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DEATH OF A GIANT

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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DEATH OF A GIANT

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Longtime readers of this column may recall not one, but two separate articles about Jamaica's giant Carib Theatre. The Carib is owned and operated by the Palace Amusement Co, (1921) Ltd., headquartered in Kingston. The first article was published in the October, 1982 issue of BOXOFFICE. The second was published in the February, 1991 issue. Both articles described the theatre as well as its enormous and unprecedented sound system. At just under 1,000,000 cubic feet, the theatre boasted statistics which made other large theatres seem small by comparison. With the acoustic output equal to 20 symphony orchestras all playing at once, the sound system I designed and built for the Carib Theatre was *by far* the most powerful of its kind ever built. It was also the first cinema sound system to be completely designed by a computer. To see and hear a film in this place was simply an incredible experience.

Sadly, this giant of grand old theatres was recently destroyed by fire. Starting in the auditorium's ceiling, the fire spread rapidly throughout the structure and turned the theatre into a smoldering ruin in just three hours. One firefighter was killed and two others injured attempting to save the building. Palace's managing director, Douglas Graham, was himself hospitalized for nearly a week suffering from smoke inhalation. Desperate to save his flagship, he spent over 30 minutes in the burning building helping the fire crews.

Plans are now underway to build new theatres within what can be saved of the original walls of the Carib. Unfortunately, it cannot be rebuilt as a single screen with today's construction costs.

In many ways, the success story of the Carib's last years is one which mirrors the success of many businesses which realize that a concentration on quality is a key to the future. In the early 1980's, exhibition in Jamaica was in the doldrums. Competition from video was reducing theatre attendance. In downtown Kingston, two theatres, the Carib and the Regal, fought it out. Both theatres were of similar size, though the Carib was larger. They were located just a few hundred yards apart in one on the city's busiest areas.

Back then, Douglas Graham's father ran Palace Amusement. With attendance weak and

getting weaker, Douglas took it to it upon himself to seek out ways to turn the situation around. He attended a National Association of Theatre Owners convention. Speaking with several manufacturers and colleagues, he explained the size of his theatre as well as the business situation. Happily, some of them suggested that he visit my booth. Upon hearing of the volume of this room, I decided I needed to visit the Carib myself.

The first time I entered the theatre, I was awe struck. I had never seen such a large auditorium. I wondered how I was going to approach a sound system design for so big a theatre. In addition to a new sound system, the theatre needed just about everything else, from a fresh coat of paint to a new concession area (all of which eventually came to pass).

During this visit, I learned that Graham had been advised that he need only install the most minimal of sound systems. The audience, some would say, wouldn't know the difference. All he needed were small speakers, 100 watt amplifiers and an inexpensive stereo processor, all of which would have been inadequate for a screening room, let alone a theatre like this. It turns out that the folks at the Regal theatre were being told the same thing. Douglas convinced the directors of his company that if the Carib was to survive and the company was grow, they had to install the mammoth sound system I had proposed.

In 1982, we did the installation. It was a powerful system with over 6,000 watts (increased to 10,000 in 1991). The Regal installed the 100 watt per channel sound system at the same time and opened with the Jamaican premiere of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK. The Carib wasn't so lucky. It debuted its new sound system with two "B" pictures. One was called SEVEN and the other was entitled DOGS. But the audience quickly made its choice. The Carib out-grossed the Regal's RAIDERS and never looked back. The Regal's owners never knew what hit them as audiences deserted their theatre for the Carib and its incredible new sound system.

As time went by, Regal's attendance dropped so low that its owners approached Douglas Graham and asked if his company would run the theatre for them. He agreed. But it was too late. Nothing could save the Regal. Perhaps the most telling sign was the refusal of the audience to go to the Regal even when it was playing the same film as the Carib. If the Carib was sold out, people waiting in line would be told that they could see the same film, *at a lower price*, starting in a few minutes at the Regal. They just wouldn't budge - choosing instead to wait over two hours, in the rain if necessary, to see the film in the Carib.

Not long after, the Regal was closed and became a shopping center.

The Carib Theatre soon became the highest grossing theatre in the entire West Indies. The Palace Amusement Company now had such a successful theatre on their hands that they were able to expand the circuit for the first time in years. Throughout the 1980's and early 1990's we also upgraded the Carib's sound system at every opportunity. First it was Dolby SR. Later it was more modern amplifiers and finally digital sound. Even though the theatre had regained its former glory, and had eliminated its competition, Graham and Palace's directors refused to rest on their laurels. To avoid a repetition of the conditions in 1980, their customers would not be taken for granted.

During one of my visits, I was asked to join the board of directors for lunch. In recounting the story of the Carib's rebirth, it was said that they had come to realize the importance of the presentation and sound quality: "We realized that we are not in the movie business," said Douglas Graham. "We are not in the concession business. We are in the sound business!"

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