

# Movies at the Punch: A History of the Punch and Judy Theater

by Carrie Jones

*To many Grosse Pointers, an evening at the movies meant a trip to the Punch and Judy Theater. Here Carrie Jones tells the story of one of Grosse Pointe's most familiar landmarks.*

**T**HE TRANSITION FROM silent to sound motion pictures took place, roughly, between October 5, 1927, when *The Jazz Singer* opened in New York, and 1935, the first year in which all motion picture theaters in the United States had been wired for sound films. In the midst of this transformation, on January 29, 1930, a small

motion picture theater called the Punch and Judy opened at 17937 (now 21) Kercheval in Grosse Pointe Farms. Rumors cite the Punch and Judy as the first theater in Michigan, or even in the entire United States, to have been built specifically for talking pictures; however, this honor has never been documented. The Punch and Judy was certainly not the first theater in Michigan to exhibit talkies; that distinction



*"Punch and Judy Theater," from a print by Jerry Crowley, 1985.*

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belonging to the Temple, Lafayette, or Madison theaters, depending on the source.<sup>1</sup> Nor was the Punch and Judy even the first motion picture theater in the Grosse Pointes. The Grosse Pointe Park theater (later re-named the Aloma), just inside the Grosse Pointe border on Charlevoix, was operating at least as early as 1923 and showing talking pictures over six months before the Punch and Judy opened. Though it may not claim any “firsts” in the history of the movies, the Punch and Judy has been a forerunner in many of the trends that have marked the exhibition of motion pictures in the last fifty-five years.

From its inception, the Punch and Judy was noteworthy for both its design and its architect, Robert O. Derrick. Derrick moved to Detroit after World War I and became a popular architect in the city, particularly in the Grosse Pointes, where he designed a number of private homes. His most famous building in the Detroit area is the Henry Ford Museum in Greenfield Village. Designed in the same year that the Punch and Judy was built, the museum contains a theater that is almost identical to the one in Grosse Pointe Farms.

The theater’s opening provoked enough public interest for the Detroit News to publish an article describing the Punch and Judy three days before its inaugural exhibition.

A few glances are all that are necessary to realize that the Punch and Judy was designed with a home-like comfort as its chief attribute. There is nothing of the elaborate appeal of the standard movie house in its Early American outline. It is more a place to feel at home amid dignified and subdued coloring, modest lighting effects and seating arrangements in harmony with the quiet atmosphere.

The architectural treatment is distinctly Colonial with

high roof, brick exterior and shuttered windows. An unassuming sign suspended over the main entrance bearing the name and two quaint marionettes is the only conspicuous indication of its nature. Within, the entire decorative scheme suggests a pioneer stateliness. The walls are plain; the only hint of embellishment being gold borders along the paneling. In the lounge wood paneling, pegged flooring, and spacious fireplaces emphasize the historical impression.<sup>2</sup>

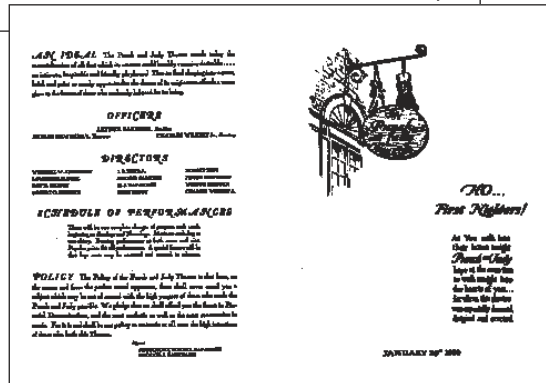
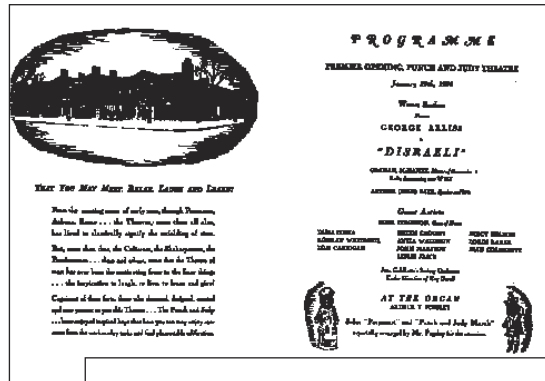
At that time, the theater had 504 seats on the main floor and 96 in the loge. As the same article described them; “The chairs in the loges are really individual parlor pieces, deeply stuffed and having ash trays for the convenience of those who care to smoke.” The use of the term “loge,” which implies multiple balconies, does not actually fit the Punch and Judy, which had only one. It was the only section of theater seats in which smoking was legally permitted in the State of Michigan. The theater also boasted a full white maple stage behind the screen.

