

## THE MATINEE

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

I want your grade school child to sit in a seat in a darkened room for four hours while he or she participates in a riot. Only one incompetent adult supervises a thousand children at this event, and her mental state is in question. Several fights traditionally occur at this affair, and no medical attention exists. Oh, by the way, I want you to pay for the privilege of your child's participation. You may think I'm crazy to propose such an outlandish set of conditions, yet your parents and mine did exactly that when they sent us to the Saturday afternoon matinee in the Bronx.

If you attended grade school during World War II, or in the years before television took over the land, you probably went to the Saturday matinee at the local Movie Theater. During the winter, or on those days when it rained, your parents used this opportunity to get you out of the house and out from under foot. Sharp, clear memories remain from those days, but the world changed, and the local theater is now approaching extinction. At one time every town owned at least one such establishment, which was reserved for the children from Saturday morning through afternoon. Parents didn't go at that time or, if they did, they left the theater with their sanity in shreds

Breakfast started early on Saturday, for you wanted to be one of the first 'lucky hundred' in line who got a comic book for early arrival. This enticement usually drew two hundred kids, each expecting to get a dime comic in addition to seeing the movie. In addition, you waited out the suspense attached to last week's cliffhanger serial. The plane crashed into the mountain while the Green Hornet pummeled the bad guys. It looked like he died; obviously, nobody survived that catastrophe. Yet you knew that each week for thirteen weeks in a row the hero or his friends entered and escaped the jaws of death until the bad guys came to

justice.

Remember standing in line before nine o'clock on a Saturday in a howling pack of grade schoolers who waited for the theater to open? You kept the dime entrance fee wrapped in a handkerchief in one pocket and woe to you if you lost it and went home for another. In your other pocket, you kept the nickel for candy. Many kids brought a sandwich, but that wasn't cool so they stored it in a deep pocket and brought out later in the dark when nobody knew they ate 'sensible' food.

Once the doors opened the pushing and shoving really began in earnest. Everybody wanted to be first to get the best seat. Luckily, all maintained differing views as to where the ideal locations were. As the crowd entered the theater, they overwhelmed the candy counter. Popcorn, sodas, candy bars and boxes of loose, but hard candies sold like hot cakes. Then the hollering began as friends tried to contact their friends who stood further back in the line. Someone always showed up late, but the early arrivals saved their friends a seat. This caused two or three fights while the lights were still on. The lights stayed on till most of the theater filled, otherwise lonely ten-year-olds prowled in the dark shouting for long lost friends-not seen since yesterday.

The matinee was always bedlam. Imps and elves from eight to fourteen continually moved up and down the rows to the bathroom- each good for five visits - as the rabble turned the aisles into a seething mass of humanity. Trips to the candy counter were added to innumerable reconnaissance visits to meet friends in the next aisle or in the balcony. It looked, like an oversized ant colony gone mad. The projector volume exceeded that of a jack hammer, while trying to overpower the screaming, hollering, and laughter that came from the diminutive raucous mob. Objects hurtled through the air included paper airplanes, popcorn, hard candies, empty candy boxes and hats taken from unfortunates who turned around at the wrong moment. Highlighted for seconds in the beam, the missiles followed the standard ballistic path through the air. The resulting shadow, for an instant flicked up and down, without any permanent effect on the pirates or cowboys who fought out their

roles on the silver screen. Because of the crowd packed in the small areas, these missiles invariably hit a target, rarely the intended one and that called for retaliation. If the new combatants maintained a supply of ammunition, a fierce but brief exchange broke out until they ran out of missiles. Then an uneasy truce settled on that section of the battle ground while some other little skirmish took center stage. The Bronx was exhilarating. The Bronx was exciting. The Bronx was alive.

Keeping the lid on Dante's Inferno took the talents of a very special person-the matron. Enlisted from the ranks of retired prison wardens, these women usually fell into two categories. One disguised herself as a little old lady. In reality, she probably free-lanced as a poisoner like the characters in Arsenic and old Lace. Too old for an office job, yet needing the money to survive, these older women took terrible abuse. It helped to maintain their sanity if their hearing and eyesight started to fail. Rarely getting respect, their nerves typically held out for a couple of months. By then they hoped to sign on with the French Foreign Legion-for a rest. Invariably when this person resigned, her replacement met the other stereotype specification a sturdy middle-aged woman with a pronounced protruding bull dog jaw, who qualified as a heavy weight, tag team, wrestler. She always got respect because of her size and her reputation as a martial arts instructor to the Marine Corps. However, the enormity of the throng and the darkness of the arena guaranteed that she kept order only within three or four rows of her presence. After a couple of weeks, the matrons focused on the important things. Forget keeping order. It was a full time job as they tried to keep the little darlings from killing each other in hand to hand combat- the girls were the worst. For self preservation, the matron also prevented the little darlings from burning the place down with their illegal smoking.

One of the regular attendees was the local bully. He usually loved the matinees; the extra cartoons; the action movies and the weekly serials but mostly he loved the matinee itself. This was his domain. It contained masses of kids he controlled. He acted as

the king of the arena, and always stood first in line, because, if he came late, everyone gave way in deference to his size and reputation. The bully swaggered inside, took a seat in the middle aisle, and proceeded to watch the movie. Anybody rash enough to stand in front of him was told to sit down only once. The second time they got a not too friendly slap on the head, which put them in their seat and kept them there if it didn't result in a concussion. Kids that complained to the matron learned the facts of life. "Find another seat," she'd reply. Matrons considered themselves tough, but nobody paid enough for a matron to tackle someone with the reputation the bully bore. For most of the show, the bully sat surrounded by empty seats. To a casual observer it appeared that he possessed the worst case of B.O. on record.

At the end of the matinee, kids came out and re-enacted the action movies they saw. They loved the swordplay and troops of musketeers wandered down the street with sabers improvised from scrap lumber, or as a last resort, from rolled up comics. The bully stole the best wooden sword, or if convenient, made one from the aerial ripped from a parked car that happened to be in his path. In his other hand, he held a shield, recognized as a garbage can cover. Imaginary enemies put upon him and he slew them by the hundreds. Telephone poles, trees, and garbage cans came in for the most abuse. They were regularly run through, kicked or slashed by the self-anointed hero. Most people viewed him as weird, so they tended to leave him alone. Because of his size, this was a smart idea. The bully vents his energies on many inanimate objects, hailed any passing acquaintance, and offered to duel with him. The designated opponent always found an excuse. They told him to see them another time-and vanished.

Well those days fade into history, and the number of people who remember this environment decrease each year. Now grandparents recall the good old days and they laughingly talk about the time they, from their vantage point in the balcony, dropped a paper cup full of soda on Sally Johnson while she sat in the orchestra. Of course, Sally is married to grandpa now, and her memory of the incident is slightly different. It isn't a pleasant memory.

Either the local bully became a police officer, the physical education instructor at the local high school or he resides in prison. The old theater transitioned to a bowling alley a skating rink or a mini mall. Too soon, recollections fade, and shortly only old photographs will hold the memory. Shown a marquee from that era, people in the future may observe the photographs and old news reels, and think, wasn't that a great thing in those days, a place to send the kids on a bad day where they would be looked after by a paid staff. Reality rarely fits the dream.

THE END