

## **GRAHAMSTOWN FILM AND HERITAGE AS REFLECTED BY HIS MAJESTY'S BUILDING**

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This paper looks at how the oral history project of His Majesty's Theatre building became a vehicle for researching broader issues. While the history of the theatre, film memoirs, social comment and a life history were recorded, the following issues surfaced: the effects of apartheid policy in entertainment areas; the impact of new media such as TV and video on the cinema theatre; the arrival of national franchises and resultant tensions of preservation of building and cultural heritage versus economic development in a small Eastern Cape city. These tensions were played out in the community Fruit & Veg 'colour' dispute with focus on His Majesty's building.

The building of His Majesty's Theatre had and continues to have an influential and varied history in the town of Grahamstown. In this oral history project research has been done by consultation of written sources and by the conducting of interviews.

His Majesty's building was built to serve the purpose of a cinema theatre, and the history of the building is closely linked to the history of film in Grahamstown. The building displays imposing architectural features, and is centrally situated in Grahamstown. Fortunately the façade was undamaged after a devastating fire. Thus the heritage of the building is linked both to its historical purpose and role in the community, and with the unique architecture and central locality of the building.

Two aspects of the research will be presented today: the issue of access to film entertainment in Grahamstown, and issues of heritage preservation.

### **The establishment of His Majesty's Theatre and Entertainment in Grahamstown**

Although Grahamstown has city status it has always been considered a 'small' town, particularly in terms of entertainment, where there was less on offer than in the bigger cities. Following the international trend film rapidly gained popularity from the 1930's and cinema came to be one of the main forms of entertainment in Grahamstown, with His Majesty's Theatre officially opening in 1935.

Cinema in Grahamstown was important to the social fabric of the town. A letter to the Grocott's Mail in 1998 stated, "His Majesty's Theatre did provide entertainment to the whole area for well over 50 years. Depending on the film, of course, one could count at least 200 or so regulars in its seats".<sup>1</sup> The Grocott's Mail quoted an unknown women in the aftermath of the His Majesty's fire in 1998, "She spoke fondly of her beloved 'HM' and told of the times before the arrival of television in South Africa when Albany farmers and their wives, all dressed up, watched a movie at the 'HM' after having enjoyed a meal

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<sup>1</sup> Grocott's Mail 30.4.1998

at a local hotel. It was quite an occasion for them”.<sup>2</sup> “During the second world war it (His Majesty’s) was especially useful in providing entertainment to the armed forces, returning soldiers and their families and friends.”<sup>3</sup> A respondent emphasised the importance of cinema for the Rhodes students in the late 1950’s, “Very important...students would walk to the Odeon and to His Majesty’s, and Friday, Saturday night it was full of students,” and in reply to a question on attendance, “Certainly it was always full on at least Friday and Saturday. Yes I went about five times a week.”<sup>4</sup> For a school boy in the mid 1980’s His Majesty’s Theatre was a social meeting place, “in those days more of a place to meet friends. More homely atmosphere than (cinemas of) today.”<sup>5</sup> A respondent concludes on the role of cinema in the 1970’s and 1980’s, “It was certainly a major form of entertainment and it was affordable. It was quite social as well, and I suppose television wasn’t especially good in those days and there wasn’t video. Cinema was considered...the big screen was fun and it was very popular.”<sup>6</sup>

His Majesty’s was remembered as having the presence of a ‘grand’ cinema, and a presence in the town as the cinema bordered Church Square. An evening out was an occasion, “You entered through the curtains. If the shorts that ran before were already playing you parted the curtains, you entered into this space that was very dramatic. It still retained the big velvet curtains, the gilded lighting, there was a drama about it.”<sup>7</sup>

### **This leads us to the question of Patron Access – just who was going to see films in Grahamstown?**

His Majesty’s Theatre catered primarily as a form of entertainment for the white residents of Grahamstown. Even prior to the apartheid policies of the Nationalist government in 1948 whites had favoured segregation. Torlesse noted from Council minutes in 1938 that the Municipality believed in segregation, and from Joint Council records, (1931-1945), it was stipulated that cinema licences for movie houses outside the location were issued subject to the stipulation that only “Europeans” could attend performances.<sup>8</sup> A respondent reflecting on the period 1960 to the mid 1990’s believed apartheid policies were enforced, and non-whites mostly boycotted the cinema. In reply to the question of when did segregation start tailing off, he said, “I don’t think it ever did,... it certainly didn’t impinge on my consciousness”.<sup>9</sup>

A respondent recalled the institutionalisation of apartheid in the mid 1970’s and as manager of His Majesty’s Theatre had to work with a government permit system. A permit was required for Indian and Chinese people, while blacks were not allowed into the cinema. Chinese people were allowed to enter from the front door and sit where they liked. While Indians were restricted to 13 people per evening, were not allowed to stand in the ticket cue, had to enter and leave the cinema via the back exit door and sit at the

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<sup>2</sup> Grocott’s Mail 30.4.1998

<sup>3</sup> Grocott’s Mail 30.4.1998

<sup>4</sup> Macdonald transcript 104 2006 pg. 1

<sup>5</sup> Sparg transcript 102 2006 pg. 2

<sup>6</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 1

<sup>7</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 2

<sup>8</sup> Torlesse, A. 1993. A History of Grahamstown 1918-1945, MA Thesis, RU, Grahamstown. pg. 201

<sup>9</sup> Macdonald transcript 104 2006 pg. 3

back of the theatre.<sup>10</sup> The respondent added that from about the time of the Tricameral Parliament in 1983 he would allow blacks to enter His Majesty's Theatre if they requested entry. He also stated that the authorities never checked on the status of the permits or the racial make-up of the cinema patrons and in reply to the question of harassment by the police said, "Nothing, nothing, amazing hey?"<sup>11</sup> Despite this relaxation of segregation in the 1980's the respondent stated the audience continued to be between 80% and 90% white.<sup>12</sup>

Meintjies notes it was common in the townships to see small entrepreneurs setting up informal movie houses in homes, churches and community halls.<sup>13</sup> In the early days from 1955 to 1976 the respondent showed films in the Grahamstown location to mainly a black audience at the Municipal Hall in Raglan Road. Adults were charged 50c and children 20c, and he comments, "They were happy let me tell you. If the movie was good I must rewind and show it again, and I would do it."<sup>14</sup> However he discontinued his film business on the advice of black friends as it had become unsafe in the townships at the time of the Soweto riots in 1976.<sup>15</sup> Thus from this time black people didn't have access to film as a form of entertainment, and even when segregation was relaxed from 1983 onwards black people most likely felt uncomfortable attending His Majesty's Theatre. There were other factors too, which the respondent spells out, "Number one, apartheid has been washed into their brains. Number two, transport also, no transport and number three the price of the ticket was too much."<sup>16</sup>

Although there was a history of watching film in the township this trend didn't continue at His Majesty's Theatre due to the following prohibitive factors: the apartheid permit system for cinemas; the ingrained apartheid mentality of black people; distance because of the central locality of the cinema; and transport and ticket costs.

His Majesty's Theatre relied for business in the most part on white patronage throughout its history as a cinema. Business was good and film was a very important form of entertainment, certainly until the late 1980's. Population figures for blacks rose dramatically in this period in Grahamstown.<sup>17</sup> However black attendance at His Majesty's Theatre did not increase correspondingly, most likely for the reasons outlined above. But as Meintjies points out there are other factors at play when he quotes calls for the need of films to reflect the realities of South African life, and the root problems being low literacy and lack of leisure time.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sonne first transcript 101 2006 pg.3

