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Cinema Houston: From Nickelodeon to Megaplex (review)

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Davis presents Martin's life and times and trials and tribulations in the traditional biographical form, beginning with her 1913 birth in Weatherford, Texas, and concluding with her burial there seventy-six years later in 1990. In the process, he reveals a performer who put the perfection of her craft above all else. Martin began performing when just a young girl, endured lean years in Hollywood while "breaking into" the business, and later basking in the wealth and comfort provided by her success. The costs of Martin's "stage perfection," however, were high. Martin's son, actor Larry Hagman, was raised by his maternal grandmother until age twelve, and afterward divided time between boarding schools and his father's home so Martin might pursue her theatrical goals. Martin's career and the raising of her daughter, Heller, were carefully orchestrated by her husband and manager, Richard Halliday, a brilliant man plagued by depression and substance abuse. Through it all, Martin remained focused squarely on her task. She smiled, sang, and performed.

The breadth and scope of Davis's research is impressive, and the plethora of personal interviews—some conducted with Martin herself—provides readers with an almost personal access to Broadway and Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s. At the same time, Martin's story serves to remind us that while film endures, the stage performance is a moment in time—a flash—then gone forever. The roles with which the Weatherford, Texas, native charmed the world were preserved on celluloid not by Martin, but by others: Julie Andrews as Maria von Trapp, Doris Day as Annie Oakley, and Mitzi Gaynor as Nellie Forbush. Even Martin's quintessential role, Peter Pan, is more closely identified with actresses Sandy Duncan and Cathy Rigby than it is with Martin, the first to sail through theaters on a wire as the boy who would never grow up.

Davis's work should appeal to a variety of readers, particularly those interested in the history of the theater. Of personal interest to this reviewer was Martin's time spent at Nashville's Ward-Belmont College, though I do take exception with the author's characterization of the institution as a "finishing school." Of interest to others will be Martin's son, Larry Hagman, the fictional J. R. Ewing of television's *Dallas*. A photograph of Martin and Hagman would have been a nice addition. It would also be interesting to know if J. R.'s fictional wife "Sue Ellen" was named in honor of his mother's lifelong best friend, Bessie May Sue Ella Yaeger Austin.

Davis's work presents neither a grand theme nor a newfound theory. Rather, Ronald L. Davis's intention with this volume was to return Mary Martin to her rightful place as the grande dame of the American musical theater, and in this he succeeded.

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BRENDA JACKSON-ABERNATHY

Cinema Houston: From Nickelodeon to Megaplex. By David Welling. Foreword by Jack Valenti. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Pp. 352. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 9780292717008, \$45.00 cloth.)

Film study has gained respectability in the English and history departments of the nation's academic institutions. The focus of this scholarship, however, is usu-

ally limited to analysis of film texts rather than audience reception of the cinematic experience. In an era in which film viewing is increasingly a private experience taking place within the home, it is easy for some to forget that screening a movie was once a public event. In the text and photographs of *Cinema Houston*, graphic artist David Welling reminds readers of the role played by movie theaters in fostering a sense of community in his native city.

Cinema Houston is essentially a nostalgic volume in which Welling laments that in its rapid urban development Houston destroyed many of the lavish movie palaces which once dotted the city's downtown landscape. Welling writes, "Going to the movies was meant to be a spectacle, both on the screen and in the theatre itself. It was meant to be larger than life. It was meant to be remembered" (xviii). Relying primarily upon newspaper accounts from the *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle*, along with photographs from the Houston Public Library, Welling reconstructs the film-going experience in Houston from the nickelodeons of the early twentieth century to the contemporary megaplex.

