sup>28</sup> Bryant, "Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre," 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 112.

Lounge on the Mezzanine Level, the adjacent Powder Room, and the Gentlemen's Lounge on the Lower Level were all decorated in Egyptian style, with the Ladies' Lounge featuring two replicas of King Tut's throne placed on either side of a false fireplace. The Men's Lounge featured scarabs over the doorways, furniture decorated with carved lotus blossoms, and lamps that were replicas of Egyptian tomb decorations. Above the sofa in the Men's Lounge was an image of Ramses II. The Egyptian theme is carried further into the Egyptian Ballroom, where the Shriners planned to hold their official meetings, assemblies, and banquets. The ballroom featured a maple floor, while the images of scarab beetles, lotus blossoms, falcons, and other images resembling hieroglyphics adorned the walls and ceiling along with geometric decoration. The adjacent Grand Salon was decorated in an Arabic design and featured a tile fountain at the entrance. The Ladies' Lounge on the Lower Level was designed to look like a Turkish harem, with corresponding furniture and curtained pointed arch entryways, while the Men's Lounge on the Mezzanine Level was decorated as a Moorish coffee room.<sup>30</sup>

The lobby and outer chambers were merely the appetizers to the main course: the Fox Theatre auditorium. The 65,000 square-foot auditorium was designed to resemble an outdoor Middle Eastern courtyard, "flanked by castellated walls with barred windows [and] capped by parapets and turrets." The stage and movie screen were set between the castle walls, which were joined by a proscenium arch, topped by a bridge. Perhaps the most striking feature of the auditorium was the ceiling, which resembled a cobalt-blue sky complete with twinkling stars (arranged in accurate formation with the help of astronomy students at the Georgia School of Technology, now known as the Georgia

---

<sup>30</sup> Roberts, *Fabulous Fox Theatre*, 28.

Institute of Technology) and slowly moving clouds. The clouds were actually projected onto the ceiling of the auditorium by a Brenograph Junior projector, which directed light through a rotating mica disc upon which an artist had etched cloud patterns. The clouds would take an hour and forty-five minutes to complete their journey around the Fox Theatre's "sky." The ceiling even featured a sun illusion that would rise at the top of the rear level with a pinkish-blue glow, reach a high noon zenith halfway across the ceiling, and set five minutes later over the right side of the bridge above the proscenium arch. What appeared to be a striped tent canopy covered the uppermost balcony seating. It was actually a cantilevered steel-and-plaster structure, but the desired illusion of being in an outdoor courtyard was complete.<sup>31</sup>

The ceiling of a movie palace placed it into one of two major schools of theater design. The "standard" style is traced back to opera house and vaudeville theater design, in which the ceiling was ornately decorated, while the "atmospheric" style of movie palace design "borrowed from Nature and the more flamboyant landscape gardeners of the past."<sup>32</sup> The atmospheric style, created by theater architect John Eberson, gave the audience the illusion of being seated outdoors. Eberson pioneered this style in 1922 with the completion of Holblitzelle's Majestic Theatre in Houston, Texas, which was built in the style of an Italian courtyard. Eberson's design created a major buzz amongst theater owners, spawned legions of imitators, and earned him commissions to design nearly one

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 22; *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 December 1929; Hall, *Best Remaining Seats*, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Hall, *Best Remaining Seats*, 94.

hundred other atmospheric theaters throughout his architectural career, including the Avalon in Chicago and the Tampa Theatre in Tampa, Florida.<sup>33</sup>

This atmospheric design was chosen for the Fox due to several reasons. Firstly, it was a crowd-pleaser. In a time when each new movie palace sought to be more spectacular than its predecessors, Eberson's and other atmospheric theaters raised the bar even higher. Secondly, atmospheric theaters were much cheaper to build and maintain. According to Ben Hall, they cost about one-fourth as much to build as the standard models, with their wildly ornate ceilings. "The simple plaster vault of the ceiling, with its projected clouds and handful of low-wattage stars, was economical in comparison with classic domes, ornamental beams, [and] stupendous chandeliers." The only repairs necessary to an atmospheric theater were replacing burned out "stars" with new light bulbs or touching up the paint job. That the ceiling was smooth, made of plaster, and painted only one color made the task of maintenance in an atmospheric far simpler than those in standard style movie palaces.<sup>34</sup> The atmospheric style also directly affected the auditorium's acoustics. Plaster is an acoustically absorbent material, and the lack of odd angles or protrusions from the ceiling helped create an acoustically "dead" environment, in which reverberations were kept to a minimum. The plaster canopy at the back of the Fox Theatre's auditorium was known to "collect" and reflect the sound coming from the stage—performers with the New York Metropolitan Opera later claimed that the Fox's acoustics were second to none.

While much of the ornamentation in the Fox's auditorium served an aesthetic purpose, some interior elements cloaked the theater's very modern technology.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 100.

Microphones in the proscenium arch further sharpened the auditorium's acoustics. The stage was built in sections and equipped with a platform elevator capable of supporting an entire orchestra. The elevators could either raise the platform to the stage level or lower it all the way to the floor. The proscenium arch at the front of the auditorium featured hidden electric speakers for Fox Movietone newsreels and talkies. Recessed faux-balconies on both sides of the stage contained grilles that masked the organ chambers of "Mighty Mo," the Fox's famous Möller organ. Custom-built for the Fox Theatre by the M.P. Möller Company of Hagerstown, Maryland, Mighty Mo had the distinction for nearly three years of being the largest theater organ in the world. "Mo" lost its title in 1932 when it was dethroned by Radio City Music Hall's twin-consolidated Wurlitzer in New York.<sup>35</sup> The 3,610-pipe Möller could be raised and lowered in the same manner as various sections of the stage, and was capable of making a wide range of sounds and noises. Mo could imitate exotic animal sounds and bird whistles, simulate instruments like the oboe, flute, clarinet, gongs, or fire whistles, and could simulate over two dozen percussion instruments. Further hidden features were backstage, where a veritable labyrinth of dressing rooms, practice rooms for musicians (including the famous Shriners' band), and a screening room made up part of a seven-story wing of the Shrine Mosque. The seventeen communal dressing rooms and two private dressing rooms could accommodate up to 130 performers at a time, and were serviced by an automatic passenger elevator. Technology was also concealed deep beneath the stage, where the Fox's own emergency generator resided.

---

<sup>35</sup> Hall, 192.

Another feature hidden in the bowels of the theater made the experience at the Fox unique. It was the first building in Atlanta to be air-conditioned, immediately setting it apart from other entertainment venues in the city. The system installed at the Fox was very efficient, with the ability to cool the theater within ten minutes. It worked by pulling air from the auditorium through large ducts into the basement, and moving it through a series of water jets, cooling the air, and then propelling it into the auditorium.<sup>36</sup> The purpose of air-conditioning, however, went far beyond providing comfort to the theater's guests. It was a part of the movie palace's appeal to aspiring middle-class customers. As Marsha Ackerman writes, "in splendid movie palaces... the use of indoor climate control helped blur the boundary between the perquisites of the wealthy and the aspirations of the middle class."<sup>37</sup> Just as the lavish trappings and decorations of the Fox gave its clientele a sense of importance, the presence of air-conditioning served the same purpose. The huge machinery and enormous expenses required to install and operate an air-conditioning system lent prestige and glamour to any establishment that could afford it. "[A]ir-conditioning reinforced the novelty, modernity, and luxury of the movie-going experience."<sup>38</sup> Motion pictures had come a long way in a short time from the dark, stuffy, and dank nickelodeons, and exhibitors continually searched for new ways to distinguish the moviegoing experience. Now air-conditioning could provide yet another attraction to potential audiences.

The goal of setting the Fox and other movie palaces apart from previous modes of film exhibition served another purpose, which exhibitors hoped would keep middle-class

---

<sup>36</sup> Roberts, *Fabulous Fox Theatre*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Marsha Ackerman, *Cool Comfort: America's Romance with Air-Conditioning* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 44.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

patrons coming back. As Janna Jones argues, movie palace operators sought to encourage acceptable public behavior amongst its patrons through the design and features of the theater. “Obviously the theater owners wanted customers to aspire to the behavior of the highest common denominator because they could not afford to offend and then lose the patronage of the middle class and the elite.”<sup>39</sup> The goal was to produce a humbling effect on patrons, to signal to them that they had entered a refined public space, and should thus behave accordingly. This was seen as integral to the retention of middle-class patrons. At the same time, picture palace owners promoted their theaters as democratic spaces, where anyone could enjoy a fine afternoon’s or evening’s entertainment in an upscale environment, and be waited on by a clean, helpful, and friendly staff. An advertisement in the *Atlanta Constitution* on December 24, one day before the Fox’s opening, urged all of Atlanta to “be king for a day” at the Fox Theatre. Managers, however, also expected patrons to act in a noble manner. “In order to attract middle-class patrons, then, movie palace owners and managers consciously differentiated their theaters from working-class venues by eliminating working-class signifiers, foregrounding symbols of the elite, and enforcing appropriate middle-class behavior—all while simultaneously expounding upon their theaters’ democratic aims.”<sup>40</sup> No matter how democratic a space the Fox appeared to be, white patrons of the theater could be assured that Jim Crow segregation was upheld. While the Fox was the only first-run movie palace in Atlanta that would allow black patrons through its doors, they were limited to a small section of balcony seating, referred to as the “gallery.” This section could only be accessed via the steep fire escape staircase on the outside of the building.

---

<sup>39</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

The gallery was separated from the rest of the balcony by a three-foot barrier that prevented black patrons from passing into other areas of the theater. Black audience members (other than nannies for the children of white patrons) were limited only to the gallery seating and to the small and modestly appointed bathrooms at the rear of the balcony.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of their social status, many Atlantans excitedly anticipated the grand opening of “The South’s Finest Theater.”<sup>42</sup> The Atlanta press had already given the exterior design of the Shrine Mosque its highest praise. Now, it gave the interior a similar treatment. The headline of a Ralph T. Jones column in the *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed the “Interior Glories of New Fox House Indescribable.” Reviewing the 5,000-seat capacity, “perfect” acoustics, beautiful drop curtain, various lighting effects, and elevated sections of the orchestra pit, Jones stated, “there isn’t anything, anywhere, that outshines the Fox for magnificence, for beauty, for modernity and for charm.”<sup>43</sup> The *Atlanta Journal* ran a similar story cataloguing the technical and aesthetic wonders of the interior. Despite the magnificence of other movie palaces, the Fox promised to be a wholly new and even more impressive viewing experience than any other: “It makes no particular difference whether you have been in the Roxy and the Paramount in New York or not. If you have seen a moon somewhere that wouldn’t make you indifferent to your

---

<sup>41</sup> Original Marye, Alger, and Vinour Blueprints. Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>42</sup> This phrase is seen in various forms in articles from the *Atlanta Journal* and *Atlanta Constitution*, as well as advertisements for the Fox Theatre.

<sup>43</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 December 1929.

first glimpse of the sun.”<sup>44</sup> The potential for exciting new screen entertainment was also met with anticipation. The *Journal* reported that the opening of the Fox “will enable Georgians to enjoy the first of many super-films that will be produced during the 1929-1930 Fox jubilee celebration, commemorating 25 years of motion picture production and progress.”<sup>45</sup>

The program for the Christmas day opening ceremonies had been set for some time, and was heavily advertised in local papers. Atlanta endured a freeze during the previous week—snow fell on December 19<sup>th</sup> and temperatures dropped into the teens—but the city had thawed by Christmas day. A capacity crowd began to line up on Peachtree Street as early as 10:30 a.m.; as the day wore on, the line wound around the corner and down Ponce de Leon as eager patrons waited to pay the sixty cents admission (children were admitted for twenty cents). Doors opened at 12:45 p.m. on December 25, 1929, and the Fox Theatre was filled within minutes in time for its first show at 1:15 p.m. The program began with a demonstration of “Mighty Mo” (which slowly rose on its elevator from the theater pit) by the diminutive Iris Wilkins, purportedly the world’s highest-paid female organist. Next, the Fox Grand Orchestra appeared on stage, conducted by Atlanta favorite Enrico Leide, to play Sir Edward Elgar’s piece “This Shrine of Beauty.” The large screen was then revealed for the first time to show Walt Disney’s *Steamboat Willie* cartoon starring Mickey Mouse. The Fanchon and Marco “Beach Nights Idea” followed, which featured 36 dancing women (the famous “Sunkist Beauties”) performing a choreographed routine. Fanchon and Marco were a brother-

---

<sup>44</sup> *Atlanta Journal*, 22 December 1929.

<sup>45</sup> “Fox Super Films Will Be Shown at New Theater,” *Atlanta Journal*, 4 December 1929.

sister tandem who were nationally renowned for managing their “Ideas” or short dance shows, which featured complicated choreography, elaborate backgrounds and sets, decorative costumes, and beautiful female dancers.<sup>46</sup> Upon their arrival in Atlanta, the *Constitution* amusingly referred to the Sunkist Beauties as “two carloads of feminine pulchritude.” When the Beach Nights Idea concluded, the Fox’s screen was again revealed for a Fox Movietone Newsreel. The sound-on-film Movietone system passed its first public test in Atlanta. Finally, it was time for the feature film—described as “splendid” by reviewers—a football-related talkie titled *Salute*, starring George O’Brien as an All-American West Point halfback, Helen Chandler, and William Janney.<sup>47</sup>

By all accounts, the premiere was a rousing success. Ralph Jones proclaimed, “The Fox theater [sic] brought to the metropolis of the south the finest gift that any city has been blessed with in the history of theatricals.” He melodramatically encouraged those who had not yet made it to the theater to “throw your advance expectations away, because they will be so inadequate to match the realization that they would be ridiculously out of place. The best you have hoped for will be but a faint shadow of the gorgeous wonder of the reality.” Jones believed that Atlanta had surpassed every city in the country with the opening of the new theater:

No longer will it be necessary to talk about the wonders of the picture palaces of New York, or other points, east, south, north or west. When traveled visitors launch into descriptions of other temples of Thespis, you can safely yawn politely behind your fingers and nonchalantly remark, “Have you been to the Atlanta Fox?” If they reply in the negative you can

---

<sup>46</sup> Hall, *Best Remaining Seats*, 216.

<sup>47</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 December 1929.

bestow one of those pitying looks of superiority and truthfully retort, “My Deah! Why you haven’t seen anything—nothing at awl! [sic]”<sup>48</sup>

Crowds continued to fill the Fox to capacity after opening day. While they did not line up as early as they had on Christmas morning, many lined up before the first show on December 26 as well.<sup>49</sup> In the final week of 1929, the Fox Theatre was the highlight of the Atlanta social calendar. As early as December 27, the Fox held its first social event, a gathering of the football All-Stars of the Southern Conference with the members of the 1929-30 Debutantes’ Club.<sup>50</sup> The first week was a smashing success, and Fox manager R.T. Newton guaranteed the city that the new year would be even better.

In the most basic sense, the Fox Theatre came to fruition due to an impressive mobilization of resources and manpower—including millions of dollars and thousands of hours of planning—but it was also a most appropriate manifestation of the ethos of 1920s Atlanta. The city had long demonstrated a tendency to nod to the past while still looking toward the future. The Fox—a theater whose interior motifs invoked medieval Arabia, Moorish Spain, Ottoman Turkey, and ancient Egypt—shared this tendency by seemingly transporting its patrons to an exotic and distant past, while at the same time providing them the most modern of amenities and comforts. Other movie palaces around the country shared in their use of architectural and technological spectacle to impress their audiences, but nowhere was this *mélange* of past, present, and future more appropriate

---

<sup>48</sup> Paul Jones, “Fox Offers Gorgeous Show As New Theater is Opened,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 December 1929.

<sup>49</sup> “Crowds Continue at Fox Theater for Second Day,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 December 1929.

<sup>50</sup> “Parties Galore Scheduled on Social Program Today,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 December 1929.

than in Atlanta. In thirty short years, the city had tripled its population, experienced a skyscraper construction boom in the central business district, and given birth to vibrant shopping and entertainment districts. Because this expansion occurred so rapidly, some neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city (especially in Atlanta's predominantly-black west side) were left in the past, lacking even the most basic of municipal services and living in poverty without modern comforts and amenities. Thus, like its premier movie theater, 1920s Atlanta was also a place where the past met the future.

Since the end of the Civil War and the city's rebirth from its own ashes, Atlanta's boosters had brashly and boldly proclaimed the virtues of their city, always with sincerity but often at the expense of propriety. Architecturally speaking, the designers of the Fox were described by some experts in similar fashion: they were criticized for eschewing architectural propriety in favor of spectacle. Regardless of these criticisms, the vast majority of Atlantans reacted positively to the Fox Theatre, demonstrated by the excitement surrounding the opening gala and popular fascination with the building's architecture. Its architectural magnificence combined with its technological impressiveness befitted a city with serious aspirations of rivaling other American cities for modern entertainment and culture. Charles Rutheiser states, "the skyscrapers being raised in the central business district during the 1920s were a concrete manifestation of Atlanta's desire to be the New York of the South,"<sup>51</sup> but the Fox Theatre equaled or surpassed any theater that New York had to offer in 1929. Furthermore, the inherent modernity of moviegoing in such a lavish environment reaffirmed Atlantans' view that

---

<sup>51</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 39.

their city had arrived on the national stage. After all, they were enjoying the most modern form of entertainment in a finer theater than anywhere else.

Atlantans met the grand opening of the Fox Theatre with wild enthusiasm, and there appeared to be little concern that this enthusiasm would wane in the coming months. The opening of the theater on Christmas Day 1929, however, came only two months after Black Tuesday and the collapse of the stock market. Because the Fox arrived so late in the era of the movie palace it had practically no time to reap the profits that other movie palaces had over the previous several years. Not only would the stock market crash and the Great Depression quickly bring about the ruin of Fox Theatres Corporation and William Fox, but the economic disaster would also soon inflict severe financial difficulty upon Yaarab Temple, casting serious doubts over the future of Atlanta's Fox Theatre.

The Fox was initially aided by the novelty of talking pictures; in this particular respect the timing of the theater's opening was fortuitous. Due to the public's fascination with talkies, theater attendance around the country rose between 1929 and 1930.<sup>52</sup> Still, movie palaces like the Fox were expensive to operate, and the economic uncertainty of the first years of the Great Depression made it even more difficult for these theaters to turn a profit. "The shocking fact," Robert Sklar writes, "appears to be that the picture palaces were economic white elephants. Their financial weakness was obvious not merely in the hard times of the Depression but in the good years, during the boom."<sup>53</sup> The dark clouds on the horizon would engulf the Fox after only 125 weeks. The original management team shut the theater's doors in 1932, and many wondered what the future

---

<sup>52</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 161.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

held for the theater, as it was unclear whether the Fox could ever open its doors again. Opening with such promise during the last week of the 1920s, the following decade would prove to be one of the most turbulent in the theater's history.

### Chapter 3

#### “On the Lap of the Fateful Gods”: The First Fall and Rise of the Fox, 1930-1939

The 1930s was a turbulent decade for the city of Atlanta; the desperation caused by the Great Depression was a poignant contrast with the exuberance and optimism of the previous decade. Initially, the onset of the Depression failed to dent the hopes of Atlanta’s leaders, and there were reasons for them to maintain their optimism. Between 1920 and 1930, the city’s population had increased by 35 percent, nearly equaling that of New Orleans, which Atlanta had eclipsed as the commercial and financial center of the Southeast. Although news outlets and experts around the country acknowledged that the United States had slipped into an economic depression, construction projects planned and begun during the Forward Atlanta campaign of the 1920s continued. Local newspapers preached optimism and patience; in July 1930, the *Journal* scolded “those who stick to the Wailing Wall” while the *Constitution* urged its readers to “quit the low grounds of grief and climb the hills to the heights of a new prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> Business continued as usual at the Fox in 1930 as well. The theater was packed on a nightly basis, it played host to social events and Shriner ceremonies, and remained Atlanta’s premier entertainment venue.

Several years later, however, desperation had set in as economic conditions worsened and thousands of Atlantans lost their jobs, homes, or savings. Federal New Deal relief programs had a significant presence in Atlanta, but the city faced additional

---

<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Douglas Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 15.

obstacles to recovery, including the influx of thousands of rural refugees seeking food and shelter and a still underdeveloped infrastructure that had been neglected and ignored during the building boom of the previous decade. As more Atlantans continued to suffer despite the efforts of relief programs, they became desperate and frustrated. Douglas Smith recounted a particularly vivid illustration of this frustration:

Few could do anything but accept their plight, although one out-of-work electrician from Atlanta journeyed to Washington, D.C., to stage his own shocking demonstration. Selecting the White House Executive Office Building as a forum, the young man slashed his wrists and, while bleeding from both arms, ran into the building and demanded to see a presidential aide. Neither federal nor local relief officials had helped him, he later informed a New York *Times* reporter; therefore, he hoped to get the chief executive's personal attention by turning to "the most dramatic method he could think of."<sup>2</sup>

While this is not a representative anecdote, it is illustrative of the despair felt by many Atlanta residents during the 1930s. By 1932, only two years after the opening of the Fox, many Atlantans were unemployed and many businesses closed their doors. In March of that year, despite playing to packed houses and hosting numerous social events and concerts, Fox Theatres Corporation faced collapse and was forced to break its lease with Yaarab Temple. The economic downturn also left the Shriners bankrupt, leaving the Shrine Mosque without an owner, and the Fox Theatre without a reliable tenant a mere 125 weeks after its grand opening. At this point, the city was forced to ask serious

---

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 86.

questions of the Fox's future: What could be done with it? Could it become a municipal theater operated by the city? Could a new ownership group and management team be found? Would it simply be best to demolish the building?

The middle years of the decade began a recovery period for both the Fox and the city. New Deal programs brought new jobs, improved housing and infrastructure, and economic relief to Atlanta residents in need; at the same time a new ownership group found a suitable management team for the Fox Theatre. Arthur Lucas and William Jenkins, who operated a chain of theaters around the state Georgia as the heads of Lucas and Jenkins, Inc., assumed management of the Fox in 1935 and ushered in the theater's longest sustained period of success in its history as a movie house. The new realities of film exhibition during the 1930s had ended the era of the movie palace and simplified film presentations everywhere. The expense of operating the Fox during its first incarnation under Fox Theatres Corp. was far too high, so Lucas and Jenkins streamlined the film presentation program—Fanchon and Marco's dazzling but costly productions were out—and booked popular musical acts separately. In the meantime, Atlanta continued its recovery from the Great Depression, celebrating the opening of the nation's first federal public housing project and the success of other New Deal programs in improving infrastructure and city conditions. By the end of the 1930s, both the city and the theater had weathered the storm.

In the first months of 1930, there were few signs of the turbulent decade to come. As it was on opening day, the Fox continued to be a glamorous night out for Atlantans desiring to be entertained at the city's premier venue. Fox Movietone talkies like *Hot for*

*Paris*, *Rio Rita*, and *The Sky Hawk* played to packed audiences in the early part of the year. The Fox orchestra led by Enrico Leide and the stage band led by Don Wilkins played popular numbers at each show, and Iris Wilkins continued her performances at the Möller organ. Fanchon and Marco's "ideas" at every show attracted a great deal of coverage from local media, and were varied in motif. One week, the "Jazz Buccaneers" idea featured "pirate beauties" "strut[ting] across the deck to the accompaniment of clanking swords and music from a buccaneer band."<sup>3</sup> Another week, the "Sweet Cookies" idea featured a bakery and candy shop theme complete with gymnasts who, according to the *Constitution*, "go through more evolutions and physical contortions than a whole pen of snakes and monkeys would be capable of."<sup>4</sup> Other ideas presented by Fanchon and Marco included "Melon Blues," "Femme Follies," and "Studio Girls of Hollywood." The Fox even hosted a revue of little people called "Singer's Midgets" for a show titled "Miniatures of 1930."<sup>5</sup> In addition to this vaudeville-style entertainment, the Fox also began a program of children's matinees later in 1930, held every week on Saturday.<sup>6</sup> These film programs, complete with musical performances and vaudeville acts, along with other entertainment drew large crowds to the Fox.

Furthermore, the Fox Theatre fulfilled its intended role as a community events center. In the last six months of 1930 alone, the Fox hosted a reunion for Army veterans

---

<sup>3</sup> "Jazz Pirates' to Strut Stuff on Fox Stage," *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 January 1930.

<sup>4</sup> "Sweet Cookies' Title of 'Idea' on Fox Stage," *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 January 1930.

<sup>5</sup> "Singer Midgets Stage Feature at Fox Theater," *Atlanta Constitution*, 16 February 1930.

<sup>6</sup> "Better Films Group Announces Matinees Begin Oct. 4," *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 September 1930.

of the 82nd Division,<sup>7</sup> a benefit performance for the local firemen's band,<sup>8</sup> and a meeting/rally for the planning of a Confederate monument at Stone Mountain.<sup>9</sup> Yaarab Temple, as owners of the building, also maintained a significant presence in the Fox during its early years. Since the lease with Fox Theatres Corporation permitted the Shriners to use the auditorium six times per year, Fox screen and stage presentations occasionally had to be suspended. Yaarab Temple held several Shrine Pageants, elaborate ceremonies combining fabricated oriental ritual and mysticism with patriotism, along with initiation ceremonies and meetings.<sup>10</sup> Other community events at the Fox like the *Constitution* Cooking and Homemaking School in March 1930 reaffirmed Yaarab Temple's decision to include a large auditorium in the Shrine Mosque's plans. The event, which was held annually with some interruptions after 1930, drew over 4,500 Atlanta women to its first session alone, with the final session on March 6 drawing a standing room only crowd.<sup>11</sup>

Although attendance at the Fox remained strong with few indications of harsh times ahead for the movie house, the city suffered as it slid into the Great Depression. Atlantans of all trades felt the effects of the downturn as early as 1930, with urban manufacturers around the South among the hardest hit. In the final months of 1930, mills

---

<sup>7</sup> "Senator George to Address Vets at Reunion Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 September 1930.

<sup>8</sup> "Firemen Eager For Full House At Fox Benefit," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 November 1930.

<sup>9</sup> "New \$2,500,000 Memorial Plan Nearly Complete," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 September 1930.

<sup>10</sup> *Atlanta Journal*. 18 January 1931.

<sup>11</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 March 1931; "Final Session of Cooking School Sets New Record in Attendance," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 March 1931.

and factories cut back production, released workers or reduced their wages, and some firms remained idle for months at a time.<sup>12</sup> Anger over joblessness boiled over during the summer of 1930, when Atlanta saw the brief rise and fall of two small but vocal extremist groups—Communists and self-proclaimed “Fascisti”. Frustrated over rising unemployment, Klansmen, jobless whites, and restless youths in Atlanta blamed black laborers for occupying jobs that rightfully belonged to whites. At the peak of their powers in the late summer, the Fascisti or “Black Shirts” (in no real way connected to Mussolini’s Fascisti in Italy) numbered about 40,000. Marching in parades, holding rallies at the Municipal Auditorium and area high schools with the tacit approval of city officials, and releasing intimidating public statements about Communists and African Americans for several months, the Black Shirts disappeared almost as quickly as they had materialized. A judge denied their application for a charter in October, and their organization quickly fizzled out.<sup>13</sup> Although the Black Shirts had disappeared by the end of 1930 (despite a minor but brief revival two years later), the frustration and anxiety over the state of the local economy over the previous year did not vanish. Atlantans endured a difficult year in 1930, and conditions worsened before they would improve.

Over the three-year span between the opening of the Fox in late 1929 and the end of 1932, Atlanta industry suffered an approximately fifty percent drop in manufacturing output. A similar downturn in retail trade began in early 1931. With numerous retail

---

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> See John Hammond Moore, “Communists and Fascists in a Southern City: Atlanta, 1930” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 67 (Summer 1968): 437-454. This is not the last instance of short-lived Fascist-style white supremacist movements in Atlanta. In 1946, the equally short-lived Columbians group terrorized black Atlantans in an attempt to prevent them from moving into previously all-white neighborhoods (discussed in Chapter 5).

stores closing, the Chamber of Commerce attempted to preserve a veneer of prosperity in 1932 by urging any surviving businesses to rent out vacant windows for their own displays. Still, businesses continued to close as more Atlantans found themselves jobless and without disposable income. The official 1930 census showed minimal unemployment in Atlanta and around the South, but by the end of the year there was one jobless man or woman for every ten employed. In the following year, the building trades in Atlanta reported more than 60 percent unemployment. Municipal workers and schoolteachers also endured cutbacks, layoffs, and terminations. With all of these developments occurring in the first few years of the 1930s, the hopeful optimism of early 1930 gave way to confusion, anger and despair.<sup>14</sup> Fox management even attempted to help those in need in early 1931 by holding a charity symphony orchestra performance to benefit the city's unemployed.<sup>15</sup>

1932, the year in which the Fox was forced to close its doors, was among the worst years of the Depression in Atlanta. The establishment of several local relief programs did little to alleviate the city's suffering. The municipal government was already in a disadvantageous position in terms of providing social and economic relief to Atlanta residents—in 1930 its per capita expenditures for welfare ranked last out of other similarly-sized American cities and few municipal programs or agencies existed that could help the poor and unemployed. Thousands of demonstrators marched on the Fulton County Courthouse that year to demand hunger relief and to protest the county's plans to cut relief appropriations by one third. In reaction to the protest, the city added \$6,000 to

---

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 17, 18.

<sup>15</sup> "Symphony Orchestra Attracts Prominent Atlantans Today," *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 February 1931.

the relief budget. Still, programs like the county's "self-help" program, which offered \$1.25 toward groceries and a free lunch in return for labor, and the Chamber of Commerce's "back to the farm" project, which resettled the unemployed or dispossessed on abandoned farms around Atlanta, failed to alleviate the problems caused by the Depression. In the spring of 1933, unemployment relief requests had surpassed 12,000 per month, while the average relief case was only allotted \$10.12. By the summer of that year, more than 60,000 Atlantans were on the welfare rolls.<sup>16</sup>

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency in 1932, who ran on a platform of federal relief for those affected by the Depression and job creation to alleviate unemployment, was a happy occasion for many Atlantans. Roosevelt had an unusually close connection to the state of Georgia since the 1920s, when he began his frequent visits to the town of Warm Springs. Roosevelt believed that the spring water of the nineteenth-century spa town would help relieve his paraplegia. Georgians developed a close affinity for the politician after he built a part-time home at Warm Springs (later nicknamed the "Little White House"), which he visited more than forty times between 1924 and 1945. According to Paul Crater, "Georgians showered the 'Yankee' politician with more support and enthusiasm than they had shown for any Northern president since before the Civil War."<sup>17</sup> One of the biggest events in the early history of the Fox was the appearance of the then-New York Governor and Democratic presidential candidate at the theater. On May 22, 1932, Roosevelt addressed the graduating class of Oglethorpe University from the stage as part of the commencement ceremonies. After the speech,

---

<sup>16</sup> Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 154.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Crater, *World War II in Atlanta* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 29.

Roosevelt was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.<sup>18</sup> Roosevelt's New Deal programs would have a major presence in Atlanta in the very near future; at the time of his appearance at the Fox in 1932, though, the city had already been through two and a half difficult years. Matters worsened when the Fox, Atlanta's most popular movie theater, closed its doors in the following month.

Although it emerged strong at the end of the 1930s, the movie industry was not immune to the effects of the Great Depression. In 1932 alone, the deficit for all studios and exhibition companies surpassed \$85 million. In the following year the industry reached its lowest point with nearly a third of all movie theaters across the country shutting their doors.<sup>19</sup> Movie palace attendance dropped from approximately 90 million Americans per week to 60 million by 1932, and even Grauman's famous Chinese Theatre in Hollywood was forced to close its doors for a few months. Admission income during the same period dropped from \$720 million to \$482 million. Many production companies and smaller theater chains fell by the wayside, but the largest fortune claimed by the Depression was that of William Fox. Fox's empire had grown to an astounding size by the beginning of the 1930s. By the time of the Atlanta Fox's grand opening on Christmas 1929, Fox had built a flagship theater in the South, owned movie palaces on both coasts and in between, owned a controlling stake in New York's premier theater (the Roxy), and had most of his theaters outfitted with state of the art Fox Movietone sound-on-film technology. Furthermore, Fox was constantly in competition with his chief rival

---

<sup>18</sup> "Oglethorpe Gets Fox for Roosevelt Speech," *Atlanta Constitution*, 11 May 1932.

