The Showmanship circuit

ACROSS CANADA FROM COAST TO COAST

Showmanship that creates public interest
... and inspires public confidence

Canadian Odeon was the only chain, other than Famous Players, that operated theatres from coast to coast. Advertisement from Canadian Film Weekly Yearbook, 1953-54.

PAUL S. MOORE

NATHAN L. NATHANSON INTRODUCES CANADIAN ODEON:
Producing National Competition in Film Exhibition

Résumé: À partir de documents publiés dans les journaux locaux ainsi que dans les revues professionnelles comme le Canadian Moving Picture Digest et le Canadian Film Weekly, l'auteur examine la carrière de Nathan L. Nathanson et son rôle crucial dans la création du Canadian Odeon en 1941. Les affiliations et l'identité même du Canadian Odeon changeaient selon le lieu géographique des sous-chains implantées à Vancouver, Toronto, Montréal et ailleurs au pays. En s'attardant plus à la construction des salles de cinéma qu'aux questions de distribution, cette étude dépasse les simples paramètres du contrôle qu'a toujours exercé Hollywood sur le cinéma canadien pour offrir un cadre de recherche permettant de comprendre la spécificité locale de l'enthousiasme des foules pour le cinéma.

When the Canadian Odeon theatre chain was created in 1941, it competed with long-dominant Famous Players theatres by localizing and regionalizing the Odeon identity. This was partly because its business origins varied among cities and regions. Vancouver Odeons, the original stronghold, were an independent hometown success story. They were largely suburban and architecturally modern. Montréal Odeons were French in focus and located mainly in predominantly francophone areas in eastern and north-end neighbourhoods. In Toronto and urban Ontario, Odeons were newly built, international-style versions of the British Odeons that were iconic for the "home country," which was especially important during and after World War II. In addition to establishing itself in Canada's three largest cities, Odeon affiliated with regional entrepreneurs and business people across the country. Relying on its independent roots, the new national exhibitor positioned itself as a patriotic alternative to Famous Players.
Despite its regional variations and affiliations, Odeon was created from its Toronto head office run by Nathanson. This is not to say that Odeon's ability to compete against Famous Players does not mean that this was originally the film-going public, but rather a generalization of the practices of business people and consumers. In order to situate a modern film audience as a commercial collective, it is necessary to understand how such networks translate into localized spaces through the practices of business people and consumers. Exhibition histories must incorporate the ways local audiences make film-going an expression of every level of citizenship from neighbourhood to beyond the nation. Going to a movie, any movie, thus becomes a way to participate in an international public, a national public, or a neighbourhood public, depending on the particular film, theatre, and audience. Here, I speculate about audiences only briefly in the conclusion, but their participation in the process is always implied.

In Film History: Theory and Practice, Robert C. Allen warns against giving too much credit to the heroic actions of movie moguls, or of any individual director-auteur, actor-star, or producer-executive. The Hollywood system is a complex industrial network that works to limit the agency and risk of any particular individual. The autobiographical accounts of movie industry pioneers often gloss over the risks Nathanson took and makes his success seem predetermined.

Nathanson was undeniably the most important showman in the history of Canadian exhibition. The intention here is not only to sketch his career, but also to detail the local variations and the range of deals that created Odeon. In the end, introducing Odeon allowed both it and Famous Players to become one hundred per cent foreign-owned, so that a British and American duopoly split the market between two giants who quickly set up mutually exclusive, informal relations with Hollywood distributors, a status quo that lasted into the 1990s. Previous synopses of the creation of Canadian Odeon lament the lack of Canadian control in exhibition and treat Nathanson as an all-powerful anti-hero. More recently, however, with several Canadian exhibition history projects underway, an analysis of regional variation in film culture is emerging, moving beyond the usual story of Hollywood dominance. Instead of head-office distribution deals, I emphasize theatre building and local affiliations with independent exhibitors, as they were documented in newspaper advertising across the country and in Canadian trade journals.

If exhibition is not generally treated as central to film studies, that is partly because many film scholars have an ambivalent attitude toward film as a commercial and industrial product. Most take cinema to be an art more than a business, a cultural more than an economic practice. Examining the business of film exhibition may thus be neglected, not only because it emphasizes commerce rather than artistry, but also because it undermines the myth of film's potential to be the same everywhere due to its reproducibility. In order to situate a modern film audience as a commercial collective, as embedded in transnational networks of capitalist production, distribution, promotion and consumption, it is necessary to understand how such networks translate into localized spaces through the practices of business people and consumers. Exhibition histories must incorporate the ways local audiences make film-going an expression of every level of citizenship from neighbourhood to beyond the nation. Going to a movie, any movie, thus becomes a way to participate in an international public, a national public, or a neighbourhood public, depending on the particular film, theatre, and audience. Here, I speculate about audiences only briefly in the conclusion, but their participation in the process is always implied.

MOVING COMPETITION FROM THE BOARDROOM TO MAIN STREET

From 1916, Nathanson's near-unique role in the Canadian film industry involved modernizing it into a centralized and regulated administrative network of franchises. The work of rationalizing was not always rational and cool, however, and Nathanson's tactics against independent exhibitors have been described as "ruthless," often apparently illegal, and they eventually drew the scrutiny of government investigations and prompted legal actions. Central organization and vertical integration were not unique to the film industry. For retail sales, the 1920s was a decade of consolidation and chain franchising, from national expansion of department stores and five-and-dimes to grocery, hardware, and clothing stores.

