

Adam Rubin  
Planning in Washington D.C.  
Prof. Amanda Huron  
April 13, 2011

### **Our Own Outrageous Ontario: A History of Adams Morgan's Ontario Theatre**

For sixty years, the triangular aluminum-clad marquee of the Ontario Theatre has stood out from amongst the low-rise storefronts along upper Columbia Road NW in Adams Morgan. Built in 1951, this former movie palace reflects the multitude of changes and struggles that the neighborhood has experienced during the past half century. Over its lifetime, the Ontario has welcomed foreign ambassadors and heads of state, Latin American immigrants, movie stars from Hollywood's Golden Age, urban blacks, iconic punk rockers, and local artists, all of whom played a key role in the twentieth century development of Adams Morgan. The Ontario has been celebrated, re-branded, picketed, reused, renovated, and ultimately boarded up, embodying a dramatic story about cultural, demographic, and economic change in the community over time. Even as the building currently stands today, vacant, cosmetically distressed, and stripped of its prominent "ONTARIO" rooftop signage, the Ontario Theatre remains a multifaceted historic and cultural landmark within Adams Morgan's built environment.

In addition to reflecting a story of change at the local level, the Ontario Theatre represents a broader story of many other urban, single-screen movie houses from the postwar era. Built at a time when television was emerging as the dominant medium for American popular entertainment, the Ontario has from its inception struggled to keep up with the changing world around it. At one point near its final years in operation, the theater even narrowly escaped a renovation that would have divided the balcony into three separate cinemas, as was common for "multiplexes" of the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The Ontario's struggle to modernize and adjust to a rapidly changing urban environment is magnified in a community like Adams Morgan – especially so during the neighborhood's tumultuous period from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mansfield, Virginia. "Up and Out in Adams-Morgan." Washington Post, August 8, 1985. Pg DC1.

The story of the Ontario that follows is largely based on its regular coverage in the Washington Post, with some years better represented than others depending on the role the theater was playing in D.C.'s greater cultural landscape at any given time. For example, during the years that the Ontario regularly hosted touring rock n' roll bands in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the theater often received mention in the newspaper in the form of concert reviews. On the other hand, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the theater hosted an entirely Spanish-language film schedule, and its events were mostly passed over in English-language print media outlets. Even with gaps in its coverage, a cohesive history quickly begins to emerge upon examination, bringing the theater to life if only for a few decades. The story of the Ontario culminates with the auditorium's premature closure just thirty-six years after its premiere screening. The theater building still stands today, dilapidated but structurally sound, though its future remains increasingly uncertain so long as it stands vacant. With a better understanding of its cultural significance, perhaps the Ontario will once again emerge as a cultural nexus of the neighborhood before the opportunity passes yet again.

### **Theaters Move to the Suburbs (1945-1951)**

The years immediately following World War II brought a massive reorganization to the film distribution business in the United States. In 1948, the landmark Supreme Court case of *the United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* (alternatively known as the Paramount Consent Decree) broke the monopoly that the major film studios held on national film exhibition, requiring the studios to divest themselves of their theaters and movie houses. Aside from the greater effects of the decision on film production in Hollywood, the decree triggered a surge in independently owned theater construction projects across the country. Between 1945 and 1952, 31 new independent theaters (with the exception of the MacArthur Theater in Georgetown, which was initially co-owned by Warner Bros.) were built in the Washington, D.C. area.<sup>2</sup> However, the geographic distribution of the new theaters also reflected changes in the postwar urban population. As people began to move away from D.C.'s old downtown, theater builders followed

---

<sup>2</sup> Headley, Robert K. *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999. Pg. 290.

suit, with ten new theaters opening in suburban Virginia, ten more in suburban Maryland, and only three new theaters opening in downtown D.C. The remaining theaters opened in the neighborhoods around the downtown area, including the Ontario Theatre in Adams Morgan.<sup>3</sup>

Even with the breakdown of the vertically integrated studio system, the new independent theater owners faced other challenges as they developed new construction projects. In August 1946, the National Housing Authority (NHA) issued regulations that granted homebuilders first access to construction materials and equipment as a push to create new suburban housing for veterans. Just a few months earlier in March 1946, the Civilian Production Administration (CPA), the postwar organization that replaced the War Production Board (WPB), curtailed materials for “non-essential” construction projects for eighteen months. Both of these regulations slowed down new theater construction and structural improvements to existing theaters. Even working under these federal restrictions, local independent theater circuits competed for new development sites outside the downtown area, including the Columbia Road site where the Ontario would soon be built by the K-B Theaters Company.<sup>4</sup>