<sup>19</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 162.

at Paramount Adolph Zukor, so he initiated a takeover of Loew's Theatres (whose founder and head Marcus Loew had died of a heart attack 1927) in an attempt to keep Paramount films off the screens in both Fox and Loew's theaters. Fox's creditors loaned him nearly \$50 million for the deal (plus additional money for his proposed acquisition of the Gaumont theater chain in Great Britain), but the acquisition also drew the attention of the Justice Department, which brought an antitrust suit against him.<sup>20</sup>

The funds that Fox had borrowed for the Loew's acquisition came mainly from American Telephone and Telegraph (which provided the sound equipment for most of his theaters) and the banking-brokerage firm of Halsey, Stuart, and Company. All of these were short-term loans, set to fall due in the winter of 1929-30, shortly after the stock market collapse. During the summer of 1929, however, Fox was seriously injured in a limousine accident in which he nearly lost his life. After being released weeks later from a Long Island hospital, he fell into a series of disagreements with the bankers and his ambitious vice president Winfield Sheehan. Sheehan had his own aspirations of running a major studio, and as such sided with the banks against Fox. Fox's finances were so depleted by the time of his release (which came shortly before the stock market crash) that he was forced to sell his holdings in the company. Weary and discouraged, William Fox sold his interests in Fox Film for \$18 million to Harley Clarke of Chicago, who assumed the presidency of Fox Film Corp. (which by then had absorbed Fox Theatres Corp.).<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 162, 165-66; Forsher, *Community of Cinema*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Gene Fennett, "Fox – With and Without 20<sup>th</sup> Century," 88; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 166; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 64.

Fox nearly went under during the early 1930s, forcing the theater chain to break its lease with the Shrine Mosque. While Loew's temporarily operated the Fox Theatre in the wake of Fox's pullout, the operation of two theaters in early 1930s Atlanta stretched the theater chain too thin. Loew's ended its temporary management of the Fox in June, forcing the Shriners to close the doors of the theater after its final show on June 25, 1932. The *Constitution* lamented, "[I]t is hard to believe that the Fox is to close its door after next Friday's performance. But that's the dope." With Loew's divesting itself of control, and with no word from the Fox studio on its intentions for its theater chain, the *Constitution* lamented, "[T]he only possible conclusion is that the house is going dark. What the future of this magnificent playhouse will be remains on the lap of the fateful gods—but, Mayor Key, wouldn't it make a swell city auditorium? And don't we need one!"<sup>22</sup>

Without a stable tenant that could provide at least \$100,000 per year in rent, Yaarab Temple struggled to maintain the Shrine Mosque. At the same time, the Shriners' financial problems intensified. The first indications of trouble emerged almost immediately after the opening of the Fox on Christmas 1929. In January 1930, a financial report stated that unpaid pledges and subscriptions to Yaarab Temple totaled over \$300,000, and that the Yaarab Temple Building Company needed another \$250,000 to complete payments due to the contractor and other creditors. When loans came due the next month, each Shriner was assessed a fee of forty dollars. This action was neither adequate nor acceptable, according to James Bryant, "as debts were larger than expected and the plan appeared to work a hardship on Yaarab Temple's membership, many of

---

<sup>22</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 June 1932.

whom were by then unemployed.”<sup>23</sup> Hundreds of Shriners were forced to cancel their membership because they could not afford dues or other assessments, and the situation worsened. By January 1931, only one year after the opening of the Fox, Yaarab Temple was forced to make a second mortgage bond issue for \$395,000. In July of that year, the Trust Company of Georgia brought action against Yaarab Temple Building Company, Fox Theatres Corporation, and other investors to foreclose the mortgage. The broken lease with Fox Theatres in 1932 and the loss of a steady stream of income to the Shriners was simply too much to overcome, and the mortgage on the Shrine Mosque was foreclosed in November.<sup>24</sup>

Although the future of the building was in serious doubt, events continued at the venue, and motion picture shows returned to the Fox. In August 1932, three months before the foreclosure of the mortgage, a local group leased the theater in an attempt to resume movie presentations. The original agreement, reached with “a group of Atlanta business and professional men” operating as Southeastern Amusement Enterprises, Inc., allowed for a one-year lease of the theater, which would be managed by former Fox orchestra favorite Enrico Leide. The performances that preceded feature film presentations were to be severely scaled back—the group announced it would employ an “all sound” policy, which would preclude the use of orchestra or organ concerts—but the possibility existed for the reintroduction of major stage shows later in the fall (Fanchon and Marco returned with new “ideas” in April 1933).<sup>25</sup> Atlantans, looking for any positive developments during the darkest days of the Depression, were ecstatic at the

---

<sup>23</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 12.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> “Atlanta Group Leases Fox; Stage Show Planned in Fall,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 August 1932.

reopening of the Fox, which had been closed for nearly two months. Patrons waited in a long line for the first show at the “new” Fox Theatre, a presentation of RKO’s *Bring ‘Em Back Alive*, a wild animal documentary film starring trapper-big game hunter-celebrity Frank Buck in the jungles of Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> Stage shows returned at the end of September, and some major musical acts were booked in early 1933, suggesting that the Fox was finally on solid ground. In the month of February, musician and radio star Eddie Cantor made his first-ever Atlanta appearance at the Fox,<sup>27</sup> NBC radio star Rudy Vallee appeared on stage a week later with his “Connecticut Yankees” orchestra before hosting a dance in the Egyptian Ballroom,<sup>28</sup> and world-renowned pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski—“sovereign of the pianoforte”—performed to a packed house.<sup>29</sup> Popular and memorable films such as *King Kong* appeared on screen, and Jimmy Beers performed at Mighty Mo. The Fox appeared to have rebounded from a period of uncertainty. The local press praised management for bringing “high-class” stage performances back to Atlanta:

The reinstatement of the same high-class stage performances which formerly appeared at the Fox is a gratifying exposition of the faith of the theater’s management in the sound improvement in conditions now taking place. Manager Leide, always popular with Atlanta theatergoers, has set

---

<sup>26</sup> “Big Crowd Gathers for Fox Reopening,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 August 1932.

<sup>27</sup> “Eddie Cantor and Big Company to Appear Here at Fox Theater,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 January 1933.

<sup>28</sup> “Rudy Vallee to Bring Orchestra to the Fox for One Day, February 13,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 January 1933.

<sup>29</sup> “Paderewski’s Never Dying Genius is Paid Homage by Great Audience,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 February 1933.

an inspiring example to other business interests of Atlanta of the wisdom of keeping pace with the trend of the day.<sup>30</sup>

The stage shows at the “new” Fox often consisted of material for a strictly adult audience. So-called “high-class” ideas drew heavily from vaudeville tradition, particularly with respect to their sexually suggestive nature. Such performances had long been a concern for some Atlantans, especially in cheaper vaudeville and movie houses in previous decades; Atlanta’s moral guardians in the 1910’s feared that movie theaters might degenerate into “recruiting places for vice.”<sup>31</sup> By the mid 1930s these fears over racy live performances had subsided. One particularly risqué show in January 1934 featured a one-time midnight performance on a Tuesday; promised to the public as a highly titillating show, it sold out quickly. A *Constitution* columnist described its sensual nature:

The 50 girls with the company have been chosen solely for their beauty and they display that beauty in gorgeous stage sets just as completely as the law will permit. Costumes, what there are of them, are the finest money will buy, but at that the quantity of material used by the ladies of the ensemble cannot have cost so much. Two of the most famous performers in the cast, Ha Cha San and La Fanete, are sisters. Ha Cha’s act is entitled “The Silver Goddess.” Her entire costume consists of a coating of heavy Vaseline mixed with silver paint, which, of course, covers her completely from head to toe, but leaves not a curve of a gorgeous figure unseen. Her sister, La Fanette, does the Danse

---

<sup>30</sup> “The Fox Sets an Example,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 April 1933.

<sup>31</sup> Goodson, ““This Mighty Influence for Good or for Evil,”” 33.

D'Eventail, which in English is a fan dance. She claims, with emphasis to be the originator of this idea and insists that Faith Bacon, Sally Rand and all the other fan dancers are but imitators. Anyway, her dance is said to be about the best and most sensational fan dance of them all, so that ought to be enough.<sup>32</sup>

Another review called it “Two and a half hours of the snappiest flesh and blood show of the day.”<sup>33</sup>

While the show went on at the Fox Theatre between late 1932 and early 1935, the fate of the Shrine Mosque was far from clear. In December of 1932, the building and all Shrine properties were auctioned off, with the Mosque itself selling for a mere \$75,000 to a corporation created by bondholders named Theatre Holding Company. With the mortgage foreclosed in November, Yaarab Temple's assets were completely wiped out, and \$357,000 in certificates was still outstanding. With membership reduced to less than one-third of its total ranks in 1929, Yaarab Temple became a paying tenant in what used to be its own property. For the next several years, the Shrine Mosque was owned by Theatre Holding Company, which leased the auditorium to Southeastern Amusements until 1935. In early 1935, Lucas and Jenkins, Inc., a theater management company run by Arthur Lucas and William Kimbrough Jenkins, negotiated an agreement to operate the Fox in partnership with Paramount Pictures. Lucas and Jenkins already operated movie theaters in other cities around the state of Georgia, in addition to several neighborhood

---

<sup>32</sup> “Capacity Audience Now Assured for Marcus Show Tuesday Night,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 January 1934.

<sup>33</sup> “Marcus’ Stage Show, ‘La Vie Paree,’ Plays at Fox at Midnight Tonight,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 January 1934.

theaters in Atlanta, and believed that they could run the Fox at a profit—a difficult proposition in a theater with such high maintenance costs in the economic climate of the 1930s. The prospect of Lucas and Jenkins’s management raised hopes that a successful tenant could keep the Fox viable.<sup>34</sup>

By 1935, Theatre Holding Company sought to sell the Shrine Mosque and recoup the money lost from bonds held in Yaarab Temple Building Company after the foreclosure. Theatre Holding Company, in early 1935, decided to attempt to sell the Shrine Mosque to the city of Atlanta for \$725,000 for use as a municipal auditorium. A group of “public-spirited Atlantans” (the group remained anonymous, but it is believed that the Coca-Cola Company was a major contributor) offered to advance the initial \$110,000 down payment for the city, thus allowing the city to pay the remaining \$615,000 over a period of twenty-five years with the revenue generated by rental of the Fox Theatre and other Mosque facilities. The proposal essentially allowed the city to take control of a six year-old entertainment venue without paying a cent (assuming the right tenant could be found). It seemed to be a win-win proposal—Theatre Holding Company would more than recoup the money lost in worthless bonds after the bankruptcy of Yaarab Temple, and the city would have a nearly brand new civic auditorium and events center.<sup>35</sup>

Although it appeared to be a mutually beneficial proposal, significant opposition emerged to the city’s possible ownership of the Shrine Mosque. Some of those opposed were politically motivated. For example, the Executive Committee of the Atlanta Federation of Trades publicly shared its disapproval of the proposal, arguing that if

---

<sup>34</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 14.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 14.

Atlanta needed a city auditorium, then it should be built new in order to create jobs for the unemployed. A month later, the Atlanta Retail Merchants Association echoed the AFT's concerns. Atlanta had already begun a substantial metamorphosis in the mid-1930s thanks to federal New Deal programs that created jobs and improved the city's infrastructure. With the establishment of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in 1933, approximately \$3.3 billion in relief funds became available to Atlanta. Governor Eugene Talmadge, whose political base resided in the rural counties of Georgia, obstructed federal relief efforts in Atlanta as part of an ongoing battle between the state's urban and rural politicians. As a result, Harry Hopkins, director of FERA, removed Talmadge from control of the Georgia Relief Commission, and Atlanta became one of the first cities in the country to have a federally operated relief program.<sup>36</sup>

Atlanta's rapid expansion during the 1920s outgrew many of the city's basic municipal services and infrastructural necessities in favor of downtown skyscrapers built to attract commercial and financial firms. One of the most neglected features of the city by the mid 1930s was its woefully inadequate and outdated sewer system, which health officials blamed for Atlanta leading the nation in diphtheria deaths in both 1933 and 1935, and for its typhoid rate nearly doubling the average of the fifteen largest urban areas in the country. Under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Atlanta added 5.4 miles of trunk sewers and five disposal plants at a cost of \$11 million to bring the city's sewer system up to date. Other New Deal administrations like the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Public Works Administration put millions of dollars toward major construction projects around Atlanta, including school improvements,

---

<sup>36</sup> Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 155-56.

hospital construction, the grading of runways at Candler Field, the repair and touch-up of the Cyclorama, and road improvements.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most significant public works project under the New Deal in Atlanta was the construction of the nation's first public housing projects, Techwood Homes and University Homes. Naturally, these housing projects were segregated in Jim Crow Atlanta—Techwood Homes, adjacent to the Georgia Tech campus was built for whites only, while University Homes, adjacent to Atlanta University, was built for African Americans—but their construction did away with two of Atlanta's most notorious slums. The Tech Flats and Beaver Slide slums were part of a ring of substandard housing that surrounded the central business district in Atlanta. These slums were unsanitary, smelly, infested, and overcrowded, with unpaved streets and ramshackle houses that sometimes even lacked basic amenities like running water. The razing of these eyesores in 1934 under the authority of the PWA was a prime opportunity to clean up the neighborhoods (and especially in the case of Tech Flats, one so close to the entertainment district on Peachtree Street) and move poor black slum residents away from the adjacent central Atlanta streets. In the fall of 1936, President Roosevelt attended the dedication ceremony for Techwood Homes, not more than a few blocks from the Fox Theatre; Techwood opened to white residents in the following year, while University Homes opened to black residents in 1938. Although Atlanta may have seemed an unlikely place for the first experiment in federal public housing, the success of the program and other New Deal

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 156; Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 108.

initiatives brought Atlanta's infrastructure and housing into the twentieth century after decades of neglect.<sup>38</sup>

As things stood in 1935, with Theatre Holding Company proposing a sale of the Fox Theatre to the city of Atlanta, the Fox could have been a part of the other New Deal modernization efforts in the area by serving as a municipal auditorium and civic center. Many, however, feared that the city would ruin the Fox Theatre if it assumed control. One Atlantan penned a letter to Lucas and Jenkins, who had managed the Fox for only a few months, pleading with them to help find an owner other than the city. He wrote, "It seems to me that if the City of Atlanta does buy the Shrine Mosque properties for the use as an Auditorium, it will mean the end of the Fox Theatre." He feared what the theater might look like after the city had its way. "When the city electricians, plumbers, and general property mashers finish their work on the building there will not be enough of the Fox Theatre left to identify it. How do you suppose those beautiful carpets and lavatories will look after all the hoodlums in Fulton County have planted their mud and tobacco juice on them?" The author lamented that the theater "would look more like a curiosity than a Theatre." He was also afraid that the city would not be able to make payments in order to retain ownership of the theater, asking, "[S]uppose the city decided... that they could not meet the payments and desired to turn the property over to the bond holders?" Turning the theater into a municipal auditorium, he felt, would certainly spell the end of

---

<sup>38</sup> Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 156-68; Frank Ruechel, "New Deal Public Housing, Urban Poverty, and Jim Crow: Techwood and University Homes in Atlanta," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 916-918.

the Fox, “and never again would the City of Atlanta be able to boast of having the most beautiful Theatre in the South.”<sup>39</sup>

The proposal had some influential backers, however, who did not share the same fears. Many of these backers, coincidentally, were also Shriners. The chairman of the City Council Public Buildings Committee, the Chamber of Commerce president, and Mayor James Key (a Shriner since 1903) supported the plan. Reverend Louie Newton of Druid Hills Baptist Church, who later became a Shriner, also supported the purchase, envisioning the Fox as a venue for the 1939 Baptist World Alliance meeting.<sup>40</sup> The Shriners were adamant in their message to the public that they would not benefit from the sale. “Nevertheless,” writes Bryant, “Yaarab Temple supported the sale because it would furnish Atlantans auditorium facilities with no expense to tax payers and, the organization hoped, allow Shriners to continue renting quarters in the mosque from a hospitable landlord.”<sup>41</sup> After much debate, the city council voted twenty-one to thirteen to take control of the Shrine Mosque building in April 1935. Many met the news with excitement, while others continued to voice their opposition. One alderman told the city council they were getting a “gold brick” with the purchase of the Fox.<sup>42</sup> Regardless, the Public Buildings and Grounds Committee would control the property for the city. Opposition did not disappear; some who opposed the deal chose to “stand by and give it time to hang itself,” and three individual taxpayers chose to file a lawsuit to set aside the

---

<sup>39</sup> James Lowery to Arthur Lucas and William Jenkins, 26 February 1935, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>40</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> “Council Votes to Take Shrine Mosque Property; City Will Pay \$725,000 For Magnificent Structure,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 April 1935.

purchase as illegal because Theatre Holding Company had not paid taxes for 1935.<sup>43</sup> To circumvent this, the same “public-spirited Atlantans” who had earlier expressed interest in purchasing the Fox formed a new corporation named Mosque, Inc., which stepped forward to purchase the theater and then sell it on to the city. Through an extremely complicated and convoluted deal, the city of Atlanta ended up with control of the Shrine Mosque in 1935.

The city officially took control on May 1 and negotiated a new five-year lease with Lucas and Jenkins to operate the Fox as a movie house and a performance venue. After an interruption in theater programs lasting through the summer of 1935, Lucas and Jenkins reopened the Fox in October with the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film *Top Hat*.<sup>44</sup> Within the next month, the Fox hosted a gala premiere of *So Red the Rose*, a Civil War-era Southern melodrama in the same vein as *Gone With the Wind* (which premiered four years later)—one scholar has called it “Atlanta’s *Gone With the Wind* that Wasn’t”<sup>45</sup>—and resumed a normal schedule of films and performances. Still, the city had projected that the Mosque would run at a deficit of \$30,000 for the next year (plus an additional \$9,000 in taxes). Mayor Key, alarmed at these numbers, suggested the city turn control of the property back to the bondholders and underwriters—Mosque, Inc. This was done with haste at the end of January, as the law stated that the holder of the title on January 31 was responsible for the previous year’s taxes. Thus, the city had relinquished control of the Fox, did not spend any tax money to operate it, and Mosque,

---

<sup>43</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 17; “Fox Theater to Reopen Friday with Astaire, Rogers in ‘Top Hat,’” *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 October 1935.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon L. Jones, “*So Red the Rose: Atlanta’s Gone With the Wind That Wasn’t*,” *Atlanta History* 43:2 (summer 1999), 45-64.

Inc. was left to negotiate new leases with its tenants. Lucas and Jenkins then agreed to a new twenty-year lease with Mosque, Inc. at \$30,000 a year. This arrangement—the ownership of Mosque, Inc. and the management of the Fox Theatre by Lucas and Jenkins—would last into the 1950s and prove to be the most lucrative in the Fox’s history. Finally, by the end of 1936, the property was safe, and the theater was in the hands of a supremely capable management team.<sup>46</sup>

As a Lucas and Jenkins theater, the Fox was run with great efficiency and attention to detail, and it resumed its multifaceted role as a movie theater, performance venue, and community events center. The screen still attracted top feature film entertainment, but management was forced, like many other theaters around the country during the Depression, to scale back the stage shows and musical performances that accompanied film presentations. Stage shows were expensive to produce. Generally speaking, they might cost anywhere between three and five thousand dollars to run for one week, sometimes twice that amount for a special holiday show.<sup>47</sup> Thus, under a new policy of practical management, the most lavish and expensive performances were no longer an option.

Sing-along and organ performances continued sporadically at the Fox under Lucas and Jenkins, but Mighty Mo was frequently silenced in the second half of the 1930s. Perhaps surprisingly, some theater patrons endorsed this decision. A letter addressed to Lucas and Jenkins applauded the action, seeing the organ as an unnecessary distraction from the film. The author of the letter wrote, “A great many people feel as I

---

<sup>46</sup> Bryant, “Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre,” 17.

<sup>47</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 52.

do that an organ in a theater is practically always played entirely too loud and the organist, being provided with a loud speaker, is always annoying.” The main complaints against Mighty Mo and the organ performances concerned their loud volume. While the sheer volume of sound was moving at first, the novelty had clearly worn off by 1936. The author stated that should the organ ever be reinstated, “I am sure that a great many of the patrons would wish that the organist not be provided with a loud speaker and that he be instructed to play the organ on a low and medium volume instead of trying to see how loud it can be played.” While realizing that “a certain number of people seem to like a loud noise” he argued that “many hundreds of people... simply suffer in silence or stay away from the theater” altogether.<sup>48</sup>

Musical performances continued under Lucas and Jenkins. The Egyptian Ballroom frequently hosted dances, at times attracting some of the famous names of the music industry. Glen Gray and his Casa Loma Orchestra were one such act that graced the European Ballroom in 1935. These dances sometimes created concerns for management—one manager referred to the “the type of drunks that attend these dances” in a letter to William Jenkins—but they were popular and produced very large turnouts.<sup>49</sup> Other musical and dance performances were held on stage at the Fox including famous soprano Helen Jepson along with baritone singer Nelson Eddy in 1936,<sup>50</sup> Vincent Lopez and his dance orchestra during Atlanta’s first annual Dogwood Festival several months

---

<sup>48</sup> F. Graham Williams to Lucas & Jenkins. 10 September 1936, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>49</sup> E.E. Whitaker to William Jenkins, 11 August 1935, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>50</sup> “Eddy, Jepson Please Large Crowd In Their Concert at Fox Theater,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 February 1936.

later,<sup>51</sup> three performances (one of them by Sergei Rachmaninoff) of the Atlanta Music Club's All-Star Concert series in 1937,<sup>52</sup> and the Jooss European Ballet in early 1938.<sup>53</sup> Eddy returned to the Fox in March 1938 to "perhaps the largest audience that ever has greeted any one artist in Atlanta."<sup>54</sup> Clyde Lucas and his band also appeared on stage for a week during November 1938.<sup>55</sup>

The Fox also continued to host miscellaneous community events and special performances, including high school and college graduation ceremonies. As the largest auditorium in the city, the Fox hosted the 1937 commencement ceremonies for Boys' High, Girls' High, and Tech High, and it served as the venue for nearby Georgia Tech's graduation for several years. During the Christmas holiday season of 1937, the Egyptian Ballroom hosted a charity ball for the Big Brother holiday drive, raising funds for the poor in DeKalb County.<sup>56</sup> The Fox also hosted the "mystical" magician Calvert on stage for a midnight show in December 1938.<sup>57</sup> Another special event gave Atlantans the opportunity to make their mark in Hollywood. Young people in the Atlanta area "with movie ambitions they have despaired of realizing" were offered a chance to showcase their talent to a nationwide search committee called "Gateway to Hollywood." The

---

<sup>51</sup> First Annual Dogwood Festival to Start Today, With Week of Music, Fun and Beauty in Store," *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 April 1936.

<sup>52</sup> "Atlanta To Have Brilliant Season in Music Series," *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 September 1937.

<sup>53</sup> "Jooss European Ballet to Present Modern Interpretations Thursday," *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 February 1938.

<sup>54</sup> "Nelson Eddy Sings to Huge Crowd and Thrills With Fine Program," *Atlanta Constitution*, 11 March 1938.

<sup>55</sup> "Band Will Play on Stage at Fox," *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 October 1938.

<sup>56</sup> "15 Decatur Big Brothers Working Overtime for DeKalb County Poor," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 December 1937.

<sup>57</sup> "Calvert to Give Show Friday Midnight at Fox," *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 December 1938.

finalists of the talent search would appear on the Fox stage for introductions, photographs, and voice tests, and the two winners (one male and one female) would be whisked to Hollywood to begin acting courses. There, they would be given a radio contract and a part in the RKO motion picture *Career*.<sup>58</sup>

Under Lucas and Jenkins the Fox remained, first and foremost, a movie house. Lucas and Jenkins managed the theater with the utmost meticulousness while first-run films, newsreels, and short subjects remained at the center of the entertainment program. The management team took particular pride in the finely dressed and well-mannered corps of ushers at the theater. Moviegoers were generally impressed at the military form of the Fox's ushers, in no small part due to the tight reins kept on the young employees. "Every day before the ushers went on duty, we lined them up for inspection," Tommy Read, a Lucas and Jenkins manager during the 1940s, recalled. "We checked everything. We made sure they had fresh uniforms on. We checked their shoeshines, their fingernails, their hair, even their breath."<sup>59</sup> Lucas and Jenkins saw their service staff as one of the most important parts of attending the show. Customer comment cards confirmed that Fox patrons "love[d] the military form the ushers use in this theater."<sup>60</sup>

Part of Lucas and Jenkins's attention to detail involved ensuring that the staff kept a clean and orderly theater. Managers performed routine walkthroughs of the Fox in which they detailed the cleanliness of the theater and the performance of the service staff. In one walkthrough, a manager noted that despite the professional and clean appearance

---

<sup>58</sup> "Film Talent Quest Begins Here Today," *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 February 1939.

<sup>59</sup> Henry Woodhead, "A Fading Paradise on Peachtree," *Atlanta Journal Constitution Magazine*, 16 June 1974, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Customer comment card, Undated, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

of the service staff, the girl working the ticket booth “did not thank me when I purchased tickets.” Additionally, there was another female ticket booth attendant, seated behind the aforementioned employee, “who talked on the telephone for at least ten minutes of the observation.” Still, the manager approved the overall state of the theater and the performance of the service staff. Ushers were “well trained and attentive to their duties.” The doorman left the sidewalk clean and clear, and helpfully “assist[ed] those who alighted from their cars.” The candy machines were well stocked and clean; the lobby had a “very clean appearance”; and “all lamps and overhead lights were burning.” The rest rooms were clean, as was the theater auditorium. Even the film equipment was not excused from inspection. The manager reported, “[N]o breaks or blurs in the film were noted and the sound equipment functioned properly.”<sup>61</sup> Such detailed management was important to Lucas and Jenkins in running an efficient theater, even though it could not always account for the best behavior of its employees. In rare instances, ushers and other service staff members sometimes shirked their duties, stole money, or distributed free movie passes to their friends. In one particular incident in 1936, management was forced to terminate the employment of four boys on the service staff from “high-type families” because they had stolen money. In other cases, ushers, staff members, or doormen gave away free tickets.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to ensuring a clean and orderly theater, Lucas and Jenkins sought other ways to attract people to the theater. As James Forsher notes, the advertising of film

---

<sup>61</sup> Walk-through report, 21 December 1944, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>62</sup> E.E. Whitaker to W. Jenkins, 21 January 1936, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

attractions became a major part of theater management in the midst of the Depression.<sup>63</sup> Lucas and Jenkins launched a major publicity push in 1938, in which a radio and newspaper ad campaign proclaimed it “Motion Pictures’ Greatest Year.” The Lucas and Jenkins newsletter *Spotlight*, distributed to every one of their theaters around Georgia, recommended that local theater managers include the slogan after every newspaper reader and in every graphic newspaper ad.<sup>64</sup> One Lucas and Jenkins theater began a search for local residents who had never seen a talkie, and “they were invited to see a modern motion picture and to interpret through them the tremendous advance the industry has made.” The end result was “a front page story of real human interest.” According to the article, this was “worth trying in any town no matter how large or small.” Other showmanship strategies included “distributing booklets in a house-to-house canvas,” fashion shows, and holding various quiz competitions in local newspapers. Lucas and Jenkins found creative uses for radio advertising as well. In a mutual advertising agreement, the Fox and other theaters would run short advertisements for local radio stations on their screens in exchange for “a fifteen-minute morning program known as ‘Hollywood Sights and Sound,’ [the] program carrying announcements of current attractions at all theatres and news of all the theatre world in general.” The goal was “constantly keeping motion pictures on the minds of the listeners.”<sup>65</sup>

In addition to advertising, Lucas and Jenkins undertook some technological upgrades to the Fox Theatre during the 1930s to keep its equipment current. In 1938, a

---

<sup>63</sup> Forsher, *Community of Cinema*, 66.

<sup>64</sup> *Spotlight*, 8 October 1938, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>65</sup> *Spotlight*, 29 October 1938, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

new sound system was installed replacing the original from 1929. According to the Lucas and Jenkins theaters newsletter *Spotlight*, “A new RCA 150-watt sound system replaced the original 42-watt Western Electric system.” Wood horns gave way to the “new cellular-type horns”<sup>66</sup> that “insured uniform distribution of all sound frequencies to every part of the theater.”<sup>67</sup> The new system, far more sophisticated than the first sound systems of the late 1920s, was unveiled at the premiere of *Men With Wings*, attended by famous airman Eddie Rickenbacker. By the end of the decade, the entertainment program at the Fox was still recognizable to those who attended the theater in its early days, but the team of Lucas and Jenkins recognized the importance of tailoring their management of the Fox to the new realities of the 1930s film industry. As talkies replaced silent films, sound projection technology was upgraded; as lavish stage presentations proved too costly, they were jettisoned; as the organ became more expensive to maintain and patrons expressed dissatisfaction with its inclusion in the program, they scaled back the duration and frequency of organ performances; as the city recovered from the Depression and more Atlantans were back on sound financial footing, management undertook an aggressive advertising campaign to compete for the public’s disposable income. These adjustments helped Lucas and Jenkins become the most successful management team in the Fox’s history.

The turbulent decade closed with one of the biggest events in Atlanta’s history—the world premiere of MGM’s classic film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. This premiere event, according to Matthew Bernstein, “proved to be a

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> “Fox Installs New Sound System,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 October 1938.

milestone in Atlanta's history, placing the city at the center of national and even international attention."<sup>68</sup> It was fitting that this premiere event occurred at the end of the 1930s—a decade in which Atlanta had suffered during the depths of the Great Depression, but from which it had emerged a stronger and more complete city. While the aggressive expansion and ambitious building projects of the 1920s presented a veneer of prosperity to the rest of the nation and matched the blustery boosterism of the city's leaders, Atlanta's infrastructure had lagged far behind. Updated roads, a modern sewer system, federally supervised slum clearance and public housing construction, and newer hospital and school buildings modernized the city to the point where its residents could now realistically compare their home to other major American cities. While other urban areas around the country benefitted from New Deal programs in a similar manner, Atlanta enjoyed a close relationship with President Roosevelt, and by the end of the decade it had become a truly national city. For this reason, the premiere of *Gone With the Wind* was a most appropriate culmination of the decade, turning the attention of the nation toward the city. Atlanta was ready for its close-up.

Mayor William Hartsfield enthusiastically proposed that MGM host the premiere event at the Fox Theatre. From this proposal, two conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it is clear that Mayor Hartsfield had little understanding of the structure of the film industry. Under the studio system, in which major studios also owned distribution companies and theater chains, an MGM film (part of Loew's Incorporated) would, of course, premiere at a Loew's theater and not a theater owned by a competing studio. In response to Hartsfield's suggestion, an MGM official wrote: "We appreciate your advising that the

---

<sup>68</sup> Matthew Bernstein, "Selznick's March: The Atlanta Premiere of *Gone With the Wind*," *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999), 28.

