

20 years at 24-frames/second

by Greg Bak

Theatre manager Lia Renaldo has fond memories of the early days at Wormwood's Dog and Monkey Cinema. "My mother would take me to the original Barrington Street theatre and I would sit on a pillow in the aisle. The facility was very cosy then—it had heat."

Since then the cinema has moved three times, and it no longer has heat. Or at least not very much. But aside from furnace problems at its most recent location, the Wormwood's story has been a successful one since the theatre screened its first movie 20 years ago on March 19, 1976.

Wormwood's owner Peter Gaskin says the theatre grew out of the need for a venue for classic films in Halifax in the mid-1970s. The Dalhousie Film Society screened art films, but Gaskin says the Atlantic Film Maker's Cooperative felt classics were needed "to help local film makers develop their skills by watching the films of past masters."

Members of the Cooperative approached the National Film Board with a plan, and the first Wormwood's opened in the old NFB building on Barrington Street, using the Film Board's equipment. Admission was \$1.50 per film, or \$5 for a monthly pass to five movies.

It was a strange name for a theatre. "Dr.

Wormwood's Dog and Monkey Show was the name of a 19th-century vaudeville troupe that toured all across the US," explains Gaskin. As part of the show, film pioneer Edwin Porter showed moving pictures to astounded audiences.

Although Wormwood's Cinema was begun as a collective effort by the AFMC, Gordon Parsons eventually emerged as sole proprietor and began to run the theatre in 1983. That year, it moved to the Khyber Building on Barrington Street.

But Wormwood's was never just a business to Parsons. As part of Dalhousie's Film Society, the Film Maker's Cooperative, and a founding member of the Atlantic Film Festival, Parsons was passionately dedicated to developing Halifax's film scene. So, while his business side recognized the need to fill his 96-seat theatre, he was committed to showing the kinds of movies that interested him personally.

"Gordon loved to watch films," says Gaskin. "He'd be projecting a film and watching it through the projection port. Change-over would come and he'd take the used reel off and set it on the rewind table. By the end of the night he'd have watched the whole film but have twelve rolls to rewind one after the other. Sometimes he wouldn't get out of the theatre

until two in the morning."

The lease in the Khyber expired in 1987 and the landlord pressured Parsons to find a new location. He chose 2015 Gottingen, but the former Carpenters Hall needed considerable renovation to be a serviceable movie theatre.

For help in renovating and running the new space, Parsons took on then-employee Gaskin as a partner, and the new theatre was ready for business in February 1988. Gaskin says the going was initially tough. "On Barrington Street you had to work there all the time or you didn't eat. The same thing happened on Gottingen Street. We would have very busy times, but also very, very slow times."

Gaskin's move to partner status didn't affect his job description: he still sold tickets, ran the projector and swept the floor. The only difference was that he had his name on the large bank loan needed to pay for renovations.

When the loan was eventually paid off, it was time to move Wormwood's again—but to a purchased, rather than rented, location. Gaskin says they decided in 1995 to take the plunge and buy the old theatre at 2112 Gottingen Street. (Parsons died in 1993 but his widow, Meredith Hutchings, continues to own part of the company.)

"The choice of this building was based on the fact that it was a movie theatre. We have always wanted to *have* a real movie theatre, because we've always wanted to *be* a real movie theatre."

The high cost of the move—about \$260,000, mostly raised through a bank loan—may single-handedly turn Wormwood's into a "real" modern theatre, complete with multiple screens and big-budget movies. "The whole idea behind this move was that we would open up two theatres," explains manager Renaldo. A big one, which Wormwood's currently has, and a smaller one to be built in another part of the large building.

"This would allow us to program all the stuff we have truly wanted to in the small theatre, while using the big theatre to screen Hollywood-type films," Renaldo muses. But the other theatre won't be built for another three or four years, during which time Wormwood's has to screen those Hollywood films to fill the seats in that big 246-seat theatre.

Trying to balance art and money "has always caused us a great deal of moral whiplash," admits owner Gaskin. In twenty more years he might find a cure for that, but until then he's got to change the next reel. ▀



Stars in her eyes: Manager Lia Renaldo bides the time between reels

Photo Peter Gaskin