Other challenges would be felt on a cultural level. Many older theaters in the District began the long and difficult process of desegregation during the postwar years. Increases in theater operating costs due to the Paramount Consent Decree necessitated a rise in admission prices, averaging about 3½ cents per ticket for neighborhood theaters. Competition from emerging forms of popular entertainment, including bowling alleys, roller rinks, public swimming pools, and most of all, drive-ins, were seen as a threat to traditional indoor movie theaters. In many cases, this threat was real and critical. Between 1953 and 1961, 11 new theaters opened in the Washington area – all of them drive-ins. But it was the emergence of television that truly put fear in the hearts of theater owners from the suburbs to the inner cities. The popularization of this new form of home entertainment increasingly resulted in dwindling movie audiences and less demand for new theaters to be built. In some cases, local theater owners attempted to bring the technology of television into their auditoriums, as they experimented with at the

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Pg. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Pg. 169.

Atlas Theater on H Street N.E., though this strategy would prove to be prohibitively expensive.<sup>5</sup> In fact, just four days before its opening, K-B Theaters' co-owners Fred S. Kogod and Max Burka advertised in the Washington Post that the Ontario would not only be equipped with comfortable push-back chairs and the latest sound and projection devices, but that provisions had been made for an eventual television conversion.<sup>6</sup> While microwave receiving equipment and transmission lines were never installed, the Ontario Theatre would prove to be one of the very last large single-screen movie houses built in urban Washington, D.C.

### **A New Theater for Adams Morgan (1951-1969)**

The Ontario Theatre opened on November 1, 1951 at 1700 Columbia Road NW, though not without some early competition for a prime site near the heart of Adams Morgan. As early as 1945, the Roth Theaters Company, another local exhibitor, had plans drawn up for a theater one block away from the Ontario site, to be named the Mozart or the Embassy upon its completion.<sup>7</sup> The Roth project ultimately fell through, and K-B Theaters was free to build their new state-of-the-art auditorium. However, even after obtaining the site, Kogod and Burka had to wait for a Safeway store lease to expire before they could break ground.

Designed by theater architects John J. Zink and Frederick Moehle and constructed by the Roscoe Engineering Company of Washington, the Ontario was conceived from the start as the new flagship theater of the K-B chain. The theater would sit 1,400 audience members and cost between \$450,000 and \$600,000 to build. The façade of the theater was designed in the modern style, with a two-story picture window frontage set off at an angle at the southwest corner of Columbia Road and 17th Street, sheltered under a stainless steel fascia roof with recessed high-hat lights. The irregular orientation of the cantilevered marquee characterized the new theater building, and even today, the design stands out from amongst the more typical commercial storefronts along the street. The

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Pgs. 171-180.

<sup>6</sup> Washington Post Staff Writer. "Newest Theater Here, the Ontario, Opens Thursday." Washington Post, October 28, 1951. Pg. R2.

<sup>7</sup> Headley, Pg. 169.

façade also featured a pink marble faced box office and marble pilasters flanking four sets of glass doors to the lobby. Retail space for a Robert Winston candy shop was also incorporated into the Columbia Road façade of the building. The theater was decorated with a gold and gray-green color scheme, a motif that was continued in the interior details, including the lobby ceiling, stage drapes, and curtain.<sup>8</sup>

The lobby space inside the building was equally as elegant as the exterior, done up in black marble with mirrored panels along the walls – materials recalling Art Deco and Moderne design elements popular in commercial architecture in the years preceding World War II. From the ceiling hung a chandelier that had once graced the old Paramount Theater in New York. Inside the auditorium, seats were staggered to ensure the best possible visibility throughout the house, with a spacious 36 inches of room between aisles. The balcony level featured two private rooms, one room set aside for noisy children and their guardians (this type of space was popularly referred to as “the crying room”) and another room for private parties, rentable by the performance. Both private rooms featured soundproofed picture windows looking out onto the auditorium. The screen was reported to be the largest commercial screen in the area.<sup>9</sup>

The Ontario was also unique in that it was the first theater built outside of downtown to have an exclusively first-run policy (films newly released from the studios). The theater opened with the local premieres of *Rhubarb* (1951), a screwball comedy about a feral cat who becomes owner of a baseball team, and *Let's Make It Legal* (1951), a divorce comedy starring Claudette Colbert and Marilyn Monroe. Securing the first-run policy was considered a triumph for the new neighborhood theater. However, at least one local reporter, Richard L. Coe of the Washington Post, griped about the commute up to Adams Morgan, writing, “Remember when the Dupont (Theater) seemed uptown?”<sup>10</sup> Coe’s complaint about traveling north to review a movie may have been intended as an

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Pg. 300.