Born in Minneapolis in 1886, Nathan L. Nathanson came to Toronto at the age of twenty-one, at first operating concession stands at Scarborough Beach Amusement Park. As he would later recall, "I will probably be remembered as the man who brought the ice cream cone to Toronto, which I did." Recalled by Canadian Film Weekly editor Hye Bossin in Nathanson's obituary, the anecdote about bringing hand-held ice cream to Toronto was evidence of a rare gift—an understanding of the whims and tastes of the public. Others recognized the gift in him. They were the men who joined him in financing his ideas, some of them leaders in Canada's investment
world. He enjoyed the scrappy, enterprising and highly competitive environment. He gravitated naturally toward anything aimed at the masses. He knew what most people would like even before they did and he gave it to them.10

His knack for promotion led next to a job at the Connor-Ruddy Company, an outdoor advertising agency that made movie posters, billboards, neon signs and marquees. Before long, he was partner with W. Rein Wadsworth in his own poster-advertising agency. Nathanson became directly involved with the cinema business in 1916, when his former boss, E.L. Ruddy, joined millionaire broker J.P. Bickell in the opening of a downtown movie palace, the Regent. Although later anecdotes make Nathanson the mastermind of the plan, he is not mentioned in the newspaper coverage at the time. Ruddy was the first president of the Regent Theatre Ltd., and the first manager was Leon Brick, who ran the Garden Theatre, an early neighbourhood luxury picture house. Before long, the Regent Theatre company acquired the Garden and other Toronto neighbourhood houses, and built a few new theatres in smaller Ontario cities. It seems Nathanson took over officially when the company began to expand into a chain of theatres. A key part of the Regent’s promotion when it opened was the promise of first-run Paramount pictures, and in 1918 the small chain was renamed Paramount Theatres, even though there was no formal connection to Paramount in the United States.8

The Canadian franchise for Paramount-Artcraft pictures was held at the time by Nathanson’s next-door neighbour in Rosedale, Jule Allen, through the Allen family’s Famous Players Film Service distribution company. The arrangement allowed their exhibition company, Allen Theatres, to expand rapidly from roots in Calgary to a Toronto headquarters and flagship theatre by 1917.11 Following World War I, Allen theatres were built in the biggest Canadian cities. But a troubled relationship with Paramount’s Adolph Zukor and the Famous-Lasky parent company in New York began in 1918, after the Allens refused to allow Zukor part-ownership in their theatres. Early in 1919, the Canadian Moving Picture Digest outlined how Nathanson’s Canadian Paramount was positioning itself to compete directly with Allen Theatres through major expansion plans in Toronto, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. By July 1919, the Allens’ franchise was officially revoked when Famous-Lasky set up its own Canadian distributors in Toronto, with branches in Saint John, Montreal, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver. Nathanson’s Canadian Paramount expanded outside Ontario, buying out theatres in Vancouver and Victoria.

With a more national scope in place, in February 1920 Canadian Paramount became officially linked to Zukor’s Paramount and Famous-Lasky. Nathanson became the first president of Famous Players Canadian Corporation. Investment came from Canadian big business with the first board including Herbert Holt (Royal Bank), W.D. Ross (Bank of Nova Scotia) and I.W. Killam, whose Royal Securities underwrote $4 million of the initial share offering. Theatre building continued with the Pantages in Toronto and the Capitols of Winnipeg, Vancouver, Regina, Montreal, Kitchener, and Calgary—each built close to a new Allen theatre. The Allens did the best they could without the Famous-Lasky distribution franchise by signing up with First National, but they were bankrupt by May 1923, when Nathanson bought thirty-five of their best theatres for $650,000. This was about the cost of just one movie palace, and $400,000 less than an offer of only ten months earlier.13

Nathanson was building up a Canadian chain specifically to be affiliated with a major American chain, or at least he was using the growing dominance of the American chain in nearby New York and New England to add perceived value to his own, even if the plan to sell out was not so clearly premeditated. In the creation of Famous Players, loose working associations and the Canadian use of American franchise keywords formed stepping stones to official conglomeration. Foundational plans for building the new company were in place long before final contracts were signed. A regional stronghold became the basis for quickly establishing a new national chain. A small number of prominent first-run theatres in key locations sufficed to weaken even a dominant national competitor. Furthermore, the first steps of buying real estate and making building plans became leverage in making formal alliances and weakening competitors. All of these features recurred when Nathanson created Odeon, two decades later.

Nathanson’s apparent willingness to affiliate with and sell out to Zukor and Hollywood should not be taken as an indication that he considered himself merely a regional manager in a trans-national corporation. Apparently he was not content to be an employee or even a partner. His many years at Famous Players included public power struggles and attempts to assert Canadian control over American interests. While he continued as president of Famous Players, in March 1929 control of the company was placed, for ten years, in a voting trust, an apparent acknowledgement of Nathanson’s abilities and personal clout. Effectively, all three, Zukor, Nathanson, and Killam (for Royal Securities), would have equal power in directing the company. Ray Lewis, editor of Canadian Moving Picture Digest, lauded the arrangement as establishing Canadian control,
since Nathanson and Killam could overrule Zukor. In the summer of 1929, Nathanson finalized plans for Gaumont British Theatres to buy out Famous Players Canadian at $75 per share, but the plan was quashed by Zukor and Killam in September. Nathanson then resigned as president of the company. The stock market crash in October soon followed, escalating financial problems for Paramount in the United States.14

With Nathanson gone and the Gaumont deal shelved, Zukor attempted to secure his control over the Canadian company in April 1930 by arranging a stock swap in which Canadians would receive four shares of American Paramount-Publix (a company losing money fast) for five shares of Famous Players Canadian (a company still posting a profit and sending remittances to the New York head office). The deal was widely denounced as the Americanization of the company, made worse when New York prematurely sent up J.J. Fitzgibbons to take over as director of theatre operations before the deal was finalized. Further, the deal was closed on May 25, both a Sunday and the day after Victoria Day—evidence that the parties involved acknowledged neither the Canadian holiday nor Toronto’s strict adherence to Sunday closing laws.

