

Book Reviews

Fifty Years on Theatre Row, by Ivan Ackery. North Vancouver: Hancock House, 1980. Pp. 253, *photos*.

Nostalgia: that's the essence of this entertaining book by the manager of several theatres in Vancouver between 1928 and 1969. His earlier experiences as an usher account for the half century of the title. For anyone who has memories of Vancouver from 1914 onward this is a very evocative book; for a potential reader lacking a Vancouver background the book is likely still to be of interest as an idiosyncratic history of the general development of the movie industry in the city and of the Orpheum Theatre in particular.

As well, irrepressible Ivan tells of his childhood in Bristol, England, youthful adventures in Vancouver in 1914, experiences in England and France as a soldier, being a lively man-about-Vancouver during the 1920s, and his brief management of the Capitol Theatre in Victoria. Ackery participated in the grimness of the Battle of Passchendaele, Belgium, in 1917, when 400,000 allied troops died in order to push the enemy back five miles. From his year or so in Victoria, only one episode stands out: the proud making in and around Victoria of the first all-Canadian talking picture, *Crimson Paradise*. It was partly financed by Kathleen Dunsmuir, who acted in it. The world premiere was on December 14, 1933, in Victoria, "the only place where it *was* a success." Ackery describes it concisely as "a real turkey" and says that no copy exists today. A pity.

Otherwise, Ackery's autobiography is largely a catalogue of famous and forgotten movies and his assiduous promotion of them, along with names of Hollywood stars and entertaining anecdotes about them. The author refers to warm friendships with Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Bing Crosby, Anna Neagle, Pearl Bailey, Louis Armstrong, Stan Kenton, and many others. During the Ackery years the Orpheum put on a few stage shows, but mostly in connection with movie promotion; hence one will

find only passing reference to actors and actresses from the legitimate theatre.

The names of the movies Mr. Ackery successfully promoted (he won several awards for his skill in this area) will be part of the nostalgia for some readers of this book: *Gone With the Wind* (a run of three months), *Canadian Pacific*, *War and Peace*, *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, etc. (The last was surely premiered in Vancouver before 1944.)

Even if one has only a limited interest in movies and their stars, this book has at least one alternative pleasure: the skill with which this relaxed and articulate writer captures the atmosphere of Vancouver over six decades — the crystal sets, speak-easies and rum-running, the grim years of the depression, the tone of fear and suspicion during World War II (especially after Pearl Harbor), the boom years of the 1950s. He refers, for example, to empty mansions in Shaughnessy during the 1930s and to housing shortages during the war years. Lack of space here forbids recounting any of the many humorous anecdotes, but this sentence catches the 1930s in Canada: "There were places where, if you wanted a drink on Sunday afternoon, they'd serve it in silver tea services and pour it out into china cups."

One of Ackery's statistics tells succinctly the later story of the Orpheum: in Canada in 1948 movie attendance was over 219 million; by 1977 it was just over 76 million. Intermittently Ackery proudly focuses on the beautiful Orpheum building (built 1927, 2,871 seats, staff of 65; usherettes earned \$15.00 a week), and he briefly refers to his contribution to the recent "Save the Orpheum" campaign.

The book under review cannot stand scrutiny as serious social history, or as a comprehensive history of either the movies or theatre in Vancouver, but it makes very pleasant reading. It will make many readers say: "So that's what Vancouver was like then."

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Stephanie, by Joan Austen-Leigh. Victoria: A Room of One's Own Press, 1979. Pp. 284.

If Joan Austen-Leigh has written a disappointing book, the fault does not lie in the theme, the classic one of what happens in an immigrant family when to the generational struggle is added youth's repudiation of