

Overview

The Interstate Documentary Project is a media initiative designed to preserve an important part of motion picture theater exhibition history—the story of Interstate Theatres and founder and lifetime president, Karl Hoblitzelle.

This saga will be told in a one-hour documentary film, titled *Before the Curtain Rises*, that the producers plan to submit to PBS for broadcast consideration. An educational outreach program will also be developed to compliment the film and will consist of an educational website that expands on the story and places it in context of 20th century history and technology. A teacher's guide will be developed for integrating the film (distributed to schools as a DVD) and website into secondary school curriculum as well.

Interstate was a giant among motion picture theater circuits in America, and its many innovations and dedication to serving its community set it apart. Karl Hoblitzelle also had a love affair with the state of Texas and become one of its most cherished philanthropists. Even though the company no longer exists, its philosophy of "dedicated to community service" continues to be played out today. In El Paso, citizens have saved one of Interstate's last movie palaces. As the curtain rises again on the Plaza Theater stage, a new chapter in the Interstate story is opened.

Rationale

The story of Interstate and Karl Hoblitzelle is important to tell for three reasons. First, this unique era of motion picture theater exhibition is fast being lost to the wrecking ball and Interstate's long and colorful history perfectly illustrates this period of American movie-going, when the theater building itself was as important as the movie on its screen.

Second, examining the present day saga of the fight to save the Plaza Theater will be a catalyst for the public debate raging within many US cities: what is our commitment to our past, is it worthwhile to spend public monies on saving old buildings, and do the arts represented in theater buildings enhance our present day culture? The story in El Paso will supply important lessons for today's urban planners, public officials, historians, and involved citizens who must deal with these critical issues. Our goal is for this film to be a powerful advocacy tool for these individuals and organizations working for historic preservation and urban revitalization.

Third, *Before the Curtain Rises* is an essential story for our children for whom the tradition of "going out to the movies" is being erased by the advance of new media devices. We all applaud new technology and innovative ways to be informed and entertained. But is there an unintended cost? Are we unknowingly walking away from the profoundly enriching experience of watching a film, together? At a time in history when events conspire to pull us apart, we cannot afford to lose a tradition that has always unified us as a community.

Audience and Venues

The primary audiences we wish to reach with *Before the Curtain Rises* will be two-fold. First, we want to engage public opinion leaders, policy makers, and involved citizens who are reshaping our communities today. The historical story of Interstate and of the struggle to restore The Plaza Theater will offer a context in which to examine contemporary issues of historic preservation, urban revitalization, and corporate commitment to their communities.

Second, there is another large audience made up of young people that we wish to reach who have little knowledge of the scope and beauty of motion picture exhibition as it existed in the early to mid 20th century. To many of these individuals, moviegoing is, and always has been, an impersonal journey to a large series of poorly maintained, shoebox sized theaters.

To guarantee as large an initial audience as possible, *Before the Curtain Rises* will be submitted to PBS for airing either on its national program list, regionally through PBS-Plus, or on a station-by-station basis through a presenting broadcaster such as KUHT-Houston PBS, KERA-Dallas PBS, KLRU-Austin PBS, or KCOS-El Paso PBS.

After its broadcast premiere, the even more important, and long-term outreach distribution will begin. The film will be made available through educational distributors to secondary schools throughout the nation. Included in this release will be a teachers guide designed to help educators integrate the film into their history and social science curriculum. An educational Web site will also be developed that will compliment the film and enhance the classroom discussions.

The Web site will also be critical as a resource for public debate. To this end, the producers will make available copies of the film to historical preservation organizations such as the Theatre Historical Society of America, the League of Historic American Theatres, the American Theatre Organ Society, and the American Film Institute as well as public policy organizations that deal with urban revitalization and historic preservation for use in their advocacy work.

Structure and Style

Before the Curtains Rises will be styled as a cinematic journey of discovery. Narrated by the filmmaker, it will tell the story of Interstate through the odyssey that director Jeffrey Mills took in researching and producing the film. His struggles to find all the players, unearth the archival photos, and cover all the modern day dramas that related to Interstate shape the story provide a wonderful structure to present the history while also making a richer examination with the context of a filmmaker's discovery of what makes his industry so compelling.

One special finding Jeffrey makes is that his father had worked for Interstate—a fact he had never known, and in its discovery opens up their relationship in ways he could never imagine.

Funding

The producers will be raising funds for production through private and corporate foundation grants and donations from individuals. The Interstate Documentary Project is being presented by [Documentary Alliance, Inc.](#), a Houston-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to fashioning thoughtful and thought provoking stories about history, culture, and science. By preserving and presenting these ideas, Documentary Alliance hopes to inform, inspire, and empower Americans to fashion a better tomorrow.

The combined budget for the film and Web site is projected to be approximately \$372,000.00

Schedule

Photography began on *Before the Curtain Rises* in November of 1996, when the producers shot a series of interviews of many of the pioneers of Interstate Theatres and several of the restored theater auditoriums. Sadly, many of these employees have passed away in the intervening years, making these oral histories all the more important.

The producers also shot footage in 1996 of the Plaza Theater in El Paso, which at that time still stood abandoned and waiting for a viable restoration plan. Since that time, the El Paso Community Foundation has committed money and a blueprint for turning the theater into a commercial and community performance and meeting facility.

Primary photography began at the end of July 2002 when the producers covered the critical City Council vote to commit to work with the El Paso Community Foundation on raising the needed monies to save the theater. Every stage of restoration work was filmed, including the night the curtain rose on the new stage, March 17th, 2006. Photography continues today to cover additional theatres, interview theatre historians, and examine the debate about the future of the exhibition business going forward. After postproduction, the project should be concluded in 2012.

Producers

The production team is led by Houston's Io Communications. Io produces documentaries and documentary-style corporate communication and interactive programs for fortune 500 companies such as HP, Chevron, Spectra Energy, Cooper Industries, and Universal Weather and Aviation. The company celebrates its 28th anniversary in 2011.

Jeffrey Mills, president of Io Communications, and director for the Interstate Documentary Project has worked in the film industry for over 33 years. He first became aware of, and fell in love with, the story of Interstate from his good friend and business colleague Dan Sessions who had been an usher at Interstate's Houston Majestic Theater. Soon, Jeffrey discovered that Interstate had touched nearly everyone in his life. His father, Julian Mills had been an usher and assistant manager at the Palace Theater in downtown El Paso, only blocks from the Plaza Theater.

Also on the production team is Barbara Mills, award-winning graphic designer and animator who will be working on both the film documentary and the Web site.