Clamour continued throughout the summer of 1930, and independent shareholders set up a protective group. Plans were laid for a court case, and there were calls for a government investigation into the stock swap. Soon after the newly-elected Prime Minister, R. B. Bennett, took office in August, he appointed Peter White to head an anti-combines investigation into Famous Players. Once hearings began, their scope expanded far beyond the 1930 stock deal, and included a full-fledged investigation into every detail of Famous Players’ business arrangements and such standard practices as run-zone-clearance policies, block booking and mothballing one theatre to boost the profits of another. Wrapping up hearings in March 1931, the White Commission released its report in June, with its introductory details more or less standing as a textbook for film distribution and exhibition practices. White declared there was indeed an illegal combine. Provincial anti-trust lawsuits continued into 1932, but ultimately were unsuccessful because they could not sustain the burden of proof the law required, and because witnesses who were vocal at the White hearings became less willing to testify later in court.15

All this time, through all the nationalist scandal and outcry, Nathanson kept quiet and out of sight, although rumours of major plans were circulating. By the time the lawsuits against Famous ended, rumours of Nathanson’s return began to appear in the Canadian Moving Picture Digest. He was finally re-elected in May 1933. He had missed the stock market crash, the worst of the depression, the White Commission, and the anti-trust lawsuits. He arrived back in charge to great acclaim, because just as with the creation of the voting trust in 1929, Nathanson’s presidency at Famous signalled a re-assertion of Canadian control over the company.16

with a degree of nationalism and Canadian patriotism, meant that Paramount could not appear to treat Canada as merely an extension of the American domestic market.

When the voting trust expired in 1939, Nathanson may have used Canadian nationalism to his own advantage. He attempted to gain official control, leading to another struggle with Paramount and another resignation. In its obituary for Nathanson, the Canadian Moving Picture Digest reported that Nathanson claimed he and Zukor had an understanding in 1933 that control of Famous would eventually go to Nathanson, an understanding Barney Balaban did not share when he later assumed control of Paramount.17 Early in May 1941, Digest editor Lewis reported the latest gossip about the negotiations between Nathanson and Paramount Pictures:

If N.L. Nathanson resigns from the Presidency of Famous Players, he will do so because Famous Players will not accept the offer of Canadian interests to purchase control. There has been a figure set for the sale of control, which means the shares now held by Paramount Pictures. There has been a figure set for the offer to purchase, but between these two figures there is approximately five millions of dollars which Paramount Pictures is adding on for Good Will.... Has the price been set to discourage a sale? With five millions of dollars one can build a powerful chain of theatres, it took four millions of dollars by Royal Securities, otherwise known as Lord Beaverbrook, to build Famous Players (in 1920).18

At this stage in the fight between Nathanson and Zukor, however, the new national chain of Odeon, formally named General Theatre Corporation, had already emerged, headed up by Nathanson’s son, Paul. In January 1941, the Digest ran a small article noting how a new theatre was being built in Kingston in the name of “Odeon Theatres of Canada, Ltd.” By February, the news was confirmed that Odeon would be a new national chain, initially strong in Vancouver through affiliation with the Vancouver Owned chain and William J. Long, who was building a new modern theatre downtown on Granville, the Vogue, set to open in April.19

The senior Nathanson’s connection to Odeon was still unclear because of his continuing negotiations with Paramount. In early May, Ray Lewis indicated it would be an all-or-nothing situation as far as she could tell, summing up Nathanson’s choice as “either in control...or out.”20 Nathanson resigned just days later: Odeon was already in place, and the new chain’s signature would be Canadian control and ownership, exactly what Nathanson claimed he was fighting for within Famous. His written resignation explained,

I am retiring as President of the Corporation. I had hoped that I would have been able to bring about the control of the company to Canada, but
regret that, after prolonged negotiations, I have been unable to arrange a satisfactory basis for the purchase of a majority of shares from Paramount Pictures of New York who hold approximately ninety per cent of the shares. For this reason I decided to retire. My Canadian associates on the Board are also retiring at this meeting.²¹

Had Paramount called Nathanson's bluff and lost? Or had Nathanson called Paramount's bluff and been cornered into resigning? The stakes seem so high, the negotiations so fierce that perhaps Nathanson underestimated Paramount's resolve to retain control. However, he had set up a situation where he would be in charge of a national, Canadian-owned chain regardless of the outcome.

INDEPENDENT REGIONAL CHAINS IN THE 1930s

There was a well-known precedent for building a new theatre chain into a dominant force, even without a major distributor's franchise. Balaban and Katz had become partners at the New York headquarters of Paramount-Publix, despite having strength only in Chicago. Even though they lacked access to first-run films, they were successful thanks to a small but carefully managed string of large movie palaces in key locations.²² The first hint that Nathanson could do something similar in Canada dates to his first resignation in 1929, at which time Ray Lewis speculated he could set up a small chain of deluxe theatres to take a major chunk out of Famous business.²³ In the end, Nathanson's creation of Odeon would rely on more than building new modern theatres in key spots in major cities. He had at least three other advantages. First, there was the guarantee of film programming from the small but consistent supply of mostly British films through Empire-Universal distributors and the initial promise (later lost) of MGM films through Nathanson's connections to the Regal distribution company.²⁴ Second, perhaps drawing upon Nathanson's inside knowledge and working relationships, Odeon successfully negotiated key leases in mid-sized cities for theatres that had been affiliated with Famous Players, often their signature "Capitol" theatres. Third, and most importantly, Odeon affiliated with a cross-country series of previously independent, regional chains.

