



Small Towne Short Stories
Son Light Christian Center: Part I
By Dave Barton

Every Thursday night, late, 10:00 P.M. or 11:00 P.M., I would lift my parent's avocado green rotary wall phone from its silver cradle and call a list of 10 phone numbers. Movies changed every Friday; dialing the theatre recordings the night before gave me a leg up on planning the five or six movies my buddy Chris and I would see that weekend, if our parents were willing to pony up the money and drive us around.

The first I called was the one closest to home: The Orange Theatre. I would get the manager on the phone if I was too early and he hadn't changed the message, but usually it was the answering machine playing on a loop: telling me whether the movie was new, how long the run time was, if it was something R-rated or whether there was a matinee with a softer film playing.

Saturday afternoons I would walk up from my parent's duplex on Palm, past the oily dust of the Anaconda Wire and Cable plant—its railroad tracks; the wooden spools omnipresent, leftovers from a giant's playtime. I remember the acrid smell of the orange groves (now apartment complexes). I would trade insults and throw rocks with the Mexican girl gang on the block; stop at the malt shop on the corner of Glassell and Palm (now Bruxie's) for a banana shake and sit across from Chapman College (now University), facing north toward the barber shop (now Ray's) where I got my buzz cut once a month.

* * *

The glass box office was outside on the sidewalk and you'd always buy your ticket there before entering the carpeted lobby. I would stare at the movie posters in the glass and metal frames, searching for the tease of titillation and entertainment. Early 70s movie posters were a mixed bag. At that time the posters were moving away from poorly drawn and composited images focused on the exploitive to the more elaborate, dream-like work of painters like Richard Amsel—the neo-noir *The Late Show*, the rustic browns and blacks of *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, the memorable *Chinatown* with Faye Dunaway materializing from Jack Nicholson's cigarette smoke. As a 12-year-old, every single one sheet was magical, filled with intrigue.

There were old insert posters above the snack bar, drawing focus to attractions that had long since come and gone when you should have been eyeing the candy and trying to make a decision. The one I remember best was, *Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice*, with its woman's mask-like face half buried in a grave, two strands of bright red blood streaming from her nose. This particular image led to traumatic recurring nightmares in my early teens, where I'd dream of discovering a body half buried or try and rescue someone in quicksand and find myself swallowed up into its darkness.

Long before copies of posters became available online, the only way to get your hands on one was to work at a theatre, drive up to LA specialty shops or approach the individual theatres and beg. Technically, the posters were loaned to the theatres as promotional material, owned by the studios who might ask for them back at any moment—but never did to my knowledge—so most managers I approached said 'no.'

I asked The Orange Theatre manager a half dozen times before he acquiesced and allowed me up the stairs and into his office. He opened up a file cabinet, searched for a moment and gave me the first two movie posters I ever owned: *They Might Be Giants*, a yellow monstrosity with profiles of George C. Scott and Joanne Woodward and the far more exciting, *The Frozen Dead*, with its bodies suspended mid-air on ice tongs in a padlocked refrigerator case, a bosomy woman screaming and Dana Andrews looking stern from a square at the poster's left. I thanked him, ran home and tacked them up on my walls immediately, much to my mother's disapproval.

* * *

Besides the mini posters, details are fuzzy about the snack bar. I remember colorful rows of candy: caramel Sugar Babies in the red-and-yellow paper wrapper, Jujubes that would get stuck in your teeth, cinnamon Hot Tamales featuring a happy little Mexican kid with a sombrero. I don't remember the smell of popcorn, though I remember eating it and getting it stuck in the rubbery grooves of my Vans.

Walking through the heavy, swinging doors into the dim theatre, I would often sit right up front so the screen filled my vision. The clock to the left was never correct. If the movie started at noon, the clock inevitably read 3:23 P.M. The chairs—soft, save

the occasional spring or broken wood seat—were comfortable, engulfing my small frame in their plush embrace.

I saw all of Don Knotts' comedies there and watched my first Laurel & Hardy, Abbott & Costello, Buster Keaton, Keystone Kops and Harold Lloyd films. Prior to VHS, this was the only way to see these movies unless you caught them on perpetual TV reruns on a Saturday morning. The Theatre would routinely show compilation films of the great silent, early talkie comedies. Absent plot, the poorly edited films would cut together stunts, pratfalls and chase scenes, providing vital introductions to a boy who otherwise favored the more adult, R-rated films of the 70s.

Watching a matinee of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* starring Gene Wilder, my little brother and I waited through the full 40-minute break afterward. We snuck between the balcony and main floor of the theatre, low in our seats, hoping no one would notice we were way too young to watch the late afternoon or evening show, *Tales from the Crypt*, with its serial killer Santa, murders on Christmas Eve, embalmed bodies writhing in agony and corpses digging themselves out of the grave.

* * *

Then there was the balcony. High above the rows of seats on the main floor, it was the coolest place. You could put your feet up if you were in front and see the projectionist walk in and out of the small white booth. It was also wonky as hell. Unless you were sitting near the edge or all the way back, it was tough to get the whole image being projected on screen. Whenever you stood, the railing was low enough that vertigo always made you weave and have to steady yourself.

Was the theatre curtain red? I imagine so, but sometimes I remember it as a lush, floor-to-ceiling gold that reflected the film when it first started playing. There were two elaborately decorated grates on either side of the screen, a throwback to when the building was a vaudeville stage, I assumed, but could have been for ventilation purposes. I remember the shield at the top of the proscenium arch, the stairs leading up to the stage below the screen on each side, the Wurlitzer in the orchestra pit that never got played. All these little details, however vague and impaired by the flaws of time and memory, were precious to me.

And then, suddenly, the Theatre was closed.

Part II of the Son Light Christian Center will be released on Tuesday, January 5, 2016. Subscribe to [The Paper Trail](#), our free subscription newsletter, to receive our monthly installments of Small Towne Short Stories.

Dave Barton has written for the LA WEEKLY and OC WEEKLY for over twenty years, the last eight as their lead art critic. He has interviewed artists from punk rock

1888
info@1888.center

photographer Edward Colver to monologist Mike Daisey, queer performance artist Monica Palacios and screenwriter Phyllis Nagy, to playwright Joe Penhall and art troublemaker Ron English. He recently joined ORANGE COAST magazine as an arts writer.

May Festival Diamond Jubilee Parade in Orange, California, 1963. Image shows view of convertible car pulling float along North Glassell, for the City of Orange's 75th anniversary (1888-1963.) The Orange Theatre, Meldor Restaurant, Reliable Shoe Shop and Santa Ana Valley Irrigation Company office visible in background. "Diamond Jubilee" banner hangs over street. Crowds are lined up along sidewalks to watch parade. The May Festival, which began in 1933 and also included the May Day Parade, continued to be held until 1991. Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA. Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply.