• SPOTLIGHT •

The Fox Theatre has lived many lives in its 87 years at 2215 Broadway, a Spanish courtyard, a scene of catastrophe, a vision of art deco splendor and the backdrop of an elegant Hollywood premiere, but nothing brings to life its history like the stories of the

Usherettes

By Emily Mangini

Dona Bean

Ida Balsamo

Marcy Davey

Adel Sanchez

The maroon uniform-clad, flashlight-wielding young women escorted moviegoers to their seats in the Fox's heyday, yet the usherette role was much more than aisle illumination. Usherettes maintained prestige and decorum in an era when movies were more than mere entertainment. Ida Balsamo, Dona Bean, Marcy Davey and Adele Sanchez are survivors of a breed that upheld the dignity, weight and glamor of an industry that shaped a society. These women also balanced the thrill of young adulthood with the significant responsibilities of their roles.

"You felt important working there," Marcy Davey recalled. "It was such a regal place." She was 18 years old when she worked as an usherette in the late 1950s. "In our own way, we were serving the community. And there was a pride in that."

Her colleagues share her pride and sense of service, perhaps because at the time World War II was a fresh memory, and duty and responsibility are prized commodities during times of war. Bean, Balsamo and Sanchez worked the theater in the final years and aftermath of the world war. For Davey it was Vietnam. Definitely, it was cool to work at the Fox. And for moviegoers, definitely it was cool to sit in the loge seats.

"Oh yes, the loges upstairs, those were the good seats," Sanchez remembered. The loges in the lower section of the balcony were not the cheap seats.

"Those seats cost extra," Balsamo added. "They were seventy-five cents."

She should know. She sold tickets in the cylindrical box office.

"Ida, she thought she was big time, selling the tickets from that big box," Sanchez said, joking with her friend.

"Oh yes, I was big stuff," Balsamo said with a grin.

The larger, more comfortable loge seats offered an unobstructed view of the movie screen. An usherette's primary duty was to ensure general admission patrons did not sneak into the prized section.

"People would ask me all the time if they could sit in the loges, even the adults," Bean said. "I just couldn't believe the nerve of people. But I would check their ticket, and tell them no. There was no going to the loges without a loges ticket."

When it opened on January 5, 1929, the theatre was known as the New Sequoia, named because its predecessor, the Sequoia Theatre, was a mere block away on Broadway. Ellis J. Arkush, Redwood City's entertainment mogul, owned them both.

The Bell Theater on Main Street, which Arkush opened in 1914, was his first. But he envisioned a grand theater on busy Broadway, and opened the original Sequoia Theatre just two years later. With a seating capacity of 750, forced air, and what was reportedly the first marquee in Redwood City, Arkush achieved his goal. For years the Sequoia was Redwood City's premier theater. By the late 1920s, however, the increasing popularity of moving pictures demanded more seats. Taking the spot on Broadway where Central Grammar School and its emblematic clock tower stood, the new Sequoia Theatre was built to seat 1,200 patrons.

A daring Adele Sanchez stands atop the then Sequoia Theatre in 1944.

Again, Arkush had grand visions for his new theater. He fashioned the New Sequoia to resemble Spanish courtyards he had seen in recent travels in Europe, the idea being that moviegoers would be transported out of their day-to-day lives and into the romance of an exotic movie palace. Golden arches accented vaulted ceilings, wall murals of landscape scenes greeted patrons. Even the theater ceiling was designed to heighten the courtyard appeal. A special projector cast images of twinkling stars and moving clouds on a sky-high ceiling painted pale blue. It was the final touch of Arkush's Spanish splendor, of which only the murals remain. This was the theater in which Balsamo, Bean and Sanchez performed their duties. But it wasn't all work and no play.

"When the theater would close, we would ride up and down the bannisters. Oh, we were crazy!" Sanchez laughed.

In addition to being an usherette, she worked the candy counter.

"I had to catch up with Ida," she said. "She was always in that big ticket booth, so I had to catch up. I liked being in complete charge, ordering all of the candy, taking inventory. And, oh boy, did I eat those Uno bars."

Bean missed working with Balsamo and Sanchez by just a year, but worked the box office and as an usherette and also has fond memories of the theater.

