



Cinéma Vérité

Fantasy and reality meet in a child's weekly solo trips to the city theater.

By PAT JORDAN

I was 10 in 1951. Every Saturday morning, my father would give me two dollar bills so I could take two buses from Fairfield into Bridgeport, Conn., where I would go to the Globe movie theater for the kids' matinee from noon to 5 o'clock. I had to get a bus transfer in Black Rock and wait on a street corner for the next bus, which would drop me off downtown in front of Morrow's Nut House, "nuts from all over the world." I then walked four blocks along Main Street, past the stores and shoppers of this big, grimy factory city, until I came to the Globe and a long line of rowdy kids my age waiting to get inside.

After I got my popcorn and jujyfruits, I searched for a seat in that dark, crowded, noisy theater with its frayed, burgundy-velvet seats and huge, overhead chandeliers like icicles. In the '20s and '30s, the Globe was a bustling Vaudeville theater with leering, popeyed, baggy-pants comics and peroxide-blond ecdysiasts. After World War II, the Globe fell on hard times and was reduced to holding kiddie matinees.

I found a seat next to an old man.

He was unshaved, smelly, in tattered clothes. It was not unusual to find such bums scattered throughout the theater each week, their heads nodding on their chests, snoring. It was cheaper to buy a 25-cent ticket to the kiddie matinee than it was to pay a buck for a flophouse bed. There were other strange moviegoers, too. Teenage couples high up in the balcony, kissing. And an occasional woman, like my mother, in a flowered dress with shoulder pads, staring at the screen without interest, as if preoccupied with more weighty matters.

For the next five hours I laughed at Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and fat, pink, stuttering Porky Pig. I cheered the prissy, manicured Hopalong Cassidy my Italian mother called "Hopalong Che Si Dice," and his folksier, shambling counterpart, Roy Rogers. We hissed at their enemies, marauding Indians and outlaws dressed in black, whom they shot from the saddles of their galloping horses, Topper and Trigger. There was no real menace in those serials. We knew that the bad guys would always be dispatched, without a

drop of blood, by our heroes with a single shot from their silver six-shooters that glinted in the sun.

Not so with the Flash Gordon serials. They filled us with a very real, bone-chilling menace. Each week, the evil Ming, with his Oriental robes and sinister Fu Manchu mustache, would sit on his golden throne and dispatch his equally evil minions to destroy Flash Gordon, in his metallic-silver spacesuit and matching silvery hair. And each week, our beleaguered Flash seemed on the brink of thwarting Ming's plans for galactic domination. Then, at the last second, Ming would capture our hero by taking hostage Flash's beloved girlfriend, Dale. The noble Flash always surrendered himself when Ming promised to set her free. We screamed out: "No, Flash! It's a trick!" and it always was.

We wondered why the innocent Flash never saw through Ming's deceit. The serial always seemed to end with Dale captured, while Ming, cackling obscenely, dragged Flash to the brink of a fiery pit. But always before Flash was pushed into that fiery pit, the serial ended

with the words "Tune in next week for the further adventures of Flash Gordon." The following week, we cheered Flash in his toy-looking rocket ship, which wobbled as he chased Ming across the galaxy. We'd forgotten the fiery pit of the week before.

When the lights came on, most of the kids rushed up the aisle and out of the theater. A few lingered, slouched down in their seats, in an attempt to watch the next show of grown-up movies. I pushed through the heavy doors into the brilliant, late-afternoon sunlight and walked back to Morrow's Nut House, and beyond it, to the Mohegan Market with the painting of an Indian in a feathered headdress on its sign.

I went inside and asked for "a pound of doughnuts for my mother." The women around me laughed, "You mean a dozen, honey." My face turned red. I hurried out of the market with my warm brown bag. I went back to my bus stop and ate a jelly doughnut, powdered sugar dusting my clothes, and waited with the old ladies in babushkas, clutching shopping bags, and the old men like those bums in the Globe, for the first of my two buses home. ♦

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