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Separate Movie Showings

Elyse Rose Echevarria

Methods of History

Dr. Phillis Barragan

Nowadays, when you go to watch a movie, it does not matter who you are, what you are, or especially what skin color you are. You can walk into a movie theatre, buy a ticket, and go watch your movie. Unfortunately, this was not the case for all movie theatres in the first half of the twentieth century. San Antonio theatres were segregated throughout in this era, which encouraged segregation throughout the city. Segregation occurred in many places, but who could have thought that segregation could have occurred at family-oriented places such as the Majestic Theatre, the Rex Theatre, and the Cameo Theater. All of these theaters were known to had segregation elements placed that overall caused a different experience for blacks and whites. Each theatre was built to please crowds, and each one completed that mission with help from their owners. Even in blacks and Hispanics leisure time, they were forced to be separated. No matter if the theatre was air-conditioned, or open to see the sky, separate was not equal.

The Majestic Theatre, located in San Antonio, Texas on Houston street, open on June 14, 1929. According to the Texas State Historical Association, “It was one of the last atmospheric theaters designed and built by John Eberson.”¹ John Eberson (1875-1954) was a designer for many “atmospheric” theatres in Texas.² The building cost nearly three million dollars to build and construct. It included an auditorium, and multiples levels of seating with a capacity of 3,700 and more on some occasions. In its first opening, it was the “Largest movie house in South and the second largest in the nation.”³ One item that was built into the theatre that no other theatres in Texas had was fully functioning air conditioner system, which made it more comfortable not only for the guests, but for performers. Despite these modern amenities, the Majestic Theatre had

¹ Ann T. Smith, “Majestic Theatre (San Antonio)”, *Texas State Historical Association Handbook of Texas*, Accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/majestic-theatre-san-antonio>.

² Ibid. Ann T. Smith

³ Ibid. Ann T. Smith

its own partake in segregating whites and blacks or Hispanics. Having so many balconies can give you a different view. To have all this space and only use some of it for blacks and Hispanics was just unfair. It was common though for theatres to be segregated.

Although there was only one showtime, it was as if you get a different showing depending on what color of skin you had. With the different viewpoint, you may miss certain aspects of the movie, and miss a total experience of enjoyment. White families were able to enjoy a movie with out having any concerns if they had enough space, they were able to choose from a not only one section of seating, but three different sections. Blacks could only choose their seats from a small section on the second balcony. The comfort was minimal as well. Even if there was open seating left in the white section, blacks were not allowed outside their segregated area. They would work all week, for a \$10 movie ticket, just to attend a theatre that was not comfortable and often not enjoyable.

Below, you will see a photo taken by Steve Kraus around the time the Majestic Theatre first opened in June of 1929.

My San Antonio.com⁴



⁴ Photo taken by Steve Kraus, June 29th, 1929, found on <https://www.mysanantonio.com/150years/article/20-things-to-know-about-the-historic-Majestic-6214608.php#photo-7848961> Accessed April 11, 2021

From the bathrooms to the entrances, segregated. For the Majestic Theatre, they had a specific entrance for African American or Hispanics to enter. According the J.M. Scott with My San Antonio, he stated in describing a photo below that “Until the 1960s, African-American patrons entered the theater from the back door on College Street. They had a separate elevator that took them to segregated seating in the second balcony, as described in the registration form for the National Register of Historic Places.”⁵

My San Antonio.com⁶



Having a separate entrance for any establishment was not uncommon. It is strange though that they would not get to see the beautiful lobby entrance and receive the full experience that only whites got to experience. For the world of theatre today, being inclusive and not judging anyone by anything much less skin color is a huge standpoint they try to make. Of course, it has nearly been 85 years since any segregation in a theatre has been in place, but for a place that stands for family sure shows how separated one can be.

The Majestic Theatre closed its doors in December of 1974. It was declared a landmark and in 1988 purchased by the city of San Antonio. The Majestic re-opened its doors to the

⁵ J.M. Smith, “20 things to know about the historic Majestic theatre”, *My SA*, (December 5th, 2017) <https://www.mysanantonio.com/150years/article/20-things-to-know-about-the-historic-Majestic-6214608.php#photo-7830834> Accessed April 1st, 2021

⁶ Ibid. J.M. Scott

public, after \$4.5 million dollar restoration project, on September 14, 1989. The seating capacity was lowered to 2,264 people according to TSHA.⁷The Majestic sees hundreds of thousands of people every season and all of them are of many shapes, sizes, and colors. The inclusivity has changed dramatically since the 1950s at the Majestic, but unfortunately not all theatres were able to make a comeback.