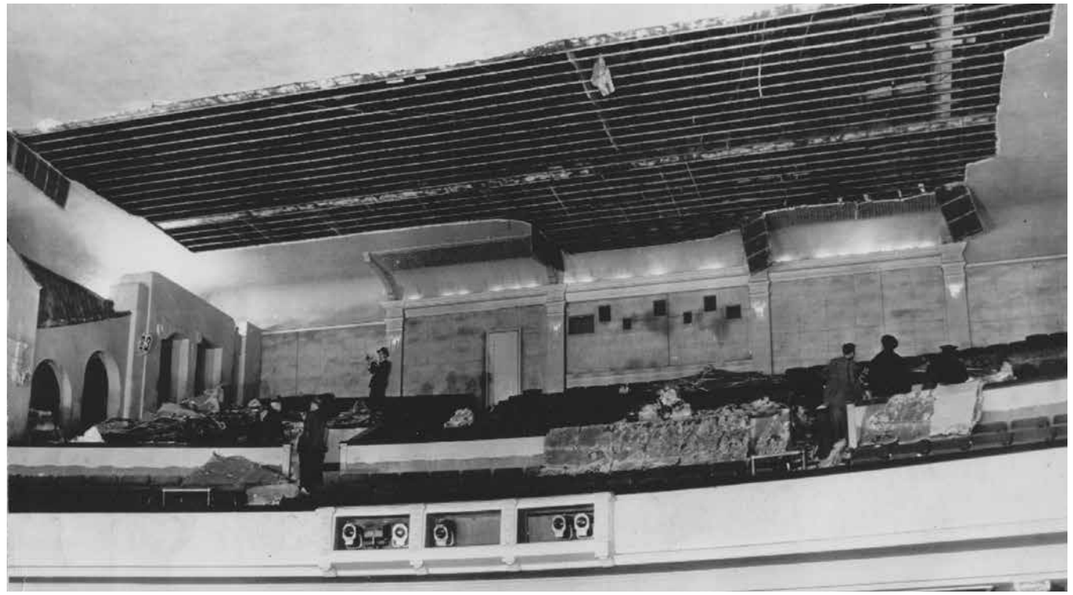
"I liked the box office best because you got to be outside and talk to people. The ticket line would wind around the block sometimes," she said.

Bean's employment was part of her sophomore Home Economics class at Sequoia High School.

"We were encouraged to go try different jobs, and I thought, 'Well, I like the movies.' So I chose the theater." A bonus was the New Sequoia Theater's proximity to the Midway Café next door. Her workday regimen was theater, homework done in the projection room and dinner at the café.

"I would have a cherry coke and a cherry pie a la mode for dinner. My mother would get so mad," she said.

An architectural weakness, short plaster nails, are behind the Fox's near-catastrophe.



Caption to the above photo from the Tribune: "Theater Ceiling Falls – An estimated 10 tons of plaster and reinforcing fell from the ceiling of the balcony of the Sequoia movie theater during the last show last night, injuring 30 persons, one seriously. Fifteen of the injured were hospitalized. The ceiling dropped in a single sheet."

The constant rumbling and vibration of the nearby train loosened the attachments. During a movie showing on the evening of June 21, 1950, the ceiling crashed down. Miraculously, only one person was seriously injured.

It was a turning point for the theater. Closing for three months to repair the New Sequoia ceiling, ownership, which Arkush had conveyed to Fox West Coast Theatres the year it was built, took the opportunity to reopen with a fresh interior and new name: The Fox Theatre.

The Spanish courtyard feel was replaced by what is now known as "Skouras style" for brothers George and Charles Skouras, owners of Fox West Coast Theatres.

The Fox's surviving décor is Skouras, rendered here by designer Carl G. Moeller. Portly, golden scrolls framing the Theatre's stage and snaking up its ceiling and walls mark the motif. The design took full advantage of aluminum sheeting that had become cheap and easily accessible at the time. A large, quilt-like mirror above the lobby entrance made it magnificent front to back.

The community celebrated its reopening on September 15, 1950 with a gala benefiting U.S. Treasury bond sales supporting the war in Korea. A special edition of the Redwood City Tribune promised that the event would give Redwood City "…a taste of the glamor, color and excitement of a Hollywood premiere."