<sup>9</sup> Washington Post Staff Writer. “‘Ontario’ Opening. Washington Post, January 6, 1977. Pg. D9.

Coe, Richard L. “Ontario Theater Opens About Nov. 1.” Washington Post, October 17, 1951. Pg. 18.

editorial flourish, but his comment planted an early seed of controversy that would continue to grow along with the Ontario over the next several decades.

Just four months after opening, a new drama was played out on the sidewalk in front of the Ontario. On March 5, 1952, picketers from the District American Legion arrived at the theater with placards to protest the opening of *Death of a Salesman*, a film that had been called out by the House Committee on Un-American Activities as being connected to Hollywood Communists, including producer Stanley Kramer and writer Arthur Miller. Signs stating “American Legion Says America First” and “American Legion Opposes This Picture as Un-American” arrived at the theater in the afternoon as the film opened for its Washington premiere; although K-B general manager Frank Boucher invited Legion officials to see the film and judge for themselves, the offer was reportedly refused.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from occasional political histrionics, the 1950s and early 1960s were generally graceful years for the Ontario. The theater thrived as a first run movie house catering to a family audience, hosting the Washington openings of classic films like *Mary Poppins* (1964), the premiere of which was attended by its star, Julie Andrews, as part of a benefit for Mt. Vernon College and Project HOPE, a public health education program. This would not be the last time the Ontario would be associated with Ms. Andrews, as *The Sound of Music* premiered there soon after in March 1965. The Rodgers and Hammerstein classic would go on to play exclusively on the Ontario screen for the next two years. However, on the first night of its record-setting run, *The Sound of Music* opened with lights, red carpet, radio, TV, and newsreel cameras for a Hollywood-style premiere hosted by the Austrian Embassy as a benefit to support the Travelers Aid Society.<sup>12</sup>

By the time of the *Sound of Music* premiere, the Ontario was already established as the venue of choice for film events catered to the neighboring community of

---

<sup>11</sup> Edstrom, Eve. “Legion Pickets District Theater Showing ‘Death of a Salesman.’” March 6, 1952. Pg. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Donihi, Rosemary. “Julie Will Pop in To Introduce Mary.” Washington Post, October 20, 1964. Pg. B2.

Washington Post Staff Writer. “St. Patrick’s Day To Be Austrian.” Washington Post, March 14, 1965. Pg. F25.

ambassadors and their embassy staffers, many of whom chose to live in Adams Morgan for its convenient proximity to work along Embassy Row. Two years previous in 1963, the theater hosted the VIP premiere of *Lawrence of Arabia*, which was attended not only by foreign diplomats from the nearby embassies, but also by members of Congress, Supreme Court Justices, White House aides, and other esteemed civic leaders. Due to the Washington location of the screening, several attendees even had personal connections to the characters portrayed in the film, including one guest, the Marchioness of Winchester, who commented to the Washington Post that she personally knew “Lawrence himself and King Feisal both very well. I’m looking forward to seeing this film.” The paper covered the screening and several of the formal pre-premiere dinner parties, including in their coverage an exhaustive list of notable attendees, not least of which included star Omar Sharif, director David Lean, president of Columbia Pictures Abe Schneider, president of the MPAA Eric Johnson, as well as all the local political personalities.

In addition to its sheer scale, the *Lawrence of Arabia* event at the Ontario was unique from other Washington movie premieres for a couple of other reasons. Firstly, it was a strictly social affair that did not benefit any specific charity organizations, as was common for premieres in the nation’s capital. Secondly, it was the first time at a Washington movie premiere that guest arrivals were announced at a microphone outside the theater, manned by radio commentator Hazel Markel, so that bystanders would know what names went with which people.<sup>13</sup>

The Ontario continued to play first run films into the late 1960s, including the Washington engagement of *Funny Girl* (1968), the premiere of which was sponsored by the B’nai B’rith Women as a benefit for Children’s Home in Israel, Leo N. Levi Hospital, and the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>14</sup> But by 1969, the theater was struggling to keep attendance up. One reason for this decline was attributed to middle-class white anxiety about the Adams Morgan neighborhood, which by the late 1960s had gained a considerable Black and Latino population. The 1968 riots following the assassination of

---

<sup>13</sup> Washington Post Staff Writer. “Lawrence Premiere Draws Capital VIPs.” Washington Post, February 27, 1963. Pg. D1.

