

Memories of cinema-going in Little Nassau

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Abstract:

This article provides a brief overview of cinema-going in Nassau, Bahamas in the 1950s. The social and political composition of the island is reflected through an analysis of the ownership of the four big cinemas during this period as well as their film exhibition and distribution systems and practices. I triangulate the memories of oral history narrators, along with news and display advertisements from local daily newspapers, and trade journals to examine local cinema-going experiences. A description of the cinemas and their location clarify the significance of these venues to the social order of the day and the culture of the groups of people that resided on this island during that time. Central to this research and a prevalent thread permeating throughout is the impact of race on the leisure activity of cinema-going and the broader everyday lives of the narrators. Thus, this article aims to decolonise discourses on cinema history and highlight the experiences of overlooked peoples.

Keywords: cinema exhibition; film distribution; Bahamas; oral history; Race.

Imagine life in Nassau, the capital of The Bahamas, under British colonial rule, during the decade of the 1950s. You are a teenager or young adult who is contemplating how you will fill your leisure hours. Several things come to mind: swimming, basketball or reading a book. However, the one that most interests you is going to the show to see a movie. You then consider which of the big four cinemas (the Savoy, the Cinema, the Nassau Theatre, or the Capitol) on the island you should patronize. Now here is where things become a bit complicated. If you are a young black woman, your choices might be the Capitol or the Nassau Theatre; for a white youth you would most likely choose the Savoy, whereas a black male would choose from among the Cinema, the Nassau Theatre and the Capitol. Implicitly, the location and choice of the cinemas correlated with the social and political structure of the Bahamian society at the time and cinema-going geographies revealed how access to certain social rights and privileges was structured.

Cinema-going in Nassau was one of the most popular leisure activities for young persons during the 1950s. As such, researching the practice of cinema-going is also an effective way to study and document the way of life of persons in Nassau during that time. By elucidating the cultural memory of young persons living on the island during that epoch, we are allowed to peer into their lifestyles and create a history of cinema-going in Little Nassau during the 1950s. By doing so, we get a view of the cultural and social experience of the young adults of that time. This serves to enrich not only the New Cinema History movement but also historical accounts in general with an alternative narrative which shifts the focus away from Western-centric, predominantly white cultural power centres and, instead, pays attention to the equally valuable but often overlooked mediated experiences of colonised peoples.

Historical Background

To fully comprehend the lived experiences of cinema-going on the islands, we first need to contextualise them within local political and media histories. The Bahamas is a Commonwealth Nation, located just 50 miles off the US Florida coast. On the Southern border of the country is the large island of Cuba, and further south is the island of Hispaniola, an island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The social and cultural fabric of The Bahamas has been subjected to the ‘economic and cultural’ diaspora of the triangular movement of human and agricultural commodities enforced during the slave trade era (Craton & Saunders, 1992; Craton & Saunders, 1998). Initially the property of Spain, these islands eventually became a member of the British Empire in the seventeenth century and a colony of Great Britain until 1973. Today The Bahamas remains a Member of the British Commonwealth of Nations having attained its independence from Britain in July 1973 (Craton & Saunders, 1992). The Bahamas, along with Bermuda and Barbados, are among the oldest parliamentary democratic forms of government, outside of Britain, in the British Commonwealth. Their system of governance consists of a local representative assembly, sharing authority with a Governor (Albury, 1975, p. 268).

The history of the media in the Bahamas begins with newspapers, which can be traced back to just after the American Revolution, when persons loyal to Britain came to The Bahama Islands and introduced newspapers to ‘the colony’ (Pactor, 1985). In 1930, VIBAX, the first Radio station in The Bahama Islands, was started, making The Bahamas the first British colony in the region to introduce radio broadcasting to the English-speaking Caribbean (Pactor, 1985). The first sound and colour movie that was screened in The Bahamas was shown in 1930 (Reporter, 1930). In a letter to the Editor of the *Tribune* newspaper of April 29, 1931, the practice of segregation within the cinema was confronted in an article entitled “Segregation at Fotosho Theatre” (1931). So, not only were The Bahamas quickly moving with broader media developments around the globe but they also provided a fruitful soil for reflections on issues of race, social inequality and injustices related to media consumption at the time.