It was an event of fantastic proportions that did not disappoint. Movie stars John Payne and Mary Jane Smith were there, as were mayors from all over the peninsula, including San Francisco. A crowd of more than 2,000 people lined Broadway to watch a parade. Redwood City's Mayor Carl A. Britschgi issued a Mayor's Proclamation, declaring, "We take this as evidence of the confidence held by Fox West Coast Theaters in the future of the Peninsula and of Redwood City in particular — a confidence proudly shared by all of us." Famed actor George Jessel was master of ceremonies for the night, which concluded with a preview showing of My Blue Heaven starring Betty Grable and Dan Dailey.

An impressive day for Redwood City provided Fox West Coast Theatres the opportunity to flex its marketing muscle. The brand new marquee shouted that "Movies are better than ever" and theater president Charles Skouras promised in the event program that the Fox was "…the perfect theater — a theater embodying the miracles of modern science and comfort, blending beauty and graciousness with practical utility."

There was good reason Skouras' decree reads a bit over the top. The re-opening occurred just as movie theaters were losing their entertainment foothold to television. Movie operators were highly motivated to convince the public that movies were better than watching television fare; the Fox Theatre was best because it was the medium's newest venue.

It was in this new theater, with its "luxurious appointments and harmonious atmosphere" that Davey worked.

"It was as if everything sparkled," she remembered, "the walls, the ceiling, even the patterns on the carpet were ornate. You were proud to work at the Fox."

Working at the Fox also came with very high expectations.

"Our manager was Mr. Singer," she said. "He ran a tight ship. You had to be at your post on time, with your uniform perfect. We were all afraid of him."

Her worst fears were realized during an otherwise innocuous shift.

"I was showing a couple to their seats in the loges when my hand hit something. It was dark, so I didn't think much of it, until guests below started yelling. I had knocked a cup on the ledge, and soda was raining down on them."

Terrified of losing her job, she hurried back to her post. "I stood in my spot in the dark, shaking all night. We all tried so hard to be perfect. I was sure I was dead. I didn't tell anyone about what happened for fifteen years." Almost sixty years later it still took coaxing for Davey to allow the story to be put in print.

Though there was the pressure of being the perfect usherette, there was also the benefit of watching the movies while working, at least for the first couple of shifts.

"Back then only one movie was shown, sometimes for two to three weeks straight if it was popular. I must have seen *The Big Country* with Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean over 100 times. You'd be standing at your post in the dark, reciting the lines," Davey said.

For Sanchez and Balsamo working at the Fox in the final years of World War II meant soldiers and sailors, common sights at the theater and downtown.

"Oh, we'd walk up and down the street with them, get a coffee, you know, all very innocent," Sanchez said. "My brother was in the service, so I was always friendly to the soldiers, hoping that someone was doing the same for him wherever he was. Sometimes a soldier would walk us to the bus at night after we closed the theater. I have to say they were very nice. But there was no hanky-panky." She paused. "Nope, no hanky-panky." Emphasis is key when it comes to these matters.

Often when Bean served as an usherette she found herself presented with dark corner dalliances of her peers. With an embarrassed but slightly devilish grin, she recalled having to redirect amorous couples' attention to the screen.

"I would have to wave my flashlight and tell them, 'the movie is that way,'" even if it meant forcing her own friends to toe the line. Even the young man on whom she had a crush would take girls up to the notoriously romantic balcony, if for nothing else than to get a rise out of her.

"He would bring girls up to the balcony," she conceded.

"He wouldn't do anything. I made sure of that. But he knew what he was doing. He wanted me to be jealous." The ploy worked. The pair was married by the start of Bean's senior year.

In 1983 the gilded years of the Fox ended, done in by the advent of personal entertainment devices and cineplexes. For years the theater stood shuttered. Whether or not a direct correlation can be drawn, the rest of downtown followed.

Theaters seem to remain the town's lifeline, however. The development of Theater Way in 2006 breathed new life into downtown, with the Fox Theatre a benefactor of that revival.

John Anagnostou purchased the Fox in 1999; in 2010 current owners Eric and Lori Lochtefeld took over. Brought back to life and scrubbed clean, the lobby once again welcomes throngs of patrons, though this time around it's not a feature film that they seek but a concert, play, or comedy act.

For all its resemblance to the original movie palace, the Fox is in many ways a different theater in a different town. But at its core it is the same grand theater around which downtown life revolved and revolves.

The days of usherettes and star-studded bond galas have passed, but the lights in the Fox are back on and in the shadows they cast still dance the memories of those times. C

Charles Skouras, President, Fox West Coast Theatres