

## **What's Playing at the Roxy?**

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After I was 14 or 15, the only time I can remember joining with my Father in any celebration of life was a trip to the Roxy Theater in the town of Decatur, Alabama, in August of 1957. My family had moved there in February so my father could work in the growing missile industry in nearby Huntsville, and I joined them in June, after my high school graduation in another state. My father had a day off from work and, with an afternoon free, he invited me to the movies. It was also my day off from my fifty-cents-an-hour job at the P&H “*Super*” market -- four short aisles, a small freezer, six shopping carts and one cashier. I was 17, hot and bored that summer, so I jumped at my father’s invitation. When I arrived in Decatur most of my peer group had already gone off to college, or maybe gotten out-of-town jobs or had married, so I had no one to really hang out with, and my younger brother was not in my age group and my older brother was in the Army. I was lonely.

Before my puberty set in, my father had been connected and warm towards me, but something happened as I grew older. A clash of personalities began to develop between us as had, I later figured out, a clash of ideologies. My father grew up in the Great Depression and his family struggled mightily to survive. That struggle led to a lack of funds for his

going to college, for which he would have been extremely well-suited, and left a deep scar on his psyche. He considered as “pipe dreams” and “fantasy” any plan on my part that didn’t have a “down-to-earth and practical” money-making objective as he had been rigidly taught to believe. He saw my desire for a writing or acting career as a road to poverty. So, we slowly drifted apart, and by the time I was sixteen there was very little personal interaction between us, a condition that hardened even more with time. My older brother began to blossom early into my father’s “favorite,” and the fact that my brother planned a teaching career sealed their relationship up. Good for my brother, I thought, but it didn’t help me at all with my college choice of theater.

My father finally gave up on me, leaving me, basically, connecting only with my mother for my guidance to life’s problems. It was an estrangement that would extend through the rest of our lives. However, he and I happened to share a sense of *schadenfreude*, or gallows humor, which is why this story is here, because we rarely enjoyed an experience together like this one, and because something happened on that hot afternoon in Decatur.

The heat and humidity were tropical and suffocating, something that we New Englanders were not used to tolerating well. The sidewalks baked the bottoms of our shoes as we suffered the walk downtown to the Roxy. But when those theater doors opened, the cold bath of air-conditioning rushed over us in the dark, and we were reborn.

The movie was “The Beast with Five Fingers,” starring Peter Lorre, Robert Alda and co-starring J. Carrol Naish. It was around one in the afternoon with only two or three other customers in sight, so we had our choice of seats. We settled in down front, the lights

dimmed, and we waited for our old friend Peter Lorre to scare the hell out of us. In this film, Lorre had been the personal secretary for a world-famous, now wheel bound, East European pianist, both living in an old Italian mansion, with an unexplained enmity existing between them. In the first half hour or so, the pianist, in a fit of anger, loses control of his wheelchair and rolls down a curved staircase to his death. As usual, Lorre is now full of fear and premonitions. He lurks and trembles around the pianist's dark mansion looking guilty as hell, probably because the pianist had begun to hate him. Well, after the pianist's death, someone or something hacked off one of the pianist's hands, and it returns each night to play the piano and run around the place -- up the grand staircase, under doors, scrabbling across carpets -- you get the picture. Then, during a few of these nightly macabre events in the drawing room, under the candelabra on the grand piano, the hand begins playing wild, lightening-strikes-the-shithouse-type of Classical music, throwing more fear into the frenzied face (that face!) of a now terrified Lorre.

The hand is on a mission -- to get Lorre, and Lorre knows it! The hand is now in Lorre's office, scrabbling over the bookcase and then jumping onto Lorre's desk. Hysterical at this point, Lorre produces a hammer and a ten-penny nail and goes after the hand. Now, if you ever watch a carpenter nailing you will notice that he begins with a couple of starter taps to secure his aim -- tap-tap -- then he bangs away. Well, Lorre and the hand have finally met, and the hand keeps zooming around. Lorre is covered in sweat and gasping in terror -- those wonderful eyes as big as dinner plates -- as he tries to nail the hand. Tap-tap, zoom. With sweat-beading determination and laser-like focus, Lorre starts pounding the nail through the hand and into the oaken desktop, which simultaneously touches a subterranean sense of the ridiculous in my father and myself. We start laughing. The

harder Lorre hammers the harder we laugh. He is a lunatic. Together in the dark my father and I become lunatics, laughing and crying at the same time.

Soon, an usher pads down the aisle, a skinny, freckled redheaded kid in a maroon, gold-trimmed uniform too big for him. He carries a huge flashlight, and the whole look makes him look even funnier. Unsure of his authority, he nervously informs us that we must stop laughing. Through his tears my father asks why. The boy stammers, "...because it – because it's a horror movie!" Now of course we can't stop laughing! A half-minute later the manager appears and repeats the usher's silly order. We know we will not - cannot stop laughing. As one, we rise from our seats, cackling like loons, lurch past the confused pair, up the aisle and through the doors back into the August furnace.

At the corner drugstore we buy vanilla ice-cream cones. Licking and chuckling we head home, now silent, now bursting forth with laughter, again and again. What wonderful insanity we shared.

I wish we could have had more sweet moments like this one. Thanks Dad.

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