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The Maplewood Theater: Its Forgotten Saga

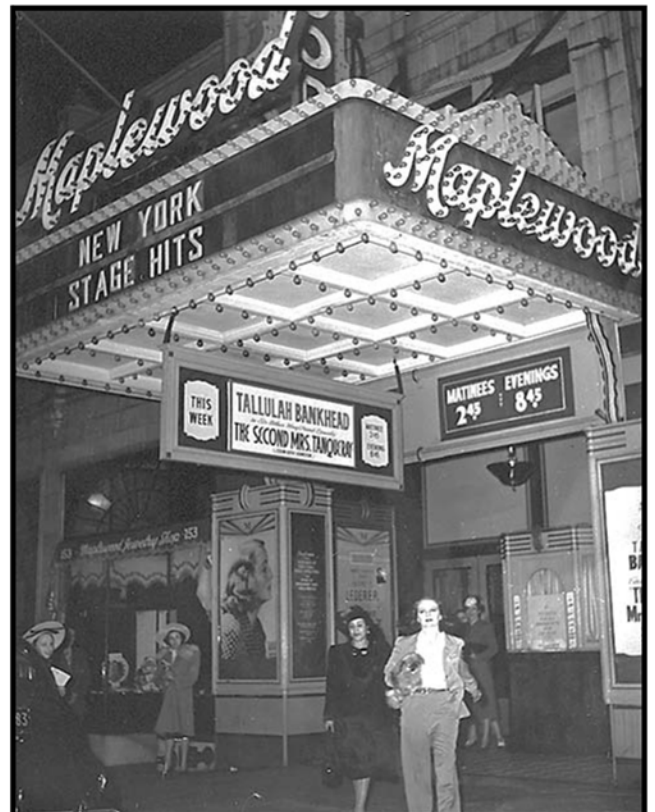
87 years of dramatic history

A glance at recent headlines will attest to it: the movie business is changing. Will simultaneous online release of big-studio films mean an end to local theaters?

A glance back in history reveals the fact that over the span of the 20th century, cinemas like the Maplewood Theater were constantly threatened by changes in the way films were produced and distributed, fickle audience tastes, and local and national economic problems. Yet through it all, for 87 years, the Maplewood Theater has persevered.

The Maplewood Theater's theatrical history dates back to 1927. Beginning life as one of the larger suburban vaudeville and movie houses in New Jersey, the Maplewood Theater struggled along for a decade before becoming the setting for a series of highly popular stage plays and musicals featuring major Broadway and Hollywood stars including Helen Hayes, Ethel Barrymore, Tallulah Bankhead, Ingrid Bergman, Paul Robeson and Maplewood's own Teresa Wright.

Legendary Tony Award-winning producer Cheryl Crawford made Maplewood her theatrical home for almost three years in the early 1940s and launched her successful version of "Porgy and Bess" in this very theater on Maplewood Avenue. After World War II the Maplewood Theater settled into being a popular neighborhood movie house, which evolved into multiple theaters in 1990.



Tallulah Bankhead in Maplewood . Photo: Time & Life Pictures/Getty

Susan Newberry, along with John Elwood, who first pieced the theater's story together in 2006, with the assistance of Marilyn White, spent more than two years interviewing former owners and staff, delving into the history of the theater, unearthing original floorplans, newspaper articles and reviews, photographs of remnants of the Pompeii-themed interior, production photos and playbills from the stage show era, a Wurlitzer theater organ console and early movie memorabilia, movie posters and much more.

Every Suburb Needs a Theater

Between 1925 and 1927, "picture houses" opened in Millburn, Morristown, Irvington, Summit and Vailsburg. It was time for Maplewood, too, as a flourishing town, to have its own cinema. Right from the beginning, though, there were difficulties. The initial developers, Frank and Elizabeth Ross, ran into opposition from the town because the location was in a residential district. The Rosses successfully fought it, then sold the property to Isadore Portnoff, a Newark builder, in early 1926.

Portnoff engaged Newark architect William E. Lehman to design the neo-gothic-style building that remains to this day. Lehman was well-known for his theater designs but also for the Newark Post Office and other important buildings. The appearance of the theater block was critical in its impact on Maplewood Village, as it was replacing several



Maplewood Theater 1953, Photo: J.L. Hammar/Getty Images

houses, and thus extending the commercial center.