The decade of the 1950s was a time of transition and change on the small island of New Providence, where the capital city of Nassau lies. This post World War II decade brought significant political and social challenges to this fledgling British Colony. The tourism industry began to develop in a more structured manner, and with it came a fair degree of economic growth to the local economy. Nonetheless, most of that growth accrued largely to the benefit of the minority ruling white class with far less trickledown effect to the majority black population.

During the 1950s the political climate within The Bahamas was still set by the white minority class, who controlled the organs of Government through the colonial governor appointed by the British Government. Members of Parliament were elected from among informal alliances and were invited by the Governor to assume cabinet and other senior government posts. This changed in 1964 when the first direct constitution of The Bahamas was put into effect by Great Britain, giving the colony limited self-government. During the decade of the 1950s, black activism increased as black persons were becoming more educated and assumed more publicly visible roles. Political organizations, trade unions, and suffrage movements within the United States, Great Britain and the Caribbean were influencing the politics of the islands. The first political party, the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), was formed in 1953 by a group of coloured men who led a membership of predominantly black persons. The white minority professional and merchant class, which directed and controlled political power for many years prior, followed suit and officially formed the United Bahamian Party (UBP) in 1956. The various trade unions, in this political jockeying for power and improved minority worker rights, were represented by the Trade Union Congress, under the leadership of Randol Fawkes, a young black attorney who led the country in the most effective and successful labour strike in its history. The General Strike of 1958, which was supported by the Taxi Union, Airline Workers Union, hotel workers and workers from the Public Board of Works, and included a boycott of the stores of the main shopping hub, Bay Street, lasted for several weeks and got the attention of trade unionists and the media in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the rest of the Caribbean, even attracting the attention and support of the most influential American civil rights leader of the time, Martin Luther King. As a result, labour reforms were instituted in The Bahamas (Fawkes, 2013; Saunders, 2016). The 1950s was a time of uprising, but it still took almost a decade before there would be significant political change. Majority representation of the citizenry was finally achieved in 1967, with the election of the PLP Government, led by a then 36-year-old black attorney, Lynden Pindling, who later led the country to independence from Great Britain in 1973.

It becomes clear that the period post-World War Two was one of social and political turmoil in The Bahamas. Inevitably, this was reflected in the cultural life and experiences of the Bahamian society, more specifically those of the younger generations, who took an active part in social movements and cultural activities. In the next section, I briefly introduce the method used to collect data for this study and describe the sample obtained. Then I highlight the cultural geographies and social context of cinema-going in Nassau, supplementing

archival analysis with precisely the cinema-related memories of informants who formed part of these younger generations in the 1950s, when the social and cultural dynamics of The Bahamas were shifting rapidly.

Methodology and the Narrators Who Shared Their Stories

The ethnohistoric strategy of inquiry utilized in this research is a qualitative design seeking to explore the contextualized individual experiences of the study's participants and subvert colonial top-down narratives. The research methodology supplements in-depth oral history interviews with a remembered film component with secondary sources of research from the public archives, and other public records. This approach allows for the topics which the participants themselves identified as important and meaningful to be explored and promotes working closely with the communities whose history and culture are studied (Carlson et al., 2018).

The narrators for this study are a mixture of male and female respondents who would have been teenagers or young adults in the decade of the 1950s and who resided on the island of New Providence, in The Bahamas. The research population for the study is a purposive, non-random sample recruited from a specific group of persons. The research sample comprises a mixture of genders, races and varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds. When determining the number of participants for a sample, it is generally suggested that the sample size be decided when the research has attained its point of saturation, or the information being provided becomes duplicitous (Deacon et al, 2007, p. 45). Kvale, however, suggests that fifteen persons, plus or minus 10, would be an acceptable standard number of interviews in a qualitative study (Kvale, 1996, p. 102). Accordingly, the research sample is composed of twenty-seven persons, who, in 2015, were between the ages of seventy-two and ninety-five. Both the mean and median age of the group of participants is eighty-one. The sample is virtually evenly distributed across male and female participants. Fourteen men participated in the research and constituted 52% of the sample population; thirteen women participated and constituted 48% of the sample population. Black and white Bahamians of both sexes took part in the research. There were ten black men, or 71% of the male research population, and four white men, or 29% of the male research population. Eleven black women were participants in the study, representing 85% of the female research population, and two white women, amounting to 15% of the female research population. Twenty-three of the research narrators were interviewed individually, and four interviewed as couples. The average running time for the interviews was thirty-four minutes. The longest interview ran for an hour and forty-seven minutes, and the shortest running time was nine minutes and twenty-five seconds.

