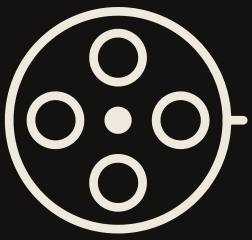
ZINE / 1971-1974



NOTES FROM THE BOOTH

Harlan Oakes

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Harlan Oakes, 1971-1974

SHEET NO. 1, OCTOBER 1971

Welcome to the Alcove at midnight. The management has asked me to set out the rules of the house. They are as follows.

- Sit anywhere. There is a great deal of anywhere.
- Do not smoke in the front six rows. The front six rows are where the plaster comes down.
- Talking is permitted where it is customary. You will learn where it is customary.
- Do not knock on the booth door. If the picture stops, I know. I am the only person in the building who definitely knows.
- The balcony is closed. If you hear anything in the balcony, it is pigeons.

Tonight's picture is about a doctor who goes too far. They always are. Enjoy the show.

SHEET NO. 6, NOVEMBER 1971

A few of you have asked what I do up here, so.

A feature comes in five or six reels, each about twenty minutes. There are two projectors. When reel one is nearly finished, a small dot flashes in the top corner of the picture. That is my warning. I start the second machine. Seconds later a second dot flashes, and I switch the light from one machine to the other. If I have done it properly, you see nothing. You have watched me do it four times tonight and not noticed once, which is the whole of the art.

Once you know about the dots you will see them everywhere, in every film, for the rest of your life. I apologize. It is the only secret I have, and now it is yours.

SHEET NO. 14, FEBRUARY 1972

We have a congregation. I did not expect it. The same forty or fifty people have been here every Saturday since Christmas, and most of them sit in the same seats. The girl in the wedding dress is in row K. The man with the oranges is on the aisle, and peels them during the slow parts, and the smell is now, to me, the smell of the second reel.

Some of you have seen tonight's picture eleven times. I have seen it more than that, because I have to, and I will tell you something I did not expect. It gets better. Not the picture; the picture is poor. The room gets better. You know when the others will laugh, and when they will shout the line back, and when the girl in row K will stand up. You come for that. So do I.

The owner says that this is a fad. He may be right. But I have been in a lot of churches and I have not seen people this glad to be together at this hour.

SHEET NO. 22, JUNE 1972

About last Saturday.

For those who were not here: about halfway through, the film caught in the gate, and because the lamp is very hot the frame we were looking at began to burn. On the screen you saw a brown hole open in the middle of the picture and spread outward, like something eating it, and then white light.

I apologize. It is the projectionist's fault, always, even when it is not. But I was surprised by what happened downstairs. Nobody booed. There was a kind of gasp, and then the whole house cheered, and when I had spliced the

film and started it again there was another cheer. One of you told me afterward that it was the best part of the evening. I think I understand. For about four seconds you saw what all this really is: a strip of something thin in front of a fire. Most people never see that. It is not a bad thing to have seen.

SHEET NO. 31, MAY 1973

A word about the regulars, since some of you are new.

You will notice that certain people dress up. You will notice that certain people say the lines with the actors. You will notice that when the woman on screen opens the cellar door, the whole of row K says "don't," and that she always does. This is not rudeness. It is how it is done here. Nobody will mind if you join in, and nobody will mind if you do not. That is the other rule of the house, and the more important one.

You will also notice that the man with the oranges is not here. He died in March. He left the Alcove a bequest in his will of fifty dollars "for the projectionist, for the midnight shows," and I have it here and do not know what to do with it. If anyone has an idea, the booth door is the one at the top of the stairs. You may knock this once.

SHEET NO. 41, MARCH 1974

This is the last one.

The Alcove has been sold. The new owners intend to use it as a carpet warehouse, and I am told the seats will go to a school. Tonight is the last midnight show and, as far as I know, the last show of any kind. The management thanks you for your custom. I thank you for something else, and I am not going to try to say what.

I have been asked what I will do. I do not know. There is not much call for a man who can switch between two lights without anyone noticing.

When the picture ends tonight, please stay in your seats for a moment after the end title. I am going to leave the lamp on with nothing in the gate. You will see a white square on the screen and the beam going over your heads through the smoke, and that will be the Alcove, with nothing in front of it. Look at it as long as you like. Then go home carefully. It is very late.

The oranges money went on the flowers in the lobby. I hope that was right.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	Notes from the Booth
AUTHOR	Harlan Oakes, night projectionist at the Alcove Picture House
DATE	1971-1974
TYPE	Zine
PUBLISHER	Typed and duplicated by the author; left in a stack by the lobby door
EXTENT	41 single sheets, of which 6 survive complete
LANGUAGE	English
SOURCE	Transcribed from six sheets kept by a former regular and given to the archive in 2024. Sheet numbers are the author's. Fragments of other sheets, too damaged to transcribe, are not included.

The Alcove was a picture house of six hundred seats in the old commercial district of a river city, built in the 1920s and failing by the 1960s. In the autumn of 1971 its owner, out of options, began running films at midnight on Fridays and Saturdays: cheap prints of horror pictures, underground shorts, foreign films nobody else would book. To the owner's surprise, people came. The night projectionist, Harlan Oakes, began typing a single sheet for each show and leaving a stack by the lobby door.

The sheets are not reviews. Oakes rarely says much about the film. He writes about the house, the machine, the audience and the strange kind of church that formed around them in the dark. He is dry, exact and plainly devoted to a job that he knew was disappearing. The films he mentions were mostly cheap and are mostly forgotten; we have not tried to identify them.

The archive holds six complete sheets, kept by a woman who attended most of the midnight shows as a student and gave them to us half a century later.

The essay The Darkened Temple describes the wider history of the midnight movie and its resemblance to a rite. Oakes understood the resemblance perfectly, and was too sensible to make much of it.

COLOPHON

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