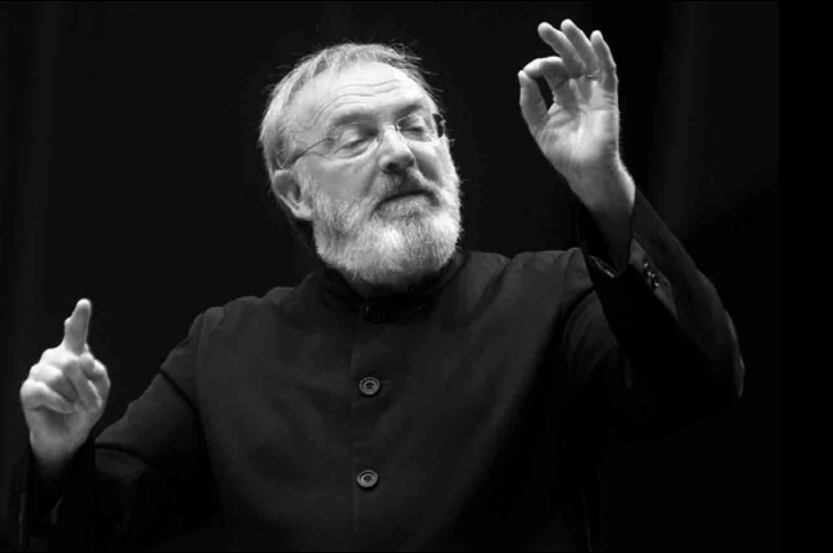


ON Stage[®]

VOLUME B • ISSUE 7



Martyn Brabbins, conductor



Barry Douglas, pianist

SOI Spring 2024 Season

EVOKING VIVID LANDSCAPES



Gergely Madaras, conductor



Sasha Cooke, mezzo-soprano



Bryan Cheng, cellist

An illustration of Eros Theatre



LARGER THAN LIFE

AN ODE TO THE SINGLE-SCREEN CINEMAS OF MUMBAI.

BY AISHWARYA BODKE

The dress circle at Regal Cinema is where you will find the best seat, I've always argued. Many, though, devotedly defend the stalls. How else would you witness a hundred people erupting into song and dance from their seats? I could be seated anywhere but there is rarely a forgettable visit to Regal.

If you take the stairway to the balcony, it is hard to miss the tall Oscar statuette embossed onto the mirror panel. The trophy is a homage to Regal's long association with Hollywood. The theatre opened with Laurel and Hardy's *The Devil's Brother* in 1933 and mainly screened Hollywood releases for years.

Unheeding to the unwritten rule book of the multiplex, to have over a thousand people hooting, gasping, laughing and shedding tears together in one of the iconic single screens of Mumbai is the

simplest catalyst to catharsis through film. It is here that the phrase 'larger than life' comes to life. The magnanimous magic of the celluloid and the spirit of collective movie-watching can often make the sight in front of the screen just as memorable as the one on it.

The theatres, too, are a thing of beauty. To call them cinema halls would be a travesty; they were referred to as picture palaces. Moulded out of proscenium theatres, many of them served as venues for live performances. The pits for orchestras were used during the silent film era to couple live music with the visuals. Years before the NCPA was founded, Regal served as a premiere venue in South Bombay, hosting poetry recitals by Rabindranath Tagore and performances by the Bombay Symphony Orchestra and opera stars.

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, founder of

the Film Heritage Foundation (FHF) and an avid supporter of single-screen theatres, emphasises that these were veritable temples of cinema. Created with immense love, they heralded modern sensibilities not only in what they showed but also in design and architecture. Unlike the multiplexes of today which look like factory-made replicas, each theatre was a unique experience. The FHF chose Liberty Theatre for its inaugural screening in 2015. Christopher Nolan, a champion of analogue film, also screened the 35mm version of *Interstellar* at Liberty in 2018. The foundation continues to turn to Regal for its retrospectives.

Located at the tip of one of the spokes of a busy circular junction overlooking Colaba's S.P. Mukherjee Chowk, Regal is surrounded by Victorian buildings. It ushered in the arrival of Art Deco architecture in Bombay and managed to



Capitol Cinema



New Roshan Talkies

tick many firsts. In addition to being the first air-conditioned cinema in India, it was also the foremost to have an underground garage, neon lighting and a soda fountain.

Not too far away, the Eros Theatre appeared five years later. It housed lounges, a soda fountain, a milk bar and a restaurant with a bandstand and dance floor. These cinemas embraced the Art Deco style, a strong reaction to colonial architecture, carving a distinct cosmopolitan identity when independence was yet to come. The Rajabai Clock Tower stands tall diagonally across Eros, overlooking the other end of the Oval Maidan, while it faces the Victorian Gothic edifice of the Mumbai High Court. A complete antithesis to the stately colonial structures, Art Deco brought in functionality, colour and curves. Following the Swadeshi Movement, one may notice a shift in the nomenclature of the deco buildings too. As you move north along Marine Drive, names like 'Soona Mahal' and 'Meghdoot' replace 'Oceana' and 'St. James Court'.