My efforts to de-colonise the narrative of cinema history join (among others): Burns' work on cinema culture in the the British West Indies between 1900 and 1945 (2020); Klien-Thomas' explorations of Bollywood film and media consumption in the Caribbean (2019);

Narayanswamy's observations on the relationship between women and early cinema in Bombay in the 1920s (2021); and Maingard's research on how cinema worked to first establish and later dismantle the South African apartheid (2013). By its very nature, the qualitative methodology which I adopted, an approach frequently used in New Cinema History projects, is one that is not directed from the top down, but evolves from the bottom up (Rossman, 2012; Maltby, 2011). Accordingly, my research facilitates the reconstruction of everyday life and meaning derived from the perspective of the individual narrators and relayed in their oral history interviews. The narrators' memories are accounts of their broader way of life signified by their experiences of cinema-going in New Providence of the 1950s. As these memories are analyzed in the research process, they provide insight not only into the leisure activity of cinema-going in the past but also into island culture and social structures. A central feature of this research are the voices of the oral history narrators. Their stories are the richest threads in this symbolic tapestry, as they are narrated in vibrant and captivating prose, adding busts of colour in their retelling. The tone of the Bahamian dialect is vital to the discourse of the narrators' memories, providing a gateway to Bahamian culture in a fashion that would have been lost in a more formal linguistic style. Many of the narrators communicated in the Bahamian dialect at some point in their interviews, some more so than others, and did not attempt to "polish up" their speech by making efforts to speak in perfect Standard English, regardless of their racial, educational, or socio-economic backgrounds. Susan Wallace, a Bahamian poet who writes in the Bahamian dialect suggests that, particularly post-independence in 1973, the dialect could be viewed as a "form of Bahamian speech in the search by Bahamians for language that adequately expresses their national identity..." (Dahl, 1991, p. 67). Indeed, the dialect was one of the elements of the narratives that not only uniquely connected the individual narrators with their national heritage, but also emphasized the collective bond that they share as Bahamians. Due to my insider status, I could understand the dialect, and as such was better able to create the written transcription of what is essentially a spoken as opposed to written language form. Being aware of the nuances in the dialect also made analysis of the oral history interviews an easier task. As an insider I also spoke in the dialect on occasion, thereby aiding in the creation of a more relaxed and relatable interview environment.

The Big Four: Location, Location, Location!

As previously mentioned, the places and environments of film consumption in The Bahamas reveal much about how social life was structured and how cultural activities were enacted at the time. During the 1950s there were four major cinemas operating in Nassau: the Savoy, the Nassau Theatre, the Cinema and the Capitol. Each of the four cinemas were located within a half a mile radius of the northern section of the island of New Providence. Two of them, the Cinema and the Capitol, were in the section of the island called Over-the-Hill, and the other two were situated on the main shopping street of the island, Bay Street, which runs parallel

to the harbour. The farthest distance between any of the cinemas was just over half a mile. This was representative of the trek from the Nassau Theatre, the most easterly venue and the Capital which was the furthest to the west. All the theatres, except for the Savoy, which stood in the centre of the commercial and tourist hub, were bordered by or in the centre of residential communities. Understandably then, each of these theatres had their distinct atmosphere and clientele. The Savoy was known for its racially segregated policy; the Nassau Theatre was popular as a decent cinema where anyone could go and be comfortable; the Cinema was very popular among men, and was very much a community theatre; and the Capital was the newest theatre built and owned by a black businessman.

In 1950, the Savoy, the Nassau, the Cinema and, an additional smaller theatre, Meers, were owned by Wometco Theatres, a Miami-based company, run by American businessmen Michell Wolfson and Sydney Meyer and operating a large chain of 29 theatres across Florida and the Bahamas (Alicoate, 1950). By 1958, the then re-named and expanded in membership Wometco Bethell Brothers Theatres chain had also secured ownership of the Capital as well(Staff, General Strike Closers Theatres in Nassau, 1958). This reveals the vested foreign interest in developing cinema-going in the Bahamas and its implicit influence over distribution, programming and social mores in local cinemas.