Fox Theatre is interested in showing the picture. However, I am sure you know that we have a theatre of our own in Atlanta.”<sup>69</sup> Loew’s Grand Theatre, not the Fox, would be the center of attention for the premiere festivities. Secondly, Hartsfield’s proposal demonstrated the high regard the mayor held for the Fox Theatre. That the premiere was held elsewhere was not a result of the Fox being overshadowed by Loew’s Grand (which had undergone an extensive Art Deco interior renovation by renowned theater architect Thomas Lamb), but rather it was due to the peculiarities of the film industry. The premiere festivities only peripherally included the Fox Theatre. The closest David O. Selznick, Vivien Leigh, or Clark Gable came to the Fox during premiere week was during their stay at the Georgian Terrace Hotel directly across Peachtree. MGM officials and the stars of the film stayed at the hotel during the week, and the Georgian Terrace served as the beginning point for their half-mile march to the entrance of the Loew’s Grand on the night of the world premiere gala. The only press received by the Fox Theatre that week was the report of a purse-snatcher (one of many who worked the city during premiere week) stealing a pocketbook outside the building on Ponce de Leon Ave.<sup>70</sup>

Although it played no major part in one of the most significant events in Atlanta’s history, the Fox accurately reflected the changes that Atlanta had undergone during the 1930s. The theater had entered the decade as a spectacular symbol of an up-and-coming city. The stunning visuals of the Fox Theatre matched the impressive skyscrapers,

---

<sup>69</sup> T.J. Connors to Mayor William Hartsfield, 21 July 1939, Wililam Hartsfield Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>70</sup> “Purse Snatchers, Thieves Work City,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 December 1939.

vibrant entertainment district, and the explosive growth of the city's neighborhoods. It also shared the city's disregard for more practical considerations. Entertainment at the first incarnation of the Fox placed a premium on style over practicality—the Fanchon and Marco ideas, for example, were highly entertaining but expensive to produce and unsustainable in the new economic realities of the 1930s. Just as Fox management ignored the consequences of high-cost shows at the theater in the early part of the decade, the city ignored the practical necessities of infrastructure and municipal services. New sensibilities were required in both city building and in theater management in the latter half of the decade. With the substantial assistance of the federal government under the New Deal, Atlanta addressed these less visually impressive but necessary considerations by bringing its infrastructure up to date and providing relief for victims of the Depression. Likewise, the Fox Theatre under the management of Lucas and Jenkins did away with the excesses of 1920s movie palaces and presented a far more streamlined entertainment program. Thus, both the city of Atlanta and the Fox Theatre emerged from the 1930s with their outward appearances relatively intact, but more sensibly managed and operated. Both the city and its most prestigious theater had survived the worst of the Great Depression and approached the 1940s on sound footing.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Atlanta and The Fox Theatre Mobilize For War, 1940-1945**

Notwithstanding the sacrifices and the loss of loved ones overseas, World War II was a boon for Americans on the home front. The benefits of wartime mobilization were primarily economic, and were welcome after a decade of hardship and uncertainty. “At every level of society,” writes John Morton Blum, Americans “had money to spend, for luxuries if they were rich, for amenities long denied them if they were of moderate means, for small conveniences, decent food, and some recreation if they were workers.”<sup>1</sup> The war had a positive effect on the city of Atlanta, too. The creation of wartime manufacturing jobs and the increased military presence around the state of Georgia stimulated migration and travel to the city, in turn stimulating the local economy. The Marietta Bell Bomber plant for example, built in 1942 just outside of the city, rolled more than seven hundred B-29 Superfortresses off of its assembly line during the war years and brought more than 30,000 jobs to the Atlanta area alone. Military installations around the state such as Fort McPherson on the Southwest edge of Atlanta, Camp Toccoa approximately 90 miles Northeast of Atlanta, and Fort Benning in Columbus brought thousands more young men and women from all over the country to Georgia, with many of them spending their furloughs and leisure time in the state capital. YMCAs and USO recreation centers around the city provided visiting soldiers with places to eat, sleep, and amuse themselves while briefly escaping their rigorous training, injecting a youthful

---

<sup>1</sup> John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 92.

energy and vibrancy into the city along with their disposable income. The war made Atlanta into a veritable hive of activity.<sup>2</sup>

The war was a boon to the film industry as well. Hollywood experienced its “golden age” during World War II, enjoying unprecedented box office success and mainstream cultural ascendancy. As film historian Thomas Doherty argues, motion pictures before the war were still considered by some as banal or morally questionable entertainment. During the war years, though, film became “a popular and prestigious art, a respected and cultivated business, [and] an acknowledged and powerful weapon of war.”<sup>3</sup> Like other industries, the film industry mobilized for war quickly and effectively. Instead of rolling war materiel off the assembly lines, Hollywood studios churned out combat films, escapist fare, and informational shorts and newsreels. Film was in a unique position to reach mass audiences in service of the war effort. As such, movie theaters across the country raised their civic importance by refashioning themselves not only as places of entertainment, but also as informational and civic events venues. Theaters enabled Americans to make tangible contributions to the war effort in a variety of ways. Thus, the American film industry recovered from the difficulties of the 1930s to enjoy unprecedented success during the war years.

The war years also represent the high point of the Fox Theatre’s history. At no other time did the Fox serve as critical a civic role, and at no other time did it become as central to the cultural life of Atlanta than during the first half of the 1940s. The sobering realities of wartime—shortages, rationing, blackouts and brownouts, civil defense drills,

---

<sup>2</sup> Crater, *World War II in Atlanta*, 51-53.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 13.

and the potential threat (real or imagined) of enemy attack—were substantial obstacles to business at the downtown movie theaters, but the Fox and other theaters overcame these difficulties by fulfilling a unique set of social needs. Although disposable income levels had substantially increased since the dark days of the Depression, leisure-time entertainment options were limited by wartime travel restrictions and rationing. Thus, an evening at the Fox, Paramount, Roxy, or Loew’s Grand was a natural choice for Atlantans looking for affordable entertainment. These theaters also performed an important civic role; in addition to entertaining their audiences, they provided Atlantans a place to take in the latest war news and to make their own contributions to the war effort. At any given time, theater patrons could donate scrap metal, buy a war bond, or donate to relief funds. In providing these opportunities to contribute, the Fox offered Atlantans a sense of connection with the conflict abroad. The disruptions and shortages of global warfare presented significant obstacles to the theater, but the boom atmosphere of the war years in Atlanta brought the Fox Theatre unprecedented popularity and cultural importance.

World War II was a watershed in Atlanta history. The city had matured substantially but unevenly during the 1920s and 1930s, but during the war, as one Atlantan put it, “It changed a good deal. It was just a sleepy little old town, really, before World War II.”<sup>4</sup> This statement somewhat understates Atlanta’s size in 1940—the metropolitan area’s estimated population was 359,000 by that time—but the sentiment

---

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Kuhn, et. al., *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 350. Quote by Atlanta bookkeeper Marian Doom.

that World War II changed everything is shared amongst those who lived through the war in Atlanta, and amongst historians. As Franklin Garrett writes, “The stringency of the 30’s was submerged in the economy of war,” and “flush times” followed.<sup>5</sup> This economy of war brought legions of new people to the city; soldiers, defense workers, and other migrants all came to Atlanta during the war years, giving the city a new energy and vibrancy. New factories were constructed, new military installations were built around Georgia while existing ones were augmented, and other infrastructural improvements were made around the city during Atlanta’s mobilization for war. The Atlanta that emerged from World War II after 1945 was far different from the one that began mobilization in 1940.

The new decade began with the city on stable financial ground for the first time since the 1920s, back from the brink of disaster during the 1930s and operating in the black by New Year’s Day of 1940.<sup>6</sup> As matters in Europe worsened in the spring and early summer of that year, Atlanta began its transition to a wartime economy. After France and the Low Countries fell to the Germans and the Italians entered the conflict on the side of the Germans, local civilian defense workers were mobilized and selective military service became effective, causing a pronounced escalation in the military presence around the state of Georgia. In October 1940, work began on the Atlanta Naval Air Station on the site of old Camp Gordon in nearby Chamblee. Fort McPherson, normally a sleepy military installation only minimally staffed on the Southwest edge of Atlanta, became a hive of activity as thousands of young men were sent to the base for

---

<sup>5</sup> Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*, vol. 2 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 1002.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 997.

induction. The army also erected large brick warehouses and built railroad switchyards on a 1,500-acre tract in Clayton County, approximately fifteen miles southeast of downtown Atlanta, creating the Atlanta General Depot (later renamed the Atlanta Army Depot). On Peachtree Street in the northeastern suburbs, the federal government repurposed the site of a World War I camp for the construction of a naval air station and an army hospital. Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Clark College also participated in a training program for administrative and support staff for African-American units in the armed forces—the Army Administration School program—beginning in 1942. Combined with the establishment of Camp Toccoa about ninety miles northeast of Atlanta and the escalated presence of soldiers at Fort Benning in Columbus, these military installations and programs brought thousands of young men to the state of Georgia from around the country. Most of them spent a significant amount of time in the capital city.<sup>7</sup>

Wartime manufacturing and business expansion also brought new faces to the city. The Bell Bomber plant, built approximately twenty miles away from downtown in Marietta, was a major employer in Atlanta during the war. Construction on the Bell plant began in 1942 and was completed in September 1943, providing more than 30,000 jobs for the city, and attracting many workers from outside Atlanta as well. Laborers arrived from all over the Southeast, many from rural Georgia and Alabama, to find defense work. The factory also employed a large number of women, especially in the later years of the war when potential male employees became increasingly unavailable due to military service. The Bell Bomber plant rolled over seven hundred B-29 Superfortresses off of its

---

<sup>7</sup> Garrett, 1002; Rice, “If Dixie Were Atlanta,” 32.

assembly line and onto the runways at the adjacent Marietta Army Air Field. In addition to providing tens of thousands of jobs to the metropolitan area, the complex spurred further infrastructural growth, including the completion of a \$1 million water pipeline required for factory operations. It also illuminated the need for better transportation between the city and its suburbs; by the end of the war, the number of passengers using the Atlanta-to-Marietta interurban transportation line quadrupled from its prewar level. Other wartime jobs brought more migrants to the city. The offices of the War Department in Atlanta employed many women, and an estimated one hundred private firms in the metropolitan area dedicated their total output to the war effort. Even Coca-Cola ramped up production to provide bottles of its famous cola to servicemen around the world.<sup>8</sup>

This influx of new blood into Atlanta reinvigorated the city's entertainment scene, which catered its offerings to soldiers. USO centers, YMCAs, canteens, and recreation centers offered leisure time diversions for soldiers on leave; soldiers and defense workers also frequented Atlanta's downtown movie theaters and night clubs for an evening's entertainment. One Atlantan recalled the excitement that the soldiers' presence brought to the weekends. "[T]hese soldiers would come up and they would spend their money and take the ladies to the various clubs and things. And some people trying to live every day to the fullest, because they did not know whether they would get back." As soldiers arrived via train to the city, they were met by USO representatives at Terminal Station who offered guidance on available recreational activities in Atlanta. White soldiers had many options for recreation, including nightclubs, canteens, hotels, and YMCAs. The

---

<sup>8</sup> Kuhn, et. al., *Living Atlanta*, 362; Rice, "If Dixie Were Atlanta," 32; Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 98; Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, vol. 2, 1002.

Georgian Terrace Hotel, across Peachtree Street from the Fox Theatre, held dances for white soldiers who stopped on their way through Atlanta, complete with a handpicked coterie of young women to entertain and dance with them. Saturday night dances at the Luckie Street YMCA were also popular amongst white soldiers. Similar services existed for black soldiers, who predominantly spent their leisure time at the Butler Street YMCA or at the various clubs and restaurants on Auburn Avenue. The Butler Street Y was so popular that a supplementary USO center had to be established in the Washington High School gymnasium to handle the overflow. The Hunter Street USO center also hosted dances, athletic contests, dinners and musical performances for black soldiers.<sup>9</sup>

Movies were a cheap and convenient form of entertainment for soldiers and defense workers since the main theaters were located in the heart of the city, and they were a very popular recreation activity for these young men and women. While some Atlantans had become used to or perhaps even desensitized to the spectacular visual style of the Fox, young servicemen, many from small towns and rural communities, were impressed at the grandiosity of the theater. Fox ushers frequently overheard complimentary comments from visiting soldiers; one claimed that the theater was “the nicest he had ever saw.”<sup>10</sup> Another Fox usher overheard a sailor exclaim, “Cheez, what a big place!”<sup>11</sup> A boy from Washington, D.C. proclaimed that the Fox Theatre “had all the theaters in Washington beat by a long shot.”<sup>12</sup> Another customer who had “lived up

---

<sup>9</sup> Kuhn, et. al., *Living Atlanta*, 354, 356; Crater, *World War II in Atlanta*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Fox Theatre comment card, 28 February 1944, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>11</sup> Undated Fox Theatre comment card, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>12</sup> Fox Theatre comment card, 9 October 1943, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

North all her life” claimed to have visited many theaters in the South and told an usher that “the Fox was the most beautiful she had seen.”<sup>13</sup> The sight of the Fox Theatre caused many visitors to Atlanta to discard their preconceived notions about the city when they arrived. Many expected to see Margaret Mitchell’s or David O. Selznick’s idyllic Atlanta of *Gone With the Wind* fame, but instead found it to be a “big, modern, bustling and metropolitan” city, with the Fox as its centerpiece. As one soldier exclaimed to a friend, “Jeez, Joe, look what a theater. Who’d a-thought Atlanta has a house like this. It makes my home town show look like a shooting gallery.”<sup>14</sup>

John Jeffries argues that “removed as they were from the battlefronts, prospering during and because of the war, home-front Americans seemed to be fighting the war on ‘imagination’.”<sup>15</sup> The battlefields in this war of imagination, however, were shaped predominantly by Hollywood. This is an important reason behind the wartime success of the Fox and other movie theaters across the country. During World War II, the Fox Theatre’s on-screen content was crucial in helping Atlantans fight the war of imagination. The war pervaded most if not every aspect of daily life, and throughout the early years of the conflict its images were ubiquitous on movie screens across the country. Theaters like the Fox served a dual psychological purpose for the home front. On the one hand, Fox patrons could figuratively battle the enemy in Europe or the Pacific alongside John Wayne, Gary Cooper, or Tyrone Power. In this respect the Fox and other movie theaters

---

<sup>13</sup> Undated Fox Theatre comment card, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>14</sup> “Backstage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 July 1944.

<sup>15</sup> John Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, Inc., 1996), 188; Blum also discusses the ‘imaginative’ nature of the war.

around the country were safe havens where Americans could gain a sense of what the soldiers in their family were going through, from the safety of a comfortable movie theater.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, audiences could also view lighthearted escapist fare that would allow them to forget the stresses of war, however briefly. In either case, the importance of Hollywood's contributions to the war elevated the importance of movie theaters in cities around the country.

War-related content came in several forms including feature films, short films or "Victory Shorts," newsreels, and cartoons. Hollywood studios mobilized quickly to produce combat feature films during the early years of the war, and audiences eagerly soaked them up as they imagined fighting with the on-screen stars against the Germans or Japanese. When the feature film did not focus directly on American troops, it instead highlighted home front sacrifices or foreign struggles against the Axis. Many of the films shown at the Fox were meant to rouse feelings of patriotism, anger, and a fighting spirit in their viewers. Newspaper advertisements for Paramount's *Wake Island*, released in the fall of 1942, assured Fox audiences that "No picture ever made you so PROUD! No picture ever made you so FIGHTING MAD!" The ad urged Atlantans to "Avenge Wake Island!" after the disastrous defeat to the Japanese there earlier in the year.<sup>17</sup> Lucas and Jenkins even invited the family members of area soldiers taken prisoner by the Japanese at Wake Island to an advance screening of the film at the Fox. A reporter for the *Constitution* wrote, "They saw it with tears in their eyes and a rising anger that, at the

---

<sup>16</sup> Forsher uses the term "safe haven" to describe theaters in wartime in Forsher, *Community of Cinema*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Advertisement, *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 September 1942.

final fade-out, left them dry-eyed mad clear through.”<sup>18</sup> Atlanta theater managers understood the importance of fighting the war on imagination (and the box office success it could bring), and they knew that films like *Air Force*, *Eagle Squadron*, *Action in the North Atlantic*, and *We’ve Never Been Licked* enabled their audiences to do so. Thus, the Fox and the other downtown theaters provided venues in which the war of imagination could take place. Throughout 1942 and early 1943, Atlanta theater programs were saturated with these combat films.

Fatigue, however, was a natural result. By the middle of 1943, Atlanta theater audiences grew increasingly weary of war films and shorts and demonstrated a renewed preference for lighthearted or escapist fare. Theater managers and booking agents recognized the need for a wider variety and slowly adjusted their theater bills. In fact, one of the biggest hits on the Fox screen in 1943 was Twentieth Century-Fox’s *Coney Island* starring Betty Grable, a “gay nineties” musical set in the famous New York amusement spot. One local theater manager commented that the film was an effective remedy for war fatigue:

Each day, more families find their sons in the armed forces. They feel badly about their absence. War pictures remind ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa’ too much of ‘Buddy.’ Newsreels and government films tell them all they want to know about the war and how it is going—and they want to see them—but, please don’t cram one war story after another down their throats—it’s bitter medicine and they won’t swallow it constantly.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Celestine Sibley, “Kin Here of Wake Island Heroes Fighting Mad After Seeing Film,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 September 1942.

<sup>19</sup> “Backstage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 May 1943.

Paul Jones, the *Constitution's* entertainment editor, agreed, stating that *Coney Island* was “the best current example of real, honest-to-goodness screen fun. Let’s have more of that type.”<sup>20</sup> Tommy Read, manager of the Fox under Lucas and Jenkins during the 1940s, overheard audience members commenting that the film was “just the type of entertainment we’ve been looking for” and that it “seems like old times.”<sup>21</sup> Musicals like *Coney Island* and *Iceland*, and comedies like Universal’s Abbott and Costello films *Hold That Ghost* and *Pardon My Sarong*, softened the barrage of combat images with levity and escapism. Hollywood studios recognized audience fatigue and by 1944 changed policy to “emphasize stories of heroism and personal achievement in the war” rather than battlefield action.<sup>22</sup> The barrage of combat images was increasingly left to shorts and newsreels.

The short subjects shown on the Fox screen further cemented the theater’s role as a wartime informational center. Fox audiences were accustomed to seeing entertaining shorts before the feature presentation, but these films took on more educational and informational qualities during World War II. Office of War Information (OWI) shorts and other war-related studio shorts were often referred to as “Victory films” or “Victory shorts,” which Thomas Doherty describes as providing “crash-course instruction in wartime purpose and guideposts for civilian participation.” The Fox and other downtown theaters played these shorts before every feature film, and they varied in both purpose and quality. Victory shorts sometimes advised civilians on home front issues like

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> “Backstage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 June 1943.

<sup>22</sup> “War, Horror ‘Out’ As Film Subjects,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 May 1944; Jeffries also argues that war film fatigue surfaced in 1943 and 1944, *Wartime America*, 182.

conservation, salvage efforts, or defense work; in other cases they praised home front heroes and heroines in agriculture and industry; others still explained unpleasant government policies or their side effects, especially rationing, shortages, and travel restrictions. Some shorts bordered on the mundane while others like *Winning Your Wings* starring James Stewart, were so well produced and had such star power that they overshadowed the feature film.<sup>23</sup> Victory shorts were not immune to audience fatigue either, though. One Atlanta critic wrote:

These subjects are interesting and informative for the most part, but seeing them once is enough. Since movies are one of the few remaining havens of relaxation and enjoyment, audiences have grown immeasurably. Many people see as many as three shows a week. With each program, at each theater, the same government short subject is shown on the screen... The great majority of these films show us what our factories are doing to produce the implements of war; what training our boys are getting to prepare them for battle. Yes, they are interesting. But they grow old with age.<sup>24</sup>

Newsreels produced by Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Time Magazine (the famous *March of Time* series) also brought combat images directly to the Fox screen. From newsreels, audiences could follow events as they happened, knowing that the theater was one of the few places they could find real combat footage. Most of these images were sanitized and censored, but they filled a need for authentic pictures from combat. Still, the images were sometimes all too real. In May of 1945, Signal Corps footage from the liberation of several Nazi concentration camps was shown on the

---

<sup>23</sup> Doherty, *Projections of War*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> "Backstage," *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 June 1943.

screens of the downtown theaters. Audience members reacted to the gruesome on-screen images with revulsion, anxiety, and horror. A *Constitution* photograph depicted one man closing his eyes tightly to “shut out a horrible scene” while another young man nervously bit his fingernails while watching the graphic images.<sup>25</sup> Such newsreels were the only source of authentic combat footage for Atlantans.

Animated shorts at the Fox also included war-related content, but often helped relieve tension with levity and irreverence. Despite cartoons’ lighthearted approach to entertainment, they could also serve propagandistic purposes. *Out of the Frying Pan* and *The New Spirit*, two cartoons animated by Walt Disney, encouraged Fox audiences to save cooking fats for the manufacture of explosives and to pay their income taxes promptly and fully. The narrator of *The New Spirit* demanded that Donald Duck and the audience pay their “taxes to beat the Axis!”<sup>26</sup> This short, like many other wartime cartoons, caricatured and demonized the Axis powers. Looney Tunes, Superman, and Popeye cartoons also lampooned the Axis powers and their leaders. For example, in 1943 the Fox screened a Disney-animated cartoon titled *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, based on the popular song of the same name. In this short, Donald Duck suffers a nervous breakdown after the constant pressure of working in a Nazi shell factory (he is repeatedly prodded by caricatures of Hitler, Hirohito, Mussolini, and Göring). At the end of the cartoon, the audience finds that Donald has dreamt the entire scenario, and the final scene is that of Hitler’s caricature on screen being pelted with a tomato. The Axis was not the only target of satire in *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, as the cartoon also lampooned wartime

---

<sup>25</sup> “Atlantans View German Horrors,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 May 1945.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Shull and David Wilt, *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004), 125.

coffee rationing and other shortages.<sup>27</sup> Such satirical and humorous animated shorts broke up the serious tone of newsreels, Victory shorts, and war films. Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny helped Fox audiences laugh away the stresses of war, if only for a short while.

Live stage presentations at the Fox sometimes supplemented shorts and newsreels to serve informational purposes as well. Several movie premieres featured question-and-answer sessions with film stars, military heroes, or “experts” on the conflict. After the March 1943 premiere of RKO’s *Hitler’s Children*, a fictional exposé of life in Nazi Germany, the Fox stage hosted stars Bonita Granville and H.B. Warner who portrayed their characters from the film in front of a live audience.<sup>28</sup> In December of the same year, James Young, an INS correspondent previously stationed in Tokyo for over 15 years and author of the book *Behind Japan’s Rising Sun*, appeared on stage at the premiere of the film of the same name. Young lectured three times on premiere day to educate the attendees on Japan’s “insane military ambitions” and to answer audience questions.<sup>29</sup> Special presentations like these served both informational and promotional purposes. Combined with Victory shorts and newsreels, the programs at the Fox Theatre and other downtown theaters were the best sources of war information in the city of Atlanta.

Since its inception the Fox had served as a part-time community center and events venue, but with the attack on Pearl Harbor its civic role expanded considerably. The

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>28</sup> “2 Movie Stars in Atlanta for Fox Premier,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 March 1943.

<sup>29</sup> “‘Rising Sun’ Author, James Young, at Fox,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 December 1943.

theater continued to host various film premieres and special events as it had before the war, but these events now served the war effort. Hollywood had mobilized for war; now, theater managers had to do the same. Exhibitors, Doherty notes, “took to their task with relish: for once they, not the glamorous production end of the business, were on the front lines (and the front page). Honed by decades of pumping up flat films, the ballyhoo talent of theatermen adapted itself readily to war promotion.”<sup>30</sup> Management at the Fox and other Atlanta theaters aggressively promoted bond sales, scrap metal drives, aid benefits, and military recruiting drives in service of the war effort. These efforts not only gave Atlantans a sense of participation, but they also helped put bodies in theater seats.

Before the Pearl Harbor attack, there was little disruption to the normal Fox schedule of live entertainment performances. Various performances graced the stage, such as the two-day engagement with the San Carlo Opera Company in February 1940, while the Shrine Mosque ballroom continued to host dinners, balls and dances.<sup>31</sup> Other promotions saw Hollywood stars appear on stage as Carol Bruce did at the premiere of the Abbott and Costello comedy *Keep ‘Em Flying* in December 1941. Although the United States was not yet at war in 1940 and most of 1941, events organizers and theater management were still conscious of the precarious situation abroad. As Nazi Germany steamrolled through Western Europe, several relief fund benefits were organized at the Fox to aid the countries under attack. The Red Cross War Relief Fund was the beneficiary of multiple Variety Club-sponsored events, which included lively programs featuring musical acts, short film subjects, and newsreels. One such event took place at the Fox Theatre almost concurrently with the Dunkirk evacuation in May 1940, and a

---

<sup>30</sup> Doherty, *Projections of War*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Advertisement, *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 February 1940.

similar benefit was held a month later, immediately after the fall of Paris.<sup>32</sup> As the Germans pushed deeper into the Balkan Peninsula and into mainland Greece in March 1941, the Variety Club also organized relief fund benefits at theaters around Atlanta to raise aid for the Greek resistance.<sup>33</sup> Fox patrons could also contribute to the war effort in other tangible ways. In June 1941 the Fox offered a special Saturday morning program for children and their parents as part of citywide scrap aluminum drive promoted by the *Constitution*. Special Saturday morning programs were regularly held at the Fox. Most of these programs featured reduced-price family-friendly screen offerings, most often cowboy or Western films. On this particular Saturday, however, young patrons gained admission by bringing in old pots, pans, or other aluminum utensils. The scrap was collected by the Red Cross, which then sold it for defense purposes and channeled the proceeds into various war relief and defense programs.<sup>34</sup> These wartime scrap metal drives were common at movie theaters around the United States during the war, as theater managers sought creative ways to bring patrons in the door while also contributing to the war effort.

The Fox's and other theaters' stature as important community centers was dramatically strengthened after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Fox became a refuge, shrine, recruiting center, and a place to make tangible contributions to the war effort. Shortly after December 7, 1941 the Fox entrance on Peachtree Street served as a shrine to the servicemen at Pearl Harbor and the Philippines. Management created a

---

<sup>32</sup> "Stars to Play in Benefit for Charity Fund," *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 May 1940; Advertisement, *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 June 1940.

<sup>33</sup> "Shadows and Substance," *Atlanta Constitution*, 16 March 1941.

<sup>34</sup> "Old Aluminum Will Be Taken for Fox Show," *Atlanta Constitution*, 5 June 1941.

colorful display surrounding the box office booth exhorting patrons and passersby to buy defense bonds and stamps. The display featured several giant banners reminding Atlantans to “REMEMBER PEARL HARBOR,” while a bond booth stood several yards behind. Closer to the lobby doors was a series of striking wall panels built around the slogan “Remember Manila.” Other murals depicted how money raised through bonds and stamps would be put toward producing war materiel. A panel featuring recent front pages of Atlanta newspapers provided moviegoers a stirring reminder of “the treacherous Jap attack on Pearl Harbor, the battle for the Philippines and fighting around the globe.”<sup>35</sup> Almost a year later, Tommy Read designed a unique display featuring three life-size figures of former employees in a tribute to the armed services. Likenesses of Billy McMillan (an assistant artist), Homer Knowles (a Fox organist), and Earl Lindsey (a ticket stub taker) stood at attention in full military garb to honor the more than 120 Lucas and Jenkins employees serving in the military.<sup>36</sup> Memorial and patriotic displays like these were found in many downtown theaters and shops throughout the war, demonstrating support for their enlisted employees and showing Atlantans that their business was making real contributions to the war effort.

The Fox continued to host special relief benefits for United Nations relief funds and for the Red Cross throughout the war. In January 1943 theaters all over the country participated in “United Nations Week,” which was organized to foster camaraderie with other Allied nations. Each downtown theater showed the ten-minute short subject *You, John Jones!* prior to the feature film, which starred James Cagney, Ann Sothern, and

---

<sup>35</sup> “Defense Bond and Stamp Sales Boosted by Fox Lobby Display,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 January 1941.

<sup>36</sup> “Original Display at Fox Honors Boys in Service,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 11 October 1942.

Margaret O'Brien, and encouraged audiences to donate to the United Nations relief organizations by highlighting the hardships of war in Allied nations such as Britain, France, Greece, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and China. That week, Atlanta theater patrons donated over \$16,000 to the fund.<sup>37</sup> Audiences also contributed to the Red Cross by "passing the hat" before various feature films. In one Red Cross drive during the month of April 1943, patrons at over seven hundred theaters in the Southeast donated more than \$150,000.<sup>38</sup> Fox patrons even donated Christmas gifts (cameras, etc.) to American soldiers on Guadalcanal in conjunction with the premiere of Twentieth Century-Fox's *Guadalcanal Diary*.<sup>39</sup> Through such donations, audiences could offer aid and comfort to other Allied nations and American soldiers overseas, while at the same time feeling a sense of tangible contribution from the home front.

The Fox and other downtown theaters hosted many special events that helped Atlantans celebrate their patriotism, contribute to the war effort, and connect with their military heroes. These bond premieres, special recruiting presentations, and other benefit events made extensive use of military pageantry during the war, including public induction ceremonies, parades, musical performances, stage presentations, and demonstrations of military equipment. The first such event at the Fox was the August 1941 premiere of RKO's *Parachute Battalion*, a semi-documentary picture about paratroopers in training. The initial screening of the picture, filmed primarily at Fort Benning, was preceded by a grand parade down Peachtree Street featuring the 501<sup>st</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> "Along Film Row: Movie Fans Swell Relief Purse," *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 January 1943.

<sup>38</sup> "Atlantans Bulge Red Cross Purse," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 April 1943.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Jones, "Backstage," *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 October 1943.

Parachute Battalion. The parade began at Terminal Station, stopped at the Biltmore Hotel for a special dinner hosted by Edmond O'Brien (one of the stars of *Parachute Battalion*) and Dorothy Comingore (star of *Citizen Kane*), and marched on to the Fox for the premiere. The paratroopers appeared on stage before the feature along with O'Brien and Comingore, and then marched afterward to the city auditorium where they were honored guests at the "Parachute Battalion Ball." The chance to see a world premiere and witness the troops in full regalia resulted in a packed Fox auditorium.<sup>40</sup> This was not the last time a large military parade would march down Peachtree Street to the front entrance of the Fox.

At the May 1942 premiere of Twentieth Century-Fox's *To The Shores of Tripoli*, the Fox audience witnessed the swearing in of young Marine recruits on stage. The ceremony was dedicated to the Marines who had fought at Wake Island earlier in the year.<sup>41</sup> Similar ceremonies took place at other downtown movie houses. In one instance naval recruits were sworn in with those in other cities via CBS radio. As part of the ceremonies marking "Avenger's Day" on June 7, 1942—the six-month anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack—thirty-two local white youths were sworn into the US Navy at Loew's Grand Theater by radio broadcast. Loew's Grand, however, did not allow African Americans into the theater, so black recruits were not allowed to participate in the proceedings. In order to comply with Jim Crow segregation, twenty-three black

---

<sup>40</sup> "500 'Chutists Parade Today in Film Prelude," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 August 1941.