<sup>14</sup> Washington Post Staff Writer. “‘Funny Girl’ Benefit Oct. 24.” Washington Post, September 8, 1968. Pg. G6.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also led to a massive white exodus from D.C.'s northern neighborhoods. As a result of these demographic shifts, *Funny Girl* was moved to another K-B cinema on Wisconsin Avenue, while the programming gap at the Ontario was filled with a few first run films and several revivals, during which time the owners decided on their next strategy to boost theater attendance. This critical moment at the end of the turbulent 1960s would lead to the first major cultural shift for the Ontario Theatre and its local audiences; however, it would certainly not be its last.

### **Afternoon in the Teatro (1969-1977)**

On August 20, 1969, the Ontario Theatre reopened as *Teatro Ontario*, inaugurating a new policy of showing Spanish-language films with no English subtitles. The first movies shown were a double bill of *El Yaqui* (1969) with *Asi Es Mi Mexico* (1963).<sup>15</sup> On a local level, this programmatic change reflected a widespread demographic shift in Northwest D.C.'s population following the Martin Luther King Jr. riots of 1968, which resulted in many white residents abandoning the District for its surrounding suburbs. Subsequently, the Ontario's new Spanish-language policy catered directly to Adams Morgan's bustling Latin community, which by 1969 had grown to dominate the neighborhood's new cultural landscape. The implications of the change are perhaps even more significant when considered with an historical perspective, as the K-B management claimed at the time that the Ontario was the only movie house between Washington and Philadelphia exclusively showing Spanish-language films.

Movies screened at Teatro Ontario included not only Mexican films, but also films from Spain, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. According to then-manager James R. Coller, English-language films with Spanish subtitles were not successful at Teatro Ontario, adding that, "Sex for Latin people doesn't go over well" – a comment that references the edgier subject matter depicted in many "New Hollywood" films of the late 1960s. Instead, films geared to a wide, general audience were the most successful, as had been the case during the Ontario's early years when the theater catered to white families. Stars such as Cantinflas, an immensely popular Mexican comedian, and El

---

<sup>15</sup> Arnold, Gary. "In Spanish." Washington Post, August 20, 1969. Pg. B9.



Santo, a Mexican *Luchador enmascarado* (a masked wrestler who battled against criminals, supernatural beings, and fascist dictators) brought in sell-out audiences for Sunday matinees, replacing white film stars of the 1960s like Peter O'Toole and Barbra Streisand.<sup>16</sup> Multigenerational Latino families, sometimes with both grandparents and toddlers in tow, typically went to the movies on Sunday afternoons after spending the morning at church and often socialized while the movie was in progress – a notable change in the Friday and Saturday night-oriented attendance and social patterns of the Ontario's former audiences. "We come on Sunday because it is one of the few days we have free from work," explained Ronald Schuett, a Bolivian who had only recently arrived in the United States when interviewed at the Ontario in 1971.

Economically, the Sunday afternoon screenings kept Teatro Ontario in business during most of the 1970s, with K-B Theaters part owner Marvin Goldman pointing out that "it is almost uneconomical to operate (the theater) all the nights and all the days of the rest of the week." As a contrast, Goldman cited that in traditional theaters, 70 to 75 percent of the business is on Friday and Saturday nights. This trend kept Teatro Ontario profitable throughout the first half of the decade, with Goldman further claiming, "No one is getting rich...but it is making a profit for the owners and providing a necessity in the community."<sup>17</sup> While Goldman's sentiment was remarkably optimistic and unprejudiced, times in Adams Morgan would change once again in the second half of the decade, and the Ontario would soon enter its next phase of existence, this time with a program calendar tailored to a new neighborhood demographic – educated, urban white professionals returning to the city.

### **Our Own Outrageous Ontario (1977-1984)**

Despite the initial success of the Teatro Ontario program, audiences began to fizzle. In 1977, the K-B chain finally sold the Ontario after twenty-six years of

---

<sup>16</sup> Aguilar, Luis. "Spanish Films Flavor Ontario." Washington Post, December 1, 1983. Pg. DC1.

<sup>17</sup> Bancroft, Bill. "Afternoon in the Teatro." Washington Post, November 29, 1971. Pg. C1.

ownership. In regards to the sale, Goldman denied that the theater was losing money, adding that the company had plans to open a new all-Spanish movie house in Northern Virginia or Takoma Park, following the Spanish-speaking community as they moved out to “more affluent neighborhoods.”<sup>18</sup> The Ontario was purchased by Paul S. Tauber and Herb White, proprietors of the then-popular Columbia Station bar and restaurant in Adams Morgan, for \$400,000 – less than the original cost of the building. Tauber and White re-opened the theater the first week of January 1977 with a double bill of *The Big Bus* (1976) and *Watermelon Man* (1970), and reverted back to the “Ontario Theater” name. While the new owners intended on keeping the Sunday afternoon Spanish-language films in the program schedule, Tauber erred in assessing the culture of the neighborhood in a Washington Post article about his purchase of the theater. In that article, Tauber was quoted as saying that “there is no large scale Spanish community left in Adams Morgan.” Furthermore, Tauber cited statistics for the area schools as being composed of 960 Latinos as opposed to 4,400 whites and stated that aside from the weekends, the rest of the week’s programming at the Ontario would be devoted to “general audience films” (meaning English-language films) – a naïve but loaded cultural bias that the Latin family audiences were something other than “general.”<sup>19</sup>

