Theater Engineering Conference

Introductory Session

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The Psychology of the Theater*

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Summary—**The motion picture theater, properly understood, has its own complex "psychology." This psychology must be understood in its component parts, and in its leading characteristics, so that all concerned may interpret it adequately. An appreciation of the mission of the theater, its activities, and its nature, plus the nature of its relationships will aid this understanding. Its place in the community will be determined finally by the manager's alertness, and his comprehension of the significance of the industry of which he is a representative.**

The question before us is, basically, how many theater managers, how many members of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, how many other persons connected with the industry have a significant conception of what we are calling "the psychology of the theater." What *is* its meaning and significance? What is its rightful place *in* the community life? How can the character of this modern miracle be expressed in a personality which will walk on the same terms with other community enterprises? Is it possible that many persons in the industry, involved as they are in their own concerns, do not realize how really "big" this industry has become?

All of these questions are important! A manager, if he is to be an effective force in his community, must know both these questions and their answers. It is he who must interpret the psychology of the theater to the community. For the theater we think has a "psychology," just as every person who comes to it has a psychology. The theater's personality is a complex one. It is, first and foremost, a business. It is often a show place in itself. It is a center of entertainment. It is an important medium of education. It is a major factor in shaping customs, opinions, and behavior. It is a place of gathering for the community. It is, in all senses, an escape, for

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through its door pass those who are for a few hours free from care, from problems, from the monotony and the jangling voices of everyday life.

How many millions chained to one locality by circumstances, have passed through the theater door to the broad horizons of the wider world. They have sailed all the seas, have visited the capitals of the world, and have rubbed elbows with distant peoples and strange customs. The creations of artistry, the marvels of science, industrial processes, and travel pass across the theater screen, along with the explicit entertainment. Moreover and most important, the motion picture theater, be it in Times Square or in some remote village street, has become so interwoven with our modern social life that it has become indispensable. It is not too much to say that if tomorrow, through the operation of some almost unimaginable social cataclysm, every theater would be closed, on the next day there would be an almost universal demand for reopening! How true it is then that you men and women who are the stewards of the "colossal" force should have a real understanding of its significance.

THE MANAGER

The individual theater is the outpost of the industry and the manager is the visible representative. For all practical purposes the individual theater and the manager *are* the industry in their community. The manager must and should be one of the best salesmen of the community as well as of his product. He must never give the impression that he is in the community, but not of it. He should have sufficient latitude to enter into such community activities as will confer a mutual benefit—on the theater and on the community. Only a shortsighted management would forbid him from making such contributions of time and money as will lubricate good public relations. The manager is *there*. He knows what he must do, and what he can refuse to do if he is to maintain good community relations. His judgment must be trusted until it is found that his judgment in such matters cannot be trusted. A realistic fact to be kept in mind is that so many people have such a vivid idea of the gigantic size of the motion picture industry that the idea must never get abroad that the theater "takes" from the community without giving something back along with the entertainment.

Resourceful managers have done many different things to advance the legitimate cause of good human relations. They have joined

service clubs. Every manager should have a membership in such clubs. They have co-operated in constructive community interprises. All managers should do so. Some have opened their doors for church services, when for some reason other quarters were not available. Some of the largest Sunday school classes in the country meet in theaters. Managers have provided the facilities, both space and films, for visual education of school children. Public meetings have been held. Other uses have been made. The underlying thought is not that you have to do any or every one of these, but that you should publish a *willingness* to try to meet any legitimate request. It is as true for theater managers as for anyone else, in the words of the poet, that, "What you keep is lost. What you give is forever yours!"

TECHNICAL ADVANCES

Technical advances, made very largely through the laudable work of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers, permit the alert manager to exhibit another interesting facet of the personality, the psychology of the theater, namely, the reduction of distraction in the modern show. We are so prone to take inventions and innovations for granted that we may be unmindful of the superb physical aspect of the modern theater. Compare it with the early motion picture house. The speaker can recall the first pictures he ever saw. They were shown by a man who is now a leading exhibitor in a not too distant city. The "theater" was the lower floor of a dwelling house, with all partitions removed. The projection machine was cranked and "hot flashes" were frequent. A man and woman seated behind the screen "talked" and made sound effects. Between pictures the manager sang some popular song whose words, enshrined in roses, and illustrated by two lovers in various paralytic poses, were flashed on the screen. The audience helped out with the dialog. The chairs were hard. Peanuts and popcorn added their merry note. And the admission was five cents. Many of you are too young to recall that there was a time when five cents was a substantial medium of exchange. People went then because of the novelty. Few persons thought that the novelty would last.

From that day to this we have come a long way in every phase of the theater. Technical progress in projection, sound, comfort, and safety has been striking. In theater architecture great advances have been made. While it is still recognized that a certain opulence of decoration is part of the theater's appeal, we have tended to move

away from the excessively baroque and what the author terms the "ro-cuckoo" styles of architectural embellishments. The Idle Hour of yesterday would hardly recognize its modern descendant.