<sup>41</sup> Advertisement, *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 May 1942.

recruits were instead sworn in before a crowd of five hundred at the Royal Theater on Auburn Avenue. It was the first time that African Americans were enlisted as seamen.<sup>42</sup>

Military pageantry at the Fox often served recruiting ends for the armed forces and their auxiliary bodies. To create interest in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps—the women's branch of the Army during the war—a local recruiting supervisor organized a special program in February 1943. For an entire week, a group of "WAACs" carrying the flags of the Allied powers appeared on the Fox stage to lead a patriotic sing-along before Universal's feature film *Shadow of a Doubt*.<sup>43</sup> The Navy organized a similar show at the Fox Theatre in March 1944 for the opening of the Warner Bros. picture *Destination Tokyo*. Forty "singing seamen" of the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) detachment at the Atlanta Naval Air Base appeared on stage for a week. According to publicity material, the WAVES sought girls from the Atlanta area to replace shore jobs left vacant by men serving overseas. Hoping to inspire young women in the Fox Theatre audience to volunteer, they installed a temporary recruiting booth in the lobby.<sup>44</sup>

The most spectacular of all military celebrations took place in August of 1943 for the world premiere of the Warner Bros. musical *This Is the Army*. Originally, a special premiere was planned to raise money for the Army Emergency Relief fund, but plans quickly escalated to stage what newspapers predicted would be "the biggest screen event

---

<sup>42</sup> "Navy Recruits to Take Oath by Radio Today," *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 June 1942; "55 Take Navy Oath on Theater Stages Here as 'Avengers,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 June 1942.

<sup>43</sup> "WAAC 'Show' Is Set at Fox Monday Night," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 February 1943.

<sup>44</sup> "Forty Singing Seamen Appear With Fox Picture," *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 March 1944.

in all the city's history, not even excepting that 'Gone With the Wind' premiere."<sup>45</sup>

Organizers planned military exhibitions all over the city, musical performances at city parks and in front of the Fox Theatre, a parade down Peachtree Street, and a spectacular film premiere complete with a live stage show and musical performance. With the help of a massive publicity campaign, the show attracted a capacity audience to the Thursday premiere, with thousands more attending the parade and shows earlier in the day.

The festivities began on the previous evening with a Fort Oglethorpe WAC band concert at Hurt Park. On the next day, Thursday the 26<sup>th</sup>, the Army Air Force conducted a flying exhibition featuring bombers and other planes over Piedmont Park. The parade, which began at the intersection of Peachtree and Baker Street at 11 a.m., was an impressive military spectacle featuring armored cars and tanks of the 791<sup>st</sup> Military Police Battalion, a weapons carrier unit, various mounted guns, a horse unit, the Fort Oglethorpe WAC band, the Tuskegee Air Field band, the Navy band from the Atlanta Naval Air Base, the Lawson general hospital drum and bugle corps, the State Guard band, two hundred paratroopers from Ft. Benning, marching WACS, WAVES, SPARS (members of the Coast Guard Women's Reserve), Red Cross and AWVS (American Women's Volunteer Services) representatives, Army nurses, and Legionnaires and disabled veterans of the First World War. As the parade reached its terminus in front of the Fox Theatre, revelers enjoyed further musical accompaniment in "sweat-wet heat" until the theater doors opened at 7 p.m.<sup>46</sup> Two hundred colored floodlights, which the *Constitution* proclaimed the "greatest display of outdoor lighting 'ever seen in the

---

<sup>45</sup> "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 August 1943.

<sup>46</sup> "This Is Army' Premiere to Attract 5,000," *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 August 1943.

south,” flashed beams of red, white, and blue light across the night sky. As Atlanta and Military Police attempted to keep the Fox entrance clear for the arrival of celebrities and military dignitaries, the throng took in a one-hour musical performance by the various bands of the parade and the Georgia Tech “singing platoon.” The crowd was so large that it even spilled onto the porch of the Georgian Terrace Hotel across the street.<sup>47</sup> The festivities eventually moved inside as the film premiere drew closer.

*This Is the Army* was a star-studded musical, adapted from Ira Berlin’s popular Broadway show, but the glitz and glamour of the film paled in comparison to the spectacular stage show. The excitement was palpable as the lucky five thousand attendees streamed into the Fox, some pulled aside by radio personality Mike Benton and asked to give their impressions of the gala to the listening audience. On the stage the audience saw dignitaries such as Governor Ellis Arnall, Mayor William Hartsfield, and several high-ranking military officials. The on-stage festivities included further military pageantry and patriotic musical performances before the feature film began. From the orchestra pit, the WAC band played a musical tribute to the mothers of young men in the service, the Ft. McPherson band followed with battle songs from the First World War, and finally two buglers—one on stage and the other in the balcony—played a somber rendition of “Taps” in memory of those who had perished in combat. After this moving ceremony the stage filled with uniformed men and women surrounding a huge American flag to sing the Star-Spangled Banner along with the standing audience.<sup>48</sup> Finally, after a full day of pageantry and spectacular entertainment, the lights dimmed and the film

---

<sup>47</sup> “Army Show Yields \$14,000 for Relief,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 August 1943.

<sup>48</sup> “‘This Is Army’ Premiere to Attract 5,000,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 August 1943.

began. The premiere raised about \$14,000 for the Army Emergency Relief Fund.<sup>49</sup> At the time, it was spoken of as one of the grandest events in Atlanta history; Mayor Hartsfield told several associates that it had “all the glamour and glitter of the famous Gone With The Wind Premiere. Only this time the stars were all in uniform.”<sup>50</sup>

One of Hollywood’s most significant contributions to the war effort was the promotion and sale of war bonds. Government savings bonds had been available as a form of investment since 1935, but in 1941 the new Series E bonds were marketed as “defense bonds” and “war bonds.” President Roosevelt and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. knew that bonds could help finance the cost of military procurement and help control inflation, but they also understood the psychological impact of giving Americans a financial stake in the war. John Blum writes that Morgenthau wanted “to use *bonds* to sell the *war*, rather than *vice versa*.” Thus, the aim of the bond campaign was to capture as wide an audience as possible, taking an approach that was “pluralistic and democratic in taste and spirit. [Morgenthau’s] sales staff appealed to the taste of a national audience, often by utilizing Hollywood’s most popular... performers.” Because films had the potential to reach such a large and socially disparate audience at once, the film industry was crucial in “selling the war” through bonds.<sup>51</sup>

It seemed natural that the Fox and other movie theaters would erect bond booths. Feature films, shorts, and newsreels regularly reminded viewers of the importance of

---

<sup>49</sup> “Army Show Yields \$14,000 for Relief.”

<sup>50</sup> Mayor William Hartsfield to Major Charles M. Ford, 27 August 1943 and Mayor William Hartsfield to Private Cecil Cauthen, 27 August 1943, William Hartsfield Collection, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>51</sup> Blum, *V Was For Victory*, 17.

investing in war bonds. The appearance of the Minuteman logo on screen at the end of feature films reminded patrons that bonds were available in the theater lobby.<sup>52</sup> Even the animated shorts got in on the act. Some scenes reminded viewers to buy war bonds, while others like the Warner Bros. short *Any Bonds Today?*, featuring Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, and Elmer Fudd, were created specifically to encourage the sale of bonds.<sup>53</sup> The Fox Theatre entrance prominently featured a bond booth throughout the war where patrons could buy their stake in the war effort. Management also planned special bond promotions, contests, or “bond premieres” in which a war bond served as admission in place of a box office ticket. Several such premieres were held throughout the war at the major downtown Atlanta theaters, with the Fox, Loew’s Grand, and the Paramount each hosting at least one.

The Fox hosted its first bond premiere in September of 1942 for the release of Paramount’s *Wake Island*. In order to gain admission to the show, Atlantans were required to purchase a war bond of \$25, \$100, or \$1000 value from designated booths staffed by members of the American Women’s Volunteer Services. Newspaper reports described a moving scene on stage before the feature presentation: “[W]ith the premiere showing [was] the presentation of a set of colors to the Wake Island Detachment of the Marine Service League, [an] organization of veteran Leathernecks of the last war.” A color guard of young Marines stationed in Atlanta then presented the colors to the wife of a Marine officer who was captured at Wake Island. The premiere exceeded its original

---

<sup>52</sup> Doherty, *Projections of War*, 82.

<sup>53</sup> Shull and Wilt, *Doing Their Bit*, 100-101.

bond sales goal of \$700,000, ultimately raising \$759,000 in bonds for the premiere.<sup>54</sup>

The planning and execution of the event combined Atlanta exhibitors' flair for the dramatic with master salesmanship. Fox management, though, found other creative ways to sell bonds. For example, the Fox sponsored a newspaper bond contest in conjunction with the 1942 premiere of the Warner Bros. picture *Air Force*, directed by Howard Hawks. Contestants were required to answer three trivia questions per day published in the *Constitution* for a week, and at the end of the week were required to write in less than 100 words "why every loyal American citizen should buy, buy, buy more War Bonds." Each day, a silhouette of a B-17 Flying Fortress was published which contestants used to identify specific parts of the plane for trivia questions. Other questions tested knowledge of military heroes and Air Force-related trivia. At the end of the week, the winner received passes to the film and a war bond of their own.<sup>55</sup> By creatively marketing the sale of bonds, Fox management and film exhibitors across the country provided a significant financial contribution to the war effort.

Despite the overwhelming popularity of motion pictures during World War II, the Fox and other Atlanta theaters had to overcome significant wartime obstacles. Rationing, shortages, threat of enemy attack, and blackouts were ever-present disruptions in Atlanta during the war, and all businesses—not just movie theaters—needed to adapt to an unstable situation. Although the Fox and the other Peachtree movie theaters prospered

---

<sup>54</sup> "'Wake Island' Bond Tickets Hit \$700,000," *Atlanta Constitution*, 17 September 1942; "Atlantans Pay \$759,000 To See Premiere," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 September 1942.

<sup>55</sup> "Bonds, Stamps Offered in 'Air Force' Contest," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 April 1943.

during the war, home front conditions took their toll early on. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, nightly blackouts and general uneasiness about the global situation affected business at all the Atlanta movie theaters. In the summer of 1941 a reporter lamented, “Atlanta’s nightly blackouts are playing havoc with the city’s entertainment business. Downtown streets are deserted. Window shopping is impossible. Theater fronts appear dark. Only lights enough to announce the name of the program are in evidence.” Shortly after Pearl Harbor, theater owners still complained of lower box office numbers.<sup>56</sup>

Even before December 7, 1941, civilian defense officials frequently warned Atlantans that the city was vulnerable to enemy bombing raids. Consequently, blackouts and air raid drills were conducted on a regular basis. The nightly blackouts created disruptions throughout the city, but after an initial hiccup around the time of the Pearl Harbor attack the theaters saw no major decline in attendance. Movies, in fact, seemed a perfect way to pass the time during blackout drills. Rather than confining themselves to their homes, turning down the lights, and drawing the curtains, Atlantans could instead go to the Fox take in an affordable and uninterrupted evening of entertainment. Civilian Defense officials encouraged theater attendance, as the programs inside ensured that fewer people would be out on the streets during drills or blackouts.<sup>57</sup> While defense measures initially affected downtown business, attendance at the Fox steadily increased after the New Year in 1942. After Atlanta’s blacked-out air raid drill in late February, downtown movie houses reported better business than usual. The marquees were dark

---

<sup>56</sup> “Shadows and Substance,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 June 1941.

<sup>57</sup> “Blackout Stage Set; Rehearsal Slated Tonight,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 February 1942.

and window displays were covered, but the show went on as usual inside. According to reports, “the audiences settled down comfortably to view the performances, indifferent to what was going on in the streets outside.”<sup>58</sup> By the end of 1943, theaters were “doing close to capacity” while the night clubs were “trying to hold the walls together to accommodate the crowds.”<sup>59</sup> Later blackouts and brownouts further curtailed the use of outdoor lighting, but failed to dent downtown theater business.

The watershed moments of the Second World War—Pearl Harbor, the invasion of Normandy, the death of President Roosevelt, V-E Day and V-J Day—were emotional occasions on the home front. For example, churches swelled after the Pearl Harbor attack, and on D-Day people prayed in mass numbers. The Fox Theatre felt the effects of these watershed moments as well. The death of President Roosevelt in 1945 hit the city particularly hard given his strong relationship with the people of Georgia. Roosevelt passed away at the Little White House in Warm Springs on April 12, 1945; on the following morning, the president’s body departed by train from his adopted second home en route to the nation’s capital. Just as thousands of Atlantans had gathered outside Terminal Station to welcome Roosevelt during the 1932 presidential campaign, thousands more bid him farewell thirteen years later when his funeral train passed through on its way to Washington, D.C.<sup>60</sup> As a sign of respect, Atlanta night clubs closed their doors on the night of April 12, and remained closed the following day. Box office numbers at the downtown theaters hit rock bottom that night, and the mood on the street

---

<sup>58</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 February 1942.

<sup>59</sup> “Backstage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 December 1943.

<sup>60</sup> Crater, *World War II in Atlanta*, 29, 41.

was one of shock, despair, and uncertainty.<sup>61</sup> In addition to closing their doors for the entire following day, theaters all over the city stayed dark until 6 p.m. on April 14, and paused their screen programs the next day for the funeral services.<sup>62</sup>

The death of President Roosevelt was a massive blow to the American psyche, but as April 1945 came to an end the mood quickly changed to one of anticipation. Allied forces approached Berlin, and as Atlantans anticipated victory in Europe several false peace stories circulated. One particularly strong rumor spread on the night of April 28, as the *Constitution* recounted the next day:

The peace report, which later proved to be false, threw Peachtree street's fun spots into a dither. The Rhodes and Rialto theaters turned their audiences out into the overcrowded streets. More than 5,000 fun seekers arrived at the city's night spots only to find that the doors were locked and signs reading: 'Closed—V-E Day' were hanging outside. The other movie houses downtown had their instructions to halt their pictures and Atlanta pastors of all faiths waited in the lobbies for word to take the stage and utter a prayer that the peace in the Pacific was not far off.<sup>63</sup>

Celebrations were premature, but victory in Europe finally came several days later. The city resisted the urge to celebrate excessively after the false alarm. To keep Atlantans focused on victory over Japan, city officials announced that no formal celebrations would take place on V-E Day. When Japan surrendered months later in August, however,

---

<sup>61</sup> "City Night Clubs Close Early as Possible," *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 April 1945.

<sup>62</sup> "Atlanta Amusements and Stores to Close Today out of Respect," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 April 1945.

<sup>63</sup> "Night Spots, Restaurants Close on False Peace Story," *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 April 1945.

100,000 people made their way to Peachtree Street's theater district in jubilant celebration. Inside the Fox Theatre the audience met the news of the surrender with cheering, screaming and rejoicing. Some patrons rushed outside crying. The film programs continued into the night of August 14, but ushers asked would-be revelers to check their horns and noisemakers at the door to protect the program from interruption.<sup>64</sup> With the massive celebrations taking place into the night on Peachtree, the crowd for the Fox's feature film of the week, Twentieth Century-Fox's *Nob Hill*, was much lighter than usual.

Even after the euphoria of V-J Day, the Fox continued its role as an events center. In conjunction with Armistice Day and the "Victory Loan" in November of 1945, the Fox held another bond premiere to promote the sale of Victory Bonds. The special stage program that preceded the feature presentation of *The Dolly Sisters* bore a great resemblance to other bond premieres and relief benefits during the war. The audience saw a live performance of the Fort McPherson band, comedy teams, and the Georgia Tech glee club, mirroring the military pageantry of previous galas.<sup>65</sup> Although the war was over, the Fox reprised its role once more as a site of patriotic contribution, military pageantry, and Hollywood glitz and glamour. The festivities looked so familiar that one could be forgiven for thinking it was still the year 1943. It would be a last hurrah of sorts for the Fox Theatre, which had never enjoyed a more central role in Atlanta culture than it did during World War II.

---

<sup>64</sup> "City Thunders Into Postwar Era," *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 August 1945.

<sup>65</sup> "Fox Victory Loan Show Promises to Pack 'Em In," *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 November 1945.

While the Fox and the city of Atlanta followed similar historical trajectories throughout the twentieth century, the years between 1940 and 1945 represent the first point at which their fortunes became inextricably linked. World War II was a turning point for both Atlanta and the Fox Theatre; in the course of mobilizing, the metropolitan area expanded its manufacturing base, attracted migrants from all over the Southeast and beyond, and became a recreational destination for young soldiers and workers. The vibrant entertainment district on Peachtree Street was a natural destination for these young people, and it became an integral part of Atlanta. It is telling that the largest public celebrations on V-J Day occurred not in Piedmont Park or at the Memorial Auditorium, but rather in the theater district on Peachtree Street. What had only twenty or thirty years before been one of the quietest and most exclusive residential avenues in Atlanta was now one of the central public spaces in the city, with the Fox as one of its anchors.

Until the war years, the Fox had been only a symbol or representation of Atlanta's growth and vitality. In 1929, the theater was the culmination of a fast and furious downtown building spree, perfectly capturing Atlanta's spirit of progress and boosterism during the 1920s. In the following decade, the city and the theater teetered simultaneously but independently on the brink of collapse during the Great Depression; with responsible management, however, both were operating in the black by the end of the 1930s. During World War II, however, the Fox and Atlanta shared the benefits of war mobilization and migration, with each entity acting as an important contributor to the other's success. The Fox had Atlanta's influx of youthful energy and disposable income combined with the ascendancy of Hollywood to thank for its increased box office

numbers and overall success. At the same time, the city of Atlanta benefited from the Fox's utility as an events venue and wartime informational center. The 1943 premiere of *This Is the Army* is an apt demonstration of the close tie between the wartime history of the Fox and of Atlanta. The blend of Hollywood glitz and glamour with military pageantry and patriotic celebration included special presentations all over the city—including a parade down Peachtree, aerial demonstrations over city parks, and musical performances at multiple venues—with the culmination of the festivities occurring at the Fox Theatre. The Fox was now more than Atlanta's finest movie theater; it was a central part of the city's cultural life.

Thus, the story for both the Fox Theatre and the city of Atlanta during the Second World War was one of overall success and prosperity. The war brought thousands of new people to the city, and the economic growth that followed would enable Atlanta's postwar population and housing boom. Levels of consumption rose dramatically during the war, and continued to rise after 1945. Prosperity, however, was a double-edged sword. Returning soldiers created a need for quickly built and affordable housing, creating a temporary housing crisis in 1946. Atlanta's deep reliance upon automobile transportation, like other large American cities, would cause most of the ensuing housing development to occur along existing or newly built multilane highways, pulling population from the core of the city into the suburban outskirts. This also brought increased business to neighborhood movie houses that had access only to second-run features, but were a stone's throw away from new suburban communities. Although the future for both Atlanta and the Fox Theatre appeared promising at the end of the war, a

combination of developments in the city and the film industry soon made it clear that a new postwar order awaited.

## Chapter 5

### **“Song of the South,” CinemaScope, and Suburbia: Atlanta and the Fox During the Postwar Years**

Atlanta roared into the postwar era on a wave of good feelings and free spending. Revelers packed the streets, nighttime establishments, and movie theaters on New Year’s Eve 1945 to celebrate the first peacetime holiday season in five years. Headlines in the New Year’s Day edition of the *Constitution* declared, “Free Spending Welcomes First Postwar Year.” The city brimmed with energy and the streets were packed with jubilant Atlanta residents who made up for years of wartime restraint by making merry to the fullest. “Horns, favors and a plate of ham and eggs were served up at \$6.20 per in most of the city’s entertainment emporiums, while thousands upon thousands jammed the box offices of the Fox, Loew’s Grand and Roxy theaters for a glimpse of the midnight screen fare,” reported the *Constitution*.<sup>1</sup> With the city’s substantial growth during the war years, it seemed that the postwar era held limitless possibilities for Atlanta. Although the optimism of late 1945 and early 1946 gave way to controversy and unrest later in the year, there was little question that the wartime boom had set the stage for further postwar expansion. The city’s prospects seemed bright.

1946 was also a big year for the Fox Theatre and the motion picture industry. It was Hollywood’s most profitable year in the postwar era, with motion picture admissions counting for 19.6 percent of total recreation expenditures nationwide. Aggregate profits

---

<sup>1</sup> “Free Spending Welcomes First Postwar Year,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 January 1946.

for all of the motion picture studios and corporations climbed to \$356 million in 1946, and theaters, in particular, counted for almost 93 percent of investment in the motion picture industry nationwide. Thus, the Fox and other movie theaters around the country rode the momentum of the war years well into 1946, generating unprecedented levels of revenue from 79 million paying customers at the box office every week. Theaters further benefited from increased postwar incomes while other recreational items and consumer goods were still in short supply.<sup>2</sup> Significant changes in the structure of the film industry loomed on the horizon, but the gains during and shortly after World War II suggested that it had never been healthier.

In spite of the immediate successes of 1946, great obstacles confronted the Fox during the postwar years. Major changes occurred to the structure of the film industry due to a 1948 Supreme Court antitrust case decision. The decision struck down the system of runs, zones, and clearances that had for years favored large urban theaters, and forced the major Hollywood studios to divest themselves of their theater chains. The downtown theaters in Atlanta and elsewhere, which had previously enjoyed exclusive rights to first-run films, lost an important competitive advantage over suburban or neighborhood theaters. Furthermore, the advent of television in the late 1940s provided additional competition for downtown movie theaters. Most importantly, though, Atlanta's amazing postwar growth—both residential and commercial—occurred primarily in the suburbs, as young, affluent, and upwardly mobile white families moved away from the city's core and into new suburban housing developments. Thus, the years between 1946 and 1960 presented a multitude of obstacles to the Fox and Atlanta's other

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis* (Berkeley, Ca.: Bureau of Business and Economic Research, 1960), 10.

downtown theaters that, over the course of fifteen years, took their toll on business, popularity, and prestige. While still performing adequately at the box office, the Fox Theatre suffered from continually diminishing audiences during the 1950s. Furthermore, the importance of the Fox as a civic events center declined in peacetime—movies and movie theaters were no longer required to serve their wartime roles as informational centers or safe havens. Hollywood studios and local theater management took various measures to combat the falling box office numbers of the postwar years, but these measures failed to prevent the Fox Theatre’s gradual decline.

In the spirit of rebirth and renewal that accompanied the first year of the postwar era, the Fox opened the year 1946 with a minor aesthetic update. Shortly after the end of the war, William Jenkins (Arthur Lucas had passed away during the war) commissioned a renowned theater architect from New York named Hal Pereira to make a few minor cosmetic adjustments and restorations in the entrance arcade, lobby, and first floor street entrance shops.<sup>3</sup> With an updated look and a fresh coat of paint, the rejuvenated Fox Theatre broke box office records several times in 1946. Paramount’s *Going My Way*, a musical starring Bing Crosby had set the previous attendance mark in late 1945, while three films set new records in the first two months of 1946. By the end of February, Twentieth Century-Fox’s *Leave Her To Heaven* had broken the record set by *Going My Way*, and Paramount’s *The Lost Weekend* subsequently surpassed that mark. RKO’s *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, starring Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman, was on track by the end of February to set the Fox Theatre’s third new box office record in the first half of 1946,

---

<sup>3</sup> Butcher, “The Fabulous Fox,” 28.

causing such a massive turnout that manager Tommy Read publicly asked Atlantans to attend matinees instead of evening shows if possible.<sup>4</sup> The Fox's strong run continued through the second half of 1946. Not even a summer railroad strike, which interrupted the shipment of film reels to the Southeast, could derail the theater's momentum. A backlog of reels at the local exchange allowed the city's first-run theaters to remain open when others around the Southeast struggled to obtain films.<sup>5</sup> Very little seemed capable of disrupting the strong run of the Fox and other downtown theaters, as they played to packed houses in the late spring and early summer. They continued to ride wartime momentum while newer postwar amusements and entertainment options (like television, shopping malls, and drive-in theaters) had yet to gain ascendancy.

Although the year began brightly at the Fox Theatre, 1946 was a turbulent year for the city of Atlanta. In the immediate aftermath of the war, swarms of returning veterans exacerbated an already existing housing shortage. The housing crunch was particularly difficult on black veterans, who returned to overcrowded and decaying housing conditions in their neighborhoods. Upwardly mobile black families and veterans began to move into previously all-white neighborhoods, turning them into so-called "transitional neighborhoods," raising the ire of white residents and creating the most racially tense atmosphere in the city since the 1906 riots.<sup>6</sup> Black families moving into these neighborhoods were frequently harassed, intimidated, and sometimes assaulted by white Atlantans who wished to keep the city residentially segregated. During the summer

---

<sup>4</sup> "'Bells' Sets Box Office Record at Fox," *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 February 1946.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Jones, "Backlogs of New Films Will Keep City Shows Open," *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 May 1946.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 42-43.

and fall of 1946 a neo-fascist white supremacy group calling itself “the Columbians” carried out a brief but fierce campaign of racial intimidation in transitional neighborhoods. Most Columbians were frustrated working-class white men, many of them veterans who competed with black Atlantans for jobs in the west side cotton mills or who were unemployed.<sup>7</sup> Although their numbers were small—at the most their ranks numbered about five hundred during the summer of 1946—they were effective in intimidating black families through violence and harassment in their prime area of activity, the neighborhoods surrounding the overcrowded Ashby Street region on the west side.<sup>8</sup> Assaults on black pedestrians were carried out with increasing frequency and violence as the summer gave way to fall. In late October, the police responded to a distress call just in time to find a badly beaten black man being held at gunpoint by three Columbians in the back seat of a car.<sup>9</sup> Several members of the group had even stockpiled dynamite in hopes of blowing up Savannah’s municipal auditorium during an African American Baptist convention.<sup>10</sup> Although were quickly snuffed out by the authorities and disappeared from the streets of Atlanta by the end of 1947, the Columbians’ short reign of terror on Atlanta’s west side was representative of a wider anxiety and uncertainty over the postwar social order. Along with similar violence in the transitional neighborhood of Mozley Park, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, the heavy presence of Klan members in the Atlanta Police Department, and African American protests for

---

<sup>7</sup> Steven Weisenburger, “The Columbians: A Chapter of Racial Hatred from the Post-World War II South.” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 4 (November 2003), 825.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 822.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 845.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 846.

greater involvement in the political process made 1946 one of the most racially-tense years in Atlanta history.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the unease and tumult of 1946, the Fox Theatre enjoyed a prosperous summer season and carried its momentum into the autumn, which culminated in the November premiere of Walt Disney's *Song of the South*, undoubtedly the biggest moment in the Fox's history as a movie palace. In a sense, the *Song of the South* was the *Gone With the Wind* premiere that the Fox, unquestionably Atlanta's largest, most magnificent, and most prestigious theater, should have hosted in 1939. As discussed in Chapter 3, Mayor William Hartsfield lobbied hard for MGM studios to hold the *Gone With the Wind* premiere in Atlanta, initially proposing the Fox as an ideal venue for the gala. Because MGM was a subsidiary of Loew's Incorporated, however, there was no possible way the event would be held anywhere other than the studio's own Loew's Grand Theatre, the capacity of which was less than half that of the Fox. Not only was the most famous event in Atlanta during the twentieth century not held at its biggest theater—the Fox was but a spectator of the premiere night parade that started from the Georgian Terrace Hotel—but it was instead held at one of its rival downtown palaces. The Fox had held other premiere events before—the 1943 premiere of *This Is The Army* was nearly as extravagant an affair as *Gone With The Wind*—but it was also one of several similar bond premiere and relief benefits held at downtown theaters throughout the war. Furthermore, it was only the Southeastern premiere, not the world premiere, of the film. In November 1946, however, Hartsfield's lobbying for the Fox Theatre paid off when he convinced RKO and Walt Disney to hold the world premiere of *Song of The*

---

<sup>11</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 47.

*South* at Atlanta's largest theater. The Fox finally had its very own nationally publicized world premiere event. While not as fondly remembered or famous worldwide as the *Gone With The Wind* premiere, it was still an event upon which all eyes and ears around the country were focused. The weeklong event was undoubtedly the pinnacle of the Fox's existence as a movie theater.

*Song of the South* was created from the famous "Uncle Remus" stories originally written by Georgia native and turn-of-the-century editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Joel Chandler Harris. While working on a plantation during his youth, Harris collected and recorded the various stories told to him by slaves. When he published these stories in the *Constitution* and a series of books between 1880 and 1918 (some were published posthumously after his death in 1908), Harris amalgamated his various slave storytellers into one central narrator, Uncle Remus. Uncle Remus's tales of recurring characters Br'er Rabbit, Br'er Fox, and Br'er Bear were creatively adapted to the big screen by Walt Disney in 1946, in what was one of the most technically intriguing films in years—Disney combined live action footage with animated characters to create a distinctive world for the characters of Harris's stories. The mostly live-action sequences in *Song of the South* serve as a framing device in which the elderly Uncle Remus introduces the tales to a young white boy named Johnny, while the animated portions take up the introductions from Uncle Remus and depict the stories themselves. This technical aspect of the film created buzz amongst both critics and the general public, and the local pride of Atlantans for Harris raised the anticipation to fever pitch.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Bernstein, "Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony: *Song of the South* and Race Relations in 1946 Atlanta," *Film History* 8, no. 2 (1996): 222.

Although the selection of Atlanta as the site of the world premiere seemed a natural one, Hartsfield had to lobby hard for the premiere. According to an associate of Disney, the mayor bombarded the studio with stacks of mail recommending the city and the Fox Theatre, with two strong sponsorship bids helping to tip the balance in Atlanta's favor. The Atlanta Junior League and the Uncle Remus Memorial Association, which maintained Harris's preserved west side home named the "Wren's Nest," co-sponsored the premiere.<sup>13</sup> Planning began in the summer, and what had begun as a rather conventional film premiere ballooned into an opulent celebration of Southernhood. William Jenkins was personally involved in the planning process, putting the final touches on the gala schedule in the month of July. The city was eager with anticipation when the premiere date of November 12 was set (the *Atlanta Constitution* had mistakenly announced a date of November 13 in August). Mayor Hartsfield and Governor Arnall both stated their desire to "make this event one of not only State but national importance." A headline in the *Constitution* even declared, "Scarlett Finds a Rival," suggesting that the event would compare in size and grandeur to the *Gone With the Wind* premiere.<sup>14</sup>

The premiere sought to raise money for the Egleston Children's Hospital and the Junior League's Speech School, while also raising funds for the refurbishing of the Wren's Nest. Because the event spanned several days, Walt Disney, his wife, and many of his Hollywood colleagues traveled to Atlanta days before to participate in the festivities. Pinto Colvig, the voice of Disney characters Dopey and Pluto, and Clarence

---

<sup>13</sup> Paul Jones, "Atlanta Selected for Premiere of Disney's 'Uncle Remus' Movie" *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 April 1946; Bernstein, "Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony," 219.

<sup>14</sup> "Tale of Uncle Remus to Have Its Premiere on Fox Screen Nov. 13," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 August 1946.

Nash, the voice of Donald Duck, visited schools and the children's hospital after arriving in town, and Disney was the guest of honor at various receptions and luncheons. Because the festivities coincided with the Armistice Day holiday, the annual parade down Peachtree Street took on a Disney flavor. Several floats in the parade depicted scenes from *Song of the South*, and were included in honor of Disney's wartime contributions to the Armed Forces. After the parade, Walt Disney toured the city along with Mayor Hartsfield, visiting various points of interest.<sup>15</sup> He was accompanied at most of the festivities by his wife, Colvig, Nash, Ruth Warrick, and child stars Luana Patten and Bobby Driscoll. Conspicuously absent from the proceedings were the black stars of the film, James Baskett, Hattie McDaniel, and Glen Leedy. Their absence only received a cursory mention from the mainstream news media.<sup>16</sup>

The premiere took place on a chilly Tuesday night. Tickets for white audience members cost between \$1.25 and \$7.50, with scalpers getting up to \$25 per ticket, while black audience members paid 60 cents to view the festivities from the gallery. White patrons were allowed into the Fox lobby at 7:30 p.m., where Junior League members clad in antebellum costumes greeted them and sold souvenir programs. The stage program began at 9 p.m. when the hosts of the "Vox Pop" radio show introduced Walt Disney and his stable of voice actors. Disney himself greeted the crowd in his Mickey Mouse voice with, "How are you-all?" drawing cheers and applause from the five thousand in attendance. The program followed with an appearance by Joel Chandler Harris, Jr. who regaled the audience with memories of his father from the stage, followed by two young

---

<sup>15</sup> "Atlanta Is Set for Dazzling 'Remus' Premiere Nov. 12," *Atlanta Constitution*, 3 November 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Bernstein, "Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony," 226.

girls who each recited their favorite Uncle Remus story, and finally with an audience contest. The proceedings were broadcast nationwide by CBS radio until the lights dimmed and the screen presentation began at 9:30 p.m. Dignitaries, politicians, stars, and audience members alike roared with applause throughout the movie. The Fox audience particularly enjoyed Baskett's performance as Uncle Remus, cheering several times at his appearance on screen. Once the film was over, Disney and other dignitaries returned to the stage to roaring applause.<sup>17</sup>

Disney had been nervous all evening. He, of course, made the requisite public appearances leading up to the screen presentation of *Song of the South*, but did not stay at the Fox for long. He never took his reserved seat in the orchestra section, and managed to quietly slip backstage before the film began. Watching from behind a curtain, Disney smoked several cigarettes before leaving through the stage entrance and making his way across the street to the Georgian Terrace Hotel, joining his wife and several close friends. In the hotel lobby, the group was mostly silent while Disney bit his fingernails, smoked, and paced across the floor. "I just can't stand to see it," he told newspaper reporters a few days before the premiere. "It hurts me when they laugh at something I think is serious, and it hurts when they don't laugh at something I think is funny. So I just can't stand to see it."<sup>18</sup> As the film neared completion across the street, Disney was notified and then snuck back into the Fox via the same stage door through which he had exited two hours before. When the curtains rolled back for a post-movie stage appearance

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 228-229.