Before jumping right into the Latino community’s protests over the new owners and program schedule, it is worth mentioning that the Ontario’s return to English-language programming was welcomed and celebrated by a new emerging neighborhood demographic – young white artists, journalists, and professionals who were returning to the neighborhood en masse, attracted by its cultural diversity, spacious apartments, and cheap ethnic food. While many neighbors decried the “Georgetownization” of Adams Morgan (in reference to the bourgeois, upscale tastes of the new inhabitants), opening night at the Tauber and White-owned Ontario suggested a more bohemian demographic than that which would have been found in Georgetown, or as it was characterized in the Washington Post, “liberal chic.” The opening night audience of more than 1,000

---

<sup>18</sup> Mansfield, Stephanie. “Neighborly Party for A Neighborhood Theater.” Washington Post, January 8, 1977. Pg. C1. It is unclear whether this move to the Latino suburbs ever actually occurred.

<sup>19</sup> Mansfield, Stephanie. “‘Ontario’ Opening.” Washington Post, January 6, 1977. Pg. D9.

reportedly spilled out from the seats into the aisles, lounged on the carpeted stairs, drank wine, enjoyed free popcorn, and even passed joints in the enclosed balcony rooms once set aside for crying children. After the screening, a local rock band played while patrons danced in the aisles, foreshadowing a programmatic shift when the theater transitioned into a live music venue just a couple years later. The general reaction to this new neighborhood demographic was varied, but one thing was clear: whether these white “gentrifiers” were just re-emerging after years of relative dormancy (both Tauber and White had lived in Adams Morgan since the mid-1960s), or if they were true interlopers responsible for displacing the local low-income ethnic population, there was clearly a local desire for a type of entertainment catered directly to their urban, artistic tastes.

Nevertheless, on February 3, 1977, the Council of Latin Agencies led a demonstration at the Ontario, in which more than 200 members of Adams Morgan’s Latino community marched along Columbia Road for thirty-five minutes, protesting the loss of the only Spanish language theater in Washington and demanding the return of Spanish films to the daily programming schedule. The protesters also demanded an apology from Tauber for his previous comments in the Washington Post regarding the disappearance of the Spanish community from Adams Morgan, issuing a statement in Spanish that translated to “Who says we don’t exist?” Claiming that he was misquoted and that the media reportage had been “insensitive,” Tauber apologized to the Latino community and issued his own statement that the Ontario would continue to show Spanish films on Sundays. While the protesters sang and marched along the sidewalk, co-owner Herb White reflected from inside the theater, “It’s very important for the Latin American community to be able to demonstrate their own unity.”<sup>20</sup>

Tauber and White certainly personified a cultural, demographic, and economic shift in Adams Morgan that could be classified as *gentrification*, *Georgetownization*, or any other related term. However, it is also necessary to consider the liberal political outlook held by this emerging urban community, and the drastic differences in language, tone, and attitudes they held in comparison to earlier inner city whites of the 1950s and

---

<sup>20</sup> Mansfield, Stephanie. “Protest at the Ontario.” Washington Post, February 4, 1977. Pg.

1960s. Even though Tauber's reported statements about the loss of Adams Morgan's Latin population were inaccurate, and even though the theater was no longer devoted exclusively to Spanish films, the new Ontario was not operating in outward opposition to the multicultural neighborhood, but rather, reflecting change as it occurred in real time.

After the initial surge on opening night in 1977, the early attendance rates at the new Ontario began to drop off considerably, and once again, the management looked for new ways to use the theater to cater to the diverse tastes of its neighborhood clientele. In addition to movies, the Ontario screened major Central and South American soccer matches, displayed the work of local photographers and artists in a "Photographer's Gallery," hosted bilingual theatrical performances, and booked concerts by musical acts ranging from Chilean folk group Quilapayun to the irrepressible Village People, who performed their seminal costumed disco show at the Ontario for two nights in June 1978.

