MY BRIEF CAREER AS A MOVIE MOGUL

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 10 December 2023
Illustration by **Chris Fernezian**, Toronto

In the '50s, Jerusalem (then part of Jordan) was a backwater, a dead end. One couldn't go anywhere because Israel was in the west, blocking the Mediterranean Sea from us. The city briefly lit up twice a year: during Christmas and four months later during Easter. Tourists and pilgrims filled the city hotels, motels, and streets. Many Armenian pilgrims, mostly from Syria and Lebanon lodged in the Armenian Convent where most Armenians lived. Their presence lifted our spirits because every evening the social clubs organized dances, recitals, and parties. Stores did roaring business selling hundreds of different Holy Land souvenirs, made-in-Italy rosaries, made-in-Bethlehem olive-wood crèche of Baby Jesus, Virgin Mary statuettes which shone in the dark because they were doused in "phosphor".

The excitement lasted ten days to two weeks. And when the visitors left, the city returned to its chronic somnolence, to depression, to inactivity. Jerusalem again became an economically-depressed, grey, and joyless town.

Many Jerusalemites, especially teenagers and young people depended inordinately on one outlet of entertainment: Cinemas Nuzha, Hamra, and Al-Quds (Jerusalem in Arabic). All three ran double features and changed their programs twice and even thrice a week. While my friends and I loved going to the movies, I was particularly movie mad. Every Sunday morning (unless we were dragged to church by our school), I walked to the northern part of the city where the three cinemas were and checked which theatre had the best double feature. Sunday afternoon was the only time I could go to the movies.

I must have been ten or so when a dramatic event occurred in my movie-mad life. While playing in the "living room" of our neighbor's one-room home, I noticed, under the bed, a brown, wheel like "thing." I asked my friend if he knew what the round object was. He didn't know. He crawled under the bed and pulled the mysterious object. It was a dust-covered movie reel which diagonally measured five to six inches. We peeked at the first couple of frames. My friend slid the spool back where it was and told me the reel probably belonged to his eldest brother who was twenty or so.

When I got home, I couldn't stop thinking about the mysterious spool of amber. The next few days my obsession with the spool persisted. Eventually, I decided to see the older brother, the owner of the spool. With two shillings in my pocket, I went to my friend's home. His brother was having dinner. I sat next to him and after chatting a bit, offered him the two shillings for the spool. He looked at my friend. The look said my friend would be punished for being nosy. He then turned to me and said I could have the spool for free. I was on cloud nine. I wanted to ask him for the movie's name. Who starred in it? Where had he got the spool, but feared he might change his mind. He ordered my friend to fetch the spool from under the bed and give it to me. I could hug my benefactor but didn't dare. With the two shillings clanging in my pocket, I merrily climbed the stairs which led to our

home.

I hid the spool under my parent's bed. When my parents were out, I peeked several times at the first couple of frames. I couldn't make heads or tails of the frames. They were all fuzzy. I was not discouraged by the blurry images…I had dreams.

Next day I proudly announced to my friends that I would screen a mysterious movie in our living room Sunday afternoon. Admission price? 1 piaster. No seats. Everyone would stand. Everyone was excited.

The fact that I had no screen or projector didn't deter me. The screen was no challenge because our walls were dabbed with whiter-than-white alkaline "paint."

Finding a solution to the projection problem was going to be a challenge. But where there's a will, etc., I eventually found a "solution" to the absent projector.

I managed to get hold of a large packing cardboard. When opened, it was about six feet by three feet. I bent it twice and made into a U. I then dug a hole at the center of the mid-part of the cardboard. The movie would be projected through the hole as the cardboard stood vertically.

I "trained" two of my friends how we were going to operate the "projector." One would hold a thick candle next to the spool. I would, standing up, unspool the reel a few inches away from the candle while my second friend, sitting on the floor, would roll back the film I was slowly releasing. We experimented to synchronize the operation.

I picked Sunday afternoon for the gala opening of the mysterious movie because my parents usually went to the movies at that time.

Before the 3 p.m. screening time, there were fifteen excited boys and girls crammed our living room. I collected one piaster from each.

I turned off the lights and began unreel the spool while my friend reeled it in. For a few seconds, we could see blurry figures moving in silence. I thought the pictures were fuzzy because the candle was not at the right distance from the film. I told the candle holder to move the candle.

He did.

POOF. BOOM. POOF. The film exploded in a flash. I dropped the reel. Everybody scrambled out. Within seconds all that was left of the film were acrid ashes. The candle holder had apparently brought the flame too close to the film.

While the "ticket holders" were demanding their money, I was more concerned in getting rid of the burnt film's acrid smell. My parents would certainly note the smell. I would be in serious trouble. I returned the 15 piasters to the moviegoers and with my assistants began to collect the black ashes and then wiped the floor countless times until the smell was gone.

When my parents returned, I was worried they might mention smelling a strange odor. They made no comment but my movie mogul ambitions were forever scotched when the amber film went up in smoke in a split seconds.

Comments



H – 2023-12-30 23:35:55
Thank you Jirair. What a charming and hilarious experience. As I read the article, I seemed to be with you everywhere . Going to the movie houses, your friiend's one room house (that's what people used to have), your curiosity about the reel, your marketing a "movie" to the crowd charging real ticket price. What wasn't easy to predict was the ending with the poof, boom and the tedious clean up before your parent's return. The illustration/Cartoon By Chris Fernezian was an extra bonus. Charming article.



Adom K – 2023-12-30 09:04:22
An autobiographical vignette written in the «raconteur»'s usual humorous and entertaining style. The reader can almost feel that they were present in the room when "Poof. Boom. Poof." led everyone to the makeshift cinema's exit!



Nora Bedrossian – 2023-12-30 06:13:05
What an interesting article with a beautiful illustration. I too, remember enjoying the double feature movies in Jerusalem and Ramallah when visiting from Amman.