The late 1930s was a boom period for small, independent theatre chains in Canada. Although the anti-trust legal actions against Famous had failed, the financial troubles of Paramount in the U.S., perhaps combined with political prudence to avoid further anti-trust scrutiny, meant Famous did not build many new theatres in the 1930s, nor did it take over many more independents.²⁵ At the same time, moviegoing boomed during the Great Depression. New theatres opened while admissions and box office receipts increased annually.²⁶ Perhaps a fiscally-constrained culture also meant more people went to neighbourhood theatres, preferring to wait a few months to see a movie and pay a dime or a quarter less than downtown, first-run prices.²⁷ Independent theatres and regional chains grew, as they had not done since before 1914 when the industry reached saturation in cities and came under government licensing and inspection. Throughout the 1930s the support networks for independent exhibitors grew stronger and expanded through formal co-operative associations and booking services, two national trade papers, and exhibitors' collectives.

Small regional chains grew into fairly successful ones. These included Nat Taylor's 20th-Century theatres in Ontario, Oscar Hanson's Associated Theatres around Toronto, Vancouver Owned Theatres, Superior Theatres in Montréal, and others in Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and the Maritimes. All grew stronger throughout the 1930s, and all except Taylor's formed the components of Canadian Odeon in 1941. Even Taylor came close to joining Odeon as vice-president. A contract with Odeon was drafted, but left unsigned when he decided to affiliate with Famous Players instead, which allowed him to maintain more control over booking what played on his screens.²⁸

When did it become clear to Nathanson that it was possible to bundle a series of coincidental negotiations into the leverage of a new organized competitor against Famous Players? Previous accounts, such as Kirwan Cox's, hint at duplicity: "Nathanson used his position as head of Famous to steal theatres out from under that company...[and] began renewing contracts personally, rather than for Famous Players."²⁹ Deliberate plan or not, perhaps only Nathanson's position allowed for the coast-to-coast vision needed to imagine, in the cacophony of the cinema business, potential for a new national chain of theatres incorporating strong independents and some key Famous Players leases. He was also the only person able to call in favours from enough people to make it happen.

However, the initial growth of the small chains that formed Odeon was probably not premeditated by Nathanson, and can be seen more simply as a consequence of independents filling in the suburban gaps that Famous was able to neglect because of its near-total dominance downtown. The only major downtown theatre built between the Allen's bankruptcy in 1923 and the creation of Odeon in 1941 was Vancouver's new Orpheum in 1927. It was built by the independent Langer chain just prior to its takeover by Famous Players.³⁰ Although it built a series of new Capitols in smaller cities, Famous Players did not build new theatres downtown in the largest Canadian cities because it did not have to, even during the late 1920s when fierce competition in major American cities brought on a period of massive and extravagant movie-palace building.³¹ In 1929, plans for palaces in Ottawa, Toronto, Windsor and Quebec City were shelved after Famous officially took control of Keith's and Loew's vaudeville theatres in those cities.³² Once it gained control, Famous built modestly. When it opened in 1920, Canada's larges-ever theatre, Toronto's Pantages (later Imperial), was the seventh-largest in North America, but by 1932, forty larger movie palaces had been built in the United States. Canada's second-largest theatre, the Montréal Loew's, was the fifth-largest in North America.
when it opened in 1917, but it did not rank in the top one hundred by 1932. This relative lack of movie-palace building in Canada suggests both how dominant, and perhaps complacent, Famous Players was because of its control of Canada’s downtowns, and just how much the Allen-Famous building war had quickly and early on flooded the downtown market in Canada. Famous Players had long rested on its 1920s architectural laurels, but from the point of view of 1941, its movie palaces were dated, old-fashioned—and American-controlled.

**VANCOUVER ODEON**

Compared to older, extravagantly ornamented Famous Players theatres, the independent theatres that became Canadian Odeon, especially at first in Vancouver, were sleek, modern, and artfully designed. William B. Long became the company’s first Western Division Manager. Before moving to Vancouver, he had operated the Rialto in downtown Edmonton, completely rebuilding it in a modern style in 1929. In 1940, Long sold his Edmonton interests, moved to Vancouver, and put in place the financing for a major downtown theatre, the Vogue. Other key suburban theatres for Odeon had already been associated as an independent chain. In 1935, J. Howard Boots was building the Dunbar and Don Sutherland the Kingsway in the outer suburbs of Vancouver. These were designed with sleek, streamlined facades of moulded concrete, highlighted in neon. These new theatres formed a co-operative with a few older independents, the Neighbourhood Owned theatres, which first advertised collectively in October 1935. In 1936 the Maple Leaf, downtown on Granville Street, was rebuilt as the Plaza, introducing a monolithic concrete façade that was prominently advertised as a first for the city. This was followed in 1938 by the Paradise, rebuilt from the Globe, again featuring Art Deco designs outlined in neon. With their large, bold facades, the Plaza and Paradise starkly contrasted with Famous Players’ Capitol and Orpheum, which had only narrow, modest entrances on Granville.

By December of 1938, the independent chain was more formally organized and renamed Vancouver Owned. It gradually gathered all of the most recently built theatres in Vancouver. From 1935 to 1941, fifteen newly-built theatres opened in the Vancouver area, and four others were entirely rebuilt, all of them independent and all but one eventually affiliated with Odeon. Famous Players had built nothing new at that time, managing only a renovation of the Dominion downtown and replacing some marquees. With the opening of the Vogue in April 1941, the new Odeon banner was introduced as a chain of a dozen theatres spanning the city. All but three were less than five years old. The Vogue, designed by Toronto architects Kaplan and Sprachman, continues to be an architectural gem in Vancouver’s downtown. The excitement its opening generated can be gauged by the following newspaper report:

Outside the theatre, from 8 p.m. onwards, swinging searchlights cut the sky above a gleaming modernistic façade swathed with flags and banners. Floodlights glared and hissed, crowds surged against lines held by police and commissaires, motion-picture cameras whirred and flashbulbs flared; as the guests passed into the theatre, notables among them paused, bowed and spoke brief acknowledgements of introductions into waiting microphones.