<sup>21</sup> It was around this time that local Washington promoter Mike Schreiber began to regularly book rock concerts at the Ontario, bringing to D.C. many of the emerging punk and new wave acts that were just beginning to gain a national following. Among the bands to play the Ontario in the last years of the 1970s were the Dead Boys, Blondie, the Clash with supporting act Bo Diddley (who in 1962 had resided at 1724 Newton Street NW in Mount Pleasant, just a few blocks north of the Ontario), the Buzzcocks with supporting act Gang of Four, the Police, and Talking Heads, among others. <sup>22</sup>

In 1979, Tauber and White sold the Ontario to promoter Sam L'Hommedieu, co-owner of the Cellar Door nightclub and concert promotion company of the same name. L'Hommedieu intended on using the theater for both live concerts and triple-feature film programs, mostly of the kung fu and horror variety, with Spanish films shown on the weekends. Soon after acquiring the property, L'Hommedieu hired Seth Hurwitz, then a young local disc jockey, to manage the theater and program films as a salaried employee. L'Hommedieu only owned the theater for a year before selling it to Carlos Rosario, who was then a prominent and respected leader in the Washington D.C. Latino community with a strong interest in continuing the tradition of showing Spanish-language films on

---

<sup>21</sup> Various articles and reviews; see bibliography.

<sup>22</sup> Cherkasky, Mara. *Images of America: Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007.

Various articles and reviews; see bibliography.

the weekends. In 1980, Hurwitz approached Rosario with a proposition: in exchange for scheduling the weekday film program and managing the theater for \$50 a week, Rosario would grant Hurwitz exclusive access to the auditorium for live concerts at the rate of \$700 for weeknight bookings and \$850 for weekend shows. Rosario agreed to the terms of the deal, and with the special arrangement sealed, Hurwitz began his career as one of D.C.'s most prolific live music promoters.

On weekday afternoons, Hurwitz programmed triple features with a "three films for three dollars" gimmick, and often played more artistically acclaimed films, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) or David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), in between typical "grindhouse" flicks. However, Hurwitz's interests were firmly in putting on live music shows. The first events Hurwitz promoted at the Ontario combined rock bands with movies, including a sold-out screening of *Rock n' Roll High School* (1979), attended by the Ramones with performances by local bands, and a screening of *The Punk Rock Movie* (1978) sharing the bill with D.C. punks the Slickee Boys. (The iconic "psychobilly" band the Cramps were also billed to play, but cancelled at the last minute.) Soon after those early shows, Hurwitz, along with partner Rich Heinecke, began to book bands exclusively, and from 1980 to 1984, they brought to the Ontario stage such acts as Magazine, Squeeze, the Go Gos, X, the Stray Cats, Joan Jett, Gary Numan, Minor Threat, Public Image Ltd., Iggy Pop, and U2 with opening act Bow Wow Wow. According to Hurwitz, U2's guitarist, The Edge, commented upon arriving at the theater in December 1981 that this show was the first time U2 had shared a headlining bill with another band.

23

Hurwitz continued to book acts that catered to the tastes of an edgier, artier musical audience that was emerging in the D.C. area at the time. During these years, Hurwitz turned the Ontario into the primary venue in the District to see some of the most acclaimed punk, new wave, and rock n' roll musicians of the era. By mid-decade, he began booking shows at the 9:30 Club on F Street NW, a venue he later purchased and eventually moved into the former WUST Radio Music Hall building near the U Street district, where it still thrives today. After a final show by band Aztec Camera on April 3, 1985, the days of the Ontario as a live concert venue in the heart of Adams Morgan were

---

<sup>23</sup> Hurwitz, Seth. Interview by author. Bethesda, MD. March 31, 2011.

officially over, and the theater would once more enter a new phase of existence – but this time with a much more uncertain future.

### **The Ontario Goes Dark (1985-Present)**

During the 1980s, the Ontario Theater became not just a local gathering spot for the Adams Morgan community, but also a destination for young music fans living in the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia to come see some of their favorite touring bands as they passed through town. On weekends, Spanish-language films were still screened for the neighborhood's Latino population; on weekdays, English-language films catered largely to the neighborhood's African American and white populations. But as had happened so many times before, the hour of change again fell upon this once-stately, now quirky and eccentric, neighborhood institution.