<sup>18</sup> "Disney 'Sees' Premiere From Hotel," *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 November 1946.

Disney appeared never to have left and wore his first genuinely relaxed smile of the evening.

While *Song of the South* was enthusiastically received by the premiere audience, and was extremely successful at the box office, the response of national critics and the local black community was mixed. National critics lambasted the depiction of black characters as insulting and insensitive. One *New Yorker* critic called the film “the purest sheepdip about happy days on the old plantation.”<sup>19</sup> Although *Song of the South* is technically set in the post-Civil War South, Disney chose to portray white-black relationships in such a paternalistic fashion that one could easily mistake the film as being set in the antebellum South. Matthew Bernstein argues that Disney resisted calls for Uncle Remus and other black characters to be given “some humanity, depth and a sense of the pain of their existence in the antebellum South.” Instead, he “opted for a cinematically-coded evocation of the plantation setting that sought to smooth over any such considerations in a nostalgic haze.”<sup>20</sup> In Atlanta’s tense racial atmosphere of 1946, this harkening to a mythical past may have calmed or reassured white audience members anxious about the postwar developments in race relations.

This decision angered the local black community, but the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP decided against a formal protest of the premiere. Bernstein contends that this ambivalent response was due to the black community’s preoccupation with more serious matters in late 1946—the resurgence of racial violence and lynchings in nearby Walton County; the visible presence of Klansmen in the Atlanta Police Department; the violent racial attacks of the Columbians; and the public statements of gubernatorial candidate

---

<sup>19</sup> Qtd. In Bernstein, “Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony,” 220.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

Eugene Talmadge (who had won the October election but died before taking office), who vowed to defy a 1944 Supreme Court ruling which “struck down the system of white primary elections by which blacks could only vote for candidates pre-selected by whites.”<sup>21</sup> Black newspaper coverage focused almost entirely on these issues rather than the *Song of the South* premiere at the Fox. The *Atlanta Daily World*’s only coverage of the premiere or the movie itself included news wire stories reporting various denunciations of the film from national sources weeks after opening night.<sup>22</sup> Because of the more pressing matters facing Atlanta’s black community, the *Song of the South* premiere barely registered amongst its civil rights activists. Fox Theatre management, the Junior League, and the Uncle Remus Memorial Association were undoubtedly relieved that no protest was ever scheduled, and that negative attention was kept to a minimum.

Despite the murmurs from the national press and the African American community, the *Song of the South* premiere at the Fox represented the high point of the theater’s postwar history. Given the controversial nature of the film, the potential existed for controversy or protest. However, while the local black community expressed discontent with the depictions of African American characters in Disney’s film, the tense racial climate of immediate postwar Atlanta and the racial violence in and around the city made those concerns seem trivial. This left white Atlanta and the mainstream media to celebrate the premiere of the *Song of the South* without guilt or incident. As the host of this celebration of Southernhood, and having ridden the wave of wartime popularity into late 1946, the Fox Theatre had reached the apex of its popularity and importance as a

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 228.

movie theater. In the years following the *Song of the South* premiere, the Fox and the surrounding area began a gradual postwar decline, but not without a final flourish. Before the massive suburban migration that started in the late 1940s in Atlanta and in major cities around the country, the Fox had become one of the most high-profile movie theaters in the country. Paul Jones, the *Constitution* film critic, even called the Fox “another Grauman’s Chinese [Theater],” the famous Los Angeles host of countless world premiere events.<sup>23</sup>

From the high point of the *Song of the South* premiere and Hollywood’s banner year of 1946, the Fox Theatre and the American film industry were forced to confront significant obstacles over the next fifteen years and beyond. An antitrust lawsuit against the major Hollywood studios, the advent of television, and rapid suburbanization were among the difficulties that the Fox and other downtown theaters across the country faced in the postwar period. When presented with these obstacles, the studios and theater managers responded in a variety of ways to keep theater patronage from severely declining, with mixed results. The first of these complications confronted the industry in the late 1940s—although it had been several years in coming—when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a suit brought against the major Hollywood studios by the Justice Department, *United States vs. Paramount, Inc., et. al.* The antitrust case challenged the basic structure of the Hollywood studio system, in which five major studios controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition arms of the industry. Originally filed by the Justice Department in 1938, the case was revived in 1944 and decided by the Supreme

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul Jones, “Backstage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 October 1946.

Court in May 1948, with several ramifications for the industry. Most importantly it forced the “Big Five” studios—Paramount, Loew’s-MGM, Warner Bros., RKO, and Twentieth Century-Fox—to divest themselves of their national theater chains and cancel any of their agreements with theater circuits (like Lucas and Jenkins, which was now named “Georgia Theatre Co.” and managed the Fox, Paramount, and Columbia Theatres in downtown Atlanta), thus breaking up the vertical integration that was a cornerstone of the Hollywood studio system. The process took time, however; the Big Five did not fully divest themselves of ownership or control of their theaters until 1954.<sup>24</sup>

Because Paramount and RKO were the first of the Big Five to sign consent decrees, they were treated with leniency. The reorganized production and distribution companies were eventually permitted to acquire theaters as long as the acquisitions did not impair competition. The old Paramount company, then, was dissolved and its assets were transferred to two new entities: Paramount Pictures Corporation and United Paramount Theatres—the latter merged with the American Broadcasting Company to form ABC-Paramount Theatres, Inc.<sup>25</sup> ABC-Paramount, along with Wilby-Kincey theaters (headed by the same Jack Wilby who operated the Fox for a brief period in the early 1930s after Fox Theatres Corporation pulled out of its lease agreement with Yaarab Temple) took over management of the Fox Theatre after 1951. Paramount-Public’s agreement with the Georgia Theatre Company was dissolved under the Supreme Court-mandated reorganization of Paramount, and the Wilby-Kincey era of the Fox’s history began with Noble Arnold appointed as theater manager. The Georgia Theatre Company,

---

<sup>24</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 274.

<sup>25</sup> Robert H. Stanley, *The Celluloid Empire: A History of the American Movie Industry* (New York: Hastings House, 1978), 135-36.

which continued to run smaller theaters around the state, still operated from its offices inside the Fox Theatre until 1970.

The *Paramount* decision immediately altered the way theaters bid for and obtained individual films. For years, under the Hollywood studio system (in place from 1930 to 1949), theaters and circuits owned or managed by one of the Big Five had first choice of new film rentals. In every city, a system of “runs,” “zones,” and “clearances” determined which theaters were allowed to bid on specific categories of films. Before the *Paramount* decision, according to Michael Conant, an “industry-wide combination fixed the run, clearance, and zone position of each theater. Every license contract between the theater and distributor stipulated the run, clearance, zone, and admission price.”<sup>26</sup> A particular theater was given its permanent run position based on “who operated the theater, its size and location, its previous run, and admission price.” In most cases, theaters received first-run films only when they were affiliated with a major circuit; the Fox, having been managed by Lucas & Jenkins in agreement with Paramount, was one such example. Furthermore, first-run theaters like the Fox were protected by zones and clearances that barred subsequent-run theaters from obtaining first-run rentals. Atlanta’s clearance was designated at 60 days (comparable to most cities, although some clearances were as long as 120 days), stipulating that films could not be shown at smaller subsequent-run theaters until 60 days after their first run. This system also designated downtown areas, where the largest theaters were located, as first-run zones. Thus, a film making its premiere appearance at the Fox Theatre, once completing its first run, was protected by the 60-day clearance, only after which could it be shown at a subsequent-run

---

<sup>26</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 61.

theater. While smaller theater owners argued that this 60-day clearance was a case of collusion between theaters and distributors, managers of the larger theaters saw it as a fair system. William Jenkins claimed that the system allowed subsequent-run theaters to capitalize on the large advertising budgets of first-run theaters like the Fox. He contended, “[T]he present clearance is equitable for the reason that if it were not for the clearance that the first run theatres secure they could not advertise their pictures to the extent which they are advertised now... If the clearance were any shorter then I think in a specific case like the Fox Theatre we probably wouldn’t be willing to spend some fifteen hundred or two thousand dollars in advertising an extraordinary picture.”<sup>27</sup>

The 60-day clearance allowed Atlanta’s first-run theaters to collect about 70 percent of all admissions for one film, an obvious competitive advantage over smaller neighborhood theaters.<sup>28</sup> With the *Paramount* decision, however, this competitive advantage was dissolved. The Supreme Court’s decision allowed larger numbers of subsequent-run theaters earlier access to first-run films and did away with the practice of block booking (in which theaters were forced to accept rentals as a multiple-film package, where studios often bundled poor films with more popular ones), but the *Paramount* decision failed to break the circuits into sufficiently small units.<sup>29</sup> In the wake of the decree, many large first-run theaters like the Fox and Loew’s Grand remained in a position of advantage, as smaller neighborhood theaters did not have the

---

<sup>27</sup> William Jenkins, Deposition in *Mion and Murray vs. Paramount Pictures, et. al.* 29 April 1946, Lucas and Jenkins Collection, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>28</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 68; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures* also provides an apt description of the studio system, but Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1986) is the most in-depth examination of the major studios, and of each studio’s role in the system.

<sup>29</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 219.

resources to bid against the major urban theaters. Thus, the *Paramount* ruling had a direct impact on the management of the Fox and other downtown theaters, but it did not significantly alter their day-to-day operation in the eyes of audiences, and did not affect the Fox's status as the city's premier movie house until years later.

Another problematic postwar development for the Fox was the advent of television, a threat that first presented itself only two years after the film industry's banner year of 1946. September 29, 1948 was designated "T-Day" in Atlanta, the first day of broadcast television in the city and in the entire south on WSB-TV, nicknamed "The Eyes of the South," a play on WSB radio's nickname "The Voice of the South."<sup>30</sup> Previous attempts at establishing an Atlanta television broadcast station had failed to yield permanent results—an unsuccessful bid for a developmental television license in 1931 was followed by a closed-circuit experimental broadcast from Rich's department store in 1939—but in December 1939, Ohio governor James Middleton Cox bought WSB radio and the *Atlanta Journal* newspaper, and was granted a license by the FCC for television broadcasting in January of 1948. Beginning on September 1, the *Journal* featured a page-one T-Day countdown to the 29<sup>th</sup> of the month. WSB generated further public interest in Atlanta through a series of closed-circuit television demonstrations at Rich's Department Store in August and September, including musical performance shows, man-on-the-street interview shows, fashion shows, marionette performances, and

---

<sup>30</sup> Ginger Rudeseal Carter, "WSB-TV, Atlanta: The 'Eyes of the South'" In *Television in America: Local Station History From Across the Nation* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997), 82; "Welcome South, Brother." *Fifty Years of Broadcasting at WSB, Atlanta, Georgia* (Atlanta: Cox Broadcasting, 1974). The call letters of WSB were colloquially said to stand for "Welcome South, Brother."

sports news broadcasts. These broadcasts served the dual-purpose of developing public interest in television and providing dry runs and practice for broadcasting crews.<sup>31</sup> Local television dealers estimated that between 750 and 1,000 sets were in operation throughout the city of Atlanta on the night of September 29, and they all agreed that the initial demand for television was significantly higher than expected.<sup>32</sup>

Movie theater managers in and around Atlanta were well aware of the threat posed by television. One exhibitor in Macon made the argument, along with others who feared the potential effects of television on box office numbers, that “people would not waste the time looking for a parking place and pay admission to see what they can see at home for nothing.” Paul Jones of the *Constitution*, however, was confident that such trepidation was unfounded. He argued that the film industry was “set on a solid foundation” in 1948, and that “one of its greatest trump cards is the fans’ desire to get away from home.” People would still want a night out, “a chance to wear that new dress or suit; to dress up and go elsewhere.” Jones even suggested that, based on a *Variety* poll of film exhibitors, most felt that the damage done by television would only be “temporary until the novelty wears off.” After that “we’ll [the film industry] digest it, just as we digested the competition of radio.”<sup>33</sup> The film industry made some interesting but short-lived attempts to absorb television technology in theaters nationwide. The famous Balaban & Katz theater chain in Chicago, for example, adopted television equipment in their theaters during the late 1940s. By 1951, however, B&K deemed the theater TV experiment a failure and removed the equipment from its theaters, and by 1953 theater

---

<sup>31</sup> Carter, “WSB-TV, Atlanta,” 83.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Jones, “Backstage.” *Atlanta Constitution*. 27 June 1948.

television had completely disappeared.<sup>34</sup> By the mid-1950s, the film industry gave up on absorbing television and instead tried to set its product apart from it with several groundbreaking film exhibition technology developments, discussed later in this chapter.

The significance of television's effect on the decline of theatrical moviegoing, especially early in the 1950s, is often overemphasized. Douglas Gomery argues that the "blame television" account rests on a faulty assumption of substitution, which contends that while television was not a perfect substitute for going to the movies, it was a cheaper and more convenient way to consume a narrative. A major problem with blaming television, however, is the fact that movie theater attendance around the country had begun a steady decline immediately after 1946, nearly five years before television had become a viable entertainment substitute for moviegoing.<sup>35</sup> Although WSB-TV began broadcasting in 1948, its entertainment programs were very limited, and the arrival of a second broadcast station, WAGA in the following year, still failed to capture a significant audience in Atlanta. A third station, WLTV, began broadcasting in the fall of 1951, but by the 1952 gubernatorial campaign, the first such race in Georgia's era of television, television was still considered by experts as only "an emerging force."<sup>36</sup> Atlanta adopted television enthusiastically, with the number of television sets in the Atlanta metropolitan area growing significantly from approximately 9,500 in 1949 to about 200,000 in May 1952, but it is worth noting that box office numbers had been on the decline since early

---

<sup>34</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 234.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Novotny, "The Impact of Television on Georgia, 1948-1952," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 91 no. 3 (Fall 2007), 339-340.

1947 (with the occasional spike in attendance).<sup>37</sup> Only in 1955, when a surge in nationwide television audiences and broadcaster profits occurred after years of substantial losses or only mild gains, could television be considered a real threat to the film industry.<sup>38</sup> By then, box office numbers had been on the decline for almost a decade, suggesting that other forces were at work.

The most significant factor in the gradual postwar decline of the Fox Theatre was the dizzying suburban growth of Atlanta in the late 1940s and 1950s. As part of the “Sun Belt,” Atlanta joined a band of southern cities stretching across the United States that experienced phenomenal growth in the years following World War II. These cities, including Atlanta, New Orleans, Miami, Tampa, Houston, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and San Diego amongst others, experienced a staggering 112.3 percent increase in population between 1940 and 1980, with Northern cities growing over the same period at a rate of only 41.9 percent.<sup>39</sup> The gap in growth rates represented a major migration of northern Americans to the Sun Belt that began during World War II and gained substantial momentum in the postwar years. In Atlanta, like other Sun Belt cities, this postwar growth took place almost entirely in the suburban areas surrounding the central business district. During the 1940s, Atlanta’s population within the corporate limits of the city grew by approximately 29,000 residents, a 9.6 percent increase. Over the same period, however, the population of the entire Atlanta metropolitan area grew by approximately

---

<sup>37</sup> “Atlanta Area Has 9,500 T.V. Sets,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 August 1949; Novotny, 339-40.

<sup>38</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Bradley R. Rice and Richard M. Bernard, “Introduction” in *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 1.

200,000 residents, a stunning 52 percent growth rate in only ten years.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the outlying suburbs of Atlanta gained approximately 170,000 residents during the war decade, and this figure would grow even more during the 1950s.

Shortly after World War II, new suburban housing developments sprouted around Atlanta with amazing frequency. Collier Heights on the northwestern edge of the city, for example, was built on land that had been undeveloped and unclaimed well into the 1940s. Immediately after the war, white Atlantans who were unable to find housing within the city began moving to this new community of modestly priced homes.<sup>41</sup> Growth into surrounding counties outside of Fulton County began as new residents swarmed first into DeKalb County, and then into Cobb County. DeKalb, a county already populated with middle-class white neighborhoods and towns like Avondale Estates and Stone Mountain at the beginning of the war, experienced significant growth in the adjoining cities of Chamblee and Doraville in the late 1940s. In 1947, General Motors opened a large assembly plant in Doraville, attracting new residents and employees, and stimulating the construction of other factories, warehouses, and industrial development in the area.<sup>42</sup> Cobb County continued its astounding growth around Marietta, which had begun during World War II with the opening of the Bell B-29 Bomber plant. The plant was taken over by Lockheed and expanded during the Cold War defense boom, stimulating further growth in the 1950s.<sup>43</sup>

Atlanta's historical role as a rail transportation hub was jeopardized by the ascendancy of the automobile as the preferred form of personal transport in postwar

---

<sup>40</sup> Rice, "If Dixie Were Atlanta", 34.

<sup>41</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 97-98.

<sup>42</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 105.

<sup>43</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 98.

America. Thus, Atlanta's elites sought a revised landscape for the city that continued to grow after the war. To accommodate the prominence of the automobile in Atlanta, area business leaders commissioned the 1946 Lochner Report, which made traffic planning suggestions for the postwar city. This report envisioned Atlanta as the hub of an interstate highway network that would link the major cities of the Southeast. The Lochner Report, released a decade before the Federal Highway Act, was prescient in its vision.<sup>44</sup> The major freeways that were built on its recommendation in the late 1950s helped accomplish the goal of maintaining Atlanta's status as a major southern transportation hub. At the same time, however, these freeways also served as corridors of sprawl in the 1950s and 1960s. With both the construction of these freeways and of two new air passenger terminals at Candler Field in 1948 and 1961, the city of Atlanta remained the transportation hub of the South, with the rail traffic of old now supplanted by automobile and air traffic.<sup>45</sup>

Several other plans for the Atlanta metropolitan area that emerged in the 1950s also rested on the premise that highway construction could provide unfettered access to the central business district from residential areas outside of the city in DeKalb, Cobb, and Gwinnett Counties.<sup>46</sup> These highway construction projects would have disastrous results for the central business district and the Fox Theatre in the following years. Outlying areas grew rapidly around the new highways, drawing even more residents and commercial activity away from the city. DeKalb County, for example, greatly benefitted from the federally funded construction of I-85, I-20, and I-285, all of which pass through

---

<sup>44</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 149; Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 172.

<sup>45</sup> Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 173.

<sup>46</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 149-50.

the county, and all of which helped to generate new residential and commercial activity.<sup>47</sup> These freeways, originally intended as traffic arteries that would allow suburban residents to drive into the heart of the city for work and leisure, ultimately drew city residents and commercial activity into the suburbs. By the late 1950s, highways, other new roads, and tax breaks for suburban developers helped set the stage for suburban shopping centers and malls, and in the next decade these commercial centers would deal a crushing blow to the central business district of Atlanta and of cities around the country.<sup>48</sup>

The end result of these postwar developments—the *Paramount* decision, the arrival of television, and suburbanization—was the gradual decline of the Fox Theatre’s appeal as an entertainment spot. This was the case for movie palaces and downtown theaters nationwide.<sup>49</sup> Studies undertaken by the film industry showed an important change in film audiences between the early years of Hollywood and the postwar era. These studies determined that the film industry’s core audience was no longer the working class or immigrants, but rather young and educated middle-class whites. Ominously for Hollywood, this was the very same demographic group that was moving en masse to the suburbs and starting families.<sup>50</sup> Now that neighborhood and suburban theaters had the same right to compete for first-run films as the major downtown theaters like the Fox, suburbanites no longer needed to drive into the city from their new homes to consume the same entertainment. Furthermore, by the mid-1950s television had become a much more formidable opponent to Hollywood, and suburban families increasingly

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>48</sup> Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 169; Kruse, *White Flight*, 244.

<sup>49</sup> Forsher, *Community of Cinema*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 84; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 269; May, *Homeward Bound*, 3-4.

preferred the comfort of their home and neighborhood to the city. The home provided these young families, in the words of Elaine Tyler May, with “a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, many traditional moviegoers began to retreat from public spaces and spend more time with their families in the home. By the late 1950s, several areas in Atlanta’s central business district had begun a severe decline, including the neighborhood surrounding the Fox Theatre.

Faced with these obstacles in the postwar era, Hollywood studios and the management of the Fox Theatre were forced to adapt to new realities. As Atlanta began its mass-suburbanization in the late 1940s, it was clear that the Fox would have to offer the city’s residents a reason to continue to spend their leisure time in the heart of the city. The comforts of home (including television entertainment by the mid 1950s), the convenience of shopping in nearby suburban commercial centers and seeing movies in suburban theaters, and the hassle of driving and parking in the central business district made a trip into the city for a show at the Fox or any other downtown theater less appealing. Urban theaters around the country faced these same problems, and both local theater managers and Hollywood studio executives took measures to adapt to the postwar order. From full-service parking lots to new film exhibition technology, these measures changed the moviegoing experience in the postwar era, but ultimately could not prevent the gradual decline of the Fox Theatre and movie palaces nationwide.

Parking had been an issue in central Atlanta since the 1920s. No-street-parking regulations were haphazardly enforced around the city since the late years of that decade,

---

<sup>51</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 3.

and although several spacious parking garages were available for use downtown, they tended to be expensive and filled quickly.<sup>52</sup> Thus in 1946, Lucas and Jenkins completed the construction of a full-service parking lot for patrons of the Fox and other Peachtree theaters across Ponce de Leon Ave to help alleviate the congestion resulting from an ever-growing number of automobile owners in Atlanta. Downtown shoppers could also park in the lot, and board downtown-bound buses at the office on Peachtree. Anticipating the ubiquity of the automobile in postwar Atlanta, Lucas and Jenkins's planning for the parking lot began during the war; a 1943 letter from a Navy seaman employed by Georgia Theaters to William Jenkins alludes to construction planning before the land was purchased in late 1942.<sup>53</sup>

Completed in the summer of 1946, Fox management opened the lot in the only fashion that theater showmen knew—with an opening-night gala event. The Fox parking lot got its very own star treatment on July 25 with a Thursday night premiere befitting a Hollywood blockbuster film. The opening included dignitaries of city and state government, brass bands, and the fanfare normally accompanying a film premiere. *The Searching Wind*, a war drama starring Robert Young, provided the screen entertainment, but it took a back seat to the proceedings on Thursday evening.<sup>54</sup> The opening of the lot was timely; a transit strike two months prior had crippled the city's trolley system for an entire week, remaining fresh in the mind of Atlantans, and trolley service on Peachtree ceased in February 1947. The Georgia Theater Company sincerely hoped the lot would

---

<sup>52</sup> Howard Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 127.

<sup>53</sup> Frederick G. Storey to William Jenkins, 4 April 1943, William Jenkins Personal Files, Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Jones, "Backstage," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 July 1946; "Novel Premiere at Fox Thursday to Mark Opening of Parking Lot," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 July 1946.

provide additional pull toward the Peachtree theaters and surrounding neighborhood even as Atlanta's boundaries pushed outward.

At the time, the lot was publicized as being the largest in the world. Declarations of grandeur also extended to future plans for the lot. A special demonstration took place in February 1947 when a helicopter from the Greyhound Skyways fleet landed in the Fox Theatre parking lot carrying Mayor Hartsfield, Mrs. Eugene Talmadge, and Mrs. Herman Talmadge on board. Danny Kaye, who was playing the Fox that week, vocalists Mary Marlow and Betty Barclay, Tommy Read, and a throng of onlookers welcomed them as they arrived. The proceedings were broadcast on WGST radio, and Mayor Hartsfield declared to the crowd of witnesses (and window-watchers from the surrounding buildings) that helicopter transportation might soon be a common sight at the Fox Theatre parking lot. "It's a fast world we're in," he declared. "The time will come when the problem of parking aircraft will be as important as our present problem of parking automobiles." Greyhound officials revealed that plans were underway to establish a regular short-hop helicopter service between major airports around the country. It was the first ever landing of any aircraft in downtown Atlanta.<sup>55</sup>

The film industry trade publication *Boxoffice* even declared that patrons might soon be able to travel to the Fox by blimp. "Negotiations are under way with Goodyear," an article stated, "to have a navy-type blimp settle on the theatre's huge parking lot, delivering travelers picked up at municipal airport or some other outlying spot."<sup>56</sup> Tommy Read had apparently been assured that as soon as a Goodyear blimp was

---

<sup>55</sup> "Helicopter Gives Atlantans Air Rides From Fox Theatre's Big Parking Lot," *Boxoffice*, 15 February 1947, 114.

<sup>56</sup> "Blimp Will Carry Patrons to Door of Fox Theatre," *Boxoffice*, 15 February 1947, 114.

decommissioned from military action, it would be made available for a Fox Theatre shuttle service. Despite these grandiose plans, it appears that neither the helicopter nor the blimp service ever came to fruition. The full-service lot, staffed by a uniformed crew of attendants, helped make a trip to the Fox Theatre more convenient in the postwar world, but it was not enough to stop the gradual decline in film viewership throughout the 1950s. Fox management would have to find other ways to ensure the theater remained successful and relevant in the second half of the twentieth century.

As movie theater attendance dipped around the country, Hollywood studios were forced to innovate in order to help large urban theaters like the Fox. As leisure-time recreational options vastly expanded in the postwar era, film audiences became more discriminating than they had been during World War II, precipitating a change in the studios' approach to filmmaking. Instead of a "portfolio" approach, in which each studio churned out a long lineup of middle- and smaller-budget films, booked for short engagements to supplement big-budget hits, Hollywood turned to even bigger budgets and "epic" filmmaking in order to draw Americans to the theater. As attendance numbers continued to fall, the annual top-ten films between 1946 and 1965 generally held up their attendance numbers. However, films lower down the box-office rankings performed progressively worse each year.<sup>57</sup> This suggested that film audiences avoided films with low production values while still demonstrating appreciation for a high-quality product. Seeing the success of epic films, Hollywood poured money into increased production values and new production and exhibition technologies. Technology was an integral part

---

<sup>57</sup> John Sedgwick, "Product Differentiation at the Movies: Hollywood, 1946 to 1965," *Journal of Economic History* 62, no. 3 (September 2002), 678.

of Hollywood's approach to movies in the postwar years, with various new exhibition formats debuting across the country in the early 1950s. Studios, Robert Sklar explains, felt that "the only way to keep audiences coming back was by feeding their craving for novelty... [T]he way to beat a gimmick was with a better gimmick."<sup>58</sup> Studio heads believed that new technologies like 3-dimensional film, anamorphic widescreen films, and stereophonic sound, would be their panacea.

3-D was the most short-lived of these new technologies, although it never appeared at the Fox. Like the early-century wooden stereoscopic viewers, the 3-D process developed in the 1950s still worked by superimposing two separate images on top of each other by special lenses (i.e. 3-D glasses). Major studios, however, were wary of 3-D and feared that audiences would not take to the special glasses. Thus, the first leap into 3-D territory was made by an independent studio with the production of *Bwana Devil*, an African adventure melodrama starring Robert Stack and written and directed by Arch Oboler in 1952.<sup>59</sup> *Bwana Devil* made its Atlanta premiere in February 1953 at the Rialto Theater (whose capacity was one quarter that of the Fox) where, according to advertisements, patrons would see that: "No longer is the picture flat! To the dimension of height and width have been added DEPTH! Thrill to the discovery of this new wonder! The picture comes alive off the screen!"<sup>60</sup> The film was successful nationwide, drawing twice the expected attendance in some cities, and encouraging major Hollywood studios to release a quick burst of 3-D films in the following two years. Critically, however, the film was a dud. *Journal* critic Davenport Steward proclaimed that *Bwana*

---

<sup>58</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 283.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>60</sup> Advertisement, *Atlanta Journal*, 18 February 1953.

*Devil* “surely must rank among the inferior movies made in the past decade.” Although he found the 3-D process fascinating, Steward wrote, “[S]trictly on its merit as entertainment, this show can’t compare with any of the newcomers to Atlanta movie houses. But it will be remembered in much the same way as the first talking picture has been.”<sup>61</sup> In terms of cost, 3-D was troublesome for theater operators. For a continuous screening of 3-D films, four projectors were required over the standard two, the optimal visual experience required an expensive metallic screen, and keeping an adequate supply of 3-D glasses for audience members required an outlay of thousands of dollars. The initial novelty of the technology sustained box office success, but by 1954 the expenses outpaced box office receipts. The format was essentially dead (despite brief efforts to revive it in the 1970s and ‘80s) by the end of that year.<sup>62</sup>

Although the Fox Theatre never partook in the 3-D experiment, it was part of the widescreen revolution of the 1950s. In an effort to differentiate their product from the small screens of television and to reintroduce novelty into the filmgoing experience, Hollywood studios developed several widescreen formats that in some cases more than doubled the size of existing screens from the 1940s. These changes were far more successful and permanent than Hollywood’s brief flirtation with 3-dimensional pictures. Cinerama, first made available to theaters in 1952, was the first of these new widescreen formats. Cinerama required extensive modifications to theaters that adopted it, including the installation of a seventy-five by twenty-six foot curved screen, which covered

---

<sup>61</sup> Davenport Steward, “A Fascinating First in ‘Bwana Devil,’” *Atlanta Journal*, 20 February 1953.

<sup>62</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 240. The recent release of the James Cameron-directed film *Avatar*, however, suggests that 3-D film may experience yet another flourish. As of the time of publication, *Avatar* is the highest-grossing film in history.

approximately 146 degrees of arc, simulating the human field of vision. The picture was composed from three projectors rolling three synchronized reels of film at once and projecting them nearly seamlessly onto the screen. Additionally, Cinerama featured multi-track stereo sound to create a richer aural environment. Fred Waller, the lead technical developer of Cinerama and a well-respected cinematographic technician, was a veteran of immersive projection technology, having already developed a hemispherical projection system for the 1939 New York World's Fair Perisphere and adapting that system to create an aerial gunner training system during World War II. Waller further adapted this immersive projection technology after the war to develop Cinerama, which debuted at the Broadway Theatre in New York City on September 30, 1952.<sup>63</sup>

Cinerama took several years to arrive in Atlanta, premiering at the Roxy Theatre in April 1956 with a gala opening. The Roxy underwent a substantial facelift to accommodate Cinerama—new carpet, curtains, and seating accompanied the installation of the projection and sound equipment as well as the curved reflective screen, which measured about six times the size of most neighborhood theaters' screens.<sup>64</sup> *This is Cinerama*, a non-fiction travelogue film, introduced the awaiting Atlanta audience to the new process with its famous opening sequence, shot with a camera attached to the front of a moving roller coaster car. Lowell Thomas, president of Cinerama, Inc., boasted that this sequence “would have women screaming in the theater and men white-knuckling the arms of their seats.”<sup>65</sup> An Atlanta film critic claimed that the “thundering, stomach-

---

<sup>63</sup> Lowell Thomas, “The Wonderful Life and Premature Death of Cinerama” in *So Long Until Tomorrow* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1977), 177-8.

