

Selling out the arts

by Michael McFee
Drama Critic

"Chapel Hill—Haven for Film Enthusiasts" crowed a headline in last year's orientation issue.

Well, don't feel too special. What you see in local moviehouses, whether downtown or in Durham, has very little to do with the fact that you are an insightful and intelligent university student. The ultimate determining factor, as the assistant manager of Durham's Yorktowne Theatre bluntly put it, is the "dollar bill." And the films which bring in those meager student dollars are booked and scheduled far away from our little cradle of culture in large booking offices in Charlotte and Atlanta.

Of course, there are non-commercially motivated programs which would be a credit to any community—the sometimes esoteric Alternative Cinema, the Chapel Hill Film Friends and even the Union Free Flicks (operating on a generous budget from student fees). But each of the managers of the local commercial theatres acknowledges that although they can suggest movies to their booking agents, they don't really know what they're getting until the mail comes.

Two of Chapel Hill's houses, the downtown Varsity and the triple Plaza Theatres at Elliot Road, are run by the Eastern Federal Corporation of Charlotte, which handles some 60 other theatres in this region as well. The two are designed to appeal to somewhat different clientele: the Plaza to the first-run PG family entertainment gangs and the Varsity to the eclectic intellectuals who can enjoy second-run Antonioni, *Behind the Green Door* and the American Film Theatre—all in the same month.

"Sound unpredictable?" That's the doing of the people in Charlotte," says manager Jerry Robinson of the Varsity. "We really don't

'Amarcord' was one of the few fine foreign films shown commercially in Chapel Hill last year.

"Foreign films go big in a university town," says the assistant manager of the Carolina Theatre. "But although we can make suggestions to a certain degree, we eventually get what Charlotte sends us."



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Critics may quibble over whether films should be regarded as art or as entertainment, but one fact cannot be disputed: they are an industry, they are a business. When the lights come up, you won't find the manager slumped in his rockingchair seat musing over the artistic merits of his newly-booked film: he'll be in

theatre planned to open in the mammoth South Square Mall in a couple of months, will bring us more of the same.

Maybe I shouldn't carp. After all, we don't have to suffer the indignities of a nearby skinflack barn like the Studio One located conveniently across the street from State. But neither should we have to sit by while the Janus in Greensboro consistently captures the premiere showings of major films like *Nashville* or *Love and Death*, only to have them turn up here a month later sandwiched between *Walking Tall Part 2* and *Linda Lovelace for President*.

Perhaps if the local managers, all young and reasonably schooled in the cinematic idiom of Chapel Hill, were allowed by their chains to have more of a direct hand in booking films and less in checking popcorn machines, a unified program at each theatre and variety within the town could be achieved. With the theatre population in the area soon to double, it seems a small thing to suggest.

No rats at Town Hall

Mike Strong, manager of Town Hall, has informed us that, contrary to an opinion expressed in another section of this issue, there are no rats in Town Hall.

Strong indicated that it was understandable that the little beasts might be interested in his establishment, because it has such reasonable deli prices and the largest selection of beer around. Rats into jazz might be interested in Town Hall's Sunday Jazz Nites. Other rats might like to down a few during Happy Hour from noon to 3 p.m. or sniff around the game room downstairs.

But only people can take advantage of the Town Hall, Strong said. A special rat bouncer (known also as an exterminator) comes in regularly to make the establishment a deadly place for rodents and a nicer place for people.

Dance opportunities limited

by Marty Lagod
Staff Writer

For those peripherally interested in the study of the dance, UNC offers a variety of opportunities. For those who wish to make a serious attempt to enter the world of professional dancing, UNC is in the wrong place. North Carolina School of the Arts or UNC-Greensboro would better facilitate these people.

Foster Fitz-simons, faculty dance instructor in the drama department, says that, "here at the University and in Chapel Hill we are not professionally oriented toward dancing. If a professional program is desired by the student, he or she should attend a School of the Arts and study dance there. We offer as much as any student and faculty member can take care of, considering we do not have a dance department. The opportunity for the student to become acquainted with the field is offered, but if a career in dancing is preferred he should go on to a professional school."

Fitz-simons, a nationally famous dancer and author of a best selling novel, *The Bright Leaf*, is the dance instructor for the drama department. He teaches two required courses for drama majors in stage movement and dance and one course open only to non-majors.

Students from a variety of fields ranging from public health to Botany and Chemistry can be found in Fitz-simons' course, which is an elective for anyone above freshman level. There are two sections that are limited by space to 50 students each, and they fill up quickly at registration time. Fitz-simons does allow and even encourages those that are interested to visit and observe his classes.

The Physical Education Department offers an alternative to those interested in the dance but unable to get into the drama courses. The P.E. dance in the past has been primarily attended by women students and has been well received. This year another instructor has been added to meet the demand for the class.

For those interested in performance



and choreography experience, there is the University Dance Theatre, entering its third year. Two programs were produced last year, one in the fall and one in the spring. The Dance Theatre is open to all interested in performing and

provides an outlet for young dancers and choreographers. Students and faculty as well as some other members of the University community participate in the Theatre, which is lead by the P.E. class instructors.

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have much to do with it. For instance, they send us an X-rated movie every six weeks or so. I personally think they're trash, but some people still come see them, so they keep coming."


Even the features which seem to be aimed toward the intellectual community—foreign films, or late shows, or the AFT—are essentially the whim of a booker who sees Chapel Hill as a seat on the economic aisle. "I don't think the politics of the academic community make that much difference," a spokesman for the Yorktowne said. "The choice of the film is pretty much determined by the size of the theatre and the distribution among other theatres in the area. We have very little control over it."