In 1983, the property was sold to the local Circle Theatres chain, and by 1984, Hurwitz had left the theater to book shows at other venues, including the famed 9:30 Club. In 1985, Circle Theatres completed a cosmetic renovation on the Ontario, its first major overhaul after years of heavy use and deterioration. Re-upholstered seats, new carpeting, a fresh coat of paint, and a new screen and stereo system were installed, and plans were made to divide the spacious balcony level to accommodate three screens, essentially converting the Ontario into a multiplex (due to architectural complexities, this last change never actually occurred). For the first time in nearly 15 years, first run movies were added back to the program schedule, with the balcony cinemas intended to be used to show “art films and movies for a sophisticated market.” At the time of the renovation, Circle Theatres C.E.O. Thomas Perakos reflected, “The neighborhood of Adams Morgan is prime for this type of revitalization.” He continued, “The scores of unique shops, restaurants and rapid rebirth of the community show us that there is a tremendous potential for this theater.” Once again, Perakos evokes “rebirth” and “revitalization” as active buzzwords to justify making new changes to a continuously vibrant urban community.

Notably absent from the new business plan were any intentions to cater to the neighborhood's Spanish-speaking community. “This change is a big change for us,” said Columbia Road record store owner Maria “Coco” Bueno, referencing a time that the

Ontario had been a meeting place for the Latin community, including both established families and recently arrived immigrants from South and Central American countries. Bueno added, “We’re taking a big step backward. What happens to us now? Where do we go?” While Bueno’s concerns were unambiguous and direct, Circle Theatres representative Freeman Fisher reported at the time that he had received “no complaints from the Hispanic community about the demise of the weekend Spanish films,” and that if the company finds there is a market for it, Spanish films could potentially be shown on one of the smaller screens. In the same article, Fisher was quick to qualify, “Right now, with only one screen, we can’t show [Spanish films]...you can’t interrupt the screening of a first run movie to show something else on the weekends.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the renovations and new/old use, Circle Theatres was not able to bring the theater back to what it had once been in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1987, after outlasting so many of its contemporaries, the Ontario Theatre finally closed. Circle Theatres claimed that the auditorium was a victim of its size and location – a statement largely based in the company’s primary focus on building and operating suburban multiplexes, which by then had become the norm in theatrical exhibition. The last show to run at the Ontario was a 9:00 p.m. screening of martial arts film “American Ninja 2,” which was attended by about 60 patrons. Fisher added that due to a lack of public transportation and parking, Adams Morgan was simply “not populated enough” to support so large a theater.<sup>25</sup> Just as he did two years previous when he essentially silenced Adams Morgan’s Latino community by insisting that no complaints had been registered over changes to the program schedule, Freeman added insult to injury by assuming that the neighborhood’s population is the reason why the theater failed under his company’s management. While it is certainly fair to admit that the 1980s were a trying time for inner city neighborhoods in Washington, and that the economic climate was just no longer conducive to operating a large single screen movie theater or concert venue in Adams Morgan, it is remarkable how the character of a community can be so easily altered by outside fictions and fantasies pertaining the urban communal landscape.

---

<sup>24</sup> Marberry, Craig. “Cinematic Comeback.” Washington Post, July 8, 1985. Pg. B1.

<sup>25</sup> Horowitz, Sari and Marin Weil. “Ontario’s Final Fade.” Washington Post, May 11, 1987. Pg. D1.

While the story of the Ontario Theatre as a gathering place in the community to see films, music, and art events ended in the 1980s, the building has remained a distinctive part of Adams Morgan's built environment for nearly 25 years since its premature closure. Retail spaces built into the property have operated off and on for several years, with the most prominent space along Columbia Road recently running as a CVS Pharmacy (now closed). The main lobby/marquee space was used for several years as a mom-and-pop retail outlet, also gone. Today, the Ontario stands with its paint peeling, several windows broken, signage removed, and tagged with graffiti, a sad shell of its former glory, but a reminder of the community's struggle to keep this building relevant over six chaotic decades. As long as it stands vacant, the Ontario Theatre is a threatened historical and cultural resource that deserves the attention, appreciation, and care of its diverse and creative neighborhood community.

### **Bibliography**

Advertisement. "Display Ad 64 – No Title (Copa Mundial Eliminatorias)." Washington Post, July 7, 1977. Pg. C6.

Aguilar, Luis. "Spanish Films Flavor Ontario." Washington Post, December 1, 1983. Pg. DC1.

Arnold, Gary. "Film Notes." Washington Post, April 4, 1979. Pg. B8.

Arnold, Gary. "In Spanish." Washington Post, August 20, 1969. Pg. B9.

Bancroft, Bill. "Afternoon in the Teatro." Washington Post, November 29, 1971. Pg. C1.

Cherkasky, Mara. *Images of America: Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007.

Coe, Richard L. "Capitol Program Features Songs." Washington Post, October 6, 1951. Pg. 12.

Coe, Richard L. "Laughter Launches Ontario Theater." Washington Post, November 2, 1951. Pg. C9.

Coe, Richard L. "Ontario Theater Opens About Nov. 1." Washington Post, October 17, 1951. Pg. 18.



