



Darrell Deckard on Forty-second Street.

what goes on—or holin’ up in the service closets, looking through the slit in the door. Pulled me in twice last week. So you watch out there, now. Just thought you’d wanna know . . .”

“Thanks, Jeff . . .”

He shambled south.

For those interested in hard-edged figures: Darrell asks forty or fifty but will sneak into a peep show booth with you long enough for one of you to come for twenty—and he’s a very busy man. Jeff starts at twenty—and he probably makes a more consistent living.

The nostalgic approach sees all these silent red and green and purple window gates, these dead and wordless movie marquees, as the end of an era, marked by the dispersal of so many of the sexual businesses we haven’t really mentioned yet. It’s been a licentious and lively area since before the *New York Times* moved into

Times Tower and, in 1904, persuaded the city to change the name from Longacre Square, before, in 1912, transferring to its current Forty-third Street location. An acquaintance with New York's history suggests, however, that we are not so much at an end. Rather, we're at the midpoint in a process parts of the city have undergone many times. Its fundamental principle was articulated succinctly by former police chief William McAdoo in 1906 (a year after Anthony Comstock shut down George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* on Broadway and a year before he forced Richard Strauss's *Salomé* to close at the Met, both after a single performance): "As everyone knows, the city is being rebuilt, and vice moves ahead of business."

The opening of the old Metropolitan Opera House at Broadway and Seventh Avenue in 1883 first brought vice up from Mercer Street and the lower parts of Greenwich Village, where the rising rents were driving out the houses of prostitution, so that only industrial businesses could afford those downtown locations. In 1889 court testimony revealed that Nathan Niles, then president of the Tradesmen's National Bank, owned a brothel on West Forty-third Street, run by the "French Madame," Elize Purret. The same year the *Times* came, 1904, the Interborough Rapid Transit opened the subway system, with its nickel fare (no tokens—or metrocards—back then) that lasted into the fifties. Feeding into the city just to its west, with *its* opening in 1937, the Lincoln Tunnel only added to the value. With a smaller version first swinging wide its doors in 1950, the now block-long pair of Port Authority buildings simply assured that this would be the city's incoming traffic center for years. With the theater district to the north and its central location on Manhattan Island, it was a developer's dream.

And the vice?

It was peep shows, sex shops, adult video stores and dirty magazine stores, massage parlors—and porn theaters. A few years ago there were two on the east end of the block's north side, one at the block's west end, and another across the street, with some seven scattered up and down Eighth Avenue, from the Cameo at Forty-

fourth to the Adonis at Fifty-first, as well as a flourishing trade in female street-walkers, drugs, and hustlers.

The threat from AIDS produced a 1985 health ordinance that began the shut-down of the specifically gay sexual outlets in the neighborhood: the gay movie houses and the straight porn theaters that allowed open masturbation and fellatio in the audience. For a dollar forty-nine in the seventies, and for five dollars in the year before they were closed (several less than twelve months ago), from ten in the morning till midnight you could enter and, in the sagging seats, watch a projection of two or three hard-core pornographic videos. A few trips up and down the aisle while your eyes got accustomed to the darkness revealed men sitting off in the shadows—or, sometimes, full out under the occasional wall lights—masturbating . . . if someone hadn't stood up on the seat and unscrewed the bulb. Sit a seat away from one, and you would either be told to go away, usually fairly quietly, or invited to move closer (if only by the guy's feigned indifference). Should he be one of *your* regulars, you might even get a grin of recognition.

Occasionally men expected money—but most often, not. Many encounters were wordless. Now and again, though, one would blossom into a conversation lasting hours, especially with those men less well-off, the out-of-work, or the homeless with nowhere else to go.

In the sixties I found similar theaters in every capital of Europe. That may explain why foreign gay tourists located these places here so quickly. The population was incredibly heterogeneous—white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Native American, and a variety of Pacific Islanders. In the Forty-second Street area's sex theaters specifically, since I started frequenting them in the summer of 1975, I've met playwrights, carpenters, opera singers, telephone repair men, stockbrokers, guys on welfare, guys with trust funds, guys on crutches, on walkers, in wheelchairs, teachers, warehouse workers, male nurses, fancy chefs, guys who worked at Dunkin Donuts, guys who gave out flyers on street corners, guys who drove garbage trucks, and guys who washed windows on the Empire State Building. As a gentile, I note

that this is the only place in a lifetime's New York residency I've had any extended conversation with some of the city's Hasidim. On a rainy Friday in 1977 in one such theater, the Variety, down on Third Avenue just below Fourteenth Street, I met a man who became my lover for eight years. My current lover (with whom I've lived happily for going on seven), once we'd met, discovered we'd both patronized the Capri, only we'd never encountered each other because I usually went in the day, while he always went at night. Once we began to live with one another, we often visited the theater together—till it was closed, toward the start of this year. There are many men, younger and older, for whom the ease and availability of sex there made the movies a central sexual outlet.