<sup>11</sup> Sonne first transcript 101 2006 pg. 4

<sup>12</sup> Sonne second transcript 105 2006 pg. 1

<sup>13</sup> Meintjies, F.1992. 'In the Township' in M. Botha & J. Bignaut, *Movies Moguls Mavericks*, South African Cinema 1978-1991. Cape Town: Showdata. pg. 273

<sup>14</sup> Sonne first transcript 101 2006 pg. 7

<sup>15</sup> Sonne first transcript 101 2006 pg. 1

<sup>16</sup> Sonne second transcript 105 2006 pg. 1

<sup>17</sup> Holleman, H. & Paterson, L. 2002 (rev.ed.). *Grahamstown the Untold Story, a social history and self-guided tour*. Grahamstown: Black Sash publication. pg.38

<sup>18</sup> Meintjies 2002 pg.274

This oral history project has revealed some of the history of His Majesty's building. In the 1930's the municipality and white residents showed their racial bias in favouring segregated entertainment areas. This was later institutionalised with apartheid and the permit system for cinemas. Towards the end of the 'life' of His Majesty's there was an easing of segregation. However it is likely that black patrons only felt comfortable going to see films in the post apartheid era.

### **Fire at His Majesty's Theatre – the end of an era**

In the early hours of a Sunday morning in April 1998, the Grahamstown Fire Department received a call, notifying them of a fire at His Majesty's Theatre.<sup>19</sup>

The fire was devastating and damage was estimated at over R1 million. The auditorium of the 1000 seater cinema was totally destroyed while other areas suffered smoke and water damage. Mr Sonne, the owner of the business was devastated, and said, "for 22 years I have been following the same procedure at closing and now this".<sup>20</sup>

A respondent explained how the fire started, "They later found out it was the street children, the beggars. Yes. They started the fire at the back. They broke the door." On the extent of the damage he said all that remained were the walls and front façade, expressing, "Everything! Everything! (burnt), I know, heartbreaking. What can you do? It is my whole life, man!"<sup>21</sup>

The burning down of His Majesty's Theatre heralded the end of an era for film patrons, and for Mr Sonne the manager who had worked with film since 1955.

### **The arrival of a national franchise and the 'colour dispute' at His Majesty's, and implications for heritage in Grahamstown**

Fruit & Veg City, part of a national franchise, opened for business in the renovated His Majesty's Theatre in March 2000. A respondent, a partner in the new franchise described how the building was in a very poor state after the fire and about R1 million was spent on general renovation. The only hint of His Majesty's Theatre was the existing façade of the building.<sup>22</sup>

The renovation breathed new life into the fire damaged building, and the busy Fruit & Veg franchise brought much needed economic development and employment to the area.

However the new franchise also arrived amid controversy over the bright corporate colours and large signage used in the 'new' look building. This developed into a local community dispute and there was much discussion with letters written to the media about the 'loud' appearance of the building. A respondent comments, "But what was done to that building really had to partly do with the choice of colours, but also the insensitive way that they were thrown at the building and also one has to take into consideration the

<sup>19</sup> Makana Municipality manuscript 28.04.2006

<sup>20</sup> Grocott's Mail 30.04.1998

<sup>21</sup> Sonne first transcript 101 2006 pg. 5

<sup>22</sup> Sparg transcript 102 2006 pg. 3

scale of the building. You can use colours and bright colours selectively but you have to consider the wider aesthetics of it and the impact on the streetscape.”<sup>23</sup>

A respondent relates a little more of the Fruit & Veg saga, “The people of Grahamstown were divided into two camps. The one lot didn’t like it at all, and the other lot enjoyed it. It was a horrible bright yellow which I think aggravated a lot of the people who wanted to keep the city the settler style that they like.”<sup>24</sup> A respondent continues the debate, “The colour scheme I thought was appalling, and quite clearly unnecessary...but I was horrified, I still try not to shop at Fruit and Veg.”<sup>25</sup> Clearly emotions ran high after the arrival of the national franchise and another respondent revealed, “Look we have heard there are a lot of people who won’t come into our store because of our colour.”<sup>26</sup> A respondent recounts, “His Majesty’s honestly you could see from 10 000 meters up when you over flew Grahamstown. I was on an aeroplane once when the pilot over flew Grahamstown and commented. So it wasn’t a typical bugbear.”<sup>27</sup>