Lehman created a front façade of white terra cotta decorated with engaged turrets and stylized references to classical ornamentation. The central theater entrance lobby was flanked by three stores on each side, with leaded-glass fanlights above their entrances. The front of the second floor was designed for offices. The Auditorium, supported by 175 tons of steel columns and trusses and topped by an immense dome, extended the width of the building (107 feet) and had

more than 1,400 seats. The stage was 25 feet deep, and just below it was space for a large Wurlitzer pipe organ – which cost \$30,000 – that would be ready to accompany the silent movies coming out of Hollywood.



Style E Wurlitzer, Collection of Nelson Page

The *Maplewood News* and the *South Orange Record* chronicled the construction with headlines like "New Maplewood Theater Will Be One of the Finest." The public was even asked to vote on the types of entertainment they wanted. A *Maplewood News* editorial boasted, "The opening of a beautiful new theater in Maplewood next Tuesday evening is a red letter event in the history of the progress of this community."

An opening full of promise

Portnoff leased theater operations to the Maplewood Amusement Company, owned by I.A. Roth and Harry Roth, who ran a chain of theaters in nearby towns. The official opening, in March 1927, was heralded with newspaper headlines – "New Theater Opens in a Blaze of Glory" -- and congratulatory ads from local shopkeepers. Crowds filled the streets, and the audience loved the latest Harry Langdon comedy and the six-year-old but exciting "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," Rudolf Valentino's first hit, accompanied by organ and orchestra.



Mayor John De Hart took to the stage to welcome the theater owners and thank them not only for bringing entertainment to the community, but for their willingness to allow the theater to be used for community events, such as benefits for the new police band, the Fire Department and the building fund of the Woman's Club.

Challenges quickly arise

But changes and challenges were afoot. The public's preferences in movies – thrilling? uplifting? musical? dramatic? – was not quite predictable, and in October a scandal arose. The theater had heavily promoted a children's matinee, a live show featuring Hopi Indians in native

costume performing snake dances, and the auditorium was packed. However, the day's entertainment also included a Western so violent that parents were aghast and children hid their eyes or were dragged out of the theater. The shock and dismay quickly led the Woman's Club to appoint a Better Films Committee to pre-screen films and warn members about unfit pictures.

American movies of the 1920s were sometimes violent, occasionally contained sexual themes or profanity, and at times promoted political and cultural agendas to which conservative forces vigorously objected. The problem was that these films were hugely popular: the 25% that had controversial content propped up all the rest. While some conservatives wanted films banned altogether, more moderate forces were increasingly concerned with the impact these films might have on young children. The Hays Code, a motion picture production code of moral censorship guidelines, was adopted by the industry in 1930, although not enforced until 1934.

Locally, controversy over content only added to the difficulty in filling the huge auditorium. Maplewood Theater management struggled from the beginning to screen films that would be acceptable to the community and also make money. As part of package deals they had to rent "racy" films they could not show for fear of more controversy, and unable to secure the first-run movies available in Newark and New York, the theater was clearly in an impossible situation -- so much so that ownership changed hands several times.

Talkies arrive – followed by the Depression

Another looming problem was the birth of the first "talkies." The first feature-length sound film, "The Jazz Singer," was released in October 1927, only months after the Maplewood Theater's opening. Although the theater continued to show

silent films in its already-outdated facility, audiences began to dwindle. Finally, in 1929, the owners installed sound equipment and improved the auditorium's acoustics, and in September presented the first sound pictures. By that time vaudeville, too, was dead. The Maplewood Theater's grand, expensive organ and

huge vaudeville-ready stage, barely two years old, were no longer needed.

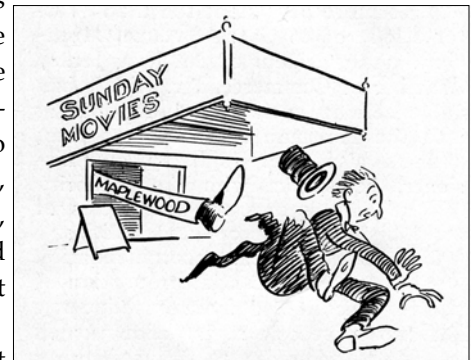
The stock market crash of October 1929 dealt another blow and in May of 1930 the building and theater owners declared bankruptcy, with the premises to be sold to satisfy a debt of \$240,000. The theater closed for three months, but reopened in

September under new management, which "spared no expense" in remodeling the space, and upgrading to the latest Western Electric sound system. They promised to show only first-run pictures, opening with "All Quiet on the Western Front."

Struggling to keep the crowds coming as the Depression worsened, the theater offered special showings for groups, rentals for fundraisers, newsreels and travelogues, as well as drawings for prizes, including a Thanksgiving turkey. In March 1931, Thomas Gorman, who had been the owner for just eight months, sold it, and once again renovations were done. The new manager, Howard Broach, promised the Woman's Club that he would show only approved films, and the club, in turn, urged its members to support the local cinema. Broach actively promoted the theater to local organizations, and hosted a luncheon for the Rotary Club on the stage, aweing them with lighting effects, safety devices and sound machines.

Sunday movies – treat or threat?

Throughout much of 1935, a fierce battle brewed over the issue of Sunday movies in Maplewood and other nearby towns. The theater managers pleaded that Hollywood producers required "preferred playing time" on weekends, and the lack of Sunday showings would limit their access to quality films. Others feared a positive vote would make Maplewood a "wide-open town" to carnivals, circuses, cabarets, sports, commercial and otherwise, on any plot of ground.



Although the first vote count was against Sunday movies, the theater owners demanded a recount, resulting in a favorable outcome. The first Sunday showings, on December 8, 1935, were standing-room only.

The added revenue, however, was not sustained, and by mid-1936 the Maplewood Theater was on the block again, and the new owners again stopped Sunday performances. Creative managers continued to encourage community organizations to have benefit screenings and other events at the theater, and programming included a mixture of concerts, cooking demonstrations and other live performances in addition to double-feature movies.

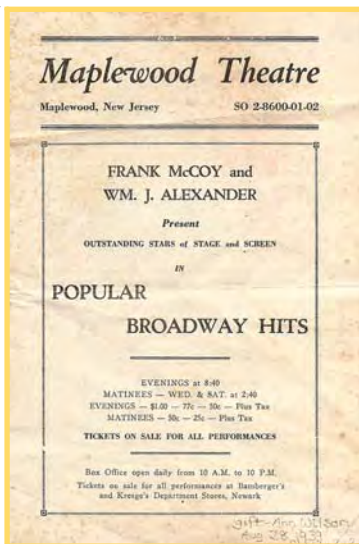
Broadway comes to Maplewood

In June 1938, producer Frank McCoy, widely known for his out-of-town staging of Broadway productions at popular prices, brought welcome relief to the theater's economic situation.

The Maplewood Theatre has been battered about in the cinematic



wars for some years and has found it tough sledding. Frank McCoy, the new manager, decided that the legitimate stage has an excellent chance of succeeding where the movies failedWhen the ... Theatre was built, its designers had the idea of stage presentations in mind, and the stage facilities are entirely adequate. It's doubtful if there is another theatre so well constructed for stage shows in suburban Essex. – Mapewood News, June 23, 1938



McCoy, along with partners O.E. Wee (1938) and William Alexander (1939), mounted 46

Broadway revivals at 55 cents for matinees and \$1.10 for evenings. The week-long productions, starring well-known actors of the day, drew a loyal audience from June 1938 through October 1939, with occasional breaks filled by other producers, and in the winter of 1941 - 1942. They included comedies and dramas, mysteries, musicals and light opera starring top Broadway, Hollywood and radio talent such as Ethel Barrymore, Gypsy Rose Lee, Laurette Taylor, Madge Evans, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Walter Hampden, Edward Everett Horton, Bert Lytell, and Phil Baker.



Edward Everett Horton

Large quantities of rain failed to keep about 1000 local theater enthusiasts from attending the first Broadway Guild presentation of "Susan and God." Maplewood Avenue hasn't had such a parking problem since the last wreck on the D.L. and W. – Mapewood News, June 30, 1938

The New York Times ran an article in August 1938 on the suburban success story

headlined "Maplewood: Theatre 1, Movies 0", attributing the feat to top-notch talent and high-quality plays and a desire to see live theater rather than films. The article noted that people came "50 and 60 miles to see a show" and "choked available parking spaces." For one well-known actress's appearance onstage, "nearly 800 persons were turned away. The theatre has now become an integral part of this community's life."

Teresa Wright – Columbia grad, Hollywood star

From January to June 1939 Fabian Theaters took over management of The Maplewood (as it came to be known) using Anton Bundsman (later known as top Hollywood

director Anthony Mann) as the director of a wide variety of shows, continuing McCoy's successful formula. A touring production of "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder brought newly discovered actress Teresa Wright back to Maplewood, where she had attended Columbia High School. It was one of her stepping stones to Hollywood, and she went on to win an Academy Award for the film "Mrs. Miniver" and to be nominated for her roles in two other films. She starred in three movie other classics: Alfred Hitchcock's "Shadow of a Doubt," "The Pride of the Yankees" and "The Best Years of Our Lives" in the early 1940s and "The Men" in 1950.



McCoy and Alexander returned at the end of June and continued to draw big crowds. Other newspapers credited the theater with "creating the first bit of warmth to thaw suburban audiences." Big name stars continued to draw crowds and in mid-1939 the productions earned record revenues, while maintaining low prices. But when McCoy and Alexander ended their run in October 1939, there was no heir apparent. New management decided to revert to a movie house again, but soon went dark.

Cheryl Crawford makes Maplewood "A Citadel of Theater"

Legitimate theater in Maplewood, however, was not dead: it was soon off to a fresh start. Broadway producer Cheryl Crawford, "one of the keenest women connected with theatre," who had visited Maplewood as a guest speaker at the Woman's Club in 1931, decided in the spring of 1940 that The Maplewood was the perfect place to stage summer plays because of the quality of the audience, the proximity to New York for actors, and the size and potential of the facility.

In an era when women producers were almost unheard of, Cheryl Crawford was a leading Broadway producer and the creative genius behind these bright years of the Maplewood Theater's resurgence. For three summers and into the fall in 1940, '41 and '42, she produced a total of 48 shows in



Cheryl Crawford. Photo: Billy Rose Theater Div., NY Public Library

Maplewood, giving the town national prominence through the staging of recent Broadway hits and illustrious stars.

After ticket sales for the first few shows were disappointing, she and Wildberg began to work with theatrical publicist Jean Dalrymple and changed their approach. They commissioned Ethel Barrymore to debut in "The School for Scandal," arranged for the premiere of Sinclair Lewis in "Ah, Wilderness!", and snared Tallulah Bankhead to star in "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." Author Edna Ferber tried her hand at acting, starring in her own play "The Royal Family." Business boomed.



Ingrid Bergman. Photo: Billy Rose
Theater Div., NY Public Library

Stars like Helen Hayes, Ingrid Bergman, Clifton Webb, Jose Ferrer, Luise Rainer, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Gloria Swanson, Sylvia Sidney and Paul Robeson helped Crawford to critical and financial success.

— *The Maplewood Theater has become, this summer, the pride of New Jersey, the love of the three Oranges.* — *Maplewood News*, August 1940

— *The Maplewood Theater... is fast establishing itself as the home of brilliant comedies* — *Maplewood News* 1940

— *A recital of the plot in this case is not strictly to the point. It is better to state quite simply that anyone who misses the show without bringing an excuse from the doctor is crazy.* —

Maplewood News, Aug. 8, 1940



Tallulah Bankhead in action. Photo: Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

In July 1942, Tallulah Bankhead said "farewell to the greatest role of her career" when she starred for one week in Lillian Hellman's drama "The Little Foxes." The week's engagement was the star's only appearance anywhere that summer.

One night after the show at the Maplewood Theater, Bankhead invited Crawford to drive back to New York with her. When Crawford stepped into the back seat of Bankhead's car, she came eye to eye with another passenger: Bankhead's pet lion cub. As they drove along, Bankhead turned back to her and

said, "Darling, you don't mind sitting there with the cat, do you?"

"Cat!" thought Crawford, as the cub growled and crawled around her. Determined to stay calm, Crawford replied, "Why should I? Is he edible?" Bankhead laughed her trademark throaty laugh and occasionally turned around during the ride to ask, "Everything all right, darling?"

"Of course," Crawford said with a grimace. Later, in her autobiography, she wrote, "I was sweating when I finally reached home in one piece, but I was damned if I would give her the satisfaction of my showing it."

Turning "Porgy and Bess" into a smash hit

As a producer, Crawford said, "You've got to have an awful lot of guts. Disasters happen every day. You can't be discouraged by failure."

Guts and a willingness to take risks were her hallmarks. In 1941, she and John Wildberg, her associate producer, decided to mount a revival of "Porgy and Bess" at The Maplewood. It had had a respectable run on Broadway back in 1935 but had been too expensive to continue to produce.



Cheryl Crawford's production of "Porgy and Bess"—seen last summer at the Maplewood Theater—passed its 50th performance at the Majestic Theater last week as one of Broadway's reigning hits. Contributing to its success are Alexander Smallens, musical director (with basses); Ruby Elzy (kneeling); Todd Duncan, as Porgy; Anne Brown, as Bess; and Avon Long, as Sportin' Life. Catfish Row in the background.

For the Maplewood production, Crawford used a smaller chorus and orchestra to keep costs down and trimmed a half-hour from the opera's running time. Nevertheless, she created an elaborate production and was able to hire most of the original cast.

The opera was a phenomenal hit in Maplewood and went on to be a box-office triumph on Broadway. Even Crawford wasn't prepared for its astounding success after its run in Maplewood.

"I never dreamed of its being a smash in New York," she confided to an interviewer. "I thought it would have a respectable run here, then go on the road. Now I don't know

when we'll go on the road."

"Porgy and Bess" was part of Crawford's commitment to bring to Maplewood productions that dealt with timely and sensitive social issues, as well as light drawing-room comedies. In Maplewood as well as in New York and other venues, Crawford produced plays that "say something about life that I believe in." She observed,

"For me, the aim is to do a fine play that will help to stimulate, enlarge and edify -- that will help audiences to understand themselves and other people better."

Paul Robeson and the "Acoustic Envelope"

Paul Robeson reprised his stage and screen role of Brutus in "The Emperor Jones" in Maplewood in August 1940. The play by Eugene



Paul Robeson

O'Neill tells the story of an escaped prisoner who declares himself emperor of a Caribbean island. During his week in Maplewood, Robeson worked on the stage with a prominent sound engineer named Harold Burris-Meyer of the Stevens Institute to develop a forerunner of the now ubiquitous stage monitor, a speaker directed at the performers, enabling them to hear themselves.

As obvious as the idea would seem, the development of this "acoustic envelope," which was called the "Robeson Technique," was covered by the New York Times, regional papers, and more prosaic technical publications. Today, performers may even have personal ear monitors feeding back their own voice on a separate channel... but it would appear the rudimentary idea was born "in a Maplewood (N.J.) theatre," according to a New York Times article.

A movie theater once again

In March 1944, under a new building owner, anticipation began to build for the re-opening of the theater once again as a movie house. Renovations were made to exterior and interior lobbies, including glass brick and tufted gray leather walls. The marquee was repainted and shone with bright lights as an invitation-only crowd filled the auditorium for gala opening ceremonies and a screening of "In Our Times," starring Ida Lupino and Paul Henreid.

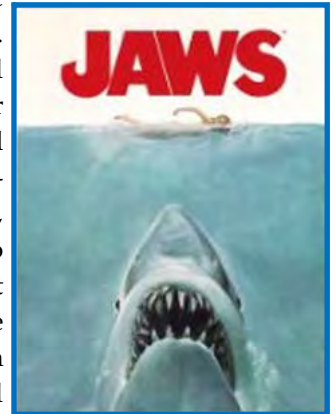
In 1949 the theater was sold again and promoted as a motion picture house with double features and children's matinees, only "77 steps from Lackawanna station." The new



manager complained about the behavior of teens on Friday nights. A brief return to stage productions was essayed in May and June 1952 by hopeful entrepreneurs, but despite the presence of top talent like Judy Holliday, Basil Rathbone, Joan Blondell and Melvin Douglas, it was not sustainable, and a new theater operator took over in July. Movies resumed that month with the musical "Singin' in the Rain."

New competition: Television

In the 1950s and '60s, neighborhood movie houses like The Maplewood began to feel the bite of the new medium of television. To compete, Hollywood created large spectacles, major musicals, Cinemascope, 3-D – all shown at the newly air-conditioned Maplewood Theater, which helped the cinema to remain a popular entertainment center for the community. In the 1970s, however, the theater began to struggle again, trying to find the right mix of features.



A big break came in 1975, when The Maplewood obtained the Northern NJ exclusive for "Jaws" (starring Columbia High School graduate Roy Scheider). For the first three weeks the lines extended all the way to Baker Street. The renowned blockbuster ran for months, continuing to draw capacity crowds. The theater manager at the time was Lolis Carroll Brooks, a Columbia High biology teacher. During the run of "Jaws" he prevailed on his daughter, Debbie, to sit in the manager's office and respond to hundreds of phone calls about hours and directions, normally handled by now-inundated box office ticket seller. As she listened to the screams marking the shark-inflicted loss of limbs she did her best to explain how to get to Maplewood Village with maps spread all around her. Despite the crowds and high attendance, the profits were limited by the percentage demanded by the movie studio and distributors.

Hard times continue

In the early 1980s, the projection booth was renovated, and carbon arc projectors were replaced with a platter system, removing the need for a professional projectionist. In 1983 Peter Doroshenko, who had been an usher since 1978, was named manager and was taught to operate the projectors as well.

The Maplewood Theater was well past its prime and was run on a shoestring. It was a big building and expensive to heat. Doroshenko recalls, "We got oil deliveries by the day because they had no credit. I would measure the oil tank with a stick and hope we would have 5 inches to get through another day and a half." The boiler was held together "with bailing wire and chewing gum."

Despite typically sparse attendance, the theater experienced one more major blockbuster, "Ghostbusters," in the summer of 1984. It ran from the end of May until October with sell-out shows and a line of people around the block.

The theater continued to deteriorate, though. The plasterwork had started to crumble, and theater operators did nothing more than slop paint on the walls. But Doroshenko recalls "some really cool features." The ornate ceiling decorations were still beautiful. Although the stage had not been used for live theater for four decades,



A decorative element

the structural iron and sandbag counterweights remained. The dressing rooms were in various stage of disintegration but the big fireproof curtains were still there, as were all the stage light fixtures and tracks for the scenery panels. The light panel worked, with its levers to dim and turn on lights.

In June 1988, Joseph Angelotti purchased the Maplewood Theater and announced an ill-fated seven-plex conversion. Angelotti's picture made the New York Times under the headline "A Movie Theater's Bit of Drama." The Township Zoning Board was not exactly in favor of the plan. In an echo of the 1930s, townspeople protested that it would attract "out-of-towners" and cause parking problems. Whether the conversion was permissible or not, the Town held a trump card: Open a seven-plex, they said, and we'll close Maplewood Avenue for street cleaning every Saturday night.

While there were movie showings in spurts during this



Filming a scene from 'One True Thing' near the Maplewood Theater, 1997. Photo Courtesy of Universal Pictures

battle, the theater was basically closed for two years, and by the summer of 1990, Angelotti was gone, there were new

owners, brothers Lee and Moe Sayegh, and the theater had become a triplex. In 1994, under managers Sue and Dan Rinaldi, the theater increased to four screens. Two more were added in 1998.

Hollywood comes to town with cameras: "One True Thing"

In the summer of 1997 Maplewood Village was filled with great excitement – a movie crew had come to town to film "One True Thing," starring Meryl Streep, William Hurt and Renee Zellweger. Store façades were spruced up and repainted, the theater's marquee was redesigned to become The Langhorne, and some 150 local residents were hired as extras, along with the Morrow Church choir, which sang in a Christmas scene on Ricalton Square. The preview screening of the film at the Maplewood Theater in 1998 was a benefit for the Maplewood Village Alliance.

What Lies Beneath...

When John Elwood, a former resident, visited the theater in 2006 to do research for a Matters Magazine article on the theater's history, manager Sue Rinaldi took him behind the "boxes" of the current six theaters to see the original decorative elements that remained above and around them. Elwood wrote, "Poseidon and his Olympian friends still rub shoulders with Moorish stars. The 'ruins' effect from years of neglect conveys the Pompeian motifs even better than Lehman could have imagined" when he designed the original 80 years earlier.

Now well into the 21st century, the Maplewood Theater survives and continues to be a source of entertainment for the community, and the current management has participated in Village life and activities for more than 20 years. The theater continues its long tradition of hosting premieres and benefits for organizations, "has celebrated birthdays, anniversaries, and has been a part of the memories being built in families," Rinaldi said. "From taking a child to the movies for the first time to young couples coming here on their first date, people come to the movies for lots of reasons and not all have to do with which movies are showing. Sometimes it's just the warm smile or our hot buttered popcorn."

The unique and extensive exhibit, displayed at the Durand-Hedden House from February 2014 through March 2015, was the product of extensive research by Susan Newberry, expanding upon groundbreaking research done by John Elwood. Key contributors of research and writing included Virginia Kurshan, David Reis, Gail Safian Harriet Sigerman, Ann Stevens, Claire Stewart, Rick Wessler, and Marilyn White. John Branigan was invaluable in producing all the graphics for the exhibit. Many others worked to help set up the massive exhibit. For a complete list of the many people who made this exhibit possible, please visit DurandHedden.org
