

Stained glass, glittering marquis, and \$50,000 profit

Princess Theatre still glitters after 71 years

by Suzanne Lundrigan

Say Mordecai, did you happen to stop by the Princess Theatre on your way through town... it's on Whyte Avenue, 10337 to be exact. Oh, you missed it... too bad Mr. Richler, because the Princess keeps a lot of Edmontonians out of the beer parlor come the blustery evenings of winter.

The Princess is the crown jewel of the Old Strathcona Society's restoration project.

Save for the installation of a Dolby Sound system, little has been altered in the 71-year-old theatre.

The glittering marquis greets patrons just as it did in 1915.

Inside, the chandeliered lobby, copper cornices, stained glass and gold-leaf trim exude the elegance and grandeur of a true movie palace.

This is to say nothing of the homemade popcorn with REAL butter, the prices: \$2.50 for members, \$4.25 for adults, and a varied and eclectic movie program.

Until recently, the only repertory house in Edmonton, the Princess is unique among Edmonton theatres.

Unlike the other local theatres which run a single movie for months at a time, the Princess generally shows two different films every night with the longest run being a one week booking which is reserved for exclusive Edmonton premieres. "Locked booking", as this system is called, also means that there are no hold-over options no matter how popular the film is.

Program Director Susan Morrow explains the intricacies of preparing the Princess schedule of films.

"I read a lot of newspapers including the Canadian publications and the New York and L.A. papers, watching for films which might do well in Edmonton. I also look to films which have done well for us in the past. As well I keep an eye out for films in Toronto which might have a shot at an independent theatre like the Princess. Members suggestions are also honoured whenever possible."

Operating as an independent has its advantages.

"I program with this city's character in mind. Thus I have to be aware of the things like the playoff slump which occurs every May. The chain theatres like Cineplex/Odeon are programmed by an individual in Toronto who is not aware of these local traits."

When bidding for a picture, Morrow recognizes that the Princess is at a disadvantage. She is in competition with companies like Cineplex/Odeon and Famous Players who are prepared to offer \$50,000 guarantees and extended runs to the distributors.

"It's a given that I get a first run film only if the bigger companies aren't interested in it. Fortunately, the big companies base their decisions on what happens in Toronto. If a film opens soft in Toronto they will drop it. Ironically we've picked up some terrific premiere films because of this practice. A recent example is the film *Birdy*, which

