



BACK IN TIME

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DINNER AND A MOVIE

On Friday nights my parents liked to go to the movies. It was a habit they had picked up during their courtship, a few years earlier. Rather than leave my brother and me parked with a babysitter, once we were old enough we were taken along too. Nothing in my life at that time was as stimulating as the movies. I sat coiled in my seat, my excitement barely under control as the lights dimmed and the music played and the titles and credits filled the screen.

First came the stars and the other actors. Then there was a succession of names and specific functions: producer, director, cameraman, makeup, wardrobe, editing, casting, sound, music, and so on. I found it all extremely bewildering. The credits appeared and vanished in rapid succession, swirling past me in the dark. It was like flying through an asteroid field, I thought. There was too much unfamiliar information, all moving too fast, for me to retain anything, and it was all rather unsettling and unsatisfying. I didn't realize that, as a child, I was not expected to be a movie buff, and was free to ignore the credits and enjoy my chocolate-covered peanuts as I waited for the film to begin.

But the bewilderment persisted, and one day, when I was about nine or ten years of age, I decided that the best course of action was to concentrate on one specific field and try to memorize a particular set of facts. For reasons I do not remember, I chose the makeup artist. From then on, every time I was taken to the movies I sat, tense and very focused, staring at the screen to see who had done the makeup for that particular film. In time I came to recognize certain names—Tom Smith, John O'Gorman, Ben Nye, Wally Westmore, and the legendary William Tuttle. I was mildly surprised to see that most of them were men as, in my limited experience, only women had any dealings with makeup. But I dismissed the apparent incongruity with a phrase I had heard grown-ups use: "That's the movies for you!" Saying things like that, to myself of course, made me feel quite worldly. I



gradually developed a warm relationship with those disembodied names and, though I had never actually seen any of them, greeted them (under my breath) like old friends. "Hello Ben, how are you these days?" Or, "Wally! How nice to see you again. Tell me, what was it like to work with Grace Kelly on Hitchcock's *The Rear Window*?"

One evening, as we were walking back to the car after seeing *Around the World in Eighty Days* ("Good evening, John!"), I told my parents what I had been doing. They listened politely, then asked me to name some of the makeup artists I had befriended. I rattled off the list, and got a little side-tracked naming some of the films each had worked on. My mother was thrilled to hear that William Tuttle had worked on *Singin' in the Rain*, one of her favourite movies. My father was delighted, as he always was when either of his sons showed some sign of creativity or initiative. As he turned the key in the ignition he looked sideways at Mum and said, "I think this calls for a



BACK IN TIME ...Continued

celebration!" To be honest, my father's definition of 'something to celebrate' seemed to encompass almost anything, but I was nonetheless gratified to hear that my little system had met with his approval.

Dad turned off Avenida 18 de Julio and drove down to the Rambla, the road that hugs the shoreline from down town Montevideo to the farthest beach-front suburbs, one of the most idyllic commutes in the world. It was a warm spring evening and we all had our windows open, the sea air blowing in our faces as we cruised to Playa Ramirez then turned inland. "I think it's a perfect night for pizza al fresco" said our driver, and his proposal was carried by unanimous vote.

The Rodelú was a long-established pizzería which opened in 1916 across the road from the Parque Rodó, Montevideo's famous amusement park. It was an ideal place for families to take a break after the kids had worn themselves out on the bumper cars and the *Gusano Loco* (Crazy Worm), shrieking and laughing on rides that spun, rolled, gyrated, and whirled them into a state of giddy exhaustion.

We sat on high stools at the open-air counter, looking at the huge ovens where men in white aprons moved large pans of pizza around with long handled, oversized wooden paddles. My father ordered pizza for us all, thick slices of spongy dough smothered in mozzarella cheese and tomato sauce. And a serving of *fainá*, a sort of Italian flatbread made of chickpea flour that was greasy and delicious. A glass of the house red wine for the parents and soft drinks for the boys: a *Bidú* for my brother and a *Bilz* for me. What a celebration! Once we had consumed every bit of the food, we sat with our backs against the counter, looking across at the *Rueda Gigante*, the giant Ferris Wheel studded with coloured lights, silhouetted against the night sky.

Dad suddenly turned to me and asked, "Do

you know what Rodelú means?" I looked at the name on the restaurant's sign, and shook my head. He explained that it was the acronym for the official name of the country where we lived. "República Oriental del Uruguay: R, O, del U." I was dumbfounded. "Why have I never heard that before?" I asked.

Rodelú, 1945. Parque Rodó.



"Probably because you were too busy trying to memorize the names of makeup artists at the movies," said my brother rather tartly, possibly still smarting a bit from watching the attention I had enjoyed earlier on. "Everyone knows about Rodelú," he added, implying that he certainly did, although I somehow doubted it. Sensing that sibling rivalry was about to erupt and spoil the evening, my father said, "Well, do either of you know why it's called The *Oriental* Republic of Uruguay?" That stumped us both, so he explained that "oriental" in this context meant "eastern," which implied that the country was located to the east of the Río Uruguay, which separated it from Argentina. It was a smooth move on his part, and he followed up his little lesson by suggesting that we should both brush up on our history and geography at school next week. We said we would and let it go at that, although I secretly thought it was far more valuable to know who had done the makeup for *Gunfight at the OK Corral*.