From the extent of the community reaction and letters to the press it was clear the Fruit & Veg dispute was to do with more than just controversial paint colour. It was also to do with Grahamstown’s building heritage and preservation of the historical character of the town. A respondent felt strongly about the colour dispute played out in the media, “Grahamstown has to maintain some architectural integrity...appeal is not unimportant and I think that (Fruit & Veg City) is just a blight on the town.”<sup>28</sup> The Grahamstown owners of the franchise argued they were forced to use the bright franchise colours and had no choice because His Majesty’s was a lone standing building.<sup>29</sup> Others disagreed, “At the time I didn’t buy the argument that this was something we had no say over, and I don’t think local authorities should be bullied by corporates.”<sup>30</sup> The respondent gave examples of other large franchises which had come to town and occupied historical buildings quite comfortably. He also commented on the importance of development in Grahamstown and the responsibilities of corporate franchises, “A town like us desperately needs development, it needs the vote of confidence of franchise corporates coming in. But they also need to realize that they are coming into a town that has a history, and is the ‘colony’ in terms of cultural tourism. It is very definitely based on built environment and the history of it.”<sup>31</sup>

A resolution to the ‘colour dispute’ was being demanded by local residents and Fruit & Veg City needed an end to negative publicity. The editor of the community newspaper ‘The Shoppa’ brought together the following three key players: the owner of the building; a fine arts professor who had been involved with the Municipal Aesthetics Committee and was Chair Person of the Ratepayers Association; and a local architect. It was

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<sup>23</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 4

<sup>24</sup> Sparg transcript 102 2006 pg. 4

<sup>25</sup> Macdonald transcript 104 2006 pg. 4

<sup>26</sup> Sparg transcript 102 2006 pg. 4

<sup>27</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 4

<sup>28</sup> Madonald transcript 104 2006 pg. 4

<sup>29</sup> Sparg transcript 102 2006 pg 4

<sup>30</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 5

<sup>31</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 5

apparent that the owner was leaning towards being prepared to repaint the building, and at great cost.<sup>32</sup> This group was involved in the many months of painting and restoration planning.<sup>33</sup> It was also fortuitous that the Fruit & Veg franchise group as a whole had also come under criticism about the franchise colours.

His Majesty's building, and in particular the façade, is worthy of preservation because of its extraordinary architecture and imposing central location. Architect Hilary Saunders describes the building as having an 'exuberant' style of the Spanish-Moorish art deco which can be seen in the Moorish gable above the entrance. Other features hint at an 'Afro-Cape Dutch' style.<sup>34</sup> Professor Dominic Thorburn describes the renovations as very elegant and appropriate for the business.<sup>35</sup>

The challenges of Grahamstown's heritage are many, and on researching the history of His Majesty's building the following questions arise: Should we preserve our history? Should we commemorate a building's past? How should we deal with change? Is all change progress? How do we preserve the historical character of Grahamstown? Which or whose histories do we preserve? Are all issues of preservation equally important to Grahamstown residents, and if not why not? These are the kinds of questions people of Grahamstown need to be asking.