<sup>64</sup> “Cinerama ‘Miracle’ Opens in Atlanta on April 2,” *Atlanta Journal*, 22 March 1956.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas, “Wonderful Life and Premature Death of Cinerama,” 181.

turning ride” of the opening sequence and the two hours that followed “drew exclamation and applause” from a spellbound crowd at the Roxy, who “thrilled to scenes that included a bullfight in Spain, Florida’s Cypress Gardens, the Golden Gate Bridge, Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls and countless other of America’s scenic wonders.”<sup>66</sup> The premiere was deemed a huge success, seen by many Atlanta motion picture tradesmen as “the biggest single event since ‘Gone With the Wind,’”<sup>67</sup> while the process and the film that debuted it were well received. Over 6,000 Atlantans turned out to the Roxy during Cinerama’s opening weekend.<sup>68</sup> The effects of the technique were impressive, but as in the case of 3-D the cost of converting theaters around the country was astronomical. Additionally, theaters that contracted for Cinerama were required to employ between twelve and sixteen projectionists to care for massive film reels holding eight thousand feet of film each. In some theaters, particularly large movie palaces, the installation of Cinerama projection systems required extensive interior renovations involving the destruction of ornate proscenium arches and the removal of seating. Thus, Cinerama simply proved too costly for theater owners to implement.<sup>69</sup> The Roxy was re-outfitted with Todd-AO widescreen equipment in 1957, and Cinerama’s 15-month engagement in Atlanta was over.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Barnes, “Cinerama Premiere Thrills 800 With Movie of Tomorrow.”

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. By now, it is likely clear to the reader that the *Gone With the Wind* comparison was made for nearly every major premiere event in Atlanta, whether or not the comparison was a realistic one.

<sup>68</sup> Barnes, “Cinerama Thrills Defy Description,” *Atlanta Journal*, 6 April 1956.

<sup>69</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 238.

<sup>70</sup> Dane Harris, “Todd’s Film at Roxy Offers New Process,” *Atlanta Journal*, 20 June 1957; Harris, “Ray Connor and Cinerama Pulling Stakes for Miami,” *Atlanta Journal*, 6 June 1957.

CinemaScope, another anamorphic widescreen format, made its bow in Atlanta in 1953 and had a much more lasting presence in Atlanta and in theaters around the country. Making its Atlanta debut at the Fox Theatre in October 1953, CinemaScope owes its very existence to Cinerama. It was specifically developed in response to the success of *This is Cinerama*, which made an impressive \$4.7 million during its initial 122-week New York run, and demonstrated to a struggling film industry that new exhibition technology could still pack the theaters.<sup>71</sup> CinemaScope, backed by Twentieth Century-Fox, left a more lasting impact on the industry than Cinerama. Because the filming process used an anamorphic lens, which captured a widescreen picture on standard 35mm film, the projection of CinemaScope films only required that a special lens be attached to a standard projector. Thus, very little new projection equipment was needed, keeping conversion costs considerably lower than those of Cinerama. The process, however, required the installation of a new screen, which featured only a slight curvature of one inch of depth for each foot of width (compared to the massively-curved Cinerama screen), and which was made from a cotton base overlaid with plastic and embossed aluminum.<sup>72</sup> As was the case with Cinerama, the installation of CinemaScope and other anamorphic widescreens in older movie palaces often required the partial demolition of ornate proscenium arches, organ grilles, and side murals. The Fox's proscenium arch escaped destruction, but other theaters were not so lucky.<sup>73</sup> The process, which at first was shot on color film, also used stereophonic sound, an expensive component of

---

<sup>71</sup> John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 113.

<sup>72</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 241.

<sup>73</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 34.

CinemaScope that accounted for nearly half the cost of the system for one theater.<sup>74</sup> The first film to use the process, Twentieth Century-Fox's biblical epic *The Robe* starring Richard Burton and Jean Simmons, debuted nationally on September 16, 1953 and broke national box office records.<sup>75</sup>

The Fox Theatre hosted the Southern premiere of *The Robe* and CinemaScope and on October 1, 1953 with much fanfare. Newspaper ads went into great detail about the new process and how it would enhance the viewing experience. Described as “the new dimensional marvel you see without glasses,” CinemaScope was guaranteed to impress visually and aurally. A half-page ad for the premiere of *The Robe* declared that the viewer’s “enjoyment is enhanced by the newly created curved Miracle Mirror Screen,” that the “new Stereophonic Sound enhances the scope of audience participation,” and that the “Anamorphic Lens creates infinite depth and life-like reality to engulf you in the action on the screen.”<sup>76</sup> Sold out audiences took in *The Robe* on a Thursday evening, but newspaper reports were curiously absent in the wake of the premiere. CinemaScope clearly left a positive first impression on Fox Theatre audiences—*The Robe* played a four-week run at the Fox after the premiere, and a second CinemaScope feature, *How to Marry a Millionaire* starring Marilyn Monroe, Betty Grable, and Lauren Bacall, debuted there on Thanksgiving Day 1953<sup>77</sup>—but the high cost of production required long and successful theatrical runs for the studio to turn a profit. By 1955, other Atlanta theaters advertised the installation of CinemaScope equipment, including most of the city’s drive-

---

<sup>74</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 242.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>76</sup> Advertisement. *Atlanta Journal*. 27 September 1953.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Jones, “Movies Feature ‘New Look’ in Thanksgiving Offerings,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 26 November 1953.

in theaters and several neighborhood theaters, but by 1956, Twentieth Century-Fox had de-coupled color film with CinemaScope, scaling back its commitment to the format. Other anamorphic formats—VistaVision, PanaVision, Technirama, and Todd-AO—came and went throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, and ultimately failed to provide the consistent box office draw the industry sought. The novelty of these technologies caused temporary spikes in attendance around the country, as it did in 1953 for example, but film attendance ultimately continued its long-term decline during the course of the decade.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to changes at the production level, the downtown theaters on Peachtree sought other ways to set themselves apart. One way to do so was to cater to a specific segment of the moviegoing public. The Fox and Loew's Grand, as the two largest and most prestigious theaters in Atlanta, continued to offer family-friendly fare and films with wide appeal. The Paramount Theatre, however, began catering to Atlanta's growing teenage audience in the mid-1950s. Thomas Doherty notes that as teenagers began to attend movies in greater numbers, Hollywood obliged with "teenpics" beginning around 1955. This shift was "a product of the decline of classical Hollywood cinema and the rise of the privileged American teenager."<sup>79</sup> Doherty's classification of "teenpics" includes rock 'n' roll films, horror films, and "dangerous youth" films, all of which Atlanta's Paramount Theatre showed on its screen. In 1955, the Paramount frequently screened science-fiction fare like *Forbidden Planet*, *It Came from Beneath the Sea*, and *Creature with the Atom Brain*, the latter two films making up a double feature that was held over for a second week. The Paramount also screened horror and thriller

---

<sup>78</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 285.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 12.

films like *The Night Holds Terror*, *The Beginning of the End*, and *The Unearthly*; “dangerous youth” films like *Runaway Daughters*; rock ‘n’ roll films like *Don’t Knock the Rock* and *Shake, Rattle and Rock*; and science-fiction films like *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *20 Million Miles to Earth*, and *The 27<sup>th</sup> Day*. Despite the Paramount’s apparent cornering of the “teenpic” market in the late 1950s, the Fox Theatre also featured teen-oriented entertainment on its screen. The classic “troubled teen” film, *Rebel Without A Cause*, premiered at the Fox on Thanksgiving of 1955.

Despite its postwar decline, the Fox continued its strong tradition as an events venue. The Fox continued to host musical performances, variety shows, and other events; the most famous of these being the stage appearance of Elvis Presley on March 14 and 15, 1956. The Fox engagement came only a day after RCA Victor had released Presley’s first eponymous LP album, along with his first EP featuring “Blue Suede Shoes.” Presley’s hit, “Heartbreak Hotel,” had passed the 300,000 mark in sales the week before after only three weeks in public release, and along with “I Forgot To Remember To Forget,” he had two of the top three positions on the country and western sales chart. Presley’s two-day stint at the Fox elicited a massive turnout from his fans in Atlanta. The *Constitution* reported “turnaway throngs” for the “semi-hillbilly singing sensation.” To accommodate demand, there were three shows per day at 4:30 p.m., 7:18 p.m., and 10:16 p.m. Also performing with Presley were “Grand Ole’ Opry” star Rod Brasfield, Uncle Cyp of the Ozark Jubilee, Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters with

June Carter, the Wilburn Brothers, and the Jordanaires. In between shows, *The Square Jungle* starring Tony Curtis and Pat Crowley played on the Fox screen.<sup>80</sup>

Elvis Presley's appearance was perhaps the most memorable musical performance to grace the stage of the Fox Theatre, but other musical performances also brought in large crowds during the postwar era. A Sunday Pop Concert series that began in 1947 and continued into the early 1950s proved to be very popular.<sup>81</sup> During its first season, over 1,000 people were turned away at the door for each show.<sup>82</sup> In some instances, crowds for the Sunday pops were as eager as one might expect for a star performer like Elvis Presley. Paul Jones noted that one Pop Concert in July 1949 nearly resulted in a stampede as paying customers flooded into the Fox. Tommy Read told him, "If you ever want to see the most unusual display of mass psychology ever seen anywhere be here Sunday afternoon when the doors are opened for the Pop Concerts." Jones described the chaotic scene:

When the ushers dropped the rope, holding back the surging throng, which had been gathering for more than an hour, hundreds of wild-eyed music lovers galloped through the lobby as though someone had just touched a flame thrower to their respective trousers.

Elderly people, some on crutches; young people, mothers with their babes in arms were in the first surge. Hundreds scrambled up the

---

<sup>80</sup> Lee Cotton, *All Shook Up: Elvis Day-By-Day, 1954-1977* (Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1985), 69-71.

<sup>81</sup> "Fox Plays Host Again to Pop Concert Fans," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 May 1950.

<sup>82</sup> "'Request' Tunes Feature Pops Today," *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 August 1947.

giant stairs to choice seats in the loge or balcony, while hundreds of others galloped to seats in the orchestra....

After witnessing this spectacle, I wonder how many hundreds of people keep from getting trampled every Sunday.

But, through last Sunday, only one person had been injured. He was an usher, who was bitten on the arm and scratched about the face by a girl who became angered when he attempted to slow her down in her mad dash toward the theater lobby.<sup>83</sup>

The Fox hosted other popular variety shows and special events in the postwar period as well. In late 1949, Horace Heidt—musical entertainer, vaudeville personality, and radio host—made his second appearance in Atlanta in as many years, the first taking place at the Municipal Auditorium in 1948. On November 21, 1949, Heidt hosted a three-hour performance and radio broadcast from the Fox Theatre featuring over sixty performers. Auditions were held the week before so that local dancers, musicians, artists, and performers could be featured in his “Stars on Parade” variety show. Performers included a blind xylophonist, a “boogie piano wizard,” “soft shoe dance stylist,” tap dancers, and other professional and local amateur talents. Heidt returned to the Fox in February 1953 for a similar variety show, this time for a two-day engagement featuring local amateur and professional performers.<sup>84</sup> These shows were highly publicized and drew substantial crowds along with other performances and events at the Fox. Other

---

<sup>83</sup> Paul Jones, “Backstage,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 31 July 1949.

<sup>84</sup> “Coast-to-Coast Stars Due Nov. 21 – Horace Heidt Review to Play Fox,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 October 1949; “Sixty Stars In Vaudeville Bill – Heidt Variety Show Plays at Fox Nov. 21,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 November 1949; “Two Atlantians Get Pay Parts in Heidt Show,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 15 February 1953.

postwar era stage appearances included Bob Hope in 1949,<sup>85</sup> and during every winter beginning in 1953 Fox audiences could meet-and-greet the Georgia Tech football team of the previous fall at “Tech Night.”<sup>86</sup> In 1957, Jerry Lewis appeared on the Fox stage in connection with the premiere of *The Delicate Delinquent*, which began its Atlanta run in July of that year.<sup>87</sup> The Metropolitan Opera also resumed its engagement at the Fox after the war, performing to full houses for presentations of “The Marriage of Figaro,” “Madame Butterfly,” “Aida,” “Tosca,” “Faust,” and others.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, the Fox reprised its role from the 1930s as the venue for a cooking school for Atlanta women. The cooking schools were popular events as postwar prosperity created an interest in new home appliances.<sup>89</sup>

The Egyptian Ballroom was also a source of income for the Fox, hosting a dance studio during the week and serving as a nightclub on weekends. Clarence Lee Williams, an African American Atlanta resident who was born in 1938 and grew up in the northwest part of the city, recalled working at the Edward Mays Hurst dance studio in the ballroom during his early teenage years. Williams recalled that Hurst “was like the Arthur Murray of Atlanta.” Performing various cleaning and maintenance tasks around the studio, Williams also helped polish the dance floor for weekend dances. Using a box of paraffin squares and a steak knife, he would shave pieces of wax onto the hardwood

---

<sup>85</sup> Paul Jones, “Backstage – Hope Headlines Fox Stag (sic) Show,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 December 1948.

<sup>86</sup> Advertisement, *Atlanta Journal*, 14 February 1957.

<sup>87</sup> Dane Harris, “Jerry Lewis Due in City on Wednesday,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 7 July 1957.

<sup>88</sup> “Metropolitan in Atlanta,” *New York Times*, 29 April 1947; “Season Tickets for Met Here Selling Fast,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 15 March 1950.

<sup>89</sup> Agnes Olmstead, “Crowd Fills Theater for Frigidaire School,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 January 1950.

floor so that “it looked like it had snowed all over the whole floor.” Dancers would grind the paraffin into the floor with the soles of their shoes, keeping the maple floor healthy and polished.<sup>90</sup> With the Hurst dance school and other activities at the Fox, the building remained in constant use during the late 1950s, but questions began to surface concerning its viability as a movie theater for the first time since the early 1930s.

As the 1950s drew to a close, Atlanta looked far different than it did immediately following World War II. The city was larger, its population had increased immensely, and more people were moving to new suburbs on the outskirts of the city and in neighboring DeKalb and Cobb counties. This exodus of middle-class white residents, the largest demographic group within the film industry’s national audience, was aided by the construction of new highways in and around the city during the late 1950s. These highways—originally believed to facilitate travel into the heart of Atlanta—had the opposite effect, instead serving as corridors of suburban sprawl. Physical change was accompanied by political and social change as well. The abolition of the white primary in 1946 opened the door for thousands of black Atlantans to register to vote. Upwardly mobile black families began to live in previously all-white neighborhoods, and these population shifts caused direct and violent confrontations between whites and blacks not seen in Atlanta since the 1906 race riot. Both black civil rights activists and white reactionaries were empowered by continuous confrontations and desegregation debates, setting the stage for widespread social unrest and change in the 1960s.

---

<sup>90</sup> Clarence Lee Williams, interview by Andrew Reisinger, 21 January 2005, transcript, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collection and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga.

The film industry also looked far different in 1960 than it did fifteen years before. The major Hollywood studios (especially the “Big Five”) had divested themselves of their major theaters, and the Fox Theatre and other downtown theaters across the country lost the competitive advantage of holding near-exclusive rights to first-run entertainment. Additionally, the postwar period presented new forms of competition to the major theaters, including drive-in theaters, television, and recreational activities that had not been available during the Great Depression or during World War II. The industry’s response—introducing new filming and exhibition technologies and focusing on “hit” filmmaking—only temporarily helped matters. On the local level, the Fox Theatre changed management once during this period, but both Georgia Theatres and Wilby-Kincey management tried to adapt to the postwar order with mixed results. Continuing the theater’s tradition as a performance and events venue was one way to do this, as was constructing a full-service parking lot to cope with increased automobile ownership, but none of these measures had any lasting effects.

Box office figures around the country declined steadily between 1946 and 1960. Still, the Fox and other theaters enjoyed sporadic spikes in attendance, causing experts to occasionally declare a revival of the film industry. In response to a national survey declaring the death of Hollywood in February 1958, John Ward of the *Journal* declared, “movies are not down for the kayo-count—at least not in Atlanta.” Ward, however, relied on mostly anecdotal evidence from theater managers around the city, citing the surge in movie attendance during the previous holiday season. Although Jimmy Harrison, head of Wilby-Kincey Theaters, pointed out that movie attendance in early 1957 was up 30 to 40 percent from early 1956, this was not a sustained long-term

increase.<sup>91</sup> As the Fox Theatre entered the 1960s, bursts of short-term box office success were followed by periods of long-term decline. Over the next fifteen years, accelerated suburbanization, desegregation, the abandonment of public space, and the further decline of the film industry only reinforced the Fox's downward trajectory.

---

<sup>91</sup> John Ward, "If Film Plays Swan Song, Atlantians Are Not in Tune," *Atlanta Journal*, 16 February 1958.

**Chapter 6**  
**“We Could Not Stop Sherman, But We Could Stop the Wrecking Balls”: The  
Second Fall and Rise of the Fox Theatre, 1960-1975**

February 5, 1959 was an average Thursday in Atlanta. The Fox Theatre had featured the acclaimed Warner Bros. picture *Auntie Mame*, starring Rosalind Russell, on its screen all week with enthusiastic response from its audiences. During the evening showing, at approximately 7:30 p.m., a disheveled looking man quietly approached the ticket booth, which was staffed as it normally was on most nights by a local teenage girl. The man showed a gun to the ticket window attendant and demanded that she give him all of the money in the box office. The girl was frightened, but her visibly shaken manager advised her to cooperate and to do as the man said. She emptied the cash box and handed its contents, approximately \$570 in cash, to the man as calmly as possible. A teenage usher witnessed the robbery from the front doors of the theater, situated approximately one hundred feet back from the ticket booth, and bravely attempted to chase the man down Peachtree Street, but the robber had too great of a head start and eluded the boy before he could be captured.<sup>1</sup> This incident was representative of the state of the neighborhood adjacent to Ponce de Leon Avenue and Peachtree, an area that Atlantans by that time referred to as “Midtown.” By the late 1950s and early 1960s, well-known residents of the area had left for the suburbs, and the neighborhood fell into a steep decline. Robert Isbell describes the state of Midtown during this period: “Scions of

---

<sup>1</sup> “Bandit Gets \$570 at Fox, Eludes Usher,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 February 1959.

old families moved away and in their wake transients moved in – tough biker gangs, ne'er-do-wells, ladies with painted faces. Old cars rusted on weed-covered grounds. Frequently trouble came, and police called it a tenderloin area.”<sup>2</sup>

The next fifteen years would see the Midtown area and other parts of central Atlanta fall on even harder times. The metropolitan area sprawled ever further into the exurbs of Cobb, DeKalb, and Gwinnett counties at the expense of the central business district; city residents continued to leave for the suburbs; and many downtown businesses either closed or moved as well. Although this had been happening since the end of World War II, the racial desegregation of public facilities and public space in Atlanta played a major role in its acceleration. Schools, buses, parks, swimming pools, department stores, and movie theaters had all been segregated spaces since the early twentieth century—if white Atlantans and black Atlantans had to share a space like a bus or a movie theater, they did so within clearly delineated boundaries in order to reinforce the social order. Despite its adherence to Jim Crow, Atlanta’s leaders often trumpeted the city’s seemingly progressive approach to race relations relative to the rest of the South. Mayor William Hartsfield’s famous declaration that Atlanta was “The City Too Busy to Hate” became an unofficial city slogan.<sup>3</sup> The response of white Atlantans to the desegregation of various public spaces and facilities, however, belied their progressive reputation. Although Atlanta’s desegregation experience in the early 1960s did not produce violent and shocking images like that of Birmingham or Selma, the Civil Rights Movement caused enough tension to make white Atlantans increasingly apprehensive

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Isbell, *Atlanta: A City of Neighborhoods* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 58.

<sup>3</sup> John D. Hutcheson, *Racial Attitudes in Atlanta* (Atlanta: Center for Research in Social Change, Emory University, 1973), 2.

about spending their time in the central city. By the middle of the decade, most white Atlantans simply abandoned the newly desegregated public spaces, including the Fox Theatre, and further retreated into the suburbs.

White flight in Atlanta had dire consequences for the Fox Theatre between 1960 and 1975. The desegregation of the Fox and other Atlanta theaters was a relatively peaceful process compared to that of other Southern theaters and of other public facilities in Atlanta. No violent confrontations occurred, no test cases were necessary to strike down existing laws, and both sides—theater owners and civil rights activists—were able to reach a peaceful resolution through negotiation. Other civil rights battles, however, reinforced a negative attitude toward the downtown area as a dangerous place, and with the growth of suburban movie theaters and shopping centers, suburbanites in the Atlanta metropolitan area had little reason or need to travel into the city for entertainment anymore. With smaller numbers of entertainment seekers in the Peachtree theater district in the 1960s, the sheer size of the Fox made its primary role as a first-run movie theater a massive burden, as it was unable to attract capacity audiences. Because it could no longer profitably operate as a movie theater, it was reduced by the early 1970s to hosting rowdy rock concerts and screening raunchy exploitation films. Just as the Fox had stood as a symbol of central Atlanta's growth and prosperity in the first half of the century, it stood in the mid 1970s, like the rest of the Midtown area, as a shadow of its former self—decayed, dilapidated, and nearly deserted.

Since its opening in 1929, the Fox Theatre was the only major theater on Peachtree that did not prohibit the patronage of African Americans. Thus, until Atlanta

movie theaters were desegregated in 1962, it was the only theater in the city where black audiences could view first-run films at their earliest availability. The experience of African Americans at the segregated Fox, however, was far different from that of white audiences, beginning on the sidewalk outside the theater. Forbidden from using the main ticket booth on Peachtree, black patrons were required to purchase their tickets from a separate box office on the side of the building on Ponce de Leon Ave. Next, they had to scale a long flight of stairs on the exterior of the building, which doubled as the balcony fire escape, to reach the “gallery,” the seating located at the back of the balcony set apart by a three-foot tall barrier. Such balconies were common in movie theaters throughout the South, and they had several colloquial names including “The Buzzard’s Roost,” “The Peanut Gallery,” or “Nigger Heaven.” These segregated seating sections were often hot and crowded, had poor sight lines, and offered inadequate restroom facilities. Since the gallery in most theaters was at the very back of the balcony, white patrons could easily forget that there were black audience members in the theater once the show started. One white North Carolinian recalled his first visit to the Fox Theatre:

I remember the first time I ever went to a movie in the South. It was during the war. I went to a big palace—the Fox in Atlanta, maybe, and it was hot. Well, I was watching the picture when I suddenly realized I heard this rustling sound above my head. I jerked around and to my shock and surprise, I saw another balcony, and it was full of people! It was the

blacks, of course, waving programs and fans to keep cool. I had heard of this ‘nigger heaven,’ but never seen one.<sup>4</sup>

Georgia State Senator Leroy Johnson, who in 1962 became the first African American to hold that office since Reconstruction, also made the arduous climb to the gallery during his youth in Atlanta. Johnson recalled, “You had to pay your money and go up a hundred thousand steps, it appeared.”<sup>5</sup>

As was the case in schools, buses, and other public spaces, “separate but equal” was a mischaracterization at the Fox, too. The experience of climbing the massive stairs to the gallery, sitting in a hot and cramped section at the back of the theater, being denied access to the rest of the theater and its luxurious restrooms (while being restricted to small utilitarian facilities in the balcony), and the overall humiliation of being treated as a second-class citizen, was sometimes too much for black audience members to bear.

Warren Cochrane, the director of the Butler Street YMCA—a hub of African American recreational activity during and after World War II—reached his breaking point one night at the Fox. After purchasing two tickets for a show, Cochrane recalled, he and his wife climbed the stairs to the gallery to take their seats. “You had to climb an enormous flight of stairs on the outside to get to the black balcony upstairs. We sat down, but we were so uncomfortable we left. We felt ashamed.”<sup>6</sup> There were few instances of overt racial antagonism at the Fox Theatre—teenagers would occasionally shout unpleasantries as

---

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. In Charlene Regester, “From the Buzzard’s Roost: Black Movie-going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities during the Early Period of American Cinema,” *Film History* 17 (2005), 114.

<sup>5</sup> Senator Leroy Johnson, interview by Clifford Kuhn, video recording, 17 October 1991, Special Collection and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. In Kuhn et al., *Living Atlanta*, 302.

they drove by the “colored box office,” but African Americans were constantly reminded of their subordinate social status throughout the entire filmgoing experience.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1940s and early 1950s, there were murmurs throughout Atlanta’s black community about challenging the segregation of Atlanta movie theaters. Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays strongly discouraged black students from attending segregated movies at the Fox. Mays once said during the 1940s, “I wouldn’t go to a segregated theater to see Jesus Christ himself.”<sup>8</sup> Mays spoke to the students at Morehouse every Tuesday, and to those who heard him speak his words were of great import. Senator Johnson recalled hearing Dr. Mays speak on segregation and being inspired by his message:

One day at chapel, Dr. Mays said to us that Morehouse men cannot afford to pay for segregation. Morehouse men cannot go to segregated theaters. And he talked about the fact that... that we—those of us who were there within the sound of his voice—he said get yourselves an ideal and cling to it and cleave to it and worship it, as though it was almighty God. For in order to survive in a segregated society, you must be ironclad and steel-girded. It was that ironclad and steel-girded philosophy, I think, certainly inspired me, and from that day on I never again went to the Fox Theatre. Never again went to a segregated theater.<sup>9</sup>

Other than the Fox, African Americans were not allowed into the large theaters on Peachtree; this limited their film entertainment options to the circuit of theaters owned by

---

<sup>7</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. In Kuhn, *Living Atlanta*, 303.

<sup>9</sup> Senator Leroy Johnson, 17 October 1991.

Thomas Bailey. Bailey was white, but catered entertainment to a black audience at his five local theaters—the Ashby, the Carver, the 81, the Ritz, the Royal. The largest of the Bailey theaters was the 81 Theatre, which seated an audience of nearly 1,500 when filled to capacity.<sup>10</sup> The 81 (named after its address at 81 Decatur Street) was the “first run” theater of the circuit; new films appeared there before moving on to the smaller Bailey theaters. It also hosted many stage shows as Atlanta’s premiere black theater and showed “race films,” films produced by black studios for black audiences while starring all-black casts, as well. The 81 Theatre and Thomas Bailey’s chain of colored theaters provided, in the words of Randy Gue, a “culturally affirming space” for Atlanta’s black residents.<sup>11</sup> Many black Atlantans preferred the more welcoming atmosphere at the Bailey theaters to the second-class treatment they received at the Fox. Clarence Williams, who worked at the dance studio in the Fox’s Egyptian Ballroom and Egyptian Gardens nightclub during the late 1940s and early 1950s, rarely attended films at the Fox despite working in the same building for the entire week. Williams often went to the 81 Theatre instead, cutting through Underground Atlanta to get to the theater from his family’s home near Georgia State University. “We’d cut through there and go to the 81,” he recalled.<sup>12</sup>

Still, some black Atlantans avoided the 81 despite the culturally affirming space it provided and the ability to see a film without being told where to sit. There appeared to be a cultural split within Atlanta’s black community, in which middle-class educated black Atlantans either attended shows at the Fox or avoided the movies altogether.

---

<sup>10</sup> Kuhn, et. al., *Living Atlanta*, 302

<sup>11</sup> Randy Gue, “‘It Seems That Everything Looks Good Nowadays, As Long As It Is In the Flesh & Brownskin’: The Assertion of Cultural Difference at Atlanta’s 81 Theatre, 1934-1937,” *Film History* 8, no. 2 (1996), 213.

<sup>12</sup> Clarence Lee Williams, 21 January 2005.

“Decent people were not supposed to go down there,” recalled one of Atlanta’s black residents. “I’m just telling you the way we were brought up. There were certain classes of people who were not supposed to go down to 81.” Another stated, “I don’t like to make a distinction between people... but, let’s face it, there are some who are better educated, or who have better jobs, this kind of thing, and those are the type of people who wouldn’t go to 81. On the other hand, there were other people who wanted to see a show, whether they had been to college or whatever, who had no compunction about going.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, black Atlantans had the choice of seeing a movie at either a colored theater, which some felt was not a “decent” place in which to be seen, or at a segregated theater; if they wished to see a film during its first run in Atlanta, they had no choice but to see it at the Fox and endure the experience from the gallery seating.

Movie theaters were not among the first public spaces to be desegregated in Atlanta. Civil rights activists first targeted buses, municipal golf courses, parks, and swimming pools in the late 1950s. While the desegregation of these public spaces caused tension in the city, violence like that seen elsewhere in the South did not erupt. Inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership during the Montgomery Boycott in 1955 and 1956, Atlanta’s black leaders and civil rights activists led by Reverend John Porter first targeted public transit. Their first act of organized civil disobedience took place in June 1956 when a group of protesters spread out in the front (white only) section of a city bus. After initially ignoring the driver’s request to move to the colored section in the back, Rev. Porter and his associates left the bus. The Supreme Court’s ruling in November of 1956 that struck down bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama emboldened Atlanta

---

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Kuhn, et. al., *Living Atlanta*, 302.

leaders to try again, and in 1957 twenty black ministers led by Rev. William Borders sat where they pleased on a segregated Atlanta bus. They were promptly arrested, and Atlanta's black leaders had the test case for which they had hoped. The desegregation of Atlanta buses officially took effect in January 1959 by court order.<sup>14</sup>

Immediately after the ruling, blacks and whites were anxious about sitting next to each other on public buses. In fact, many whites stopped riding buses altogether, or moved outside of bus service. "As desegregation picked up speed," notes Kevin Kruse, "so too did white flight from the lines."<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon repeated itself in other public spaces. Municipal golf courses were desegregated by court order in 1955, but remained contested spaces—several were vandalized and a National Negro Golf Tournament was cancelled at one course because of white protests to the city—until the early 1960s when whites simply stopped using them.<sup>16</sup> The same applied to parks and swimming pools. Desegregated officially in 1962 and 1963, respectively, parks and pools were not violently defended by whites city residents who had almost exclusively enjoyed them previously. They were instead abandoned to African Americans as white Atlantans continued their flight to the suburbs.

The desegregation campaign for Atlanta's lunch counters and stores in the early 1960s was more contentious than that of buses and parks. It would have a direct effect on the desegregation of the city's movie theaters, however, mainly due to the contribution of students and student-led advocacy groups to the process. Inspired by the student-led sit-in movement in Greensboro, NC, Atlanta college students published "An Appeal for

---

<sup>14</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 117.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Human Rights,” a full-page ad signed by students from the six colleges of the Atlanta University Center, on March 9, 1960. Within a week these students formed the Committee on the Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR). COAHR was instrumental in desegregating lunch counters and downtown stores in 1961 and movie theaters in 1962.