Despite this sensational description of the opening, advance press coverage presented the new Odeon flagship as the culmination of the growth of a regional chain of equally impressive façades. A collage of Odeon cinemas appeared amid...
several pages of promotional material that emphasized the entire network of theatres, but also their regional and neighbourhood importance as successful local businesses. Each theatre's manager was pictured and profiled with information about his or her connections to the community and how each came to Vancouver. For example, Walter Dawson at the Paradise had a long career in the local theatre business, while Queenie Albanoff had managed the Nova since it opened in 1937, just a year after she arrived in Vancouver from South Africa. Several others managed theatres built by their fathers.17

By the end of 1941, three more Vancouver Odeons had opened and six more theatres had joined the chain. In less than a year, Odeon had nearly matched Famous Players' strength in British Columbia, in number of theatres as well as in key theatres downtown in Vancouver and Victoria. After World War II, Odeon added a luxury theatre in West Vancouver and a large downtown palace in Victoria. Although Toronto's Kaplan and Sprachman had designed the Vogue and the Park, they were not mentioned in the promotion of their openings. In contrast, local architect H.H. Simmonds was featured in opening promotions of his Odeon designs in New Westminster, Victoria, and Vancouver. British Columbia would continue into the 1980s as the major stronghold for Odeon, its success promoted as related to its roots as a local independent business.

MONTREAL ODEON

For Odeon's downtown profile, Montréal was a weak spot. Compared to Vancouver's Granville Street, Odeon could not compete with Famous for the mainstream audience along the west end of rue Ste-Catherine. Instead, its strength came from French-language programming and affiliations with independent chains that specialized in the same. Dubbing sound films into French for the Québec market was gradually implemented. Just after synchronous sound was introduced to Canada in Montréal in 1928, a Canadian Moving Picture Digest article put a positive spin on the lack of French sound films, claiming francophone audiences were learning "Film English" as they consumed Hollywood films in their original English versions.9 According to the Canadian Film Weekly, even after French dubbing was introduced in the 1930s, it found a profitable place in the suburban theatres of Montréal's east and north neighbourhoods only after 1943.60 Before then, the Cinéma de Paris downtown was part of a French-language chain in Québec, J.A. DeSève's France Film, which had a series of Cinémas de Paris throughout Quebec, and in Montréal also owned the St. Denis and the Canadien. One independent theatre, the Beaubien, was initially with the France Film chain when it opened in December 1937, but later moved to Odeon.

Theatre building slowed in Montréal in the late 1930s, but United Theatres, affiliated with Famous Players, opened two new cinemas, the Snowdon and the York. Two new independent theatres, the Kent and Villeray, became affiliated with the Beaubien and several older houses to form Superior theatres, which first advertised in October 1941.61 Affiliation with Odeon came in 1945, with the planning of three major new theatres, to be designed by local architect Henry Greenspoon. The monumentality of the new Montréal cinemas was particularly important because Odeon's presence downtown was limited to two second-run theatres built before World War I, the Midway on boul. St-Laurent and the Electra east on rue Ste-Catherine.

Odeon was never able to programme an adequate supply of English-language Hollywood films, and the Kent in particular, located in Notre Dame de Grace and the lone west-end independent, had such trouble booking films that it pursued a major court case in 1944 against United Theatres and mainstream distributors.62 Despite the lawsuit, the Kent did not do better after 1945 under Odeon, and by 1951 it had affiliated with Famous Players. Even before Odeon lost the Kent to Famous, it had completely stopped advertising in English-language
newspapers. Focusing entirely on advertising in *La Presse*, Odeon made its catch phrase “Films Parlant Français.” This contrasted with the earlier openings for the Crémazie and Mercier, which were promoted equally in English- and French-language newspapers, although the March 1948 opening of the French-language flagship Champlain, east on Ste-Catherine at Papineau, was never advertised in the English newspapers.

Despite positioning itself as a French-language chain, strong in the north and east neighbourhoods of the city, Odeon remained weak in Montréal. Famous, not Odeon, first moved into Montréal’s suburban shopping malls in the 1960s. Famous also initiated placing cinemas in downtown office complexes.43 With the new building that accompanied the opening of the underground Métro for Expo in 1967, Odeon finally found space in the western part of downtown and once again began advertising in the English daily newspapers. The Place du Canada and the Alexis Nihon Plaza cinemas opened in 1967 with much fanfare, followed by the Berri in 1969. Surprisingly, Odeon did not move into the suburbs of Montréal until the late 1970s.44 The apex of Odeon’s presence in Montréal was in the late 1940s, when three new Odeons opened in a six-month period: the Crémazie, which offered “le maximum de sécurité, de commodité et de confort,” the Mercier, advertised as “votre cinéma de prédilection,” and the Champlain, touted as “dépassant toutes les espérances par son confort et son architecture originale.”45

**OTHER REGIONAL ODEONS**

In addition to the Vancouver owned chain and Montréal’s Superior theatres, Odeon affiliated with several other independent chains across the country, some of which had previously been linked to Famous Players. In Ottawa, P.J. Nolan’s trio, the Centre, Rexy, and Avalon, gave Odeon a site downtown and in two neighbourhoods. In Halifax, leases for the Garrick and Casino downtown were combined with the Oxford neighbourhood house. The Morton theatres in Saskatchewan and Manitoba negotiated a deal with Odeon after spending the 1950s with Famous. In Winnipeg, this meant Odeon had control of a couple of older downtown theatres, the Beacon and Garrick, but the chain still leased and renovated the 1906 Walker Theatre for its main Winnipeg house. Similarly Odeon renovated the 1912 Grand Theatre downtown in Calgary and the 1917 Pantages on Hastings Street in Vancouver. In its national publicity, the renovation of these theatres was lauded as a form of historic preservation.