Preserving our building heritage could be aided by educating people about the history of Grahamstown. A respondent suggests, "I think if one took learners from a broad spectrum and taught them about the town and about the architecture and how the town has changed, there would be more of an appreciation."<sup>36</sup> There is value in preserving the historical character of Grahamstown's buildings, "To retain what I call this resonance within the town of the architectural heritage, even though it be colonial often and euro centric, is important for cultural tourism. And it is one of the things that people come to Grahamstown to see, and it is photographed and it is remembered and it is appreciated as such, and that feeds into the economy."<sup>37</sup> A respondent concludes succinctly, "But it is not an either or, it is actually to conscientize people that look, there are all sorts of things here that can be restored and valued."<sup>38</sup>

The respondent believes it was healthy to have people reacting to the Fruit & Veg corporate colours, "Very often just to have people reacting, to get a reaction rather than to have apathy is better...I think one will find that there is more ownership than one might initially think in terms of our architectural environment and people feel very possessive of it."<sup>39</sup> The reaction to the arrival of a national franchise, whether positive or negative, has made people more aware of the town's history and heritage as reflected by its

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<sup>32</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 5

<sup>33</sup> Grahamstown Shoppa 26.05.2006

<sup>34</sup> Grahamstown Shoppa 26.05.2006

<sup>35</sup> Grahamstown Shoppa 26.05.2006

<sup>36</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 8

<sup>37</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 8

<sup>38</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 8

<sup>39</sup> Thorburn transcript 103 2006 pg. 9

buildings. In this case reflected by the bright yellow shine of His Majesty's Theatre, now known as His Majesty's Food Emporium sporting the mellow colour of 'yuma yellow'!<sup>40</sup>

### **Concluding comments**

It is certain that the destiny of His Majesty's is tied to both the historical value of the building's history and to the architectural merit of the building. The future of the building will be ensured if there is knowledge of its history, and a sensitive contemporary use of the building that is economically viable and beneficial to the community. The building still stands but in a very different form. The community via debate insisted on retaining the name 'His Majesty's' on the façade of the building. This is a small reminder of the past, but can evoke poignant personal memories together with memories of past periods of Grahamstown's and South Africa's history.

In summary this project shows how cultural heritage can be retrieved through the processes of oral history. His Majesty's building, although a magnificent building with a community purpose and history did not have a full recorded or written history. Written records were brief and news-like detailing only main events such as the opening of the building, the fiery end, and subsequent economic developments. Thus the oral history captures a fuller picture, reveals nuances and fills the gaps in the recorded written history. Societal, community and personal histories are revealed, and a reading of the transcripts reveals the human aspect of history, of emotions and attitudes. In this case the oral history reveals how a public place or building can become an important 'locus', (meaning a place, locality or location), for community memory. We are fortunate in Grahamstown/Rhini to have His Majesty's still in existence and so the building continues to act as a 'locus' for memory. This place or 'locus' can continue to exist in collective human memory even when the physical building is no longer in existence. This reminds us of the power of human memory, and the importance of recording oral histories.

Please contact me if you are interested in a copy of the full paper. Thank you for your time.

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### **REFERENCES for presentation paper**

- Holleman, H. & Paterson, L. 2002(rev.ed.). Grahamstown the Untold Story, a social history and self-guided tour. Grahamstown: Black Sash publication.
- Meintjies, F. 1992. 'In the Township' in M. Botha & J. Blignaut (ed.s), Movies Moguls Mavericks, South African Cinema 1978-1991. Cape Town: Showdata.
- Torlesse, A. 1993. A History of Grahamstown 1918-1945, MA Thesis, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

### **Newspapers**

Grocott's Mail

The Grahamstown Shoppa

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<sup>40</sup> Fruit & Veg manuscript 2006

**Manuscripts**

Letter from the Makana Municipality re: Building Fire, His Majesty's Theatre, 28.04.06  
Note from Fruit & Veg City, 2006, Grahamstown, detailing colours of the new look building.

**Interviews**

Mr Thakor Sonne Transcription of Tape 101 dated 1/05/06

Transcription of Tape 105 dated 27/05/06

Mr Dudley Sparg Transcription of Tape 102 dated 3/05/06

Professor Dominic Thorburn Transcription of Tape 103 dated 12/05/06

Professor Ian Macdonald Transcription of Tape 104 dated 18/05/06