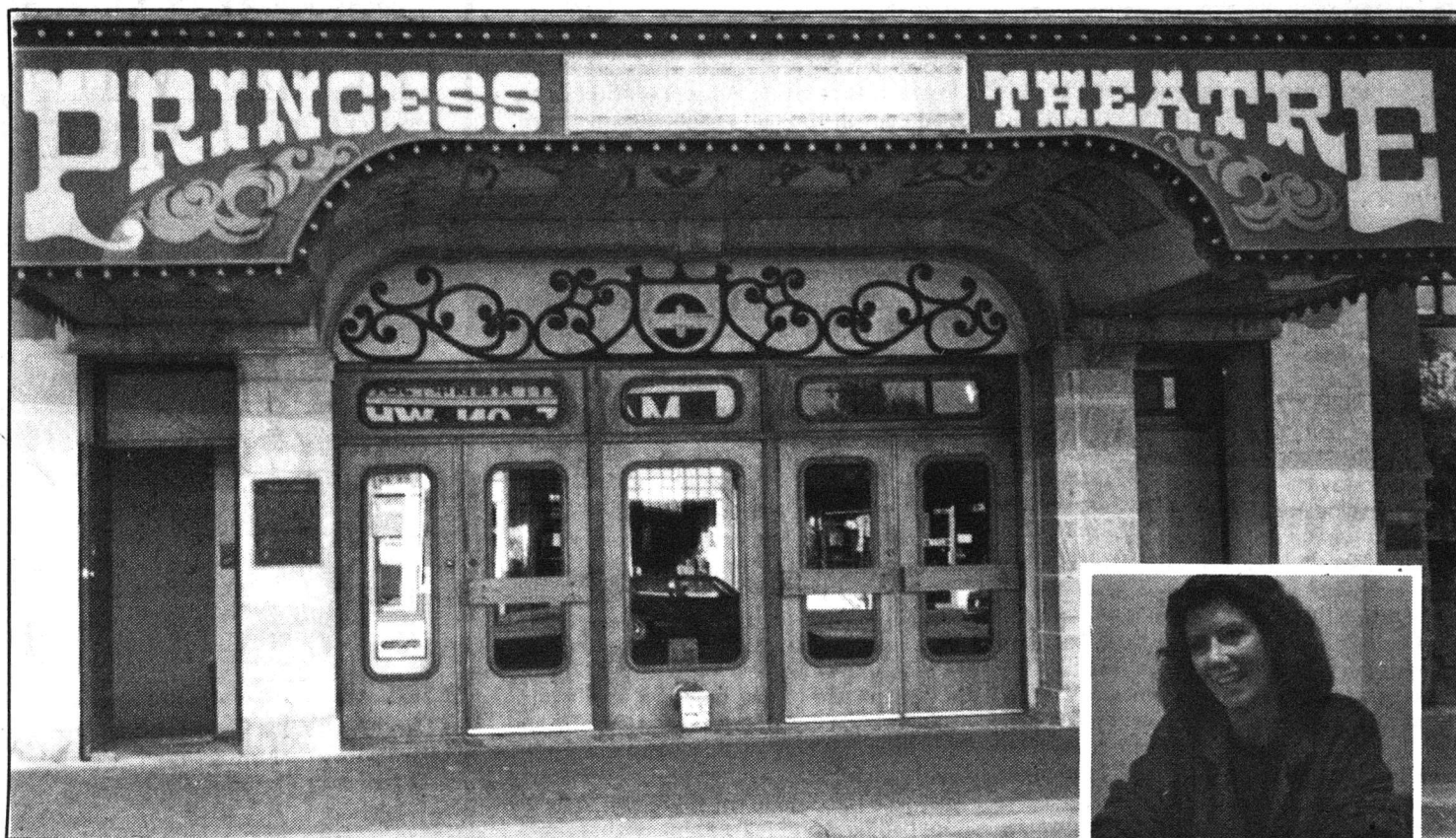


photo Greg McHarg

Susan Morrow (inset) and Princess Theatre: "We know our audience and we know the city."



though it did only so-so business in Toronto, played to packed houses here in Edmonton.

Savvy of this sort has served the Princess well. In spite of considerable competition from the other big name companies, the Princess is a financially sound proposition.

With a profit of \$50,000 last year, Morrow is looking forward to putting some of those funds back into the Princess.

"The Princess is a fund raising arm for the Old Strathcona Foundation which is a non-profit organization. Each year they receive twenty to thirty thousand dollars of our profits and the rest goes back into the theatre."

Among the renovations planned for the 85/86 season is the restoration of the west wall which because of inadequate drainage soaks up water which then seeps through the wall causing damage to the plaster and paint. The lobby is being repapered and there are plans in the offing for a members bar in the basement...to become a reality this spring.

"Last year we had 5,000 members and on any given night at least 40 per cent of the audience are members. We'd really like to open a private drinking establishment which would cater to these members. We would be able to carry the Princess's atmosphere over into the club."

Plans for the future aside, Morrow is ever aware of the business aspect of theatre management.

When asked about the advent of the Cineplex/Odeon's new repertory theatre to be housed in the Jasper Cinema, Morrow is

adamant, "It sucks. That company has more money than I'll ever see to pour into advertising."

Competition doesn't frighten Morrow, but the principle of the matter irks her, "I think the Princess can handle the competition."

"A chain like Cineplex/Odeon has one individual programming out of Toronto for all the theatres in that chain. Obviously this individual will not have the insight that someone living in Edmonton would have about the city."

At the Princess we know our audience and we know the city. Therein lies the advantage we have over a company like Cineplex/Odeon."

Business matters and inner workings aside, the Princess is the place to go if you have to brush up on your Bunuel for Film Studies 400, "read" *Pride and Prejudice* for English 210 or lose yourself in an old Bogie flick. Tom Wingfield couldn't have had it better.

What's that Mr. Richler... yes that's right only in Edmonton...pity, eh?

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TOP 10 ALBUMS

1. Jane Siberry — The Speckless Sky (Duke Street (Canada))
2. The Cure — The Head On The Door (Elektra/Wea)
3. Van Morrison — Live At The Grand Opera House Belfast (Mercury/Polygram)
4. Sir Charles Thompson — Portrait Of A Piano (Sackville (Canada))
5. Aly Bain — Aly Bain (Whirlie/Celtic Distributors)
6. The Independents — Save Yourself (Rockin' Rod (Canada))
7. Steve Tittle — (One Of The) Merely Players (Nerve (Canada))
8. The Colour Field — Virgins and Philistines (Chrysalis/McA)
9. Harbie Hancock & Foday Muse Suso — Village Life (Columbia/CBS)
10. Joe McPhee — Visitation (Sackville (Canada))

Singles, EP's & Tapes

1. Rip Chords — View From Above (Concrete Discs (Canada))
2. Chris & Cossey — Sweet Surprize (tape)
3. Propaganda — P — Machinery/Dr. Mabuse (First Life) (Island/MCA)
4. Felt — Primitive Pointers/Cathedral (Cherry Red/UK)
5. Dreams So Real — Whirl (Twin Tone)
6. Sinatras — I'm Lonely (Strike Back/Quality)
7. The Adult Net — Incense And Peppermints (Beggars Banquet/WEA)
8. Zimbo Chimps — In A Cave/Inca Vacation (Budget Ranch (U.S.))
9. X Ray Pop MB5 (Sacem (France))
10. Jackie Washington And The Mystery Band? — Is You Or Is You Ain't (Roto-Noto Records)