Movie theatres have been around for decades. In San Antonio, the Majestic Theatre was not the only theatre that had movie showings or a “atmospheric”⁸ like ceiling. The Rex Theatre was located at 1301 N. Zarzamora, San Antonio, Texas according to Paula Allen with the San Antonio Express News.⁹ The Rex Theatre was even more different from other theatres as it not only was an open-air theatre, and its patrons were predominantly African America and Hispanics. You would rarely or never see someone of white skin attending a showing at the Rex theatre.¹⁰ It was never a sad or unfortunate scene as the people who came to watch and the owners who provided a place to always come and a good reason for being there.

Many theatres, especially now in 2021, are indoor, air condition regulated and have game arcades and so much more. In the 1940s and 1950s, that was not so much the case. For a large indoor theatre, only so many theatres were built to have indoor air conditioning. Smaller theatres would also have limited access to building air condition into their theatre. The Rex Theatre was

⁷ Ann T. Smith, “Majestic Theatre (San Antonio)”, *Texas State Historical Association Handbook of Texas*, Accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/majestic-theatre-san-antonio>.

⁸ Ann T. Smith, “Majestic Theatre (San Antonio)”, *Texas State Historical Association Handbook of Texas*, Accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/majestic-theatre-san-antonio>.

⁹ Paula Allen, “Rex Theater served black audiences on San Antonio's West Side in the 1940s, '50s”, *San Antonio Express News*, November, 11th, 2017, Accessed April 12, 2021. https://www.expressnews.com/life/life_columnists/paula_allen/article/Rex-Theater-served-black-audiences-on-San-12350564.php

¹⁰ Open-air theatre: A place where a theatre or concert is held outside or in the open-air.

different structurely because it was an open-air or outdoor theatre. Many would mistake the for a drive in theatre, but in a interview with Ethel Garrett conducted by Allen, Garrett said that,

“African-American-only theater (1940s-'50s) located at 1301 N. Zarzamora St. at West Poplar street. The structure that is left was the projection and ticket booth. This theater was not a drive-in; there were folding theater seats, no roof and a large screen, and the theater was surrounded by a corrugated metal wall. The price of admission was 10 cents. As a preteen, I enjoyed attending the neighborhood theater and meeting up with friends. I am interested in who the owner was and the closing date of the theater”¹¹.

With this firsthand experience, we are able to prove with out photo evidence that the theatre was an open-air theatre. However, Allen is the one who goes more into detail about how this theatre was pretty enclosed as to who was let in.

The Rex Theatre was another theatre in San Antonio that let hundreds of people enjoy family while watching a cinema on the big screen. But the people who were watching were blacks or Hispanics. Hardly any whites would come to a theatre that was shared with other people of different colored skin. If the whites were to come, they would be expecting a segregated section or they did not have a prejudice towards blacks. The great thing about the Rex Theatre was that it catered to its audience. Allen stated that,

“That he did: Labutis Sr. not only had his movie businesses but also two loan companies and a jewelry store. He built a house for his family — wife Vera and two children, Ralph Jr. and Renée — in the 200 block of West Wildwood Drive. He established the Rex Theater in the late 1940s, says his son, when drive-in theaters, a different open-air concept, were getting to be

¹¹ Paula Allen, “Rex Theater served black audiences on San Antonio's West Side in the 1940s, '50s”, *San Antonio Express News*, (November, 11th, 2017), Accessed April 12, 2021. https://www.expressnews.com/life/life_columnists/paula_allen/article/Rex-Theater-served-black-audiences-on-San-12350564.php

popular. “Most of them were on the North Side, and black people didn’t go there. He asked around (the neighborhood), did a little research and found out that people were interested in a theater they could walk to,” said Laboutis Jr., who worked at the Rex as a teenager”¹².

Making your customers happy, no matter the ethnicity, shape, or size, will always result in a thriving business. Allen also goes to talk about how the Rex Theatre was an overall different experience compared to other theatres in San Antonio. She writes,

“The alternative was going to a segregated downtown theater, where “The film-seeking black person had to accept several acute indignities,” wrote the San Antonio Express, June 11, 1972. “He had to go to the back or side of a theater to get in, had to sit in ‘the colored balcony’ and had to buy popcorn at a mini-concession stand in a small, tucked-away lobby”.”¹³.

The Rex Theatre was a family environment that was made for a leisure of pleasure. Blacks saw the same movie everyone else was watching at the same price, in a family friendly environment, and most of all a place where they were respected. They could bring their own personal items from home that could alter the experience to make it as if you are watching it in your own back yard. The Rex Theatre changed the status of “segregated” by bringing together families for one leisure time. A time that has turned into quality bonding time for everyone.