The management at the downtown Carolina Theatre, a link in the huge ABC chain, seems slightly more sympathetic both to the booking agencies and to the film-art university mentality. "Chapel Hill is a very hard town to book for, because films do unexpectedly well here that don't do well elsewhere," said the assistant manager, citing last year's popular French film, *The King of Hearts* as an example. "Sometimes we book films we think will do well, and they don't. Foreign films go big in a university town. But

the box office seeing if he broke even, all public service aside.

How to compromise the two, business and pleasure? One way is to program down the middle of the road, like the Plaza or the Yorktowne. Another is to bring an unpredictable cross-section that will appeal to everyone somewhere, like the Varsity. Another cinematic option could possibly come to Chapel Hill with the scheduled mid-September opening of the Ram Cinema, three moviehouses in the NCNB Plaza downtown. A spokesman for the Schneider-Merl movie chain in Raleigh (which also books the Yorktowne) said that one of the houses will probably be devoted to foreign films that will make it commercially, like those of Bergman or Fellini or Truffaut. Program-wise this theatre aspires to be like the Alternative Cinema on a less elite level: price-wise it promises to be like the other theatres.

Whether this much-needed venture will be economically and artistically feasible in Chapel Hill remains to be seen. Hopefully no one will balk, booker or patron. But that's still only one out of three new NCNB theatres; the other two will persist with first-run swill like *Give 'Em Hell, Harry*, the gala opener. And indications are that the four-barrelled Carroll's Cinema, a quadruple



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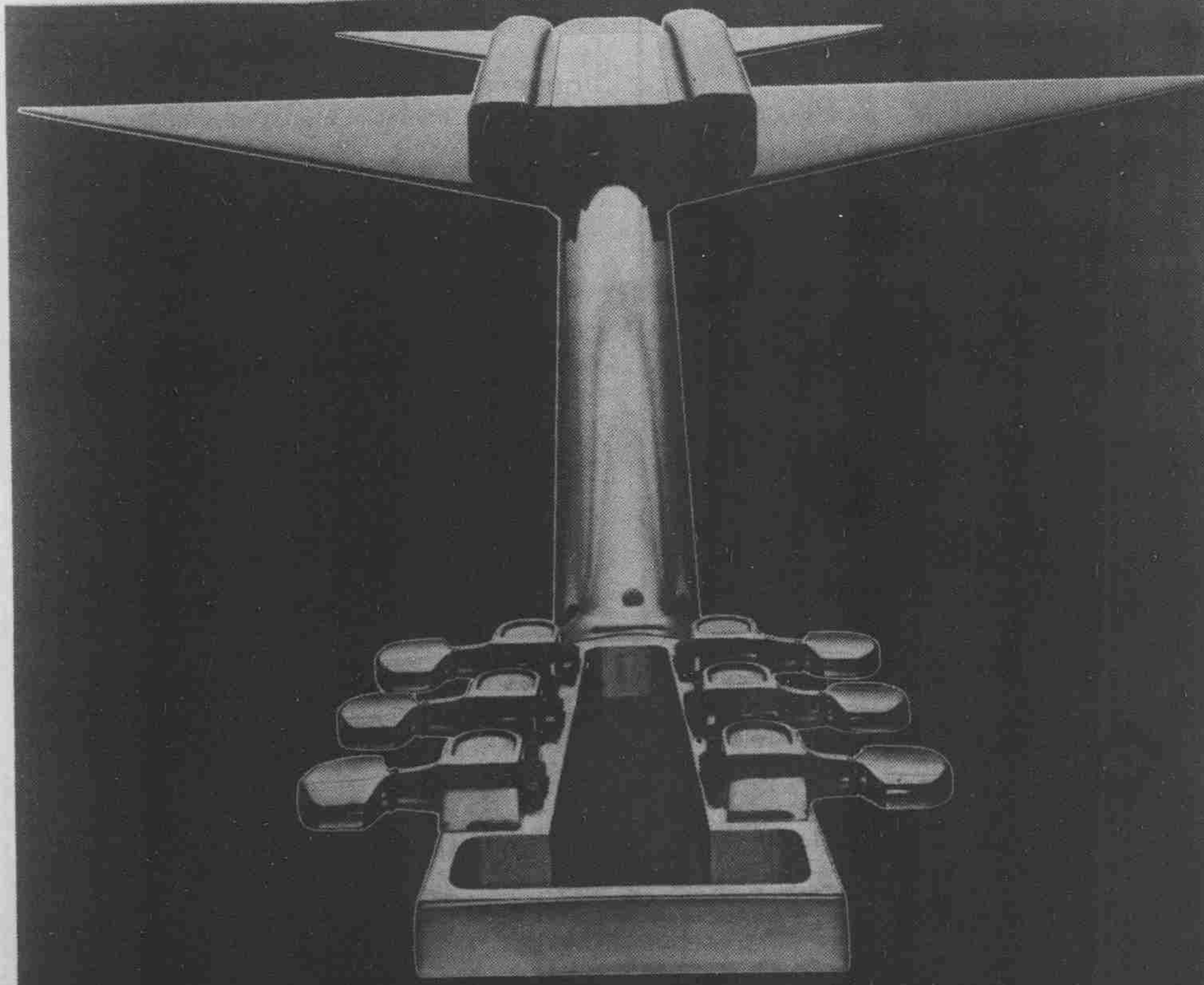
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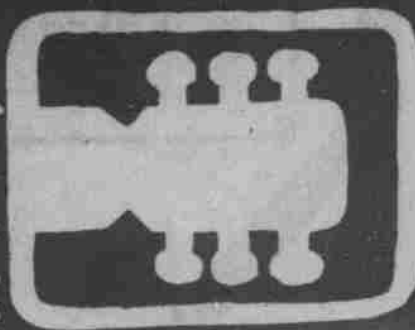
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