ENGINEERING ADVANCES

But let us look at this idea which we have called the reduction of distraction in the theater made possible by striking engineering advances. And it would seem that the patrons should know what underlies the successful showing of a picture: Our measure of how successful is this reduction of distraction, is how completely the individual patron is enabled to concentrate on the picture without distraction by uncontrolled noise, faulty lighting, discomforts of any kind, or fears as to his safety if an emergency should come about. Continuous study is given to these matters by functioning committees of the SMPE, and theater managers have access to a wealth of technical information.

Let us look at a few of these innovations. How many persons know what comprehensive study is given to theater carpet, its quality, texture, "joints," and method of laying. We are all greatly impressed by projection and sound equipment, but part of the benefits of these technical advances would be lost were it not for the correct pitch of the floor and the proper arrangement of seats. And what improvements have been made in seats and in indirect aisle lighting, in the skillful arrangement of gallery steps and in the marking of top or bottom steps whose height may differ from the others thus causing a tripping and falling hazard if uncorrected. Such a simple and effective device as the increasing width of the aisle from front to rear has been noticed by millions who have no conception of its significance in emptying a theater.

SAFETY

Consider safety measures, which, though unseen to a large extent, must be present. The speaker is vitally interested in safety and in the safety of persons in places of public assembly. So are you! He is interested in a beautiful entrance and lobby, but more interested in how quickly and safely the entire theater can be evacuated. It may be well to repeat a statement from a previous paper: that if by reason of lack of provision for preventive measures a panic should happen in a theater, 20 years of good management can be undone in 20 seconds. So we come to consider all the study that has been given to the

number, the types, and the arrangement of exits, as well as the means which are used to inform patrons of exit locations. We are interested in proper lighting of outside exits, in the substitution of ramps for steps where possible, in the fact that all exits must lead to a safe place.

As fire is a leading cause of panic, you, the manager, and you, the engineer, give constant thought to fire prevention and to the training of staffs in the handling of possible emergencies. A constant correspondence is going on between the manager and the engineer in which questions are asked and answers given as to how the safety of a given theater may be increased. We do not often think of this, but in proportion to the millions of patrons handled, the motion picture theater is relatively one of the safest places in which to be! How many people know this fact? All of these advances come about through the teamwork of the engineer and the manager, with the public as the ultimate beneficiary. When a patron sits in a modern theater he is enjoying, consciously or unconsciously, a rich inheritance of technical and managerial excellence. Why not tell him more about it, as the manager moves about the community?

CONCLUSION

So, the manager has a great deal to sell, if he has the capacity to appreciate, as was said at the beginning, the real significance of that of which he is part. Some managers are on the defensive. They have an excessive deference to criticism, possibly because they are unsure of themselves or because they separate themselves, spiritually, from the producer, or, let us face it bravely, from Hollywood. That is rather silly, is it not? Something like a swimmer repudiating the water in which he swims, saying that he would do better if he had different water.

Let us look at Hollywood for a moment. Hollywood is where most of our pictures are made. It has been said once or twice that it is a rather fabulous place. Well, why would not it be? Put a large number of creative artists such as actors and actresses, producers, directors, and the innumerable technicians and others, all prima donnas in some degree, into one locality and what would you expect? Add to this happy company the great American vice of exploiting to the last degree any merchandisable commodity through every variety of publicity medium. Add also that army of hangers-on who make their fat livings battening on gossip, on unconventionalities, on shattered

artistic reputations, so that every trivial work, happening, or opinion becomes inordinately magnified. If we buy a goldfish bowl and stock it, we shouldn't complain because thereafter we can see every movement of the fish, particularly if we have an announcer. An ultimate explanation of Hollywood doubtless never will be made, but some explanation that is reasonably comprehensive can be attempted. And it may be salutary to remember that the exhibitor would be in a rather curious position without Hollywood!

Another factor which puts certain managers on the defensive is patron criticism of "bad" pictures. There is really little defense for bad pictures. We may as well be frank; some of them are pretty poor. Yet the wonder of it all to an uninstructed layman like the author is not that there is a percentage of weak pictures, but that in an industry which has to maintain such production schedules for so many different tastes, so many reasonably good ones are put out.

What other industry of comparable scope do *you* know which within its limitations, must meet such a variety of tastes as the motion picture industry? The picture which nauseates the intelligentsia in one area, delights others. There is every possible provision for experimental pictures, for new forms, for "art" pictures. But such pictures never will be commercially profitable, nor would they ever satisfy the majority of tastes. Remember, this is no defense of mediocrity. It is a realistic appreciation of realistic problems.

The industry must make a profit, if it is to continue to produce pictures for exhibition. This is something the advanced thinkers sometimes forget. Certainly, pictures should be better. They will improve slowly as writers, producers, exhibitors, *and patrons* improve. The manager can at least discuss some of these facts with the critics before agreeing too glibly with them and subtly conveying the impression that if he were at the helm things would be different.