- Coe, Richard L. "San Francisco Mime." Washington Post, November 3, 1978. Pg. B7.
- Considine, J.D. "John Lydon." Washington Post, November 2, 1984. Pg. C4.
- Daley, Steve. "Performing Arts – Village People." Washington Post, June 5, 1978. Pg. B11.
- Donihi, Rosemary. "Julie Will Pop in To Introduce Mary." Washington Post, October 20, 1964. Pg. B2.
- Edstrom, Eve. "Legion Pickets District Theater Showing 'Death of a Salesman.'" March 6, 1952. Pg. 10.
- Harrington, Richard. "Blondie's 'Girl Group' Sound." Washington Post, November 9, 1978. Pg. D24.
- Harrington, Richard. "New Wave: One Hand Clapping." Washington Post, July 20, 1978. Pg. D11.
- Harrington, Richard. "Squeeze." Washington Post, August 10, 1981. Pg. C7.
- Headley, Robert K. *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1999.
- Hendrickson, Paul. "Rock's Unheralded Harbinger." Washington Post, February 16, 1979. Pg. D1.
- Himes, Geoffrey. "Go-Go's Girls & Lone Star Stars." Washington Post, November 21, 1981. Pg. C6.
- Horowitz, Sari and Marin Weil. "Ontario's Final Fade." Washington Post, May 11, 1987. Pg. D1.
- Hurwitz, Seth. Interview by author. Bethesda, MD. March 31, 2011.
- Joyce, Mike. "Bow Wow Wow & U-2." Washington Post, December 12, 1981. Pg. C13.
- Kernan, Michael. "Our Own Outrageous Ontario." Washington Post, October 30, 1981. Pg. C7.
- Mansfield, Stephanie. "Neighborly Party for A Neighborhood Theater." Washington Post, January 8, 1977. Pg. C1.
- Mansfield, Stephanie. "'Ontario' Opening." Washington Post, January 6, 1977. Pg. D9.

Mansfield, Stephanie. "Protest at the Ontario." Washington Post, February 4, 1977. Pg. B8.

Mansfield, Virginia. "Up and Out in Adams-Morgan." Washington Post, August 8, 1985. Pg DC1.

Marberry, Craig. "Cinematic Comeback." Washington Post, July 8, 1985. Pg. B1.

Martin, Judith. "Quilapayun: Cultural Ambassadors in Exile." Washington Post, November 19, 1977. Pg. C6.

Sasfy, Joseph. "Buzzcocks." Washington Post, September 5, 1979. Pg. C4.

Sasfy, Joseph. "Rock 'n' Ramones." Washington Post, July 26, 1979. Pg. F9.

Sasfy, Joseph. "Stray Cats." Washington Post, July 28, 1982. Pg. B16.

Sasfy, Joseph. "X-citement at the Ontario." Washington Post, July 10, 1982. Pg. C10.

Sumrall, Harry. "Diddley, Clash." Washington Post, February 16, 1979. Pg. D3.

Sumrall, Harry. "Magazine." Washington Post, August 6, 1980. Pg. E7.

Sumrall, Harry. "The Police." Washington Post, October 9, 1979. Pg. C4.

Sumrall, Harry. "The Talking Heads: Powerful Urban Rock." Washington Post, November 15, 1979. Pg. F23.

Volz, Willard. Photograph of Ontario Theater. Washington Star, March 9, 1977. *MLK Library, Washingtoniana Archives.*

Washington Post Staff Writer. "'Arts & Crafts (Images of Adams Morgan).'" Washington Post, April 20, 1978. Pg. DC8.

Washington Post Staff Writer. "'Funny Girl' Benefit Oct. 24." Washington Post, September 8, 1968. Pg. G6.

Washington Post Staff Writer. "'Lawrence Premiere Draws Capital VIPs.'" Washington Post, February 27, 1963. Pg. D1.

Washington Post Staff Writer. "Newest Theater Here, the Ontario, Opens Thursday." Washington Post, October 28, 1951. Pg. R2.

Washington Post Staff Writer. "On with the Show." Washington Post, March 4, 1979. Pg. SM42.

Washington Post Staff Writer. "Over \$20,000 in Clothing Looted From Northwest Store." Washington Post, October 29, 1979. Pg. C4.

Washington Star Staff. Photograph of Ontario Theater. Washington Star, October 19, 1969. *MLK Library, Washingtoniana Archives*.

Washington Post Staff Writer. "St. Patrick's Day To Be Austrian." Washington Post, March 14, 1965. Pg. F25.

Wuelfing, Howard. "Gary Numan." Washington Post, October 30, 1982. Pg. C5.