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Left in the Dark: Portraits of San Francisco Movie Theatres

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Left in the Dark: Portraits of San Francisco Movie Theatres
Photo: Charta

Slideshow: Left in the Dark: Portraits of San Francisco Movie Theatres



Video: Castro Theater



A bit of footage from the Castro Theater.

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"Spellbound in darkness" is the way some used to describe the movie-going experience. Imagine yourself, sitting with others in a theater, enraptured by the moving images passing before your eyes.

Spellbound in darkness is a turn-of-phrase that's both a bit mysterious and suggestive. A new 168 page book, *Left in the Dark: Portraits of San Francisco Movie Theatres*, helps shine an usher's light on what it was that cast that spell – and what it once meant to "go to the movies."

Left in the Dark (Charta) is a singular book. It's neither a nostalgic survey of old movie palaces nor a specialized look at architectural design, exhibition practices, or urban history, nor even a personal account of the shared experiences of film buffs. Rather, it is all these things and a little more.

Left in the Dark, by Julie Lindow and R.A. McBride, celebrates The City's historic movie theatres and by extension its communal movie-going experience through beautifully printed full-color photographs complimented by a handful of personal essays with local, literary and scholarly appeal.

McBride's vivid photographic portraits of San Francisco movie theatres, including the beloved Castro, Roxie, New Mission, and Balboa, illuminate the role of the movie house as a gathering place – a social nexus.

McBride has been documenting local theaters for more than a few years. For this book, she gained access to the interiors of some of San Francisco's finest theatres (each built between 1910 and 1950), allowing the grandeur of their decaying interiors to take center stage, as it were. Of the nineteen theaters featured in this new book, four are now closed or have been demolished. Their architectural elements, from rotunda chandeliers and large single screens to painted walls, fixtures and worn armrests, come to the fore. There is sadness as well as a certain nobility in these 59 images.

Casting the theatres as characters within the city's larger cultural landscape, a handful of local writers, scholars, and film exhibitors including Rebecca Solnit, Eddie Muller, and Gary Meyer uncover the forgotten histories of these cinema locales. If you ever saw a film at the Alhambra, The Clay, Victoria, Vogue, Red Vic, Bridge, or Coronet – then these may well be your histories too.

In this age of DVDs and streaming video, movie attendance continues its long decline (begun with the advent of television); cinema-going is becoming less and less of a collective experience.

This book and its authors make a valid point: as society retreats from public life into stay-at-home personal entertainment technologies – our movie-going heritage becomes an ever more significant and inspiring source of ideas for new cinematic / communal experiences. In other words, it's important to get together and experience art.

San Francisco is fortunate to be one of the world's most vital movie-loving and movie-going cities. It's also particularly fortunate to have so many of its historic movie theatres still standing. By drawing the past into the present, *Left in the Dark* offers its reader's hope that even as these historic temples of the cinema slowly crumble (and are torn down), the social spirit of "the movies" lives on.

Left in the Dark is a singular book. We need more books like it.

Just as its possible to stay at home and watch a DVD, so

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