

The Ritz

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The Ybor City theater, now a nightclub, brings back memories for a film buff.

As a youngster of 10, Nick DiMaggio found himself all atingle going to an Ybor City theater scorned by many as a second- or third-run film house.

Now 50, he remembers the Saturday morning in 1961 when his father dropped him off at the Ritz, at Seventh Avenue and 15th Street. Already, a line was streaming down the street.

The attraction? A horror film called "13 Ghosts," which required a "ghost watcher" device to get three-dimensional thrills.

Readers of this page may recall DiMaggio's May 6 memories of Tampa's first drive-in theater, the Hillsboro, which closed recently as a multiplex. Now he has added his recollections of another longtime Tampa cinema.

The law firm librarian concedes he was well on his way to becoming "obsessed" by films - especially those showing at the Ritz - when he was a student at West Tampa Junior High School.

He was already a subscriber to Famous Monsters of Filmland magazine, so he knew about the William Castle film "13 Ghosts."

"At that age and all alone [in the theater], I remember being a bit apprehensive, thinking, "I hope this movie is not too scary! There's no one here to hold onto!" " DiMaggio noted in a written recollection.

But when the lights dimmed and the curtains opened, he was entranced. "The spell of the Ritz overtook me for the next five years of moviegoing mania," he said.

Almost every weekend in the early '60s, DiMaggio was taking in double and triple features at the Ybor City film house. Most of the audience in that period consisted of "teens, preteens and young adults," he said.

A number of the movies would be considered "camp" today, including "13 Ghosts." But he watched them avidly.

So avidly that he was able to compile a list of virtually every film he watched at the Ritz, using newspaper microfilm as a memory prod.

The list runs from "13 Ghosts" with Martin Milner and Rosemary DeCamp, seen on May 27, 1961, to "Love & Kisses," with Ricky and Kristin Nelson, on Dec. 11, 1965.

DiMaggio said science-fiction appealed to him, but "from then on, my interest spread to other genres."

Asked to come up with his all-time favorites, he struggled to reduce them to three: "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?" with Bette Davis and Joan Crawford; "Homicidal," with Glenn Corbett; and "Bye Bye, Birdie," with Dick Van Dyke, Ann-Margret and Janet Leigh.

All were viewed at the Ritz. His favorite actress from that period is Ann-Margret.

DiMaggio still takes in a movie two or three times a month with his girlfriend. But they're forced to attend a multiplex.

HE ADMITS IT'S UNUSUAL to express fondness for a particular neighborhood theater, such as the Ritz, but he looks upon it as a "jewel compared to today's movie houses. They seem generic and clonelike to me."

DiMaggio's interest in the Ritz grew into a full-fledged research project; he wanted to learn as much about the old place as he could. He put his findings into a booklet that he distributed to a few close friends.

Originally, the Ritz was known as the Rivoli. It was apparently built about 1917, as a red brick building with a second floor of rooms and apartments. Legend has it that sexual liaisons took place upstairs.

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"It may have been a burlesque theater," DiMaggio speculated.

A 1927 advertisement in The Tampa Daily Times showed the Rivoli featuring Louise Brooks in "Rolled Stockings," Richard Dix in "The Quarterback" and Gary Cooper in "The Last Outlaw." These were all silent films.

In 1931, the physical layout was changed, with a steel and concrete structure rising behind the original theater. The new building became an auditorium with a Mediterranean-type village setting.

A Seventh Avenue entrance was maintained, with a long lobby leading to the auditorium. Storefronts flanked the box office.

The changes apparently coincided with the name change to the Ritz. They also may have coincided with the upgrade from silent films to "talkies."

At any rate, the Ritz settled into a pattern of running a series of single and double features, weeks or months after the films were shown at first-run "palaces" downtown.

In some periods, the Ritz played Spanish-language films, usually midweek. With so many Spanish-speaking residents in Ybor City in the 1930s and '40s, it's surprising more weren't shown.

Why did DiMaggio cease seeing movies at the Ritz in December 1965? Because the theater stopped showing standard films after Dec. 31.

A transition to XXX-rated films and nudie shows put the Ritz into the headlines. "It was raided regularly," he said.

Adult films in the 35 mm format were "fairly tame" by today's standards, with little actual nudity, DiMaggio related. Then 16 mm films became "frank, bold and graphic," provoking constant court battles, he added.

After hitting the legal age, the film buff said he attended a couple of the films "out of curiosity, to see how the old theater looked." The theater looked about the same, he decided, but the audience was different - and much quieter.

LATER ON, the decibel level undoubtedly hit new levels when live strip shows featured entertainers with names like "Candy Cane" and "48-24-36 Anne Howe."

In September 1983, the building was bought by developer William E. Field and underwent remodeling. A sign, "Puttin' On the Ritz," signaled an upgrade. The Tampa Tribune's Greg Tozian wrote, "The Ritz Theatre has traded sex for style."

Unfortunately, Field's ambitions to create an entertainment complex like Orlando's Church Street Station didn't materialize. His efforts to intersperse films with stage productions and other artsy events failed to produce hoped-for crowds.

Toward the end, Field pulled in some crowds with punk-rock groups. But by January 1987, a bank foreclosure closed the doors. Field was quoted as saying, "Theaters are love affairs. They aren't for making money."

In the aftermath, the stage group Playmakers of Tampa used the facilities for a period until it disbanded.

Later years have seen the Ritz building go through several transitions. In recent years, the Masquerade has thrived as a trendy night club, attracting crowds of young music fans. It seemed to be in the vanguard of Ybor City's "new wave" of night life.

DiMaggio said the stage and the proscenium are the main reminders of the building's past as a theater.

As for the longtime Ritz fan, "the magic is gone."

Even horror films no longer carry the appeal they once did for him: "So many of them today depend upon computerized special effects, blood and gore."

**Caption:** PHOTO 3Photo from the John Germany Public LibraryTribune file photo (1986)(2) At left, the Mediterranean village decor still distinguished the Ritz when it was renovated by developer William Field in 1986. Below, "Sierra Baron" and "Live Fast, Die Young" were featured at the Ritz in 1958.CANDACE C. MUNDY/Tribune photoNick DiMaggio, holding a copy of his booklet on the theater, stands in front of the old Ritz - now the Masquerade nightclub.

**Memo:** LELAND HAWES HISTORY & HERITAGE

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