No, there is a psychology of the theater, but it is a psychology which must be studied constantly, and learned, and interpreted. This is no small activity with which you are connected. It is a "big" thing with magnificent opportunities and large responsibilities. It is an industry built on great technical proficiencies and artistic achievements. Its success will depend ultimately on the fullest co-operation among all concerned, the producer, the engineer, the exhibitor, and the patron. There must be the fullest awareness of the problems just as there is the great appreciation of the achievements. It is the managers, ultimately, the men and women at the distant outposts, who are the

interpreters. On this comprehension, their perception, and their alertness, the personality of the theater will largely depend.

Let us take a brief journey, not to one of the great theaters in large cities, but to a small "house" on the streets of a town. This particular house is a "two-shows a night." It is dusk. As the sunlight fails, the twinkling lights of houses and storefronts come on. The townspeople are at supper. The manager of the theater stands in front for a moment. He has lived here for a number of years and some of his roots are already deep in the life of the town. He sees lights in stores which would otherwise be dark were it not for the theater which brings the townsmen through the evening streets. He looks up and down the street, greets a few friends, and then passes inside. In a moment the bright lights of the marquee are turned on. The manager looks over the house, checks his little staff, and soon the patrons begin arriving.

In this simple procedure, something really tremendous has happened. From all of their diverse occupations, with all of their problems, their tastes and their hopes and fears these people have come to be entertained. But to the manager they are not just people. They are his friends, his fellow townsmen. In a real sense, he is the steward of a wider world than these people see every day, the world of the cinema, both the world of make-believe and the world of reality. Like Aladdin, when he turns on the lights of the theater, he turns on also the lights, the varied lights, of human experience. Certainly there is a psychology of the theater, there is a personality, a meaning.

Do we *know* it?

DISCUSSION

MR. WILLIAM H. OFFENHAUSER, JR.: There is a wide variation in the psychology that you find in theaters in different places. One goes to the Music Hall for instance, and one enjoys the depth of the seats. I have seen pictures in the open down in Africa, and I can assure you the psychology of the theater there is quite different. When I came back, I went up to New Hampshire for a little trip through the White Mountains. I happened to see a picture advertised in a local theater which I wanted to see. It was up one flight in what is called a fire trap. Incidentally, it was a two-projector house, but one of them was not running. The audience seemed to hark back to that old gag or trick of audience reaction that was rather common, I think, 35 years ago, of stamping between reels. That went on in this small town just two weeks ago.

Then when I come down here, we talk about a wide range of things, from what you might call the peak of industrial civilization as we have it here in New York, in the United States, and, the absence of it in some other places.

It seems to me that the psychology of the theater extends considerably beyond merely the matter of mechanics and of people. It is a question of adapting the mechanics to the people and the people to the mechanics in some way or other. How it can be done, I do not know, but it does make an impression when, let us say, two weeks or so ago I saw, in London, one of the Russion propaganda films in color, 90 minutes of so-called documentary, and then saw a film, one of our typical Class B minus gangster films in Africa, shown to Africans. They sit up in the six-penny seats. Incidentally they are interested in girly-girly shows, and all that sort of thing. They do not want the others. And then I saw what one might call a picture much closer to the Class A type—I wouldn't call it quite A, probably B plus, in this one-projector house in the United States. It seems to me that there is a wide diversity of material, conditions, and equipment that is encompassed by the motion picture industry, and much consideration could be given to it.

We could talk about it endlessly. But what good does it do? The reason we really want to come is to see a show.

MR. BEN SCHLANGER: There is one point that Dr. Cutter brought out which I think is worthy of a little further enlightenment, and that is the cinema-goer who comes to the theater to forget all his problems completely and be in the world of what he is looking at in the cinema. And that is what we need greatly, a theater auditorium where a person can sit down and look at what is ahead of him and not be conscious of the physical shelter in which he is enjoying that picture. He has to be able to look at that picture, lose himself in it completely, and have no reminder of the fact that he is in an enclosure and looking at a picture.

That is a pretty difficult thing to accomplish but I think it is worth striving for.

If you have auditorium walls with certain types of decorations, let us say Georgian and Colonial, and the picture that is being shown on the screen is a scene in the Sahara desert, they do not belong together at all. In other words, the auditorium has to be a completely neutral enclosure, to enable you to enjoy completely that which is being shown to you, and we have to try to make that picture that is ahead of us not appear as a picture, but as real life; in the motion picture it can appear even more like real life than in the stage theater, because in Hollywood the boys have a few tricks up their sleeves that can produce it.

CHAIRMAN JAMES FRANK, JR.: The African theater, I suppose, had no walls and no ceiling.

MR. SCHLANGER: You could project a picture in the open air, like in a drive-in theater, and you will have this: a very brightly lighted picture, and then the black of night around you. That is a little better than sitting in an enclosed theater with a bright screen and many other distractions, but there is still another point. You have to go even further than that. You have to accept the shelter that encloses you in an indoor theater and take advantage of the shelter and use the surfaces of that shelter to create a light tint which will be related to the picture instead of having a black surrounding around the picture, which is an artificial masking. We do not walk around all day long with a black frame in front of us