Indeed, the issue of race-based explicit accessibility rules and unspoken expectations was shared, to a certain extent, across American and Bahamian venues of the period. The Savoy was the only local cinema that embraced the practice of racial segregation, allowing a white-only clientele to patronise the establishment. The Nassau Theatre catered to a mixed clientele, both racially and socially. Black, coloured or mixed, and white participants remembered watching films at the Nassau Theatre. It was seen as a place which attracted a variety of persons. Nonetheless, Harold, a black narrator, and Oscar, a white narrator, were both of the opinions that this theatre was built primarily for the black and coloured population to provide a venue where they could see a film in the city, on Bay Street. The Cinema Theatre appealed to persons residing mainly in the black communities off East Street. So, even though there was no formal segregation policy enforced across these two venues, there was a general, unspoken understanding that their main purpose, often defined by physical proximity, was to serve black communities.

The Savoy Theatre was the oldest of the four main cinemas. Its exact opening date is unknown, but it was prior to 1937. The Savoy was one of three theatres that were owned and operated by C.W.F. Bethell who was part of the white minority elite on the islands at the time. Bethell was one of the founding members of the UBP, a Government Member of the House of Assembly, representing the Island of Grand Bahama, and a cinema tycoon in the country at the start of the 50s (Sturrup, 2008). His ownership of theatres in Nassau dates back to the 1930s, when he owned and operated three cinemas – the Montagu Theatre, the Nassau Theatre and the Savoy Theatre. Both the Nassau Theatre and the Montagu burned down in September and October 1937, respectively (Reporter, Here and There Fire Destroys Nassau Theatre, 1937; Reporter, Fire Destroys Montagu Theatre, 1937). Shortly after the fires, Bethell

announced that he would renovate the Savoy by enlarging the lobby and increasing the accommodations to make the facility more comfortable (Reporter, Savoy To Be Improved, 1937). Bethell also revealed his plans to rebuild the Nassau Theatre, relocating its entrance to Bay Street instead of the former Union Street entrance. The plans to renovate and rebuild the Savoy and the Nassau Theatres were realized by the late 30s and by the 1950s both cinemas were identified as the two movie establishments operating on Bay Street, registered under the company name of Theatrical Enterprises Limited. After its renovation, the Savoy was described in an article from June 1940 as “modern in its appointments, the walls of the auditorium decorated with panelled monotone mural paintings of picturesque street scenes from the British Isles” (Staff, 1940). The article reported that there were 645 seats in total in the theatre, 510 of which were orchestra and 125 were in the balcony (Staff, 1940). Bethell also owned and operated the Cinema theatre which was located Over-the-Hill, in the centre of the black community, situated on East and Louis Streets. There was no found public record of when he acquired the Cinema or when it commenced operations in Over-the-Hill Nassau, but the oral history narrators provided rich evidence of their patronage of this theatre during the 1950s. The fact that Bethell considered it important to invest in attractive theatres catering, respectively, to white and black communities on the islands reveals the universal appeal, cultural significance and financial profitability of cinema-going at the time.

The Capitol was the newest of the four theatres as it opened in the late summer of 1950. The initial owner of the Capitol, Percy Pinder, was an enterprising black businessman, who aggressively promoted this new, state of the art theatre with display advertisements in both the *Guardian* and *Tribune* daily newspapers, up until its opening. It was heralded as ‘a new theatre for the Southern District’ (Reporter, New Theatre for Southern District, 1950). Newspaper and archival research reveals that the Capitol Theatre was clearly the most remarkable of the four major theatres. On Saturday, 29th July 1950, a display advertisement was placed in the *Nassau Daily Tribune* announcing that the Capitol Theatre was opening soon under the ‘Distinguished Patronage of H.E. Sir George Sanford and Lady Sanford, the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of The Bahamas, and his wife’. The programme for the grand opening of the theatre included: a welcome address by G. C. Cash, MHA, organ selections by Bert Cambridge; a solo by Persis Roberts Rodgers; a solo by Freddie Munnings; and a solo by Barbara Williams (see: Fig. 1). All the attractions on the programme were persons of prestige in the black and coloured communities, starting with Cash, a black Member of the House of Assembly, and along with Cambridge (a musician and former black parliamentarian), Roberts Rodgers, Munnings and Williams – all influential musicians and singers who were well known among the Bahamians on the island. The feature film presentation for the evening was the Metro-Goldyn-Mayers’s *Stars in My Crown* (Jacques Tourneur, 1950), starring Joel McCrea and Ellen Drew. So, the opening of the new theatre was portrayed in the press as an attractive cultural event, patronised by creatives and politicians of local importance and featuring world-class (i.e. Hollywood) entertainment. The allusion to royalty in the first programmed

film's title was also likely meant to increase the perception of exclusivity and lavishness linked to the Capitol, and to implicitly validate the cultural experience of black communities there.