The Detroit News went on to describe the care taken by the theater’s builders to insure superior sound reproduction.

Acoustical experts of the University of Michigan supervised the insulation of walls and arrangement of the projection and speaking

apparatus. A layer of felt in the ceiling and the use of special materials assure the efficiency of the talkie equipment, which is the most modern to be had.

At its opening the Punch and Judy was equipped with both Vitaphone and Movietone sound apparatus, though the vitaphone would most likely have been removed sometime later in that year when nationwide standardization of sound equipment adopted the use of optical soundtracks. According to Harold B. Franklin in his 1929 manual of motion picture projection, this “dual sound projector system” originally



Program for opening night at the Punch and Judy Theater, January 29, 1930.

<sup>1</sup> Detroit News, August 28, 1958. Detroit News, May 20, 1959. (Both of these very brief, untitled articles are on file in the Detroit Public Library. They have been pasted onto filing cards, and no other information concerning their publication or sources is listed.)

<sup>2</sup> “Punch and Judy Theater Ready,” Detroit News, January 26, 1930, sec. 10, p. 1, col. 7.

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*The Punch and Judy as it looked in its glory days of the 1930s.*

installed in the Punch and Judy, “was employed in the greater number of installations.”<sup>3</sup>

In Charlotte Herzog’s article “Movie Palaces and Exhibition,” a depiction of the average projection booth in a 1920’s movie palace, is also a very close description of the booth at the Punch and Judy.

*The building codes and fire law, which pertained to the projection booth, were greater in number and more rigid than those governing the rest of the theater because nitrate film was still used. The whole booth and everything in it had to be fireproof; doors had to open outward and be self-closing. The projection and observation portals had to have automatically closing steel plate or asbestos shutters held in place by fuseable links or cords which, in case of a fire, would burn and break, and cause the shutter to slam closed. If one shutter dropped, the rest would automatically follow. Projectors had to have ventilating tubes or flues extending up through the roof to exhaust flames, smoke and gases, and film had to be rewound in a separate room so the only film destroyed in a fire would be that in the projector. Besides the rewind room, there was often a separate fan room, battery room, and a generator room for converting AC to DC current for the carbon arc lamps used in projectors at that time.*<sup>4</sup>

The Punch and Judy’s projection booth had two carbon arc projectors, at least one spotlight, and a smaller projector for displaying lyrics on the screen during sing-alongs.

In the early 1940s, the original projectors were removed and two Simplex XL carbon arc projectors were installed. These projectors had Peerless Mag Arc lamphouses, and Simplex ITC soundheads. The amplifiers for the sound system were also replaced with newer models at this time. The next decade brought numerous additions to the capabilities of the Punch and Judy’s projection booth. The apparatus necessary for using magnetic soundtracks was added to the projectors. Presumably this addition was made after 1952 when the first feature film with a magnetic soundtrack was released. Though some projectors with this capability could also be adapted to run 70mm film (almost all films in 70mm were also released with a magnetic soundtrack), it is unlikely that the Punch and Judy’s projectors were so equipped. The projectors were also wired with a Selsen motor so that they could be run simultaneously for the presentation of three dimensional films. It is probable that this modification also took place sometime after 1952, when 3D started its relatively popular era. The Punch and Judy was also equipped with removable anamorphic lenses for showing widescreen movies. These lenses would most likely have been added

<sup>3</sup> Harold B. Franklin, *Sound Motion Pictures* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1929), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Herzog, “Movie Palaces and Exhibition,” *Film Reader*, No. 2, 1977, p. 190.

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sometime between the release of the first Cinemascope picture in 1952, and July 1955 when *A Man Called Peter*, a Cinemascope film, was screened at the theater. From that time until thirty years later when the theater closed, only the two speakers behind the curtain were replaced and a 16mm projector, specially adapted to show an entire feature film on one reel, was added, both in 1981.

Throughout its history, the building itself received very few alterations. Perhaps the greatest change occurred in the 1940s when the marquee was added and the original square lobby was changed to a rounded shape. At the same time the orchestra pit was filled in, which facilitated the addition of ten seats to the main floor. Building permits indicate that in 1960 the marquee was lowered and a new awning added. The doors on the front of the theater were replaced and the wood paneling surrounding them covered with brick in 1962. The marquee received new wood paneling in 1964, and in 1969 red draperies were installed, the lobbies were re-carpeted and the red seats were recovered. The Punch and Judy had no concession stand until about 1973, and an arcade installed in the lobby sometime after October 1977 was removed prior to September 1981. Beyond these intentional changes, age and neglect also altered the theater. As of September 1984,

some of the main floor seats had been removed, the auditorium was in need of painting, the basement restrooms were unusable because of flooding, the upstairs lounge was being used as a storeroom and the balcony was closed because part of the ceiling above it had collapsed.