The book is more descriptive than analytical, but Welling makes a good effort to place the cinema of Houston in historical context by providing thumbnail sketches of city theaters organized in a chronological framework. Replacing early theaters often associated with vaudeville, the massive downtown theaters of the 1920s, such as the Metropolitan, Loew's State, and Majestic, employed opulent furnishings, and patrons were guided to their seats by uniformed ushers. These movie palaces were casualties of the Great Depression and World War II and replaced by more intimate neighborhood theaters. With the arrival of television and growth of suburbia, movie attendance in Houston and the nation at large plummeted. The sprawling automobile culture of Houston, however, encouraged the construction of drive-in theaters in the postwar era. The boom in film viewing from one's automobile proved to be somewhat of a short-lived phenomenon as the city's last drive-in closed in 1992. Suburban filmgoers were drawn back indoors through the construction of the megaplex, such as the 3,500 seat Spectrum, in which the film industry is attempting to recreate some of the splendor of the 1920s, but with greater consumer choice on multiple screens.

Although his focus is upon mainstream cinema, Welling also draws the reader's attention to Houston's art-cinema houses as well as theaters specializing in adult features. Welling observes that the world premiere of the Robert Altman art-house hit *Brewster McCloud* (1970), featuring the Houston Astrodome, enjoyed its world premiere in the city's domed stadium. He also offers an interesting account of the city's unsuccessful efforts to halt exhibition of the popular X-rated film, *Deep Throat* (1972). The segregation of Houston's downtown theaters persisted into the late 1960s, and Welling should also be credited with examining the history of theaters catering to the city's black and Hispanic populations.

Cinema Houston will hold a nostalgic appeal for residents of the city, but the volume should also encourage cinema scholars to move beyond analysis of film texts and consider audience reception and reaction to the movie experience. The newspapers employed by Welling certainly constitute credible sources, but scholars should also use interviews to analyze the role played by public memory for film audiences. These techniques would be especially valuable research tools

for the study of smaller Texas towns where the picture show was one of the few sources for local community entertainment.

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Eckhardt: There Once Was a Congressman from Texas. By Gary A. Keith. Foreword by Al Gore. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. Pp. 334. Illustrations, chart, notes, sources, index. ISBN 9780292716919, \$34.95 cloth).

Immediate political biography, done poorly, can often be tedious, even for the most enthusiastic aficionados of political history. Yet Gary Keith takes an intriguing personality and important political career, contextualizes them, and gives us an interesting window into postwar politics. Keith's lens is Congressman Robert "Bob" Eckhardt, a progressive Democrat with a unique and significant career in understanding modern Texas and American politics.

Keith begins the Eckhardt story in turn-of-the-century Texas. Born to German settlers, the Eckhardts were prominent Austin residents. They lived in a state enjoying increased political importance and economic growth, but still marred by racial discrimination, notably against Latinos, and Jim Crow institutions such as poll taxes for African Americans.

While an undergraduate and later a law student at the University of Texas at Austin, Eckhardt made the connections, personally and professionally, that proved so important to his later life and career. As a young attorney he fought against segregation and for labor. Eckhardt served in the Army Air Corps Reserves during World War II, despite a fear of flying, teaching at a ground school. After the war he worked for the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) and eventually moved to Houston in 1950. Eckhardt worked as a lobbyist and as a cartoonist for the *Texas Observer*, was an unwavering supporter of progressive Ralph Yarborough and early organizer for the liberal Democrats of Texas (DOT). The author introduces us here to the personalities and characters of postwar Texas politics, including Lyndon Johnson, John Connally, and George H. W. Bush.

A longtime activist and lobbyist, Eckhardt made a predictable foray into politics and served in the Texas House of Representatives from 1958 to 1966. There he began a career in the Texas House as a legislator's legislator, working tirelessly on maintaining fair taxes as well as, in his most famous victory, preserving "Open Beaches" for public use.

In some ways the beneficiary of redistricting in growing Houston, voters sent Eckhardt to the U.S. House in 1967, where he served until 1981. He worked on committees such as (not surprisingly) Labor, and worked on other important issues including environmental protection, consumer defense, and progressive taxation. A supporter of the New Deal, his postwar political record often placed him in agreement with his Democratic Party. Once in Washington, Beltway insiders learned about Eckhardt what many Texans already knew: the Congressman had a freewheeling personality. Eccentric and charming, self-absorbed and