Figure 1. *Nassau Daily Tribune*, 29th July 1950.

Indeed, the brand-new Capitol Theatre boasted of a cooler and more comfortable environment. It was built with a stage and curtains in front of the screen. The 164 x 46 feet auditorium was the largest theatre in the Colony, featuring a large balcony with seating capacity for 750 patrons. The chairs were modern, and the projectors and sound equipment were reported to be the most 'up-to-date', even in the United States (Reporter, New Theatre for Southern District, 1950). One of the significant arrangements highlighted in the announcement of the opening of the Capitol Theatre was the working relationship that its owner Pinder had established with both United Artists and RKO for the distribution of first-run movies to his theatre (Reporter, New Theatre for Southern District, 1950). The architectural design of the building also allowed for live performances to be conducted at the theatre. One Saturday in early February 1951, the Bahama Playhouse Players were reported to have performed the play *Springtime for Henry* at the Capitol to a "large and enthusiastic audience" (Reporter, Bahama Playhouse Players At Capitol, 1951). The location and the flexibility of use of the venue provided an opportunity for this theatre group to perform their plays in front of a more diverse audience, and at a price that was more affordable for the less economically privileged Bahamians. The Capitol Theatre was considered, not just a place where persons from all races and economic and social classes could go to view a film in a relaxed and modern environment; it was also a venue in which anyone who could afford a

ticket could be exposed to ‘high culture’. Paramount to all this, however, particularly for black Bahamians, was the fact that a black Bahamian owned and operated this spectacular theatre. For a black person to aspire to own a business of this magnitude in The Bahamas in the 1950s was out of the norm, and indeed, for Pinder it was a very ambitious endeavour. He was a visionary in building his theatre using the design and facilities that he utilized, as well as the location, which was Over-the-Hill, just opposite a government public parade ground, yet still within walking distance to Bay Street, East Street, and a pleasant walk from Union Street (Elizabeth Avenue) and Dowdeswell Street.

Sometime between 1950, when the theatre was opened, and 1951, when Pinder relinquished ownership over it, he experienced some challenges in securing films for viewing in the Capitol. In a newspaper article, dated 7th February 1951, it was noted: “Owing to the non-arrival of the film *Eye-Witness*, which was to have been shown at the Capitol Theatre tonight and Thursday, *The Story of G.I. Joe* will be substituted...” (Reporter, Capitol Theatre, 1951). Some of the oral history narrators indicated that there was a sense that Pinder’s race was a factor in his ability to import first-run Hollywood films into the country. There was also the sentiment that Bethell, the white Bahamian owner of the other main theatres, was in some way responsible for this blockade to the inward flow of films to Pinder and the Capitol. Whatever the reason for the demise of Pinder’s dreams to own and run a first-class theatre in the Over-the-Hill section of Nassau, Bethell was able to acquire the Capitol Theatre from him and commence operation of it in May 1951. The consolidation of all the theatres in New Providence is evidenced by the advertisement of the films being exhibited at the Capitol, the Cinema, the Savoy, the Nassau Theatre, and the Meers Theatre all grouped together in one large spread (see: Fig 2.). Despite their (after a certain point) common ownership, the theatres in New Providence were well-dispersed which made them accessible not only to persons residing close to their locations, but also to those who travelled from as far as Fox Hill in the East and Chippingham in the West.



Figure 2. The Nassau Guardian, Monday May 21 1951.

Film Distribution and Exhibition in 1950s Nassau

In addition to the concentration of exhibition powers in the chains of a few wealthy individuals, The Bahamas was no different from the rest of the world also in its reliance on America, and, in particular, Hollywood, for the supply of their films. The distribution system of films from outside of the mainland USA into Nassau evolved over time from one in which Bethell personally flew into Miami to collect and return his films on a regular basis, to a more formalised system with the Wometco group involving an agent and other technical experts who provided regular inspections of the cinemas to ensure and maintain the international standards for the screening of first-run films. There is little doubt that the business of selling motion pictures was a successful one in Nassau in the 1950s. The daily newspapers from the decade are proof that American films were being imported on a regular and consistent basis, with many of the films being viewed simultaneously in the United States over a similar period. So, in terms of programming, the offering on the islands was very similar to that in America. The promotion of the motion pictures shown at the various theatres was by word of mouth, poster displays in front of the theatres, and newspaper display advertisements. A notable exception was the Savoy which, one of the narrators remembers, also issued promotional

booklets of upcoming films to their patrons. Below, the narrators remember how they learned of new films in the 1950s:

Thomas (b. 1932): Just by the posters, because we were downtown, and we see the posters, and we know what's showing ... or word of mouth, somebody would tell us... You know such and such a thing is showing? How you know? Man, we saw it ah, ah, on the poster, it's coming on Wednesday. Okay we gone ta see that...They had it outside on the wall, you know they would ... maybe six, six of them on the wall, they have on the wall of the theatre ...they have the posters. And you could pass by and see them.

Nancy: It was interesting because they gave out little booklets that told you what was coming at the movies ... and they'd tell you what two were coming next, and on through the week. So we'd know that on Thursday evening you could go see some shoot em up cowboy, or something.

This testifies to the variety of formal and informal channels through which Bahamian spectators learned about local film exhibition. However, information on the process of film distribution was less readily available, both to contemporary researchers and to the audiences at the time. In the absence of company records that would illustrate the distribution practices and companies with which the theatre owners in The Bahamas conducted business in the 1950s, the newspaper advertisements for the featured films remain the only source shedding light on the issue.

Many of the movies rotated from one theatre to the other, and persons were able to see the selected film at a theatre of their choice. Even so, it is evident from an analysis of the programming that some of the theatres exhibited a particular type of film more than others. The first-run films were screened at the Savoy and the Capitol, and the B-Film double features were shown at the Cinema Theatre. It seems evident that the exhibitors knew their audiences and catered to their tastes in movies. The Savoy, for example, screened the very popular and successful film *Samson and Delilah* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1949); while the Cinema featured motion-pictures which were shown on double bills, many of which were of the Western genre and serials, with titles such as *The Cisco Kid* (Paul Landres/Lambert Hillyer, 1950-1956), *Silver on the Sage* (Lesley Selander, 1939), *Rio Grande Patrol* (Lesley Selander, 1950) and *Roughshod* (Mark Robson, 1949). Characteristically, B-films were short for industry standards (55 to 75 minutes), did not feature major stars, and were produced on a low budget (Rogers, 2017, p. 141; Taves, 1993). So, if a viewer had the extra means and time to spend, they would choose a film from the programme of the Savoy or the Capitol. Alternatively, the Cinema provided accessible and quick entertainment for its community.

Prior to the opening of the Capitol Theatre, Pinder announced that he would be working along with both RKO and United Artist to procure films for his new enterprise. From a random selection of newspaper advertisements promoting films to be screened in his theatre it becomes evident that Pinder did indeed show pictures that were distributed by not only RKO