Even though the first film was screened in India in 1896 at the Watson's Hotel (now Esplanade Mansion)—India's oldest surviving cast iron building—it was only at the turn of the century that these picture palaces emerged.

Capitol Theatre, one of the oldest in the city, was initially known as Gaiety Theatre. Established for the performing arts in 1879, it was converted into a movie theatre in 1928. Defunct for years now, the structure silently gazes at the busy Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. The Imperial Cinema of 1905 occupies a place on Grant Road with the iconic elephant sculptures adorning the rear gate intact. Before becoming Alfred Talkies in the 1930s, the atmospheric venue started as the Ripon Theatre in the 1890s. Years passed, and the cityscape changed but Alfred Talkies never failed to announce

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each running film with hand-painted posters. Central Plaza at Girgaum and Metro Cinema at Marine Lines followed suit in the 1930s.

The cinemas of Bombay represented the pulse of a nation on the brink of change; motley groups of migrants and the manifestation of their aspirations. This glimmering band of venues, then, was complete with the arrival of Liberty Theatre in 1949. The name was a resounding echo of an independent nation. It exclusively screened Hindustani films.

Nazir Hoosein, the renaissance man who lovingly nurtured the theatre until his demise in 2019, inherited Liberty Theatre from his father Habib Hoosein, who had begun showing films at the Bandra Gymkhana on Sunday afternoons and erected tent cinemas during World War II. He went on to own 45 theatres, including the Garrison and Strand in Colaba and Naaz on Lamington Road. Liberty, however, was his crown jewel. A brochure commemorating Liberty's inauguration proudly pronounced it as 'a statement to the Indian people that no theatre can be too good for them or for Indian pictures.'

Atul Kumar, Founder Trustee of Art Deco Mumbai, remembers meeting Nazir Hoosein, "His visiting card did not have an address. It only said, 'Liberty Theatre: Showplace of the Nation.' The landmark was that prominent."

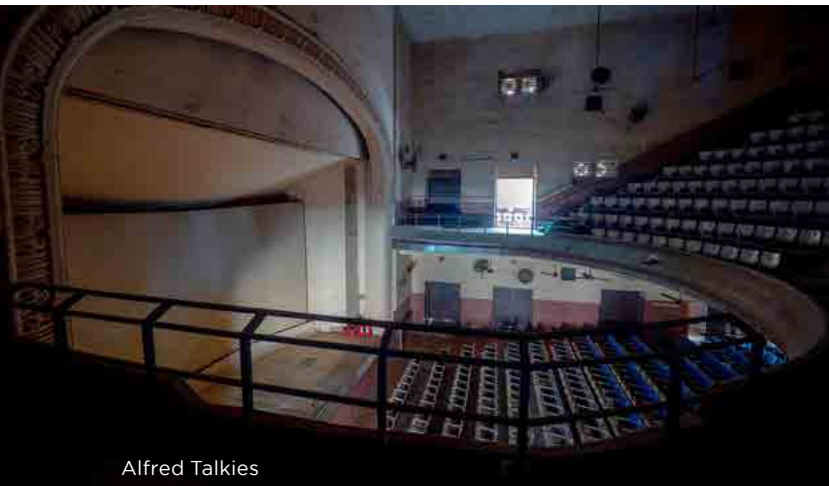
Neon red lettering sparkled on the façade of the towering Art Deco building

that housed shops and offices, the family penthouse and a special preview theatre. Marble from India, teak from Burma and Canadian white cedar were used for the extensive interiors of Liberty. The walls carried monochromatic murals of film stars. It was designed by W.M. Namjoshi, the man behind the Golcha Cinema in Delhi, Raj Mandir in Jaipur and Mumbai's beloved Maratha Mandir.

Each of the picture palaces was uniquely crafted with intricate details and ample quirks. Kumar beams as he talks about the magnificent teak wood panelling in Regal, drawn from the Greek muses of comedy and tragedy. Its ziggurat profile is beautiful while the Eros Theatre, he points out, looks like a tiered cake. Underneath the seats at Eros were tiny hooks that could hold hats, a sartorial norm at the time.

The circular recessed lighting on the ceiling at Liberty is made of thousands of incandescent bulbs, none of them visible to the audience. Kumar insists that it is one of the finest in the world. "They were masters of lighting. The lights created a soft luminescent glow that never hurt the eye. A stunning light and shadow show was orchestrated—still is—for you before the film begins. It is surreal."