When the Punch and Judy opened in 1930 there was no indication of the decay it would face fifty-four years later. The program of entertainment instituted by the theater's founding owners was at least as innovative as the up-to-date equipment in the projection booth. Many motion picture theaters of the time, particularly the palaces, downplayed the importance of the feature film in favor of organ concerts, shorts, newsreels and live entertainment, all of which were necessary to subsidize the great expenses to run these huge theaters. The Punch and Judy, however, was one-tenth the size of the largest palaces, and could rely on a much simpler program to draw a sufficient crowd for the theater to remain profitable. The *Detroit News* quoted Arthur Gardner, president of the Punch and Judy, at the opening ceremonies. "The Punch and Judy theater, as you have noticed, has no tinsel and no monkey-business at all. The motion picture will be everything and the only thing considered in planning our program."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the paper stated that;



*Looking east on Kercheval, the Punch and Judy in the early 1980s.*

*The idea of presenting "Disraeli" as a trail blazer for the Punch and Judy was an inspired one. Ordinarily a motion picture theater is not a bit choosy about its opening feature film, being content to rely on the colorful nature of the attendant events to make the guests forget. But in the case of the Punch and Judy opening, the finest talking picture produced to date was selected. A beautifully tinted color subject, "The Dance of the Paper Dolls" introducing a score or more of talented juvenile singers and dancers, and a sound news reel completes the first unit.*

This emphasis on the feature film was continued at the Punch and Judy, and for awhile it was the only theater in the city which did not rely on double features.

The Punch and Judy was also a leader in the area of matinees specifically designed for children. Saturday and Sunday matinees were certainly a popular aspect of theater-going long before the Punch and Judy was built, but the first matinees tailored for children were not inaugurated until March 23, 1928. The Punch and Judy started matinees, described in the same article quoted above as "selected subjects for children," in February 1930. The Grosse Pointe News reported that; "Janet Mueller, Grosse Pointe News society editor, recalls that in the 1940s, '50s and '60s it was common for children in Grosse Pointe to celebrate their birthdays by first having a party and then going to the Punch for a matinee."<sup>6</sup> Though ownership of the theater changed in 1976, children's matinees continued until 1981.

Aspects of the Punch and Judy's entertainment that did not remain constant throughout its history include the showing of first-run films, weekly program changes, the number of daily performances and ticket prices. From 1930 until sometime before 1936, films were changed two times a week, and there were three performances daily, at 2:30, 7:00 and 9:00 pm. Ticket prices ranged from 25¢ for children at all times, 50¢ for adults for matinees, 75¢ for evening performances and \$1.00 at all times for the reserved seats in the smoking "loge." Though the Detroit News article describing the opening events called these prices "popular" they were far from the average movie price at the time, which was 25¢. By 1936,

prices at the Punch and Judy were lowered to the national average of 25¢, at least for the mainfloor, though the balcony seats were 40¢ and still had to be reserved in advance. Programs at this time were changed three times a week, and there were two performances daily. Sometime between 1936 and 1977 when the Punch and Judy was converted to a repertory house, it began to exhibit first-run pictures, which had previously been reserved for the large palaces downtown, and programs were changed only once a week. The switch to classical films saw film prices of \$2.50 for double features in 1977, while in 1981 the same price was good for a single film, with double features at \$3.00. Programs during this period were changed sporadically, from as frequent as a new movie every other day, to films which ran for two or more weeks at a time.

The type of films shown at the Punch and Judy was strictly regulated, first by the theater's owners and later by the Grosse Pointe Farms City Council. A footnote at the bottom of the opening night's program and signed by the managers was quoted in The Detroit News article of the next day:

Here on the screen and from the perfect sound apparatus there shall never assail you a subject which may be out of accord with the high purpose of those who make the Punch and Judy possible. We pledge that we shall

afford you the finest in pictorial dramatizations and the most aesthetic as well as the most constructive in music. For it is and shall be our policy to maintain at all costs the high intentions of those who built this theater.

By 1978, however, the Punch and Judy was no longer owned by those who built it and complaints from neighboring residents, concerning noisy late night crowds leaving the theater prompted the city council to demand a contract with the management which promised that what the Detroit News termed "smutty entertainment"<sup>7</sup> would not be exhibited at theaters in Grosse Pointe (the Punch was the only theater in Grosse Pointe at that time). At the same meeting a resolution was also passed that would require that all future operators of the theater sign such an agreement.