Odeon was also able to gain control over theatres that had been leased to Famous. In Hamilton, the two largest theatres in town, the Capitol and the Palace, became Odeons in 1942 when the controlling company, Hamilton United, negotiated with Nathanson despite a minority ownership by Famous Players. Odeon also took over the Capitol theatres in Moncton, New Brunswick, and in smaller Ontario towns, including Brampton, Niagara Falls, Woodstock, and Midland. The takeover of the Hamilton movie palace leases was such a coup that Famous Players challenged the deal between Odeon and Hamilton United in court.46 “Capitol” had always been a Famous Players brand name, but the loss of its signature logo in so many places necessitated a new brand, “Paramount,” for expansion in the 1940s.

**ONTARIO ODEON**

Compared to Odeon theatres in other provinces, Ontario Odeons were more often newly built and planned from the head office in Toronto. In contrast to Québec, Odeons could be found throughout the province, but the company was less successful in affiliating with smaller chains. When Nat Taylor turned down the Odeon vice-presidency and went to Famous Players, the number of Ontario independent theatres that could affiliate with Odeon was severely limited, especially in Toronto. Odeon cinemas in Canada’s largest film-going market would have to be built from the ground up, from real-estate purchase to grand opening. Odeon’s strategy in Ontario emphasized its theatres’ newness and, after World War II, its connections to British Odeon and the Rank Organization.

Only two Ontario Odeons had begun construction when the war temporarily put a halt to new building.47 The Odeons in Sarnia and Kingston, both designed by Kaplan and Sprachman, were prominently promoted as Canadian-owned-and-operated when they opened in 1941. In Ontario, the older theatres that joined Odeon in 1941 were mainly older and smaller buildings. Thus, except for Hamilton, Sarnia, and Kingston, the Odeon logo was held for use exclusively with the new modern theatres built after the war. When theatre building began again in 1946, Odeon was British-owned, and there had been time to lay out a province-wide building plan under architect Jay L. English, who drafted designs for twelve theatres across the province.48 The strategy in Ontario was three-tiered: five new theatres in Toronto, including the national flagship; one new Odeon downtown in other large cities; and a B-level chain, National Theatres, most named “Roxy,” in small towns and the booming suburbs of Toronto.

Four neighbourhood Odeons in Toronto circled downtown: the Fairlawn to the north on Yonge Street, the Hyland just north of downtown, the Danforth in the east end, and the Humber to the west. Opening in September 1948, the Odeon Toronto, on Carlton at Yonge, was the last theatre built in Canada with more than 2,000 seats and the last in North America built with a new theatre organ. As “the showplace of the Dominion,” it gave Odeon a national flagship with enough grandeur to claim to be at the vanguard of modern architecture. Its opening ads featured a map of its services, which included a full restaurant on the mezzanine, an art gallery promenade, checkrooms, a courtesy desk, and plenty of “foam-filled seats in lounging luxury space.”49 Compared to Odeon, Famous Players’ new post-war theatres in Toronto were fewer in number, smaller in scale, and mostly built by affiliated chains. Only the University,
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Another key feature of Odeon’s distinction was its screening of Rank Organization’s British films, especially at grand openings. The first post-war Odeon to open, the Fairlawn in Toronto, featured a British war picture, Green for Danger (1946, UK, Sidney Gilliat). Ads leading up to opening day explained how Odeon provided the “ultimate” in construction, air conditioning, patron comfort and presentation, but the theatre also promised the ultimate in British films as a way of distinguishing itself from Famous Players. All of the post-war Ontario Odeons featured British films for their openings, and many advertised the J. Arthur Rank brand name and logo with lists of forthcoming British films. The Odeon Guelph featured Great Expectations (1947, UK, David Lean). The J. Arthur Rank production Jassy (1947, UK, Bernard Knowles) opened the Toronto Danforth. At the Odeon Toronto flagship, Oliver Twist (1948, UK, David Lean) had its North American premiere. Another Rank film, Blanche Fury (1948, UK, Marc Allegret), opened the Odeon London. Toronto’s Odeon Hyland opened with the Canadian premiere of Hamlet (1948, UK, Laurence Olivier), so high-profile a title that promotion wholly focussed on the film, without reference to the new theatre. The Odeon Ottawa, the last of English’s theatres to open, featured The Red Shoes (1947, UK, Michael Powell). In local newspaper promotions for new theatres, Rank himself was often profiled and the many branches of the Rank Organization reviewed. Altogether, the modern architecture, the British films and the patronage of Rank positioned an Ontario Odeon as offering something apart from movie-going in the past—and apart from what Famous Players offered.

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the two companies were already known to have settled into a mutually beneficial duopoly. Even before all the new post-war theatres opened, Variety reported grumbling from Hollywood distributors that the two chains were refusing to bid against each other.53 It is well known that an entente cordiale was eventually put in place: while Odeon got first pick of films from Columbia and Universal, Famous took films from Paramount, MGM, and Warners.54 By the late 1950s, with the movie business shrinking, there was even a joint committee to coordinate where each chain would close theatres.55 Previous accounts of Odeon’s creation have strongly argued that this collusion of interests continued for decades, restricting what was shown on Canadian screens and deterring the growth of Canadian filmmaking. In such accounts, Nathanson’s success in introducing Odeon relied on manipulating distribution franchises. From the evidence of trade journals and local advertising, however, his strategy of opening and affiliating theatres, one at a time, made the creation of Odeon seem fragmented and highly competitive, rather than a quick and easy splitting of the Famous monopoly into a duopoly.