Their sit-in campaign proved to be a watershed moment in Atlanta race relations. With these protests, civil rights activists demonstrated courage, organization, strategy, and a unity of purpose that took many white Atlantans by surprise.<sup>17</sup> The sit-in campaign of 1960 and 1961 was a joint effort by COAHR and other Atlanta students, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). To ensure that they would be on “safe ground,” the protestors first targeted eating establishments in public buildings like city hall, the state capitol, and the Fulton County Courthouse. Demonstrations were also held at A&P Groceries, and the students then turned their attention to Rich’s Department Store. Rich’s was an ideal target, as it was the largest department store in the South, it was locally owned, and it was a central part of daily life in Atlanta. If they could elicit a favorable response from the wealthy and influential Richard H. Rich, student protestors could claim a valuable victory in their struggle to desegregate public spaces in the city.<sup>18</sup>

Rich’s had deep roots in Atlanta’s black community; it was the first store in the city to offer credit to black customers, and its salespeople were required to address black customers as “Mr.” and “Mrs.” The store followed a strict policy of segregation, but because of the attempts to make black customers feel more welcome, Richard H. “Dick” Rich hoped that he could avoid the sit-ins and protests that had taken place at other

---

<sup>17</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 180.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

businesses around the city. Students began their campaign against segregation at Rich's in the summer of 1960 with protests and a boycott that continued into the fall; one coordinated sit-in on October 19 brought unwanted publicity to Rich's when it resulted in the arrest of Martin Luther King Jr. Mayor Hartsfield attempted to bring the students, black activists, and white businessmen to an agreement, but after a negotiated thirty-day truce ended in late November, sit-ins resumed at several downtown businesses including Rich's. The atmosphere was tense—one protest in October had drawn out Klansmen in full regalia to counter-protest—but ultimately, the lost business that resulted from the controversy over the Christmas period proved to be too much.<sup>19</sup>

Nearly a year later, in the fall of 1961, lunch counters at Rich's and other downtown stores were desegregated by agreement, using “control programs” to gradually permit an increasing number of black customers to be seated at specific times. Both sides learned valuable lessons from the sit-in campaigns of 1960-1961. Business owners learned that sit-ins and protests (and the potentially ugly counter-protests that could ensue) could seriously damage business. Furthermore, they learned that control programs or periods could help keep the desegregation process orderly and manageable. The students and Civil Rights activists, on the other hand, learned that they could affect change through their actions, and during 1960 and early 1961 they had gained the support of more conservative members of the black community. Imbued with confidence from their success, civil rights activists turned to desegregating other businesses, particularly hotels and movie theaters in the fall of 1961.

---

<sup>19</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 186-191, 193; Winston Grady-Willis, *Challenging Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 17-18; See also David J. Garrow, Ed., *Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1961: Sit-Ins and Student Activism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1989).

The initial impetus for the desegregation of the Fox came from an unlikely source: New York's Metropolitan Opera Company, which had resumed its annual engagement at the Fox after the war, appearing every spring since 1947. The controversy surrounding the Met's spring 1961 appearance at the Fox provided the perfect opportunity for activists to make a stand. According to the *Atlanta Daily World*, four black theatergoers arrived with balcony tickets to the Met's performance but were forced to give up their seats when it was discovered that they were seated next to white audience members. The ticket holders left the theater "humiliated." Both SNCC and the SCLC sent telegrams to Rudolph Bing, the head of the Metropolitan Opera, in protest of the incident. The SCLC telegram, signed by Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, stated, "the SCLC regrets sincerely that the famed Metropolitan Opera Company has allowed itself to be dictated to by the whim and caprice of so-called 'southern custom,' at such a critical moment in history, particularly in this community."<sup>20</sup> Bing responded publicly, stating that the Met "does not, as the Negro leader had suggested, allow itself to be dictated to by anyone." Bing denied any hand in the seating policy, stating that the Atlanta Music Festival Association made the Fox available to the Met every year, and handled venue-related concerns like seating.<sup>21</sup> While the Met disagreed in theory with the policy of segregation, it could not directly make any changes to the segregated seating policy. The 1961 engagement, however, emboldened the Met to take a stand, as another incident in Atlanta directly affected members of the company. Three black opera performers were denied hotel facilities in the Peachtree-Ponce de Leon area near the Fox, and following the Tuesday night performance they were denied service at

---

<sup>20</sup> "Segregated Opera Protested Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, 6 May 1961, 1.

<sup>21</sup> "'Met' Answers Dr. King," *New York Times*, 7 May 1961, 80.

the Seven Steers Restaurant.<sup>22</sup> While the Met dealt with segregation in Atlanta for years since it resumed its engagements at the Fox, Jim Crow was beginning to create real problems for its performers and employees.

The experience caused a change of heart at the Metropolitan Opera Company. Several weeks after the 1961 Atlanta engagement, the Met announced that it would “no longer perform before segregated audiences, and has made known this decision to southern cities on its schedule next season.” Not wanting to become embroiled in an intensifying social controversy in cities around the South, or to subject its black performers and crew members to the humiliations of segregation, the Met stated that it “would not become a pawn in the segregation vs. integration issue.”<sup>23</sup> This did not sit well with some white Atlantans who wished to protect the tradition of Jim Crow. One man wrote to the *Journal*, “For years the Metropolitan Opera has been coming to Atlanta and with great condescension and appalling manners has pocketed our gold and moved on to fields not so green.” He believed the Met wanted to “tell us how, where and with whom we are to sit. This is too much... Met go home; Met stay home.”<sup>24</sup>

In the wake of the Metropolitan Opera controversy, COAHR approached Atlanta theater owners in June 1961 about desegregating their establishments. The theater owners rebuffed the advances of COAHR leaders, and the summer vacation interrupted further student activity until the fall months. When the students returned in September, representatives from COAHR joined efforts with representatives from the NAACP, the Greater Atlanta Council on Human Relations (GACHR), and the Young Adult Group of

---

<sup>22</sup> “Negro Opera People Find Segregation: Facilities in Area of Opera Refuse Service,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 3 May 1962, 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Opera Firm to Snub Segregated Dixie Audiences,” 25 May 1961, 1.

<sup>24</sup> W.H. Zillessen, Jr., letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 8 June 1961, 30.

the Unitarian Church to pressure Atlanta's movie theaters to desegregate. A white student, who was a member of all four groups, made first contact with local theater owners and was met with indifference by some and hostility by others. Some theater managers, when contacted by the student groups, simply hung up the phone. One owner expressed interest in desegregating, saying he "would go along with one or two other theatres," but refused to desegregate his theater by himself.<sup>25</sup> As the autumn wore on, attempts by the NAACP, COAHR, and GACHR to negotiate with Atlanta theater owners did not produce any meaningful results.

Theater owners saw the students' demands to meet as "intimidation" and proclaimed that they were "not going to be threatened." COAHR grew frustrated with the owners' obstinacy, and as Thanksgiving approached its members voted to begin protests at the Roxy Theatre in late December, where *King of Kings* was set to open on the 21st.<sup>26</sup> Although demonstrations were planned and protest banners had been drawn up, the students still pushed for negotiation.<sup>27</sup> At the behest of Mayor Hartsfield, who wished to avoid any potentially ugly scenes at Atlanta's movie theaters, the groups agreed to meet with theater owners, the Mayor himself, and the Chief of Police in December. After meeting twice in four days for a total of six and a half hours, the parties tentatively agreed to desegregate Atlanta's movie theaters after a "cooling-off" and a "control" period. Since the Metropolitan Opera announced in July of 1961 that it would return for its Atlanta engagement in the spring of 1962 before a desegregated audience, it

---

<sup>25</sup> Janet Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Segregation: A Case of Prolonged Avoidance," *Journal of Human Relations*, 13 (Feb. 1965), 210.

<sup>26</sup> Advertisement, *Atlanta Journal*, 7 December 1961, 48.

<sup>27</sup> "Talks Fizzle, Negroes Plan Theater Drive," *Atlanta Journal*, 16 November 1961, 59; "Movie Owners Asked to Integrate Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, 5 November 1961, 1.

was agreed that everyday theater desegregation would occur after the Met's spring engagement.<sup>28</sup> Mayor Hartsfield preferred to wait until after the Georgia legislature had adjourned its session during the spring, fearing that the presence of legislators from rural and more reactionary regions of the state could threaten a peaceful and controlled desegregation plan.<sup>29</sup>

The "cooling off" period that took place between the meetings and June 1, 1962 expired without incident. During this time, civil rights activists pledged to refrain from attempts to force the desegregation of Atlanta theaters. During the "control period," between May 6 and June 1, downtown theater owners agreed to "invite" at least two African American patrons per week. The process went surprisingly smoothly; the police were not called once as the downtown theaters were desegregated. While theater owners steadfastly adhered to the terms of the agreement because they feared the loss of white patronage and overall business, the agreement also ensured a controlled and orderly process. The two-black-patrons-per-week limitation was discarded early on during the control period, and by May 15 the *Atlanta Journal* reported that the Fox and other downtown theaters had been desegregated without incident.<sup>30</sup> Thus Loew's Grand, the Rialto, the Roxy, and the Fox, which was showing *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* that week, were fully desegregated by the middle of May. The Rialto, however, was desegregated one week earlier than planned. One black Atlantan who had heard of the agreement through word of mouth, did not realize that activists had decided to wait approximately one week after the beginning of the control period before desegregating

---

<sup>28</sup> "Met to Sing Here at Integrated Fox," *Atlanta Journal*, 25 July 1961.

<sup>29</sup> Feagans, "Atlanta Theatre Desegregation," 211-12.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-13.

the movie theaters in the city. Deciding that he wanted to see a movie on Sunday, May 6, he went to the Rialto expecting to find a fully desegregated theater. Although the Rialto staff did not yet expect any black patrons to attempt to gain admission, the man was sold a ticket and took his seat without incident. Curiously, he left the theater after approximately thirty minutes. When asked why, he replied, “It wasn’t my sort of movie.”<sup>31</sup>

In the case of movie theater desegregation, Atlanta upheld its image as “The City Too Busy To Hate,” suggesting that white theater patrons, while possibly having other concerns about desegregating the public sphere, were not bothered by sitting next to black theater patrons. The Young Adult Group of the United Liberal Church in Atlanta conducted a survey in October 1961, around the same time as the lunch-counter controversy, polling patrons at two Atlanta neighborhood theaters for their opinions on theater desegregation. The survey yielded six interesting conclusions. Firstly, the screen entertainment ranked highest in importance to theater patrons over the theater’s location and with whom they would be sitting. Secondly, nearly every person surveyed was aware of the lunch-counter desegregation campaign in the city. Thirdly, “in both theatres almost three-fourths (72 per cent) of those interviewed indicated acceptance of lunch-counter desegregation.” Fourthly, “the number indicating acceptance of theatre desegregation was only slightly smaller than those indicating acceptance of lunch-counter desegregation (72 per cent in Theatre A and 64 per cent in Theatre B).” Fifthly, a minority of those surveyed opposed the desegregation of both lunch counters and movie theaters. Finally, the survey concluded that since the percentages of those for and

---

<sup>31</sup> “Negroes Attend Atlanta Theaters,” *Atlanta Journal*, 15 May 1962, 2.

opposed to desegregation of lunch counters nearly matched those for movie theaters, “it seems that theatre desegregation, once effected, will meet with the same success as lunch-counter desegregation.”<sup>32</sup> The theater owners, to their surprise, were unnecessarily concerned about the short-term ramifications. “By the next year, none of the theaters expressed any dissatisfaction or loss of business as they had feared.”<sup>33</sup>

The results of the theater desegregation campaign in Atlanta were even more successful than the lunch-counter campaign in that both sides avoided any ugly incidents or negative publicity. This was a direct contrast to efforts in other Southern cities, where theater desegregation sometimes incurred violent confrontations. Louisville, Kentucky experienced its first open demonstrations against theater segregation in December 1959, with violence occurring at several of them. In Nashville, Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Lebanon, Tennessee, protesters picketed downtown theaters, and in some cases employed stand-ins and rotation lines during the following winter. Both Nashville and Chattanooga theaters experienced violence, and lost business because of sit-ins, stand-ins, and boycotts. One theater owner in Nashville claimed that it took six months for his box office receipts to return to the pre-demonstration level. People, he claimed, “were afraid to come downtown.”<sup>34</sup> Standoffs also occurred at the Carolina Theatre in Durham, North Carolina from the winter of 1961 until the theater was finally desegregated in 1963, several of which erupted in violence and resulted in the mass arrest of protestors.<sup>35</sup> In one of the more violent theater desegregation confrontations in the South, 221 students were arrested during a protest at the Florida Theatre in Tallahassee, Florida. When word

---

<sup>32</sup> Feagans, “Atlanta Theatre Desegregation,” 215-216.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-209.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 55.

of the arrests reached the Florida A&M University campus, over one hundred students walked toward the theater in a sympathy march. These students were tear-gassed and thirty-seven of them were arrested and taken to jail to bring the arrest tally to 258.<sup>36</sup>

Atlanta's experience with theater desegregation was much less violent than it was in other Southern cities. One explanation for this lies in the nature of black leadership in Atlanta as compared to other Southern cities. While the efforts to desegregate lunch counters and movie theaters (and later hotels and restaurants) were predominantly student-led, the students gained gradually increasing support from the old guard of Atlanta's black community in the late 1950s. This old guard, much more moderate in its politics and cautious in its approach to the struggle for civil rights, had formed part of a postwar coalition with Mayor Hartsfield and white business leaders once the black vote became a significant force in city politics in 1946. This moderate leadership was willing to work with white politicians and corporate leaders to affect *gradual* social change. As Kevin Kruse writes, "Together, both sides stood united through the 1940s and 1950s in pushing an agenda of progress and suppressing the segregationist sentiment of working-class and middle-class whites."<sup>37</sup> As the moderate black leadership of Atlanta strengthened its support for the students' actions, however, the students, fresh off their success in the Rich's campaign, appeared more willing to negotiate with theater owners than they had been previously. During the early 1960s, according to Winston Grady-Willis, "veteran elite activists shared enough common ground with students and younger professionals to maintain a fairly viable united front in what remained a middle-class-led

---

<sup>36</sup> Glenda Alice Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 147.

<sup>37</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 41.

movement in Atlanta.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the moderate black leadership of Atlanta, the likes of which did not exist in other Southern cities, tempered the potentially radical and more confrontational elements of the student groups, and the students’ successes both at the negotiating table and on the street during the sit-in campaign of 1960-61 had demonstrated the effectiveness of combining diplomacy with direct action. Furthermore, theater owners and managers in Atlanta saw the disruptive nature of the sit-ins at department stores and lunch counters, putting the students in a powerful bargaining position. The unique leadership structure of Atlanta’s black community thus helped mitigate the potential for violence or confrontation. Without shedding blood or being arrested, black Atlantans were free by mid-1962 to walk through the Peachtree Street entrance and sit anywhere they pleased at the Fox Theatre, and they were now able to attend movies at any theater in the city.

In the wake of the desegregation campaigns across Atlanta in the early 1960s, white Atlantans continued to leave for the suburbs as they had during the previous decade. As the public schools, hotels, stores, movie theaters, and restaurants desegregated, whites withdrew from public spaces in which they had previously enjoyed social superiority. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, white Atlantans simply abandoned the city—the surrounding suburbs more than doubled their population during the 1970s. 60,000 white residents left the city limits, while the northern suburbs in Cobb, Gwinnett, and north Fulton counties added more than 153,000 white residents, more than twice the number of those who had left the city during the same period. Thus, not only

---

<sup>38</sup> Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid*, 55.

were white Atlantans leaving the city, but also white families from around the country continued migrate to the area and settle in the suburbs, accounting for significant economic and commercial growth outside the city. This growth occurred at the expense of commerce in the city of Atlanta itself—between 1963 and 1972, the city’s share of total retail sales in the metropolitan area fell from 66 to 44 percent. Even worse, the central business district’s share was a meager 7 per cent of all metropolitan retail sales. Jobs in the central business district fell from 20 to 12 per cent of the total metropolitan area between 1960 and 1975, and if not for the loyalty of companies like Coca-Cola and Georgia Power, which kept their corporate headquarters in downtown Atlanta, the decline would have been even more pronounced. Furthermore, suburban migrants were more affluent than those staying behind in the city. By 1970, the median incomes in the suburbs had far eclipsed that of the city of Atlanta—Gwinnett County’s median income was 13 percent larger, Cobb County’s was 32 percent larger, and north Fulton County’s was an astounding 45 percent larger than that of the city. These figures would have been even more striking if the affluent neighborhood of Buckhead, annexed by the city of Atlanta in 1952, were factored out of the city data.<sup>39</sup>

White Atlantans left the city in droves, bringing a significant amount of spending power and jobs with them. Despite the continued suburban migration, downtown Atlanta experienced another building boom during the 1960s. Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr., who replaced outgoing mayor William Hartsfield and defeated staunch segregationist Lester Maddox in the election of 1961, launched a second Forward Atlanta campaign in the early 1960s in the hopes to lure industry and business to the city. The new Forward

---

<sup>39</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 243-245.

Atlanta campaign emphasized Atlanta's racial moderation (continuing to play on Hartsfield's "City Too Busy to Hate" moniker), pro-business environment, prominence as a transportation hub, and picturesque neighborhoods. The second campaign was nearly as successful as the first—while Atlanta was a regional branch office city for much of the first half of the century, it became a national headquarters city in the 1960s. The growth of local businesses and relocation of other national businesses to Atlanta created thousands of jobs each year, and unemployment levels fell as low as 1.9 percent. Atlanta ranked in the top ten cities in the nation for downtown construction, bank clearings, and employment, and in 1965 it reached an agreement to bring a Major League Baseball franchise and a National Football League franchise to play at the brand new Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, constructed just south of downtown.<sup>40</sup>

Atlanta was now a "major league city," but the level of population and commercial activity continued to drop in relation to the suburbs since downtown was becoming only a place to work, not a place to live, to shop, or to be entertained. Furthermore, racial attitudes polarized throughout the 1960s, especially in the wake of racial violence around the country in 1966 and 1967 and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. A study conducted in the early 1970s concluded that white Atlantans' attitudes toward African Americans were less favorable than those of residents in many other cities in the United States, belying its title as "The City Too Busy To Hate."<sup>41</sup> This was a clear departure from the 1961 theater desegregation survey conducted by the Young Adult Group of the United Liberal Church, which suggested that

---

<sup>40</sup> Roth and Ambrose, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 188-190. Allen's father, Ivan Allen, Sr., oversaw the first Forward Atlanta Campaign of the 1920s.

<sup>41</sup> Hutcheson, *Racial Attitudes In Atlanta*, 53.

white Atlantans had little objection to sitting next to black theater patrons. All of this resulted in a downtown area that had lost its vitality to the suburbs. According to research performed in 1974 by Central Atlanta Progress, a body of local businessmen created in the 1940s to promote interest in the downtown area, people avoided going downtown because of a variety of reasons including the fear of crime, poor race relations, a poor pedestrian environment, a lack of nighttime activities, and a perceived lack of parking.<sup>42</sup> Downtown had become specifically a place to work, not a place to live.

Midtown continued its decline throughout the 1960s as well, but manager Noble Arnold continued to operate the Fox Theatre as a first-run movie house in the face of declining box office returns. The film industry, in the wake of its reorganization during the late 1940s and early 1950s, continued to struggle on a national scale, and television's ubiquity by the 1960s exacerbated matters for theaters around the country. Although the halcyon days of the downtown movie palace were long past by the 1960s, Arnold and his management team still strived to make the Fox experience as thrilling as it was on opening night. "Mighty Mo," the Fox's famous Moller organ, had been out of commission since the early 1950s and in a state of extreme disrepair, but Arnold wished to restore it to its previous glory. In late 1962, he met with representatives from the American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts group (now the American Theatre Organ Society) about securing their help to repair Mighty Mo. Early the following year, two members of the Southeastern chapter of ATOE undertook a thorough inspection of the organ and catalogued the damage. While there was much work to do, the organ was in relatively

---

<sup>42</sup> Harold Brockey, CAP President, to Mayor Maynard Jackson and W. Wyche Fowler, City Council President, 16 September 1974, Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 951, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.

good condition. Cables were dead, reservoirs in the chambers needed repairing, rubber tubing had ossified, and the console itself was missing keys, indicator lights, and wires. Bottles, flash bulbs, cigarette butts, boxes, and assorted other debris had also collected in various chambers over the years. It was an electrician's nightmare, but the inspectors submitted their report to Arnold, and he authorized ATOE to undertake the necessary repairs. Joe Patten, an electrical engineer who sold x-ray equipment and lived in East Point, was commissioned to do the repairs. Patten completed the work in ten months with the help of only a few volunteers, and Mighty Mo returned to action on Thanksgiving of 1963. Bob Van Camp's renditions of "Georgia on My Mind," "Days of Wine and Roses," "Alley Cat," and "Valencia" that evening were met with thunderous applause from the Fox audience.<sup>43</sup>

Arnold's tenure as the manager of the Fox Theatre ended in 1970, and within a few short years the theater fell on severely hard times. The Metropolitan Opera moved its yearly Atlanta engagement from the Fox to the newly constructed Atlanta Civic Center in the late 1960s (also built as part of Mayor Allen's second Forward Atlanta campaign), and under the new management of George Deavours and later Mike Spirtous in the early 1970s, the Fox stopped screening first-run films in favor of exploitation films. As a poignant illustration of the Fox's place in the Atlanta entertainment scene, during the same week that the Met was performing at the Civic Center in the spring of 1974 the Fox was screening a double bill of women-in-prison films, *The Hot Box* and *Caged Heat*. The Fox also showed low-budget blaxploitation films like *Johnny Tough*. As Henry

---

<sup>43</sup> Henry Woodhead, "A Fading Paradise on Peachtree Street," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, 16 June 1974, 17; Arli W. Southerland, "The Atlanta Fox Story," *Theatre Organ* (Winter 1963).

Woodhead wrote for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine* in 1974, “If the quality of the films shown at a theater is an index of its health, the Fox is one sick movie house.”<sup>44</sup> Still, Deavours claimed that the year 1973 was “one of the best in recent times” and that box office figures for first six months of the following year were “stable.” “We like to think of the Fox as an entertainment center, rather than just a motion picture house,”<sup>45</sup> he said. Part of this was continuing the tradition of the Fox as a concert venue. The theater hosted major musical acts in the 1960s and 1970s, but as the 1970s wore on crowds became increasingly rowdy and treated the theater with minimal respect. During one particularly raucous concert, an on-stage mishap reflected the lack of admiration which some Atlantans felt toward the Fox: “A hired stalker fell into the organ pit while trying to negotiate a railing and broke about five keys off the massive console. She also managed to bust up the organist’s stool. Somehow she accomplished all this without hurting herself.”<sup>46</sup> Along with rowdier rock shows, the Fox also hosted a range of special events in the early 1970s, including a religious opera and closed circuit television of auto races and prize fights.<sup>47</sup>

In the early 1970s it became increasingly apparent that it was no longer feasible to operate the Fox as a first-run movie house. This was the case for many urban picture houses, which resorted to showing exploitation or pornographic films in many American cities. By 1974, a theater had to guarantee a multiple-week run before it could obtain a first-run film for exhibition. Woodhead explained the predicament of such a large theater:

---

<sup>44</sup> Woodhead, “Fading Paradise,” 18.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

...[T]he Fox is simply too big. While most new theaters seat only 500 or so, the cavernous Fox can handle 3,934 viewers (its capacity before a seating renovation was 5,000). The greater the seating capacity of a theater, the shorter the life of a movie playing there. The Fox can no longer guarantee long runs of a popular movie, so they go to the tiny new suburban shopping center houses. Its gargantuan capacity, part of its grandeur as one of the last remaining movie palaces, has become finally its albatross.<sup>48</sup>

In a few short years, the Fox Theatre had gone from a first-run picture house to an exploitation film theatre and venue for boisterous rock concerts. Tommy Read, manager of the Fox when it was operated by Lucas and Jenkins and later the Georgia Theatre Company, was sad to see what the theater had become. “It’s sure fallen from grace,” he said in 1974. “To think they would put rock groups in as opulent and fine a place as that.” Noble Arnold agreed. “All the tripe in the Fox now... Oh God it’s really distressing,” he said. “The Fox is the second largest theater in the United States, and there was a lot of pride involved in running it. We never thought anything but first-run movies.”<sup>49</sup> Rumors occasionally swirled during the early 1970s that the Fox Theatre was in danger of being demolished because it was losing money, and there was a sense of sadness that Atlanta had let a local treasure slide into disrepute and that the city was on the verge of losing an important piece of its history. One Atlantan wrote, “Every time I

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 26.

drive by now I am saddened to see the marquee.”<sup>50</sup> Many feared that the Fox would have to be sold and demolished by July 1974. Deavours had been overheard months before at a cocktail party saying, “There’s no getting around it. The Fox is gonna go.”<sup>51</sup>

In the same month Mosque, Inc., owners of the Fox Theatre building since the 1930s, announced that it had planned to sell the building and that it would be demolished. Operating costs were too high, and the Fox was simply hemorrhaging money. Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Co. entered negotiations to purchase the property from Mosque, Inc., but by July an agreement had not yet been completed. At this point, Mosque, Inc. consisted of three major owners—ABC Southeastern Theatres, which owned 50 per cent and operated the Fox, and the Georgia and Storey Theatre Companies, which each owned 25 per cent. ABC Theatres held a lease to the Fox Theatre until December 31, 1974, but both the owner and tenant had agreed to break the agreement in the event of a sale. Thus, the building could have been razed before the New Year if it was sold. John Stembler, the president of Mosque, Inc., revealed that the Fox had been operating at a loss for quite some time. This was confirmed by an ABC Theatres representative who disclosed that the Fox had been “going downhill” for a period of five to six years, and except for a short period during 1973 had not turned a profit for two to three years. This decline coincided with the departure of Noble Arnold as manager.<sup>52</sup>

Atlantans met the news with a variety of reactions. Many were shocked and saddened to find that the city was on the verge of losing the Fox. Interestingly, the

---

<sup>50</sup> Martha Ann Latham, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, 16 July 1974.

<sup>51</sup> Woodhead, “Fading Paradise,” 18.

<sup>52</sup> Colleen Teasley, “Will Tear Down Fox, Owners Say Flatly,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 July 1974.

impending loss of the Fox caused several Atlanta residents to think of the destruction caused to the city by Sherman's march over a century before. One woman wrote to the *Constitution*, "Atlanta was burned once—can there be any excuse for willful self-destruction?"<sup>53</sup> Another woman believed that the tragedy could be avoided, saying, "We could not stop Sherman, but we could stop the wrecking balls."<sup>54</sup> Esteemed actress Helen Hayes, star of stage, television and film, published an open letter in the *Constitution* late in the month of July stating, "We cannot afford at any cost to let the Fox go."<sup>55</sup> Before the formation of an organized "Save the Fox" campaign, many Atlantans wrote to the Atlanta Historical Society, begging the group to purchase the building and save the old theater for the city. One woman attached 45 signatures supporting her proposal to the AHS. She argued that the Fox deserved to be mentioned in the same breath with cultural landmarks in other great cities:

We can not [*sic*] understand WHY such a magnificent, priceless building should be destroyed – and for what?? It is built and paid for. The most outstanding attractions to see in other countries are the Cathedrals, museums and such. Why can't Atlanta save the Fox as an attraction for tourist and visitors... USE it for fine performances. Too much of the beautiful things (both the material and personal) have disappeared from our heritage already. So please SAVE the Fox for us and for posterity.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Nancy Hamilton, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Constitution*, 31 July 1974.

<sup>54</sup> Dorothy Parham, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 18 July 1974.

<sup>55</sup> Helen Hayes, open letter, *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 July 1974.

<sup>56</sup> Mrs. David Hopkins to William Garrett, Atlanta Historical Society, 16 September 1974, Fox Theatre Subject File, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.

The building still held architectural importance to its supporters as well. One Atlantan feared what would replace the “castle” of her childhood, lamenting, “To believe that this might be reduced to ruins for one more sleek edifice is a sad breath.”<sup>57</sup>

Other Atlanta residents were less sentimental, feeling that it was time to let the old building go. “Surely Atlanta can do without this white elephant. Since when did a 45-year-old building become a historical monument anyway?” asked one man.<sup>58</sup> Some believed that the poor condition of the theater by the mid-1970s was an indictment of Atlanta’s true feelings toward the building. One Atlantan argued that those who wanted to save the Fox should have supported it before it had become too late. “If the nostalgic older people who are protesting the proposed demolition of the Fox theatre would revisit this once-great place of entertainment,” he wrote, “they might realize that their former dream palace is now a little brown around the edges and that the wrecking ball would, in fact, be euthanasia for the ‘old girl.’”<sup>59</sup> Even the editor of the *Journal* argued that the Fox was no longer economically viable as a movie house. Using starkly economic logic, he argued that since its owners wanted to sell and had found a buyer, they should be free to do so. Any burden of preserving the building was on the owners themselves. Sentiment toward preserving the theater was fine, “but sentiment must be practically served and there’s the rub.” The Fox had “outlived the purpose for which it was built. Unless another purpose can be found for it, it is doomed by the laws of the marketplace. All Atlanta will hate to see it go but all Atlanta would hate it even worse to pay the cost

---

<sup>57</sup> B. Johnston, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 18 July 1974.

<sup>58</sup> J. Vernon Yost, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 18 July 1974.

<sup>59</sup> J. Vernon Yost, Letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 18 July 1974.

of maintaining the property for sentiment's sake."<sup>60</sup> Another man even composed a poem that made light of the Fox's situation:

A white elephant many a year,  
The Fox mammoth will soon disappear,  
And some who dissent,  
And don't pay the rent,  
Are shedding a crocodile tear.<sup>61</sup>

Concerned residents advanced several proposals to prevent the theater from being demolished. Shortly after it was announced that the Fox would soon be sold and demolished, about 25 Save the Fox supporters gathered at Herren's Restaurant to discuss the theater's future, including Joe Patten, Fox organist Bob Van Camp, and Mayor Maynard Jackson. Several proposals were advanced, including a call for Southern Bell to build around the Fox and use it as an auditorium.<sup>62</sup> The tourism committee of the state senate proposed that the state buy the theater in order to prevent its demolition. Senator Jack Stephens expressed his wish for the state to buy the property and make it "into a profit making venture." Governor Jimmy Carter, however, saw little chance of \$5 million in public funds being used to preserve the theater. He preferred to wait until the property was owned by "some sort of non-profit organization" before the state got involved.<sup>63</sup> One Atlantan proposed that the Atlanta Cyclorama, the 360-degree portrayal of the Battle of Atlanta housed in a neoclassical building in Grant Park, be relocated to

---

<sup>60</sup> *Atlanta Journal*, 18 July 1974.

<sup>61</sup> Emil Bernstecker, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Journal*, 18 July 1974.

<sup>62</sup> Teasley, "Will Tear Down Fox, Owners Say Flatly."

<sup>63</sup> Joyce Murdoch and Rex Granum, "Senate Panel Pushes Plans for State to Purchase Fox," *Atlanta Constitution*, 16 July 1974.

the Fox. “The City should consider the Fox as the new home for the Cyclorama. That site is close enough to downtown hotels to attract tourists... Already it has been suggested that a six million dollar bond be floated for the Cyclorama triangle site [an alternative proposal for a new Cyclorama building]. The asking price for the Fox is five million, therefore, one million would be left for restoring the painting.”<sup>64</sup> Georgia Tech students even created a petition to keep the Fox as an Atlanta area student center that would use the entire building, including the theater.<sup>65</sup> Despite numerous proposals to save it, it appeared that the Fox Theatre was doomed to meet the wrecking ball in July 1974.

The idea of repurposing an urban movie palace for live performances was not new. Several old movie palaces around the country had been restored and repurposed for various types of live performances by the mid-1970s, including St. Louis’s Powell Symphony Hall (formerly known as the St. Louis Theater and repurposed in 1968), Pittsburgh’s Heinz Hall (formerly known as Loew’s Penn Theatre and repurposed in 1971), and Columbus’s Ohio Theatre (saved from demolition and repurposed in 1968). In an attempt to repeat the successes of these theaters, members of the Save the Fox campaign commissioned the firm of Hammer, Siler, George Associates in the summer of 1974 to perform a study that examined the reuse of other historic movie palaces, evaluated the Atlanta entertainment market, and projected the financial prospects of the Fox. The study concluded that a restored Fox Theatre could fill the city’s need for a live performance facility with its large seating capacity, aesthetics, and acoustics. If the

---

<sup>64</sup> David K. Smith, letter to the editor, *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 July 1974.