The Rex Theatre was not the only black theatre in San Antonio. The Cameo Theatre, located on 1123 East Commerce Street, San Antonio, Texas, was the theatre for blacks to go to in downtown San Antonio. Unlike the Rex but like the Majestic, the Cameo was a theatre that was indoors. Like the other theatres, it not only showed movies, but had live production

¹²Paula Allen, “Rex Theater served black audiences on San Antonio's West Side in the 1940s, '50s”, *San Antonio Express News*, November, 11th, 2017, Accessed April 12, 2021.

https://www.expressnews.com/life/life_columnists/paula_allen/article/Rex-Theater-served-black-audiences-on-San-12350564.php

¹³ Ibid. Paula Allen. Accessed April 12, 2021

performers as well! The Cameo Theatre showcased many films and productions but the different experience that the Cameo had was that it provided a place for blacks to enjoy African American made films and productions while also being segregated in a smaller setting.

Cameo Theatre 2015¹⁴



The Cameo Theatre was originally built in 1940. It had a house seating of around 574 seats.¹⁵ Built in a largely African American neighborhood, the Cameo Theatre was specifically built for blacks. It was a place for them to be accepted. A writer from the San Antonio Observer writes:

“The Cameo was a focal point for the latest Black films by Black producers. The Cameo served as a movie theater and a vaudeville house for singers and musicians. In the early years, performers such as Fats Domino, B.B. King, and Louis Armstrong played at the Cameo. Other performing musicians who stayed at the Deluxe Hotel across the street, may have visited the Cameo and included Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Lionel Hampton. This area was a hub of black businesses that served the community because of segregation”¹⁶.

¹⁴ Google Maps, Accessed April 11, 2021.

¹⁵ “Cameo Theatre”, *Cinema Treasures*, Accessed April 18th, 2021.

<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/8074>

¹⁶ “Black history in San Antonio- The Cameo Theatre & Black Commerce Street”, *The San Antonio Observer*, (May 2, 2020), Accessed April 18th, 2021. <https://saobserver.com/black-history-in-san-antonio-the-cameo-theatre-black-commerce-street/>

The Cameo Theatre compared to other theaters in San Antonio such as The Rex and The Majestic is in its own category. The Cameo Theatre gave experiences and opportunities that was just for minorities. They did not have to accommodate their leisure time for anyone else. They got to experience a night of enjoyment without worrying if they could or could not sit as a family.

San Antonio Register Friday June 7th, 1940¹⁷



The Cameo Theater provided a place for African Americans to showcase their own movies, productions, and performances, what it also provided for the people off stage was a place of leisure that was not only comfortable but enjoyable. Although smaller than other theaters in San Antonio, the Cameo provided an experience that was unlike the Majestic Theater but similar to the Rex. It may not have been built the same way, but when looking at the overall experience on how they were able to sit down and chairs that were provided to them and enjoy a movie that is projected inside at any time of the day or watch a live performance at any time of

¹⁷ “San Antonio Register: Cameo Theatre Opening”, *The Portal Of Texas*, June 7th, 1940, Accessed April 18th, 2021. <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph399552/m1/7/?q=Cameo%20Theater>

the day. It was an experience that was unavailable without the consequences of being segregated or separated.

San Antonio Express News¹⁸



The Cameo Theater offered a lot to the black community. It gave them exposure to a form of art that often might not have been available to them on a normal daily basis. With This exposure can and did give new hope as well as better lives for the black community. It showed that there are jobs out there in the world that although may be different, can be enjoyable as well as sustaining. Not only did the Cameo Theater give an experience of enjoyment, but an experience that not every black community were not only able to receive but even imagine going to.

¹⁸ Deborah Martin, "Cameo Theatre now owned by City Church", *San Antonio Express News*, March 19th, 2015. Accessed April 18th, 2021. <https://www.expressnews.com/business/article/Cameo-Theatre-now-owned-by-City-Church-6146261.php#photo-7683159>

The Cameo Theatre Historic Designation Certificate¹⁹



HISTORIC DESIGNATION: VERIFIED CERTIFICATE

This verified certificate regarding Historic Designation is being recorded in compliance with Section and 35-606(b)(5) of the City of San Antonio's Unified Development Code, which provides that upon designation of a building, object, site, structure, or cluster as a historic landmark, the City Council shall cause this designation to be recorded in the official public records of real property of Bexar County, the tax records of the City of San Antonio and the Bexar Appraisal District, the house numbering section of the City of San Antonio's Department of Development Services, and on the City of San Antonio's official zoning maps.

