

## **The Snohomish Theater by Mac Bates**

Every day as I cross the bridge into Snohomish, I turn onto First Street, pulled ineluctably by memory. I don't really expect to see Schott's Meat Market, Snohomish Drug, Mel's Delicatessen, or J.C. Penney instead of the antique stores and boutiques, which have breathed life into downtown Snohomish, but, invariably, as I turn onto Avenue B, I look to see what's playing at the old Snohomish Theater. Of course, nothing is playing. There have been no coming attractions for almost three years when the last movie ended, the credits rolled, and the screen went black forever.

Jackhammers three years ago leveled the lobby and exposed the darkened theater. Rows of sticky, soda-stained seats were ripped from the floor. For a few days the patched movie screen was exposed to the last warm light of fall before workmen dismantled it, leaving a gaping black hole on First Street and in my heart.

I had never been backstage and had had little desire to see what lay behind the curtains. The screen was my window to the world of romance, adventure, terror, and fantasy. Movies enchanted me. The images came not from the projector but from behind the screen, if one dared look (and I could not), an ethereal vapor spiraling out over the Snohomish River, wisping above cornfields and grazing cattle, and soaring over the forested foothills to Hollywood where almost anything seemed possible.

In the 1950s, Snohomish was a long way from anywhere. Seattle was an hour-plus drive on winding back roads. Saturday morning TV was "Tom Terrific," "Fury," and not much else. If no one was interested in a chestnut fight in the woods behind Central

Elementary, or a pickup football game, a kid faced a dull weekend. But there was the Snohomish Theater. Fifty cents, plus another seven cents for a Charm sucker (I preferred grape) got you a scratchy Flash Gordon serial, Bugs Bunny cartoon and a Three Stooges movie. There were even raffles; my brother Andrew once won a plastic replica of the White House, along with thirty-some little plastic presidents.

The raucous audience cheered when the lights dimmed and the curtain opened. In the back rows and balcony, the older boys slipped arms around their girl friends' shoulders, a prelude to some serious necking. They never saw the movie. The younger kids jumped over and crawled under seats, throwing popcorn and ducking when the ushers shone angry flashlights on them. They rarely watched the movie. In the dank, cavernous bathrooms, the faux James Deans and Carol Lynleys smoked cigarettes and struck rebellious poses. They could care less about the movie. Except for the night I inexplicably dumped a tub of buttered popcorn on Dave Troupe's lap, I always watched the movie.

Slouched in my seat, staring at the screen, I entertained impossible thoughts: I wasn't gawky, didn't have the last crewcut in Snohomish, was not struck dumb in the presence of girls, and was, in fact, making out in the balcony. In the darkened theater I could shed my awkward skin and join the stars on screen. Scrunched stiff-necked on the floor in front of the first row of seats (according to Biff Reading, the best place to watch the movie) I wanted to scream up at Clifton Webb to forget honor, jump in the lifeboats and leave the damn Titanic." When Debbie Reynolds sang "Tammy's in love," she sang it to me. On the white sands of Palm Beach I capered with the bosomy, bikinied coeds in *Where the Boys Are* until my mother, stunned by the cleavage, dragged my brothers and me out of the theater. When

the Beatles dashed down some London Alley in *A Hard Day's Night*, chased by screaming girls, I was right behind them—not quite as comfortable in Beatle Boots.

Even as a kid I stayed for the credits, trying to imagine the life of a gofer, gaffer, or key grip. Suffused in the movie's warm afterglow, I was slow to leave the theater and confront the harsh light of day and the vague but discomfiting knowledge that someday I would just be old.

In the late 1960s, the larger world seemed to roar up the newly opened interstate to Snohomish while its children roared out. Kids were lured to the malls, with their stripped-down boxy theaters. The Snohomish Theater survived by showing adult films—*Deep Throat* had its Northwest premiere in Snohomish—but in the early 1980s concerned parents, including Seattle theater entrepreneur Randy Finley, brought family films back to Snohomish until the fall of 1999.

I took my daughters to the Snohomish Theater; they never got the chance to go by themselves. On our last trip to the theater we saw a Muppet movie or something with mice in it. I wish now it had been something more memorable, perhaps *October Sky* or *Fly Away Home*. I wish I had been able to point out the balcony light socket where the girls' Aunt Lizzie had broken a light and had been asked to leave, or the seat where Uncle Stu sat when someone stuck gum in his hair.

Last fall I took Rosalie and Isabella to see Harry Potter at the Monroe Galaxy Theater (six, seven or eight) and they were entranced. I leaned back in my comfortable seat and fell asleep; at the Snohomish Theater I would have gotten whiplash the moment I nodded off. I know my daughters will find magic on the movie screen, as I did, but I wish they could have found it, slouched in the patched velvet seats of the Snohomish Theater.