and United Artist, but also MGM, Universal and Paramount, as well as smaller independent distributors such as Argosy Pictures, London Films Productions, Eagle Lion Films, and Monogram Pictures. How exactly Pinder transported his films to the island is unknown, but he must have had some type of arrangement with the distribution companies. After the opening of the Capitol, more of the major studio productions were advertised for screening at Pinder's cinema. Notably, the film that opened the theatre was the MGM Western *Stars in My Crown*. Then there was another Western – *Wagon Master* (John Ford, 1950) and the drama *The Fugitive* (Henry Fonda, 1947) by RKO Radio Pictures Distributors, the romance *If This Be Sin* (Gregory Ratoff, 1949) distributed by United Artists, epic literary adaptation *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930) by Universal Pictures and the black comedy *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), a Paramount Pictures production. Subsequent to Bethell acquiring the Capitol, the main four theatres continued to screen pictures that were produced by a variety of studios and distributed through a new arrangement with Bethell. As previously mentioned, some of the narrators firmly believed that the ownership of the Capitol Theatre changed in under a year due to the financial challenges faced by the original owner and his inability to continue to secure first-run films for screening. At the time, films were a commodity that had to be imported and the import agent would have the power to distribute that commodity to whomever they decided to do business with. In order to run a theatre at the calibre of the Capitol, Pinder had to have first-run films to make it a profitable venture. Robert, a narrator, believed that Bethell was somehow able to get the first-run films, "but Mr. Pinder couldn't get it ... he simply could not get it, because he was not included in the distribution." Nathaniel, a male narrator who later worked in the cinemas in Nassau, remembers that "Percy Pinder had owned the Capitol, and the Bethell Brothers, or Mr. Charlie, specifically, bought it from him..." He recalls that "Percy Pinder had to sell out to 'Mr. Charlie' because he wasn't able to get up to date films." He also suggested that the overhead expenses became too great for Pinder to continue the profitable running of his Capitol theatre.

Even though Pinder struggled to maintain a long-term steady supply of first-run pictures, the films he did secure were released with no significant delays in comparison to other territories. An assessment of the time lag between the official worldwide release dates of some of the films shown at the Capitol and their actual screening dates in the cinema provides some insight. When the theatre opened in late July 1950, *Stars in My Crown* had been released in the US in April, just three months prior. This three-month gap between release date and screening date persisted until October, when films that had been released as far back as 1934 (such as, *Imitation of Life*) were shown at the theatre. This trend continued for the remainder of 1950 and into 1951, when in May 1951, just days before divesting himself of the Capitol Theatre, Pinder screened the film *Sunset Boulevard*, which was released by Paramount Pictures in August 1950. By 1952 C.W.F Bethell's Theatrical Enterprises Limited owned the four main movie theatres in Nassau, Bahamas, and the relationship with the Wometco group for the distribution of films into Nassau continued throughout the 1950s (Staff, 1958).

Under the control of Bethell's Enterprises, in all likelihood, the first-run films would first screen at the Savoy, and would then rotate in a particular order to the other theatres. As early as 1940, Bethell commented on the challenges of booking a film for the Savoy and its limited patronage of approximately nine hundred regular moviegoers, because of the shortage of prints. He stated that "[a] print is out of the exchange almost ten days to accommodate a Nassau two- or three-day booking, thus major companies are reluctant to tie up a new print until it has completed the more remunerative first-runs in southern key cities" (Staff, Strange Customs For Nassau Theatregoers, 1940). While this did not affect all the pictures released in the Bahamas, it did have some impact on the time when Bahamian theatre audiences would actually view first-run movies. The more frequently run features would be highlighted in the newspapers under the captions of the names of the cinemas or the names of the actual films that were being promoted. For example, it was announced in the local newspaper that the film *Samson and Delilah* was going to be held over by popular request and would be shown at the Nassau Theatre for an additional two days, Thursday and Friday, after which it would be shown at the Cinema Theatre on Saturday (Reporter, Samson and Delilah, (1951 USA)).

One practical consideration regarding the length of time that a film might be exhibited at a particular cinema is the size and configuration of the population of New Providence. The official Bahamas Census of 1953 shows the population of New Providence being composed of 6,742 European (White), 31,144 African (Blacks), and 6,784 Mixed, bringing the total size of the population to 44,670. Between 1953 and 1963, the population in New Providence grew to 80,907 (Craton & Saunders, 1998, p. 180 & 196). Using 1953 as a sample year, the Savoy, which catered only to the whites, would have had to provide this leisure activity for only fifteen percent of the entire population. The other three cinemas, and the Meers Theatre, on the other hand, were open to the rest of the population, even though the mixed-race persons were more likely to attend the Nassau Theatre. It seems likely that the four cinemas would have adequately accommodated all those persons interested in viewing a film, albeit, they would have to view them at one of the other four theatres available to them. While racial segregation still affected Bahamian cinema-goers, at least cinemas had the capacity to fully cater to their segregated audiences.

The only two theatres for which statistical data is available pertaining to size and other physical dimensions were the Savoy and the Capital. As for the operation and management of the theatres, male narrator Leon (b. 1943) commented:

The Capitol was run strict ...Nassau Theatre was slack (chuckles) ...You never knew what was gonna happen in there ...Poor management in that theatre, poor management... fight dis break out, or rats would run across the front, white rats. They had some white rats in there (giggles).

