



BACK IN TIME

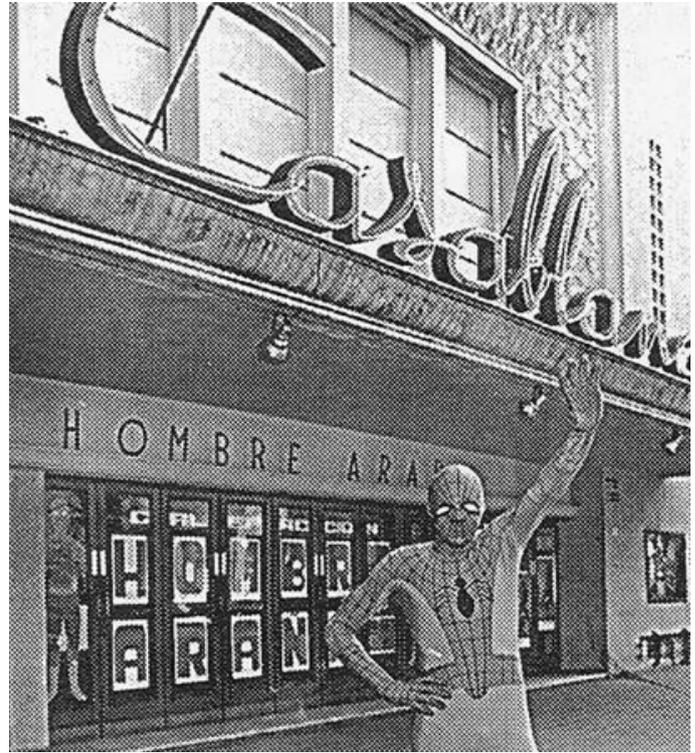
by Tony Beckwith
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THE CASABLANCA

It wasn't just the convenience, although -at the corner of 21 de Septiembre and Ellauri- it was very convenient. Right in the heart of the Punta Carretas neighbourhood. And it wasn't necessarily the films they showed because, in the larger scheme of things, the films were of secondary importance. No, it was the fellowship, the camaraderie, the sheer fun of spending the whole afternoon at the movies with your friends. That's what the Casablanca was about.

There was another theatre just up the road, the Biarritz, and others in other neighbourhoods but, in my opinion, none matched the Casablanca because that's where most of my friends spent their Saturday or Sunday afternoons in autumn and winter. It had a fairly spacious lobby with staircases leading up to the balcony. Straight ahead, through the large swing doors where you had to show your ticket, and around the far edge of a black curtain, were the orchestra seats on the ground floor of the auditorium. The walls were cream-coloured with dark wood trim, and the seats were upholstered in what looked like dark leather. It was dimly lit, but bright enough to be able to recognize your friends when one of them waved to let you know where they were.

I always assumed that we all, in our different ways, saw the Casablanca as a haven, a place to step away from whatever challenges we were facing in our teenage lives. Surely, once in a while, we all had situations of one kind or another, at home or at school, from which we'd like to take a break. When I was settled in my seat



at the Casablanca and the lights were off and the MGM lion started roaring, all my cares and woes disappeared. Sitting in the dark, eyes glued to the screen, I could forget, for example, that I was the shortest person in my co-ed class at school, a situation that caused me a great deal of anguish during my early teens. The Casablanca could sweep me away on a sort of magic carpet ride, for a whole afternoon. First we'd see a newsreel, shot in black & white, with a jarring soundtrack, lots of trumpets. Then perhaps a cartoon from the dawn of animation, followed by a brief travelogue about Norwegian fjords in the springtime. Then we'd launch into the first of four full-length feature films that would keep us entertained from about one in the afternoon until about eight o'clock or so. There were very short intermissions between the films, just time enough to run out and buy some snacks. Not every cinema had a concession stand



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in those days, in the late 1950s, so we relied on the vendors who stood on the pavement by their carts and barrows all afternoon dispensing delicacies like warm *garrapiñada* -crunchy, caramelized sugar-coated nuts that smelled delicious and tasted even better.

Sometimes we sat in groups, sometimes couples paired off and sat by themselves, exploring the novelty of a budding romance. In my clearest memory of that experience I am leaning back in my seat, stretching my arms up into the air for no apparent reason and then, oh so casually letting them fall along the top of the seatbacks on either side. I now technically had my arm around the girl sitting next to me, but it took an eternity to summon up the nerve to let my arm slide down from the back of the seat and come into contact with her shoulders. By that time my arm was so cramped I could barely feel it, and certainly couldn't use it for whatever I had had in mind. Meanwhile I wondered, what was she thinking? It was all so mysterious. And the afternoon rolled on.

During those marathon sessions we watched westerns, love stories, horror stories, war and POW movies, murder mysteries, monster movies, comedies, and many other genres. They were all windows into other lives, other ways of being, and as such were part of our cultural education, an exposure to the wider world that we would all engage with soon enough. I could usually relate to certain characters in any film I was watching, and could easily see myself sitting at a table in a sidewalk café in Prague, wearing a fedora and smoking enigmatically as I waited for

someone to approach and identify himself as another spy. Or *herself* -big surprise!- and suddenly there was romance in the air as well as intrigue. Sometimes, for just a split second, I couldn't (or wouldn't) remember if I was an actor in a movie or just a smitten kid with a paralyzed arm awkwardly draped around the shoulders of the girl he liked.

There was always the potential for a bit of craziness at the Casablanca on those weekend afternoons because some people were there solely to create a brouhaha of some kind. On one occasion, during a rare moment of total silence as a murderer crept up on his victim, someone rolled an empty Coke bottle down the stairs between the seats in the upper balcony-*thumpity! thump! thump!* As people started screaming, someone else released a parrot they had somehow smuggled into the theatre. The poor thing flew around in circles, squawking and scattering feathers and other surprises on members of the audience, while casting surreal shadows on the screen. Chaos ensued -the noise was deafening!- as ushers rushed around, shining torches in people's faces, trying to restore order. That sort of gleeful anarchy was very exciting to a middle-class boy whose life was bound by rules and conventions (or so it seemed), and who couldn't wait to see what lay outside the sheltered cocoon of his childhood. It had a magnetic attraction that made me feel I belonged to a movement of some kind, something far bigger and wilder than I was. That sense of belonging was also very much what the Casablanca was all about.