The rowdy crowds the residents complained about were

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*“. . . it was common for children in Grosse Pointe to celebrate their birthdays by first having a party and then going to the Punch for a matinee.”*

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<sup>5</sup> "Punch and Judy Theater Opens," Detroit News, January 30, 1930, Vol. 57, n161, sec. 1, p. 2, col. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Pat Paholsky, "Film Group Pulls Out Sans Notice," Grosse Pointe News, September 27, 1984, Vol. 45, n38, Sec. 1, p. 1, col. 3.

<sup>7</sup> "Theater OK's Farms' Pact Barring Smut," Detroit News, February 9, 1978, Vol. 105, n171, Sec. B, p. 3, col. 1.

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at the Punch to attend late-night screenings of cult films, most notably *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The crowds received considerable notoriety, as well as coverage in the press.<sup>8</sup> While screenings of the film led to problems with the city government, the manager Larry Lyman, in an article in the *Detroit Free Press*, explained why they were continued. “. . . quite frankly, *Rocky Horror* is the film that has paid the bills, the one that has allowed us to bring in the old musicals and the classic comedies. . . .”<sup>9</sup>

The change in management in 1977 also brought live entertainment to the theater for the first time since its opening. It was an attempt, as outlined in the *Grosse Pointe News*, “to make the Punch the focus of cultural activities in Grosse Pointe. That group’s goal was to attract prominent patrons of the arts, restore the building to its original splendor and establish a cultural center for the Pointes similar to Orchestra Hall in Detroit.”<sup>11</sup> Despite these grand intentions, however, complaints were raised in city council meetings concerning the type of artists performing at the Punch and Judy. Council members were concerned with the type of crowds shows featuring acts with “punk” musicians might draw, and made several attempts to stop the performances.<sup>12</sup> In 1981 when the theater management again changed hands, live shows were no longer offered, with the exception of a four-month run of locally produced plays for children on Saturday and Wednesday afternoons.

One feature of the Punch and Judy’s entertainment potential which received even less use than the stage was its Wurlitzer organ. It was one of only six theater organs left in Detroit, and after 1967 it was maintained by the Motor City Chapter of the American Theater Organ Society in exchange for occasional use of the building. The organ was first used in the Wurlitzer building downtown as a model and was installed in the theater just before opening night. Arthur T. Pugsley was organist at the debut where he played two selections; “Potporri” and “Punch and Judy March,” which had been written for the occasion. Due to the fact that the theater was not built for silent films, the organ was rarely played after that, except to accompany sing-alongs and occasional church services held in the building in 1940. Mrs. Krueger, wife of the manager and organist at the Alhambra theater on Woodward, sometimes played the organ at the Punch and Judy, though not in public. It was restored by the A.T.O.S.

in 1967, at which time it was noted for being in remarkably good shape despite so many years of neglect.

One more area in which the Punch and Judy was a precursor of trends that would shape motion picture history involves the people who built it. The significance of the theater’s original owners was noted in the *Detroit News* article which described the Punch and Judy before its opening.

Representing a project in which many socially prominent residents of the Grosse Pointe Villages are interested, the Punch and Judy is the first concrete expression of the popularity of movies among the wealthy. Ever since their inception, pictures have been predominantly the amusement medium of “the man in the street,” and remain so today, but the fact that members of the city’s foremost families would sponsor a venture of this nature bespeaks the ever-widening sphere in which the movie is operating.

The lively interest of Grosse Pointers in motion pictures was further evidenced by the considerable recognition given the debut of what was, in fact, a small neighborhood theater. The *Detroit News* devoted two articles to the event: one, on the society page, listed many of the prominent area residents who attended the premiere,<sup>13</sup> while the second listed other celebrities in attendance and described the national attention given the affair.

*All the brilliance and gaiety of a Hollywood first night, or even the premiere of one of those giant cathedrals of the motion picture engineered by a Fox or Katz, featured the dedicatory festivities of the little Punch and Judy. . . . A dozen or more distinguished actors and actresses from the stage and screen came in from New York and Hollywood as guests for the opening night and Graham McNamee, nationally-known announcer, dashed away from the National Broadcasting Co. headquarters in New York long enough to give a running account of the opening over station WWJ.*

All of this interest in a relatively obscure little theater becomes understandable when reading the names of the Punch and Judy’s directors. All were listed in the social register, some in *Who’s Who in America*,<sup>14</sup> and many of their names are still well known in Detroit. The directors were: Wendell W. Anderson, Lawrence D. Buhl, Roy D. Chapin,

<sup>8</sup> For instance: Michael McWilliams, “Midnight Madness,” *Detroit News*, April 9, 1982, Vol. 109, n230, Sec. D, p. 3, col. 1.; Eric Sharp, “Bad Taste Attracts Film Cult,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 17, 1978, Vol. 148, n74, Sec. A, p. 3, col. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Stark, “From Arnold Schwarzenegger to ‘Z’ On Film,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 6, 1978, Vol. 148, n125, Sec. B, p. 14, col. 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Theater OK’s Farms’ Pact” p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Paholsky, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> David Kramer, “P&J Problems Cause Concern in GP Farms,” *Grosse Pointe News*, May 31, 1979, Vol. 40, n22, Sec. 1, p. 1, col. 6.