It is a cruel tragedy that so many of these architectural gems are now defunct. Green burlap covers Eros, which is set to reopen as an IMAX screen. Liberty now hosts exclusive performances and film festivals, most notably the KASHISH



Alfred Talkies



Edward Theatre

Pride Film Festival. Hoosein welcomed it with abundant love and understanding. It was one of his last wishes that Liberty continues to be the festival's home.

Photographer and former cinematographer Hemant Chaturvedi has been a recurring name in the conversation surrounding single-screen cinemas for the last few years. His selfless and forever-spirited mission to document every single-screen cinema in India—operational, defunct or in ruins—has recently touched the number 1,000. It is a crucial archival endeavour to preserve the memory of our cinematic past.

His voice often camouflages his worry, sometimes through an amusing story from his travels to the remotest of corners, looking for a cinema. Chaturvedi spent his formative years in Mumbai and going to Liberty was an inseparable part of the experience. The 28-seat private theatre at Liberty above the main auditorium is a charming little space that hosts soirées and special screenings. The opulent seats, he recalls, come with a drink holder and a folding flap for critics to make notes. “The most luxurious seats,” he asserts.

“I learned only recently that the seats were bought in an auction of Pan Am jumbo jets. They are designed by the century-old seat-making company called Pen Workers. A gentleman from the company told me that his grandfather was summoned to create the mechanism to instal those seats because they were just so huge and unwieldy,” Chaturvedi tells us.

Liberty also boasts an exceptional sound system. The tale goes back to 1994, nearly half a century after the theatre opened its doors with the premiere of Mehboob Khan's *Andaz*. A curious request was made. The producers of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* wanted to show the film at Liberty but only with a new German sound system that would cost ₹10 lakh. Hoosein was worried about the irrevocable losses he would face should the film fail. “If it

bombs, we will reimburse you for the sound system,” they said. The knockout success saw over two million people walk through the doors of Liberty. The film ran for over a hundred weeks. For a moment in time, it was enough to save Liberty.

Various measures to inject funds and increase footfall have provided fleeting respite from losses. Film festivals, heritage tags and culture walks and renovation projects have helped but a complete transformation in movie consumption has set them back significantly. Mumbai has over 100 single-screen cinemas, of which only a handful are operational. The smaller screens, as you head north to the suburbs, have also dwindled in the last decade. It is also interesting to note how they propped up in the city and how geography and change in the composition of neighbourhoods played a part in their sustenance. Catering to different working classes and regional audiences, they were dramatically different from the Art Deco picture palaces.

The first film to premiere at Maratha Mandir in Mumbai Central was *Sadhna* starring Vyjayanthimala and Sunil Dutt. Aditya Chopra's directorial debut, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* has had a glorious run that will complete 30 years next year, interrupted briefly only by the pandemic. *Mughal-e-Azam*, which had a notable run of six years, was massively celebrated here. It is said that Dilip Kumar arrived at the premiere on a horse. The stuff of legends.

Chandan Cinema in Juhu shut shop a few years ago. In 2006, a glossy PVR multiplex opened nearby. It was believed that the fate of a film could be predicted based on its response at Chandan; a true Bollywood barometer. Among the longest-running films here, however, was the English-language *Saturday Night Fever*.

In the bylanes of Matunga, Aurora Talkies became a haven for Tamil and Telugu films after it was bought by Nambi

Rajan to give back to his community. Alfred Talkies and New Roshan Talkies are located right next to each other, in close vicinity of Kamathipura. Right opposite is the Gulshan Cinema, still running with cheap rates for pulpy B-grade films.

The experience of single-screen cinemas and picture palaces is irreplaceable. Once swanky centres, they are now dependable hubs for affordable movie-watching. There is something about the atmosphere here that transcends the screen in a way that can be called culture-defining. For many, it is an emotional relationship tied intrinsically to the city. Losing the samosas at Chandan, the chicken mayonnaise roll at Eros and the caramel popcorn at Liberty is like losing a part of childhood.

Wistful stories of dwindling single-screen cinemas continue to surface but can there be a silver lining to it? Chaturvedi shakes his head. “Times have changed,” he says with a sigh. But if we have learnt anything from films, hope is never all lost. On a hazy evening last year, over 1,000 people braved torrential rains to show up at Regal Cinema for a free screening of the 1949 film *Mahal*.

Chaturvedi recounts a funny tale. Nishat Talkies in Girgaum had abandoned the House Full sign as it had not been used in years. Post-pandemic hits of 2023, like *Pathaan*, pulled in such unprecedented numbers, they had to run to nearby theatres to borrow the sign.

Today, these structures uphold a greater value: that cinema is for all. The point of telling diverse stories through films that are inclusive and accessible is entirely lost if the act of watching a film is not accessible. “Is it not heartbreaking to see only a few people trickling into the cinema after an era where one had to chase crowds away?” Chaturvedi had once asked the manager at Alfred Talkies. A stoic response came his way, “We endure the woes of today for the pride of our successful past.” ■

HEMANT CHATURVEDI