Additionally, this verified certificate is being recorded to comply with Section 315.006 (b) of the Texas Local Government Code, which states each municipality shall file in the real property records of the county clerk's office of each county in which the municipality is located a verified written instrument listing each historic structure or property that is located in the municipality and county and is designated as historic by a political subdivision of the state by:

1. the street address, if available in the municipal files;
2. the legal description of the real property on which the structure or property is located; and
3. the name of the owner of the real property, if the name is available in the municipal files.

The historic structures or properties described in this verified certificate have been given the following historic designations, as described on the attached documents:

- City of San Antonio Historic Exceptional Landmark (HE); or
- City of San Antonio Historic Significant Landmark (HS); or
- City of San Antonio Historic Landmark (HL); or
- City of San Antonio Historic District (H)

The legal descriptions of the real property on which the aforementioned designated historic structures or properties are located are as described on the attached documents and are on file in the Office of the City Clerk.

Book 16817 Page 1967 238pps

VERIFICATION

STATE OF TEXAS §
 COUNTY OF BEXAR §

KNOW ALL PERSONS BY THESE PRESENTS

BEFORE ME, the undersigned authority, personally appeared Shanon Shea Miller and being by me duly sworn on his/her oath states:

1. that he/she is the Director of the Office of Historic Preservation (City Clerk, Director of the Office of Historic Preservation, or their authorized designee);
2. that he/she is over 21 years of age and fully competent to make this statement;
3. that he/she is duly authorized to make this verification;
4. that the matters contained in the foregoing attachments are based on information collected and maintained by the Office of Historic Preservation in files which are kept in the regular course of municipal business by a municipal employee whose business it is to collect and maintain such information for the municipality.

Shanon Shea Miller
 Municipal Official Signature

Shanon Shea Miller
 Municipal Official Name

Director
 Title

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN to before me on this the 6 day of June, 2014.

Shanon Shea Miller
 NOTARY PUBLIC STATE OF TEXAS
 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

STATE OF TEXAS §
 COUNTY OF BEXAR §

This instrument was acknowledged before me on June 6, 2014, by

Shanon Shea Miller as Director
 Name Title



The Majestic Theatre, The Rex Theatre and The Cameo Theatre all had a form of segregation experience at some point in time. Not every experience was the same. But it all links back to segregation Overall, the exposure as well as the memories that a movie theater or production theater brings are some of the most family oriented memories. Unfortunately, through some theaters in San Antonio the memories may have been overall impacted by segregation. With the majestic theater forcing Blacks to sit on a different level and enter an exit through a different entrance 'cause not only a different viewpoint of whatever they were watching, but an uncomfortable state knowing that they are only there for one section and one section only. Not to mention the price difference between the Rex and cameo an majestic theater. For the majestic,

¹⁹ "CITY OF SAN ANTONIO OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION". *The State of Texas County of Bexar Official Records Search*. August 8, 2014. Accessed April 30th, 2021.

you would have to pay almost five times what a white person would pay for a cheap movie. But if you travel less than two miles to East Commerce St or even 10 miles to Zazamora street, you could watch a movie for the same price as whites would. Compared to the majestic though you would never see the atmospheric like setting as well as the beautiful scenery that the Majestic had to offer. Could a family be willing to trade a beautiful scenery and layout for a view that might be obscured and uncomfortable? or would they be OK with sitting outside with whatever weather San Antonio could offer and having to bring their own personal items from their homes, if any furniture was available to be carried or brought from home, and sit wherever they please? Or Lastly, are they willing to go all the way back to downtown to enjoy a theater that can offer the best of both worlds but be completely segregated and no way of experiencing what a mix of both white and black society is?

Every person experiences a movie different. Whether it be you are a hopeless romantic , or you are a die hard thriller junkie. For Blacks and Hispanics in San Antonio, it didn't matter what type of movie or show or performance was happening at the theater. What matters is what experience and what overall enjoyment they were getting all while being told they should not get the same experience as a white person. To have separation is to have a separate experience. The experience you want from a theater, no matter what kind, is one that is memorable and enjoyable. For Blacks to have to go out of their way for a activity that is often done during their leisure time for enjoyment and pleasure can almost bring more stress and often a vexatious time. Frustration and hardship already was occurring. to add these emotions to an experience that should be pleasant was unfair to our black community.

As of today, the majestic remains open to house many Broadway touring productions and amazing performances by artists from all over. Both the Rex and Cameo theater have been

permanently closed Anne no longer run any sort of performances and movies. It is strange to see how the theater with the most segregation survived through and reopened but the two theaters that try to overcome segregation and provide a outlet for the black community didn't make it. Although now the majestic is now integrated and no longer require separate seating order use of a separate entrance, we should still show how black history impacted San Antonio in all areas of us.

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