<sup>65</sup> Frank Wells, “Fox Has Friends, But Not Enough,” *Atlanta Consitution*, 30 July 1974.

money could be raised, the Fox could be bought for approximately \$9 per square foot. The construction of a new performance venue, however, would cost between \$50 and \$60 per square foot.<sup>66</sup> The study also determined that, with a projected population of 2.8 million people in 1985, Atlanta would need a performance space like the one provided by the Fox in addition to the already frequently-booked Civic Center and Memorial Arts Center Symphony Hall. While competent management would be crucial to its survival, a restored Fox could be self-sustaining with revenues generated from ticket admissions, concessions, and rents from retail stores and office space. The study also noted that the Fox could be a major tourist attraction and could serve as the key to the revival of the Midtown area, stating, “The most significant economic benefit of revived Fox Theatre operations would be to anchor the local area from slippage into accelerated economic erosion in the short run and to stimulate additional investment in the area in the long run.”<sup>67</sup>

This was a recurring argument in campaigns to preserve movie palaces around the country. Janna Jones has noted that similar rhetoric was used in efforts to save the Tampa Theatre, the Fox, and the Carolina Theatre in Durham. “All three theaters were envisioned as the first step in downtown rejuvenation. Because these buildings had great public sentimental value, they seemed like the logical first step in creating interest in the downtown area.”<sup>68</sup> This rhetoric also reflected two significant changes in American culture between the 1920s and 1970s. Firstly, the idea that these theaters were

---

<sup>66</sup> Arthur L. Montgomery, Save the Fox Case Statement, 1976, 1, Fox Theatre Subject File, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.

<sup>67</sup> Qtd. in Atlanta Landmarks, “The Walls of the Fabulous Fox Theatre Can Still Come Tumbling Down,” 1975; Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 97-98.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 113.

architectural treasures reflects the recategorization of what were once considered populist and tacky structures. “During efforts to save the theaters and designate them as historic buildings, their architecture was no longer considered populist, but rather was elevated to high architecture.”<sup>69</sup> Secondly, the idea that sites of movie exhibition needed to be preserved reflected the full-scale incorporation of film into American popular culture. Movies and moviegoing in the 1920s were still considered by some as the opposite of culture or as “low” culture at best. By the 1970s, however, movies had become completely woven into the fabric of American popular culture. Furthermore, the act of moviegoing (not just the movies themselves) was being protected. The mostly middle-class social interaction of moviegoing was being constructed as cultural heritage.<sup>70</sup> By rescuing and repurposing a landmark important to middle-class Atlantans, city officials and preservationists hoped to bring these people back into the downtown area—the first step in urban planning efforts beginning in the mid 1970s to, in the words of Charles Rutheiser, “plug the (w)hole in the center” of the city.<sup>71</sup>

In the same month that Hammer, Siler, George Associates conducted their study, a nonprofit group was formed under the name Atlanta Landmarks, Incorporated, which began exploring available options to prevent the destruction of the Fox. Believing that the theater had great architectural and cultural value, the group set about raising the necessary funds to purchase the property, save the Fox, and repurpose it while celebrating its historical and cultural value to Atlanta. In the meantime, Mayor Maynard Jackson met

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>71</sup> Chapter 4 of Rutheiser’s *Imagineering Atlanta* is titled “Plugging the Whole in the Center, 1975-95,” in which he discusses efforts to bring affluent Atlantans back into the central business district who had moved to the surrounding suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s.

with several members of Mosque, Inc. and Southern Bell to discuss a moratorium on issuing the demolition permit. Any parties interested in stepping forward to purchase the Fox had eight months to assemble the necessary funds (the purchase price was set at \$4.25 million); this was a victory for the preservationists, but eight months was an extremely short period of time to gather the money. The state legislature then stepped in by passing a resolution during March of 1975 to postpone the May 1 deadline for the acquisition of the theater so that Atlanta Landmarks or any other interested parties had sufficient time to plan and finance a potential purchase of the Fox.<sup>72</sup>

The grassroots Save the Fox movement composed of ordinary citizens, theater enthusiasts, journalists, and actors gained considerable momentum from the summer of 1974 to the summer of 1975. In July 1974, Mayor Jackson received the first of several petitions circulated to save the theater. The first list consisted of almost 5,000 names and was collected in less than a month. A public meeting held at the Fox by concerned enthusiasts on Monday July 29 attracted over 2,500 attendees. Entertainer Mitzi Gaynor also expressed her desire to see the Fox saved, touring the theater with Joe Patten in August 1974. The Southeastern Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society, the same group that assisted with the repairs of the Möller organ ten years before, held a conclave of over 300 attendees at the theater in September. There seemed to be an endless supply of interested parties, but coming up with the money necessary to save the Fox appeared too tall a task. Hopes were raised in September, when Atlanta-based pornography magnate and entrepreneur Mike Thevis made a public offer to purchase the Fox. Thevis, however, faced a federal prison sentence for the interstate transportation of

---

<sup>72</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 96-97.

obscene materials (although Thevis had claimed his recent profits had all been legitimately derived), and the city asked that he stay anonymously involved in the bidding. Thevis could not escape his impending legal issues and nothing ever came of his bid to purchase the Fox. In January 1975, the famous pianist Liberace threw his support behind the Save the Fox campaign. He told the *Journal*, “It was always the showplace of the South, and Atlanta certainly should have a place where all of the things of historical interest could be shown. I don’t see why we can’t have a Civic Center and a Fox Theatre as well. You don’t miss a thing like that until it’s too late.”<sup>73</sup>

By the end of 1974, the future of the Fox was still in limbo. On January 2, 1975, the Fox showed what many believed to be its final film, *The Klansman* starring Richard Burton and Lee Marvin. After the 9:25 showing, Spirtous briefly addressed the audience, and the last public tours were conducted before the doors were padlocked.<sup>74</sup> The breakthrough that many were hoping for, however, came in 1975. Through considerable financial sacrifice by Joe Patten and other members of Atlanta Landmarks, an agreement was eventually reached with Southern Bell and Mosque, Inc. By acquiring adjacent parcels of land within the Fox Theatre block that were equal in value and acreage to the theater site, Atlanta Landmarks could then exchange the land parcels for the theater. Southern Bell then would obtain the parcels and a site for its new office building adjacent to the theater, and the Fox would remain standing under the ownership of Atlanta Landmarks. The compromise was a coup for the Save the Fox campaign, but Atlanta Landmarks was still left with \$1.8 million dollars to raise to purchase the theater. Five

---

<sup>73</sup> Qtd. In John Clark McCall, *An Atlanta Fox Album: Mecca at Peachtree Street* (Atlanta: McCall, 1975), 6.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

banks loaned the remaining money for the purchase, with the due date for the principal amount set as June 20, 1978. “That meant that if Atlanta Landmarks defaulted in the principal amount or an increment of the interest, the Fox would be given back to the Mosque shareholders, and they would tear it down.”<sup>75</sup> To the delight of many in the city, Atlanta Landmarks acquired the title to the building on June 25, 1975 and began restoration work.<sup>76</sup>

The Fox appeared to have been saved, but the efforts could have been easily erased if Atlanta Landmarks missed a loan payment at any point during the mid- to late-1970s. Linda Rondstadt performed the first concert at the “saved” Fox Theatre in October 1975 in front of a sold out audience. During the next few months, well-known acts like Paul Simon, Fleetwood Mac, Aerosmith, and the Atlanta Rhythm Section also performed in front of full houses. In July 1976, Lynyrd Skynyrd played a three-day engagement at the Fox and donated \$5,000 to the theater for upkeep. In March of that year, the *Washington Post* reported that the Fox was in the black again, but would still struggle to pay off the first \$135,000 interest payment in June 1977. “Yet, as a result of a competent management team, an excellent concert promoter, the rental of the auditorium and other parts of the theater, tax exemptions, and the dedication and hard work of Patten and other members of Atlanta Landmarks, the nonprofit corporation was able not only to repay the \$1.8 million within the three-year period, but also to generate a profit each of

---

<sup>75</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 99.

<sup>76</sup> Jones details many of the sacrifices of individuals like Joe Patten, Bob Foreman, and many other members of Atlanta Landmarks, and the preservationist community in *Southern Movie Palace*.

those three years.”<sup>77</sup> The *Journal* proclaimed in September 1977 that the Fox’s first full year under the ownership of Atlanta Landmarks was a remarkable success. “It is nice occasionally when something goes well,” wrote the columnist, “and that is what has occurred with the effort to Save the Fox.”<sup>78</sup>

Atlanta had always been a future-oriented city that was not shy about scrapping the old in favor of the new. The Atlanta Urban Design Commission once described the city as one that had a “love affair with the wrecking ball.”<sup>79</sup> Architectural historian Robert M. Craig has called Atlanta “one of those great American cities that tend to rebuild themselves every forty years or so.”<sup>80</sup> The Save the Fox campaign, however, broke this cycle of demolition and rebuilding in the city. It was one of the first major victories for Atlanta’s historical preservation community, and it was accomplished through a large-scale grassroots movement. Furthermore, it reflected the growing belief around the United States that the restoration and repurposing of movie palaces like the Fox could draw middle-class Americans back into the city. Not only was the Fox Theatre considered a historical treasure that elicited feelings of nostalgia, but it was also considered to be part of a new beginning for the city of Atlanta. It had survived by the slimmest of margins, and in 1975 stood at the corner of Peachtree and Ponce de Leon as a symbol of the nascent reclamation of Atlanta’s central business district. When it opened in 1929, the Fox was the end result of Atlanta’s explosive growth during the previous

---

<sup>77</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 100.

<sup>78</sup> Hal Gullviver, “Saving the Fox Effort Doing Well,” *Atlanta Journal*, 23 September 1976.

<sup>79</sup> Atlanta Urban Design Commission, *Atlanta’s Lasting Landmarks*, (Atlanta, 1987), 3.

<sup>80</sup> Craig, *Atlanta Architecture*, 10.

decade. Now it would be a catalyst, not a product, of Midtown's and central Atlanta's rebirth.

## Conclusion

Although the Fox was saved, its future success was not a foregone conclusion. A new challenge now confronted Atlanta Landmarks—the restoration of the theater to its former glory. It had deteriorated into a severely dilapidated state by the 1970s. Fixtures were broken, thieves had walked off with accessories and furnishings, plaster was cracked or broken, and paint had chipped or begun peeling. When the Fox had shown what many believed to be its last film in 1975, Joe Patten had to stop a group of people from loading several of the theater’s Egyptian throne chairs into the back of a pickup truck and driving away with them. After the incident, Patten took as many sofas, chairs, tables, and other furnishings as he could down to the theater basement and locked them away for safekeeping.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, Atlanta Landmarks had a tight restoration and maintenance budget for the Fox Theatre. A public “Fix the Fox” campaign during the early 1980s helped raise money to restore the theater to an approximation of its original (early 1930s) condition, and musical and theatrical performances at the theater continued to generate revenue to cover operating and maintenance costs. Preservationists and restoration experts helped with painting, plasterwork, tiling, and replacing upholstery; once the budget permitted, technical upgrades were made to the theater’s infrastructure and electrical system, enabling higher production values for live performances and attracting more spectacular shows to the Fox stage.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jones, *Southern Movie Palace*, 61.

These upgrades have made the Fox one of the best venues for Broadway theater performances in the country. It is the only Broadway touring house in the South, and its size, aesthetics, acoustics, and history make the Fox the only real option for such performances in the city. Although the Fox's smaller stage sometimes forces productions to move to the civic center (a production of *Miss Saigon* did not appear at the Fox because the helicopter would not fit on the stage), it has become an automatic stop for Broadway productions in the past three decades. Yul Brenner's month-long run of *The King and I* was the highest-grossing touring production in the country in 1982, and a three-week run of *Les Misérables* at the Fox in 1989 broke nationwide box office records. These shows have been crucial to the theater's recent success. Other performances at the Fox in recent years include the Atlanta Opera and the Atlanta Ballet, and it also continues to host musical concerts and stand-up comedians.<sup>2</sup> Each summer, the theater hosts the Coca-Cola Summer Film Festival, showing classic and current films on the CinemaScope screen. Its success as a versatile playhouse, concert venue, events center, and movie theater has enabled the Fox to avoid conducting annual capital campaigns. Outside of the Fox the Fox campaign of the early 1980s, it has been almost entirely self-sufficient since Atlanta Landmarks purchased the facility in 1976.

What is clear from the history of the Fox Theatre throughout the twentieth century is that it has been one of Atlanta's most accurate indicators of urban vitality. Its construction capped a decade-long wave of urban development in the 1920s, and it was the crown jewel of the Peachtree Street theater district that included several other

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 248.

impressive movie palaces. That the city now had one of the most spectacular and modern movie theaters in the country was validation to its residents that Atlanta was becoming a modern metropolis. Although the theater was nearly lost in the wake of the stock market crash and Great Depression, its recovery and resurgence in the second half of the 1930s coincided with the implementation of New Deal programs that alleviated poverty and unemployment that plagued the city and made infrastructural improvements that were long overdue. During World War II, both the Fox Theatre and the city of Atlanta prospered thanks to the wartime influx of new residents and new money. The postwar decline of the Fox coincided with that of central Atlanta, with the Fox's neighborhood of Midtown suffering from the rapid suburbanization of the metropolitan area. By the 1960s and 1970s, both central Atlanta and the Fox were largely abandoned until the Save the Fox campaign of the mid-1970s helped begin a revival of the area. At nearly any point during the Fox's existence, its prosperity coincided with the prosperity of central Atlanta.

Another interesting correlation between the history of the Fox and the history of Atlanta is the way the theater and its approach to entertainment reflected the growth of the city through World War II. During the downtown building boom of the 1920s, for example, Atlanta's leaders were intent upon making grand architectural statements. They commissioned the construction of impressive skyscrapers and massive office buildings to accommodate the major corporations and financial firms they expected to attract during the Forward Atlanta campaign. This rapid expansion outgrew the city's already inadequate infrastructure, and it eschewed internal improvements befitting a modern city (adequate roads, a modern sewer system, etc.) in favor of architectural grandeur. The Fox was part of the new aesthetic grandeur of the city, but its operation under Fox

Theatres Corporation was nearly as shortsighted as that of the city of Atlanta. Like other movie palaces of its kind, the Fox produced lavish and costly shows to accompany the screen programs with little consideration for sustainable management. Even though it opened after the Stock Market Crash, theater management appeared unconcerned about the potentially impending economic crisis. The Great Depression was devastating to both the city and the theater. Only responsible management during the New Deal Era could bring the city of Atlanta and the Fox Theatre back from the brink of disaster. Atlanta emerged from the Depression with new roads, a modern sewer system, new hospitals, schools, and government buildings, and public housing thanks to New Deal programs, entering a period of responsible government and restraint. The management of the Fox also practiced restraint under Lucas and Jenkins, streamlining the entertainment program and operating the theater in the black again by the early 1940s. During World War II, both the city and the theater mobilized for war with stunning results—the Fox experienced its most successful years by serving the war effort, while Atlanta’s service to the war effort raised its national profile to the level of other major cities in the United States. It was only after the war that the parallels between the Fox’s approach to entertainment and Atlanta’s approach to growth disappear.

It would be an overstatement, however, to declare a direct causal relationship between the prosperity of the Fox and the prosperity of central Atlanta. This is mainly due to the crucial role played by the film industry in the Fox’s history. While the first fifteen years of the Fox Theatre’s existence mirrored the prosperity, crash, and recovery of Atlanta, movie palaces around the country suffered a similar fate, some with even more dire results. Many closed during the first half of the 1930s, and most that stayed

open did so only after a reevaluation of their costly entertainment programs. The war years represent the closest intersection between the history of central Atlanta and that of the Fox. During World War II, the Fox became a *de facto* civic center and wartime safe haven because of the crucial role that Hollywood played on the home front. With entertainment options around the country severely limited by wartime restrictions despite an across-the-board increase of disposable income, movies were the leisure activity of choice for millions of Americans who not only sought an escape but also sought information about the conflict abroad. No event better encapsulated the Fox's centrality to the culture of wartime Atlanta than the lavish 1943 premiere of *This Is The Army*. After the war, however, the *Paramount* decision played a pronounced role in the decline of the Fox and movie palaces around the country. Suburbanization was the main culprit, but the film industry's reorganization in the wake of the antitrust proceedings and its attempts at adapting to the postwar landscape (drive-in theaters, suburban shopping mall theaters, etc.) resulted in a model that could no longer sustain large urban movie palaces. Just as Atlanta residents abandoned the city for the suburbs, so the film industry abandoned its urban palaces.

As the only first-run theater in downtown Atlanta to allow African American audience members inside, the history of the Fox is also a window into the history of race relations in the city. Although movie theaters were some of the most democratic public spaces in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, Southern theaters like the Fox drew the line when it came to race. The Fox was the most progressive of the city's first-run theaters in that it at least allowed black patrons through the door. That door, an adequate metaphor for both the treatment black Atlantans endured in a

segregated environment and the struggle they faced for equal rights, could only be reached after climbing a massive exterior fire escape/stairway, which led to a cramped balcony that offered small and inadequate restroom facilities and no access to the rest of the theater. The process by which the Fox and other Atlanta theaters were desegregated in 1962 was relatively smooth compared to the desegregation of other facilities in the city, and certainly less violent. The desegregation of movie theaters supported those of the opinion that Atlanta was “The City Too Busy To Hate” even if other desegregation battles in the city belied that title. As with other desegregated public spaces, white Atlantans simply abandoned the Fox in the 1960s and 1970s instead of either accepting integration or fighting it. Desegregation combined with suburban migration accelerated the decline of the Fox and many areas within the city’s central business district.

The campaign to save the Fox demonstrated three significant historical changes from the time of its opening in 1929 to the mid-1970s. Firstly, the reverence Atlantans held for the Fox Theatre reflected the centrality of moviegoing to American culture in the twentieth century. Memories of the Fox were not exclusive to one particular social group. Instead it was a significant place for many Atlantans, white and black, rich and poor. As a democratic and extremely affordable form of entertainment, movies’ appeal to the masses made movie palaces prime candidates for historical preservation in the 1970s and after. Movie palaces like the Fox were public spaces that held shared experiences and memories, ensuring that appeals to preserve them fell upon a broad audience. Secondly, the campaign reflected the acceptance of the movie palace as a legitimate architectural form. In the 1920s, architectural critics lambasted movie palace designs as vulgar and lowbrow. Even in 1929, when the aesthetics of movie palaces had

become increasingly refined throughout the previous decade, the Fox Theatre's design had its share of critics. The fact that it was preserved as a treasured architectural landmark and that it has been added to several historic registers reflects the elevation of movie palace architecture from vulgarity to cultural significance. Finally, preservationists began to argue in the 1970s that movie palaces could be restored to spark revitalization in their surrounding areas, reflecting the economic and cultural importance that Americans had invested in movie palaces. The movie palace-as-agent-of-economic-development approach had already proved successful in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Columbus, and other American cities before the Save the Fox campaign. Once seen as frivolous places of entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century, movie palaces were now seen as potential catalysts for urban revitalization and redevelopment. Thus, by saving the Fox from the wrecking ball in the 1970s, preservationists won their first successful battle in their hope to restore life and vibrancy to the central city.<sup>3</sup>

Once the target of a massive preservation effort, the Fox Theatre now enables similar efforts to revitalize theaters in other cities. In 2008, the Fox Theatre Institute was established, created to assist other preservationists in their campaigns to preserve and restore historic theaters around the state of Georgia. As the only preserved theater in the country with a full-time restoration department, the Fox's preservationists have an abundance of skill and expertise to offer other preservation efforts, and the Fox Theatre Institute was designed to help local restored theaters with restoration, programming, fundraising, and community development. Atlanta Landmarks set aside \$500,000 in 2008 to help pay for restoration work in fifteen theaters around Georgia, beginning with

---

<sup>3</sup> Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161.

the Art Deco DeSoto Theatre in Rome, approximately seventy miles northwest of Atlanta. The FTI also provides an informational communication network for preservationists and theater enthusiasts, enabling the easier dissemination of historical knowledge and preservation advice.<sup>4</sup> A prime example of historical preservation as a catalyst for urban revitalization, the Fox is now an active participant in the preservation and revitalization of other urban areas around the state.

As one of Atlanta's most significant structures, the history of the Fox Theatre is useful in studying several aspects American culture during the twentieth century. As shared public spaces in urban settings, movie palaces like the Fox can illuminate important aspects of local cultural history, social history, and urban history. While some have been preserved and restored, many others have met with destruction by fire, neglect, or demolition, and are no longer standing. The histories of these vanished movie palaces can also be useful for study. Since all movie palaces emerged during the same time period and from the same circumstances, their histories reveal a great deal about the cities and cultures in which they were built. As it did during the twentieth century, the Fox will undoubtedly serve as a historical and cultural window to twenty-first century Atlanta as well.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kirsten Tagami, "A Ticket to Restoration," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 17 July 2008.

## Bibliography

### Archival Sources

Emory University, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Book Library, Atlanta, Ga.  
William Berry Hartsfield Papers, 1892-1980

Fox Theatre Archives, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Ga.  
Burton Smith Collection  
Customer Comment Cards  
Lucas and Jenkins Files  
*Spotlight* Newsletter  
William K. Jenkins Files

Georgia State University Library

Clarence Lee Williams, Interview by Andrew Reisinger, 21 January 2005.  
Transcript. Southern Labor Archives, Special Collection & Archives,  
Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, Ga.

Johnson, Leroy, Interview by Clifford Kuhn, 17 October 1991. Video recording.  
Special Collection & Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta,  
Ga.

Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.  
Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records  
Fox Theatre Subject File

### Newspapers and Periodicals

*Atlanta Constitution*  
*Atlanta Daily World*  
*Atlanta Independent*  
*Atlanta Journal*  
*Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*  
*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*  
*Boxoffice*  
*City Builder*  
*Hearst's Sunday American*  
*Southern Architect and Building News*  
*Southern Frontier*

## Secondary Sources: Articles and Chapters

- Bernstein, Matthew. "Nostalgia, Ambivalence, Irony: *Song of the South* and Race Relations in 1946 Atlanta." *Film History* 8 (1996): 219-36.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Selznick's March: The Atlanta Premiere of *Gone With the Wind*," *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 7-33.
- Bernstein, Matthew and Dana F. White. "Imitation of *Life* in a Segregated Atlanta: Its Promotion, Distribution and Reception." *Film History* 19.
- Bryant, James C. "Yaarab Temple and the Fox Theatre: The Survival of a Dream." *Atlanta History* 39 (Summer 1995): 5-22.
- Butcher, J. "The Fabulous Fox," *The Georgia Tech Engineer*, January 1957.
- Carter, Ginger Rudeseal. "WSB-TV, Atlanta: The 'Eyes of the South.'" In *Television in America: Local Station History From Across the Nation*, eds. Michael D. Murray and Donald G. Godfrey. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997, 79-91.
- Crimmins, Timothy J. "The Atlanta Palimpsest: Stripping Away the Layers of the Past, 1870-1970." *The Atlanta Historical Journal* 26 (Summer-Fall 1982): 13-32.
- Egerton, John. "Days of Hope and Horror: Atlanta After World War II." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 78 (Summer 1994): 281-305.
- Erskine, Hazel. "The Polls: Demonstrations and Race Riots." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 31 (Winter 1967-68): 655-677.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Polls: Speed of Racial Integration." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 32 (Autumn 1968): 513-524.
- Feagans, Janet. "Atlanta Theatre Segregation: A Case of Prolonged Avoidance." *Journal of Human Relations* 13 (February 1965): 208-18.
- Gomery, Douglas. "Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry." *Journal of Contemporary History* 19 (January 1984): 89-103.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Picture Palace." *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3 (1978): 24-36.
- Gue, Randy. "Nickel Madness: Atlanta's Storefront Movie Theaters, 1906-1911." *Atlanta History* 43 (Summer 1999): 7-33.
- Hein, Virginia H. "The Image of 'A City Too Busy to Hate': Atlanta in the 1960's." *Phylon* 33 (3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr. 1972): 205-221.

- Jones, Gordon L. "So Red the Rose: Atlanta's *Gone with the Wind* That Wasn't." *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 45-67.
- Jurca, Catherine. "Motion Pictures' Greatest Year (1938): Public Relations and the American *Film Industry*." *Film History* 20 (2008): 344-356.
- Liazos, Ariane and Marshall Ganz. "Duty to the Race: African American Fraternal Orders and the Legal Defense of the Right to Organize." *Social Science History* 28 (Fall 2004): 485-534.
- McGehee, Margaret. "Disturbing the Peace: *Lost Boundaries*, *Pinky*, and Censorship in Atlanta, Georgia, 1949-1952." *Cinema Journal* 46 (Fall 2006): 23-51.
- Mead, Howard. "Russell vs. Talmadge: Southern Politics and the New Deal." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 65 (Spring 1981): 28-45.
- Moore, John Hammond. "Communists and Fascists in a Southern City: Atlanta, 1930." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 67 (Summer 1968): 437-454.
- Murdock, Pat. "The Lone 'Lady Censor': Christine Smith Gilliam and the Demise of Film Censorship in Atlanta." *Atlanta History* 43, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 68-82.
- Novotny, Patrick. "The Impact of Television on Georgia, 1948-1952." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 91 (Fall 2007): 324-347.
- Register, Charlene. "From the Buzzard's Roost: Black Movie-going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities during the Early Period of American Cinema." *Film History* 17 (2005): 113-124.
- Reuchel, Frank. "New Deal Public Housing, Urban Poverty, and Jim Crow: Techwood and University Homes in Atlanta," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (1997): 915-937.
- Rice, Bradley. "Atlanta: If Dixie Were Atlanta." In Bullard, Robert D. *In Search of the New South: The Black Urban Experience in the 1970s and 1980s*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Sedgwick, John. "Product Differentiation at the Movies: Hollywood, 1946 to 1965." *Journal of Economic History* 62 (September 2002): 676-705.
- Thomas, Lowell. "The Wonderful Life and Premature Death of Cinerama." In *So Long Until Tomorrow*, New York: William Morrow and Co., 1977, 173-195.
- Weisenburger, Steven. "The Columbians: A Chapter of Racial Hatred from the Post-World War II South." *Journal of Southern History* 69 (November 2003): 821-860.

## Secondary Sources: Books

- Ackerman, Marsha. *Cool Comfort: America's Romance with Air-Conditioning*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002.
- Allen, Frederick. *Atlanta Rising: The Invention of an International City, 1946-1996*. Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996.
- Atlanta Urban Design Commission. *Atlanta's Lasting Landmarks*. Atlanta: Atlanta Urban Design Commission, 1987.
- Balio, Tino, ed. *The American Film Industry*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976.
- Bauerlein, Mark. *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001.
- Bayor, Ronald. *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Belton, John. *American Cinema/American Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Widescreen Cinema*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Blum, John Morton. *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976.
- Brooks, Jennifer. *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Bullard, Robert D. *In Search of the New South: The Black Urban Experience in the 1970s and 1980s*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Campbell, Gavin. *Music and the Making of a New South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
- Chambers, John and David Culbert, eds. *World War II, Film, and History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Conant, Michael. *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960.
- Cortner, Richard C. *Civil Rights and Public Accommodations: The Heart of Atlanta Motel*

- and McClung Cases. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001.
- Cotton, Lee. *All Shook Up: Elvis Day-By-Day, 1954-1977*. Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1985.
- Craig, Robert M. *Atlanta Architecture: Art Deco to Modern Classic, 1929-1959*. Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing, 1995.
- Davis, Townsend. *Weary Feet, Rested Souls: A Guided History of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.
- Dick, Bernard. *Star-Spangled Screen: The American World War II Film*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985.
- Doherty, Thomas. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, 2d ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.
- Edgerton, Gary R. *American Film Exhibition and an Analysis of the Motion Picture Industry's Market Structure, 1963-1980*. New York: Garland, 1983.
- Egerton, John. *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Eyman, Scott. *The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution, 1926-1930*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.
- Ferguson, Karen. *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Fernett, Gene. *American Film Studios: An Historical Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1988.
- Forsher, James. *Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003.
- Garrett, Franklin. *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*, Vol. 2. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954.
- Garrison, Webb. *Legacy of Atlanta: A Short History*. Atlanta: Peachtree, 1987.
- Garrow, David J., Ed. *Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1961: Sit-Ins and Student Activism*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1989.

- Godshalk, David Fort. *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Hollywood Studio System*. Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1986.
- Grady-Willis, Winston. *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Hall, Ben. *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1988.
- Hamer, Andrew Marshall, ed. *Urban Atlanta: Redefining the Role of the City*. Atlanta: Business Pub. Division, College of Business Administration, Georgia State University, 1980.
- Harmon, David Andrew. *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946-1981*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- Hartshorn, Truman. *Metropolis in Georgia: Atlanta's Rise as a Major Transaction Center*. Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1976.
- Heathcote, Edwin. *Cinema Builders*. New York: Wiley-Academy, 2001.
- Hunter, Tera. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Hutcheson, John D. *Racial Attitudes in Atlanta*. Atlanta: Center for Research in Social Change, Emory University, 1973.
- Jeffries, John. *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front*. Chicago: I. R. Dee, Inc., 1996.
- Jones, Janna. *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.
- Keating, Larry. *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Kidney, Walter C. *The Architecture of Choice: Eclecticism in America, 1880-1930*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974.
- Kruse, Kevin. *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

- Kuhn, Clifford, et. al. *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.
- Lankevitch, George. *Atlanta: A Chronological and Documentary History, 1813-1976*. Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1978.
- MacLean, Nancy. *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Margolies, John. *Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun*. Boston: Little, Brown: 1991.
- Martin, Harold. *Atlanta And Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*, Vol. 3. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- McCall, John Clark. *An Atlanta Fox Album: Mecca at Peachtree Street*. Atlanta: McCall, 1975.
- McLaughlin, Robert. *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema During World War II*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006.
- Mitchell, William R., Jr. and Van Jones Martin, *Classic Atlanta: Landmarks of the Atlanta Spirit*. New Orleans: Martin St. Martin, 1991.
- Naylor, David. *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Great American Movie Theaters*. Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1987.
- Preston, Howard L. *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979.
- Putnam, Michael. *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Rabby, Glenda Alice. *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999.
- Roberts, Kathy. *The Fabulous Fox Theatre: The History of an Atlanta Icon*. Atlanta, Ga.:

- Atlanta Metropolitan Publishing, 2002.
- Roth, Darlene R. and Andy Ambrose *Metropolitan Frontiers: A Short History of Atlanta*. Marietta, Ga.: Longstreet Press, 1996.
- Rutheiser, Charles. *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- Segrave, Kerry. *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 1992.
- Shand, Philip Morton. *Modern Theatres and Cinemas*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1930.
- Shull, Michael. *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2004.
- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Smith, Douglas L. *The New Deal in the Urban South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988.
- Stone, Clarence. *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989.
- Thompson, Joseph and Robert Isbell. *Atlanta: A City of Neighborhoods*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994.
- Tuck, Stephen. *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001.
- Waller, Gregory. *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.
- Waterman, David. *Hollywood's Road to Riches*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Williamson, Joel. *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Zierold, Norman. *The Moguls: The Power Princes of Hollywood's Golden Age*. New York: Avon Books, 1969.

### **Unpublished Sources**

Fleming, Douglas Lee. "Atlanta, the Depression, and the New Deal." Ph.D. Diss., Emory University, 1984.

Greenwald, William Irving. "The Motion Picture Industry: An Economic Study of the History and Practices of a Business." Ph.D. Diss., New York University, 1950.

Khalidi, Omar. "Fantasy, Faith, and Fraternity: American Architecture of Moorish Inspiration." Unpublished, 2004.

Williams, Danielle E. "Local Motion Picture Exhibition in Auburn, From 1894-1928: A Cultural History From a Communication Perspective." M.A. Thesis, Auburn University, 2004