Nostalgia presupposes an uncritical confusion between the first, the best, and the youthful gaze (through which we view the first and the best) with which we create origins. But the transformation from the cheap Village, Delancey Street, Fourteenth Street, Upper West Side, and (supremely) Forty-second Street movie theaters of the fifties and sixties (where you could generally find some sort of sexual activity in the back balcony, off to the side, or in the rest rooms) to the porn theaters of the seventies (a number of them set up specifically for quick, convenient encounters among men) does not, in my memory at any rate, fit easily into such an ordinary/nostalgic schema.

By the early seventies the movie industry was already reeling under the advent of home video technology. Suddenly it became impossible to fill up the larger theatrical spaces that had attracted audiences since before the Depression, eager to see this or that new celluloid epic, that or this new double feature.

All over the country, save for a few major venues (in New York the Ziegfeld, the Astor Plaza) that persevered like filmic museums from another era, movie theaters underwent an almost spontaneous mitosis—dividing into two, three, four, and even six viewing spaces. The film of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1983) was probably the last movie I watched from a full-sized neighborhood theater balcony before, a season later, a tetraplex took over the space and, a

season after that, at Broadway and Eighty-third Street, a hexplex opened next door on the same block, so that briefly in my neighborhood we had a choice of *ten* films at any one time, where three years before there had been only one. And around the Forty-second Street area a decade or more of idle speculation on the renovation of the Times Square area (“Movie Capital of the World,” as it billed itself on the wall sign over the upper floors of the Forty-second Street Apollo—not to be confused with the Harlem house of the same name and greater notoriety) turned into active plans and active buying—and/or an active freeze on all real improvements, since the whole thing would be bought up and pulled down in a year or more, wouldn’t it . . . ?

Under this economic pressure in the early-to-middle seventies, some two dozen small theaters were given over as outlets for the nascent pornographic film industry: a handful between Sixth Avenue and Eighth Avenue along Forty-second Street proper, another handful on Broadway (the Circus, the Big Apple, the Baby Doll . . .), and another half dozen or so up along Eighth, starting with the Cameo on the west side of the avenue between Forty-third and Forty-fourth and running up to the Adonis. Most of the theaters purveyed straight fare, but a few (the Adonis, the Eros I and II, the King, the David, the Bijoux, and, in later years, one half of the Hollywood) provided gay features. The transformation meant that from then on all major repairs for these properties were at an end. Only those without which the theaters could not stay open were done. In that condition the porn theaters continued, not for two, three, or four years, but for the next twenty-five. Some did not last the duration. Each new burst of interest in the area’s renovation would be accompanied by a new wave of do-gooder rhetoric, and a theater or two would go. By the middle eighties the three houses between Sixth and Seventh were gone. One on the north side had been turned into a fried chicken emporium. Another had become a sporting goods store. The Bryant (that had featured “Live Sex Shows,” which, at five performances a day between ten and ten, were exactly that: a brown or black couple spent twenty minutes on a bare blue-lit stage, first the

woman stripping for the man, then fellating him, then his performing cunnilingus on her, and finally the two of them screwing in two or three positions, finishing—with pull-out orgasms for a few of the after-six shows—to polite applause from the largely forty-plus male audience, before the porn film started once more. At the back of the chest-high wall behind the last row of orchestra seats, usually some guy would give you a hand job or sometimes a blow job; there for a couple of weeks I gave my quota of both) was simply a south-side vacant lot.

Perhaps the biggest event in that twenty-five- or thirty-year history was when, around 1986, the last thirty-five-millimeter projector ceased to roll in the projection rooms of the Capri, the Venus, the Harem, the Sweetheart, and the Hollywood, to be replaced by often blurry, out of focus, pale, flickering three-color video projectors. Such projectors had already been installed in the gay theaters—the King, the David, and the Bijoux down on Third Avenue, just below Variety Photoplays. In the middle eighties the Variety still alternated a porn film with a legit movie throughout the day for an entrance price of \$2.50, just up from \$1.95 a year back, and \$1.45 a year before that. (“We apologize to our patrons for the raise in price,” read the cardboard sign hung inside the ticket window. “But face it: Even at \$2.50 we’re still a bargain.”) But everywhere else the video industry that had precipitated the change had finally triumphed—practically without a ripple.

The earliest years in those theaters (i.e., the first half of the pre-video years, prior to 1980) were a time of what now seem like quite extraordinary experiments: the porn theater where, for example, every other seat was removed, the ones remaining making a ghostly checkerboard of the orchestra—on the assumption that the stereotyped “furtive businessmen” with overcoats draped across their laps, which various *Playboy* and even *New Yorker* cartoons presented as the utilizer of the facilities, would appreciate as much room as possible between each seat and the next.

Six months later, the missing seats were back.