In cities across the country, Odeon offered a distinctive, locally-oriented character. This aspect of Canadian exhibition is not peripheral to the centralized control of distribution and head office links to Hollywood. Writing histories with attention to local advertising, architecture and the regional roots of affiliated chains is as important as tracing Hollywood connections for understanding the appeal of mainstream films, and eventually understanding Canadian audiences. For example, since Odeon was formed before the U.S. had joined the war effort, its success might be correlated with pro-British and anti-American patriotism. Immigration from Britain before and after the war certainly meant common knowledge of British Odeon and the significance of the Rank Organization in British culture at the time. Perhaps more important, population growth and urbanization surely meant a corresponding opportunity to expand the movie theatre industry in Canada, and construction was under way even before Nathanson left Famous for Odeon. With their modern theatres, both technologically and culturally sophisticated, Odeon could provide a film culture to match post-war cultural needs. Further research in these areas might help explain the success of Odeon in more complex terms than film distribution deals, and allow for a better understanding of movie-going as part of a local as well as global culture.

The business of theatres and the social geography of movie-going is central to Canadian film history. Especially because of the prominence of Hollywood products, local exhibition is key to characterizing the particularities of Canada’s film-going culture. As builders on real estate in the downtowns and neighbourhoods of almost every Canadian city and, later, key tenants in suburban malls and big-box developments, Odeon, Famous Players, and hundreds of smaller independent entrepreneurs helped to shape the modern culture of Canadian cities and the viewing practices of Canadian audiences.

NOTES
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4. Canadian Moving Picture Digest (hereafter CMPD) began in 1915. (Microfilms, however, start in November 1917) From 1918 until 1954, it was edited, later owned, by Ray Lewis, who tended to present her news as editorials titled “Ray Presents.” CFW first appeared in 1942, revamping the Canadian Exhibitor. It was owned by Nat Taylor of Century Theatres. Editor Hye Bosan designed CF with more of a newspaper in layout, and used a more objective writing style. Lewis shared what she knew, framed as editorial gossip and rumours, while Bosan kept his insider’s knowledge confidential. For a review of these papers and a tribute to Bosan, see Pratley, 77-79.


8. Magder, 54.


11. For the Regent's opening, see "Palatial Theatre Opened Yesterday," *Toronto World*, 26 August 1916. For the organization of companies that became part of Famous Players Canadian, see Peter White, *Investigating into an Alleged Combine in the Motion Picture Industry in Canada* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1931): 16-20.


19. "Two New Theatres Announced for Kingston," *CMPD*, 25 January 1941; "Odeon Theatres of Canada Will Operate Dominion-Wide Chain," *CMPD*, 22 February 1941. To be precise, there were two companies, Odeon Theatres and General Theatres. Paul Nathanson was initially head of both. As with the difference between Famous Players and Paramount Theatres in 1920, it seems Odeon was the umbrella management and General had direct ownership of newly-built theatres. For example, in Nat Taylor's personal files for April 1941, a contract to build in Winnipeg was with General, while another to renew the lease for the Roxy in Regina was with Odeon. Nat Taylor Fonds, York University Archives, 1999-036, Box 001, File 30.


25. Between 1930 and 1937, small chains (two to nineteen theatres) increased from ten per cent to twenty-one per cent of the total number of theatres, and to twenty-nine per cent by 1940. Thus, the precipitous drop in single-theatre ownership in the 1930s, decreasing from seventy-two per cent to forty-seven per cent of the total, can mostly be attributed to the growth of small, rather than large, chains (presumably only Famous Players and affiliates), which increased their part less dramatically from eighteen per cent to twenty-four per cent of the total number of theatres. Dominion Bureau of Statistics as compiled in "indies Share Their Expansion," *CFW*, 1 December 1948.

26. Between 1930 and 1933, there was a dramatic drop in box-office receipts (from $16.5 million to $25 million) and number of operating theatres (from 907 to 762). The industry faced the spectre of the White Law of the 1930s, and by 1941 there were 1,240 theatres open, and $41 million in box office from 162 million admissions. These figures nearly doubled in the decade after Odeon was created; by 1950 there were 2,360 theatres and 245 million admissions grossing $86 million box office. Figures from the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, as compiled in Hye Bossin, ed., *Yearbook of the Canadian Motion Picture Industry* (Toronto: CFW, 1951): 56.

27. For example, in Vancouver Sun ads for evening shows in the first week of September 1936, the downtown Vancouver Orpheum and Capitol charged 50c for first-run orchestra seats, and the downtown Dominion and Plaza charged 25c for second-run, while in the neighbourhoods, the Dunbar charged 20c, and the Kingsway, Olympia, Hollywood and Fraser each charged 15c.

28. The draft contract for Taylor to become general manager of Odeon's General Theatres Ltd. is in the Nat Taylor Fonds, York University Archives, 1999-036, Box 001, File 30. A draft press release announcing the deal with Famous is in the same box, File 15. Paul Nathanson's interpretation of the incident as a result of Nathanson's scheming: "Taylor was offered a partnership in Odeon, which he refused, apparently because Nathanson reneged on his offer and tried to make Taylor an employee." There is no correspondence in Taylor's files to explain fully what happened. Although the initial deal with
Famous did not involve sale or partnership, by 1945 a formal integration had taken place. "Taylor, FPCC Form Co'y," CFW, 4 July 1945.


30. White, 47; Magder, 34.

31. Small city "Capitals" of the late 1920s include Cornwall and Trois Rivières (both 1928), Saskatoon, North Bay, New Toronto and Smiths Falls (all 1929), Chatham, Port Hope, Galt, Halifax and Sudbury (all 1930). Most were designed by Toronto architect Murray Brown. Also older theatres were renovated and renamed "Capitol" at the time, for example in Niagara Falls, Brantford, and Brockville.

