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# Theaters shift to multiscreen

By Lise Olsen  
Staff Reporter

"The Nebraska" and "The Varsity" mean football to most sport fans. But theater-goers know them as two of Lincoln's early movie houses.

The Nebraska was razed in 1973 to make room for a multihouse "theater of the future," now known as the Plaza Four Theaters, 12th and P streets.

The Varsity, formerly at 13th and O streets, was replaced by the new National Bank of Commerce. The Varsity's parent company, Nebraska Theater Company, in 1973 built Cinema I and II, now the Cinema Twin at 13th and P streets. Many changes have taken place in Lincoln theaters in the last 15 years.

Of Lincoln's original single movie houses, only The Stuart Theater, in the Stuart Building at 13th and P streets, remains. A theater or opera house has

been at that corner since 1870, according to a July 26, 1977, Lincoln Journal article.

When the Stuart building was built in 1928, it was one of four Lincoln high-rises. A 1928 article in the Lincoln Journal called it a \$1.5 million skyscraper.

The original theater had 1,850 seats and a stage six stories high. The projection booth also was 60 feet high and movies originally were shown at a 45 degree angle, which distorted pictures. The ceiling had chandeliers and ornamented stone walls supported huge stone exits.

In 1972, Dubinsky Bros. Theaters, a Midwestern theater company with about 100 theaters in Nebraska, Iowa and Illinois, began leasing the theater. Irwin Dubinsky, a company owner, announced plans to seal off 40 percent of the theater to improve its acoustics and decrease maintenance costs. Lincoln artists, architects and historians organized a "Save the Stuart" committee. Dubinsky defended his proposal in a Jan. 30, 1972, Journal article, saying the changes he suggested — false walls and draperies — would cover but not eliminate the original construction.

When the Stuart reopened in May 1972, the ceilings had been lowered, the orchestra pit, stone walls and chandeliers were covered up and seating had been reduced to 950.

Today, the clearest glimpse of what's hidden under the curtains and false walls can be seen in Barrymore's, 124 N. 13th St. The ropes, catwalk and curtains of the old theater are visible, and the bar's bathrooms are in the old dressing rooms.

In 1977, the Stuart family gave the first five floors of the Stuart Building to the NU Foundation, suggesting the theater be restored and converted into a performing arts center. The proposal was rejected because of the size and acoustic design of the theater.

Next year, ground will be broken for a new fine arts building — the Lied Center for the Performing Arts. The Stuart seems destined to remain a movie theater.

When the Stuart was renovated in 1972, the national trend in the theater industry was shifting from single screen theaters to "multihouses" — one theater building with several screens.

The Douglas Three theaters, 13th and P streets, (built in 1972,) were the first multiscreens in Lincoln. They were followed closely by the Plaza 4 and the Cinema 1 and 2, now both owned by Commonwealth theaters.

Commonwealth, a national theater company, also owns the State and the Cooper theaters.

The Douglas Theater Company, based in Lincoln, owns the Douglas 3, 84th and O Drive-In and the East Park Three. Dubinsky Bros. Theaters, also Lincoln-based, owns the Stuart, Starview and the now closed West O Drive-In.

The three Lincoln theater companies bid against each other for first-run



David Fahleson/Daily Nebraskan

Barrymore's rafters show what used to be the backstage of the Stuart Theater.

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films. Picking a hit is a guessing game, David Livingston, executive vice president of the Douglas Theater Company, said.

"We're buying on faith and rumors... we never see these films by the time we've bought them," he said.

Often films are booked before they're made, Livingston said.

In the early '70s, westerns were the biggest box office draws. This year's western releases, "Silverado" and "Pale Rider," aren't doing as well as promoters predicted, Livingston said. Science fiction and fantasy pictures with high-tech special effects please today's crowds, he said.

Teen movies also are often today's hits, he said.

In the late '70s and '80s the most popular films were the epic pictures — Star Wars, E.T., Jaws, etc.

Livingston often bases his movie choices on the track records of stars and directors, but that system is not totally reliable, he said.

"A few years ago Burt Reynolds was big, now you couldn't force people to buy a ticket at gunpoint," he said.

Other successes seem to surprise everybody. One film that nobody wanted called "E.T. — the Extra-Terrestrial," became Lincoln's biggest box office success. In a 27-week run in 1982, 147,000 people bought tickets. This summer it was back.

Another surprising success, "Star Wars," released in 1978, had a big effect on the theater industry, Livingston said.

George Lucas promoted Dolby stereo sound for the film's release. Soon theaters all over the country began installing improved sound systems. Dolby is almost standard today, Livingston said.

Better movie soundtracks and special effects have continued to require improvements, Livingston said.

"Audiences today get bombarded by technology," he said.

Theater managers will have to continue to improve to compete with sophisticated home video equipment and cable programming, Livingston said, adding that future theaters probably will feature comfortable seating and gala presentations.

In many other cities, suburban shopping center theaters have become standard. The East Park 3 is the only multiscreen shopping center theater in Lincoln. A three screen theater has been approved for construction in the Edgewood Shopping Center, 56th and Nebraska Highway 2. However, further suburban theater development in Lincoln is unlikely because of zoning restrictions and general public opposition, Livingston said.

The next few years might also bring the closing of one or both of Lincoln's remaining drive-ins, Livingston said.

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