<sup>13</sup> “Grosse Pointe’s Society Attends Theater Opening,” *Detroit News*, January 30, 1930, Vol. 57, n161, Sec. 2, p. 35, col. 4.

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*Punch and Judy Building under renovation, 1987.*

Robert O. Derrick, J.B. Ford Jr., Arthur Gardner, M.J. Kavanagh, John Kerby, Norbert Neff, Phelps Newberry, Wesson Seyburn and Charles Wright, Jr.

Mr. M.J. Kavanagh and his wife were the original managers. In 1931 Carl L. Krueger took their place, and he in turn was succeeded by Frank Krueger in 1933. Some of the extravagance of the opening continued at the Punch and Judy, for as Frank Krueger reminisced in *The Detrouiter* in 1975,

*“chauffeured limousines used to pull up in front and drop elegantly dressed people off. We catered to the top of snob hill. You needed reservations to sit in the loge back then, and when we presented something like *Gone With the Wind*, we actually had a man with a microphone announcing the theater guests as they arrived.”*<sup>15</sup>

Ownership and management of the Punch and Judy did not change hands again until 1976, but the sketchy records found seem to indicate that some internal changes did take place. The owners of the theater went under the name of the

Grosse Pointe Theater Co. in 1935, Community Theaters in 1960, and the Punch and Judy Theater in 1964. Polk’s *Detroit City Directory* for 1936 listed the theater as vacant,<sup>16</sup> though a Works Progress Administration history of the Grosse Pointes compiled in the same year describes the theater as operating at the time and even mentions the assistant manager as Fred Smith.<sup>17</sup>

In April 1976, the theater was sold to Robert D. Edgar and Richard S. Crawford. A 1983 *Detroit Free Press* article quoted Edgar’s claim that the theater had not been profitable for the preceding twenty years, which, along with the deaths of almost all of the Punch and Judy’s founders in previous years may explain its sale.<sup>18</sup> On January 16, 1977, the new owners closed the theater due to increasing financial losses. The Unity of Infinite Presence Church, originally from Detroit, attempted to buy the Punch and Judy in June 1977 for use as a house of worship, but the city council would not pass the necessary zoning changes. The city of Grosse Pointe Farms considered purchasing the theater at one time, but did not

<sup>14</sup> Who’s Who In America, XXI (Chicago: A. N. Marquis Co., 1940).

<sup>15</sup> “Notes,” *The Detrouiter*, October 1975.

<sup>16</sup> *Detroit (Michigan) City Directory* (Detroit, R.L. Polk & Co., 1936).

<sup>17</sup> Maude Johnson, from an unpublished WPA history of the Grosse Pointes, dated February 17, 1936, on file at the Grosse Pointe Historical Society.

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*Entrance to the Punch and Judy Building, 1996. Photograph courtesy of Glen Calvin Moon.*

go through with the idea. After that, the theater had six different operators, among them Lou Bitonti and Larry Lyman from October 27, 1977 until April 1979, and Tom Shaker sometime between then and September 1981. That same month the Classic Film Theater took over operations at the Punch and Judy, opening with the film *Casablanca*. They ran the theater until September 16, 1984.

In 1984 co-owner Robert Edgar proposed that the building be renovated into office space. His plan was approved, and the Punch and Judy theater was demolished as part of the renovation in 1986. In 1987, the Punch and Judy Building opened its doors to new tenants.

Today, this small neighborhood theater, considered by many as just a comfortable or convenient place to watch movies, is just a memory. But the Punch and Judy had a history which may well deserve a place in motion picture annals along side the “firsts” and the famous.

**SOURCE:** Originally titled, “Small In Size, Not In Importance: A History of the Punch and Judy Theater, Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, 1930-1985.”

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Grosse Pointe resident Carrie Jones researched and wrote this paper while a student at Wayne State University. She later donated a copy to the Grosse Pointe Historical Society.

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**CREDITS:** All illustrations and photographs courtesy of Robert G. Edgar and Lakeside Investment Company.