32. Dates are reports in CMPD: Ottawa plans from 12 May 1928 (Famous and RKO combine interests in Canadian Keith's Theatres 8 June 1929); Toronto plans from 14 July 1928 (vaudeville moves from Loew's Uptown to imperial in 1930); Windsor plans from 16 August 1928 (takeover of Windsor Loew's 17 November 1928); Quebec City plans from 20 October 1928 (Audiatorium, Quebec City takeover 3 May 1929).


34. W. J. Long Explains Resignation from Odeon," CFW, 25 February 1942. As well as the rebuilt Rialto downtown, owned by lawyer Harry Friedman, "Edmonton Suburban" theatres, which later joined Odeon (and referred to as the "Shacker houses" by the CMPD, 8 March 1941), Included the Avenue (1934) and Rocky (1939). Also, the Vancora (1940) was built by the firm of Rule, Wynn, and Rule specifically to "scoop" the modern style and opening date of the nearby Gameau, according to Trevor Boddy, Modern Architecture in Alberta (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987): 65-75.

35. All dates from Vancouver Sun: The first ad for "Neighbourhood Owned" theatres listed the Kingsway, Fraser, State, and Music Box (16 October 1935). The Olympia and Maplewood are followed: the Hollywood opened on 24 October and the Dunbar on 30 November 1935. For the Plaza opening, see "Concrete Monolith First in City," Vancouver Sun, 1 September 1936; For the Paradise opening, see, "Smart New Paradise Theatre Opens Doors Today with 'Better Entertainment' Policy," Vancouver Province, 11 November 1938.

36. "Glittering Ceremony Opens Vogue," Vancouver Sun, 16 April 1941.

37. All dates from Vancouver Sun: "Vancouver Owned" was first used 5 December 1938, and included the Dunbar, Kingsway, Olympia, Fraser, Nova, Hollywood, Music Box, Cambie, and Colonial. The Oak, Rio, Marpole, Varsity, and Rocky followed. All but the Hollywood joined Odeon eventually. Curiously, the downtown, second-run Colonial was listed for just the first day. "Odeon" was first used 15 April 1941. The original dozem were the Vogue, Plaza, Paradise, Dunbar, Varsity, Kingsway, Rocky, Marpole, Rio, Fraser, Olympia, and Nova. For management profiles, see advance publicity, "These People Manage Odeon Theatres Here," 12 April 1941.

38. In 1941, the Park opened, 4 August; the Circle, 10 November; and Odeon New Westminster, 28 November. The Music Box, Lux, Beacon, Lonsdale, Metro and Sapperton also joined Odeon by 1942, as well as the Plaza and Oak Bay in Victoria. In 1946, the Odeon West Vancouver opened 20 February, and the Odeon Victoria one week later.


41. Superior theatres consisted of the Midway and Electra in the eastern part of downtown; the Beacham and Villarey in the north; the Kent in the west; the Verdon Palace and Perron in the southwest, and the Capitole in St. Jean and Rex in St. Jerome, both outside of Montréal.


43. United/Famous Players suburban cinemas around Montréal were Dorval (1962), Versailles (1965), Fairview (1966), Greenfield Park (1967), Centre Laval (1968) and Galeries D'Anjou (1968). In office towers, it opened Place Ville Marie (1962) and Westmount Square (1967).

44. Odeon moved into the suburbs with Laval 2000 (1976), Decarie Square (1977), and Brossard (1977). Expo 67 also brought new theatres from National General Cinemas at Place Bonaventure (1967), and in the suburbs at Place Longueuil (1967) and Côte des Neiges (1968).

45. La Presse opening ads: Crémaize (9 October 1947); Mercier (15 January 1948); Champlain (28 March 1948).

46. At first, the new leases went uncontested ("Famous Announces Changes in Operation of Hamilton Theatres," CMPD, 16 August 1941). A few years later, the theatres were put to bid again, won by Odeon ("Odeon, FPCC Bid for Ham. United," CFW, 5 April 1944; "Hamilton U.T. OK's Odeon Bid," CFW, 12 April 1944). This was followed by a lawsuit ("Injunction on Hamilton Deal," CFW, 26 April 1944), settled mutually in December 1948. Odeon kept the theatre leases until the final couple of years before the theatres closed in the early 1970s, when they both briefly operated under the independent banner "Granada.


49. Toronto Telegram, 9 September 1948, opening-day advertising for the Odeon Toronto.

50. 20th-Century built the Glendale (1947), Downtown (1948), Towne (1949) and Birchcliffe (1949). Premier built the Willow (1948) and added a second auditorium at the Hollywood (1947). B & F built the Vaughan (1947) and Donlands (1948). For Famous Players directly, there was only the Nortown (1948) and the University (1949).

51. On the architecture and trademarks of British Odeon cinemas of the 1930s, see Eyles.

52. All opening dates and films from local newspapers: Green for Danger at the Fairlawn (15 August 1941), and Peterborough (17 December 1947), Great Expectations in Guelph (31 October 1947); Jassy at the Danforth (16 April 1946), and Port Arthur (4 November 1946); Blanche Fury in London (22 October 1946), Fort William (5 November 1948), Brantford (17 December 1948), and the Humber (27 January 1949); Hamlet at the Hyland (22 November 1948); The Red Shoes in Ottawa (21 May 1949).

53. Variety, 10 April 1946; reported secondhand in "How's that again? It's a Starter," CFW, 24 April 1946.

54. One of the few times the informal split among distributors was acknowledged on the record is an interview with Famous Players' President George Destounis on CBC's "Home Movies," one part of the series, The Great Canadian Culture Hunt, telecast 17 March 1976. See Cox, "Canada's Theatrical Wars," 49.


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