Another male narrator, William (b. 1928), remembered the extreme lack of security patrol within the cinema space of the Nassau Theatre:

Like on a Saturday, a couple of us, we would buy a bottle of Red Hackle Whiskey, which was the cheapest whiskey on the market (chuckles) at the time that we could afford, and we would go to the Nassau Theatre and sit in the back and drink whiskey and just laugh our heads off at the foolishness that we were watching on screen.

A female narrator, Nancy (b. 1940), related her experience at the Savoy during an evening outing which created a feeling of community and togetherness , even though it was unsafe for the viewing audience who were required to view the film under compromised conditions. She also recalled that their consumption of the concessions was somewhat monitored:

The theatre was so full, they sold so many tickets that we sat in the aisle, on the steps, and ... it would be terrible if there was a fire or anything. They probably wouldn't allow us to do that these days, but...we sat in the aisle. Mr. Roberts used to run the candy store ... popcorn, coke and a chocolate bar, and he knew most of us by name, and he would make sure we didn't use too many candy bars, or anything.

These three recollections reveal the different social atmosphere in each venue at the time and signify that, while race-related restrictions governed access, viewers still actively chose between the diverse social and cultural experiences which each cinema offered.

Another important element in the exhibition tier of the film industry is the fixing of cinema ticket prices. The admission prices for the Capitol when it opened in 1950 were advertised at the top of the price range, and the price corresponded to the time of the screening as well as the category of seat. The day was divided in two sections, 2:30 pm to 6pm, and after 6 pm. The ticket prices for the first half of the day were: Auditorium 2 shillings and Balcony 3 shillings; and after 6 pm: Auditorium 3 shillings and Balcony 4 shillings (Advertisements, 1950). The price for a special children's show, however, was reduced to one shilling (Advertisement, 1950). By 1953, most of the cinemas advertised continuous shows daily, beginning at 3 pm in the afternoon and running until 11 pm, with the exception of Sunday, when screenings would start at 5pm. The Savoy's schedule was different from the other theatres in that they advertised continuous showings, Sunday to Friday, 3 to 7 pm, and Saturday 2:15 pm and regular evening shows at 8:30 pm. The ticket prices for the Cinema were listed at Matinee 2 shillings and 2/6 shillings and Evening 2/6 shillings and 3 shillings (Display, 1953). Despite the associate cost, a black narrator George (b. 1934), remembers that the movie theatres were always full:

'Well, movie attending was ... they always had a full house, because entertainment and things to do was sort of limited, so, people that had the means, which wasn't much... Today it would have been a palsy sum, but people that had the means would go to the movies ...it was an outing.'

So, cinema-going was an important aspect of social and communal life on the island. The different venues acted as cultural hubs but cost differentiation meant that, in addition to racial segregation, socio-economic circumstances also separated certain viewers from others.

Conclusion

Cinema-going on the island of New Providence, the only island in The Bahamas on which a film could be viewed in a public theatre setting in the 1950s, clearly demonstrated the agency of the white minority ruling class and foreign investment interests over the majority black citizenry. This economic and social dominance was manifested in the location of the cinemas which simply reflected the overarching colonial structure of this British colony. The practice of racial segregation was allowed to flourish within a one-mile radius which was clearly demarcated by the locations of the four theatres and their clientele, and the selection and rotation of the films that were screened in these venues. The location and the clientele of these cinemas were a true demonstration of the social order of the times in the Islands of the Bahamas, clearly indicative of the racial and socio-economic boundaries that were set, and the strict allegiance to them. The films distributed to the Nassau theatres were imported into the island, and in many cases exhibited in the theatres within a very similar time to their American counterparts. Not only were they screened within a timely manner, but they were mostly current feature films, produced by both major and independent Hollywood production companies. From all appearances, the motion-picture business in The Bahamas was in no way lacking, and the eager moviegoer had access to the same cinema fare as their counterparts the world over. And, indeed, despite the racial barriers that limited the enterprising black cinema owner Pinder in his ambitions for his revolutionary cinema, as a local narrator, Robert, a young projectionist in the 1950s stated, for local audiences 'the show did go on'.

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