

Daniel Mark Epstein  
1948  
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by Theo Epstein

The first movie I saw in a theater was *Hans Christian Andersen* starring Danny Kaye, which came out in 1952. We lived on the outskirts of DC, so my mother drove me into the city to... where was it? Some theater downtown. My father would have been working nearby, in the city, and my sister Linda would have been just a baby, too young to take with us.

The first thing I felt was the overwhelming size of the actual picture. As a four year old boy, I had seen television on a tiny screen, and in black and white. Suddenly to be surrounded by the characters and children in the film, dancing and singing in technicolor—I felt as if I was inside the the story, as if I was one of the children in the film. This movie appeals to people of all ages, but particularly it appeals to children because there are so many children in it. I remember being completely submerged by the story and surrounded by it.

The film imagines the life of Hans Christian Andersen. It is a musical—he sings his stories to the children of his village. Hardly any of the narrative is true to his life of course, but it was a magical world to be invited into as a young child. It was easy to believe Danny Kaye was singing right to me, as much as to the child actors. Later we got a lot of 78 recordings of a lot of the songs. Your aunt is too young to remember probably, but I still remember some of them. “Thumbelina, Thumbelina, tiny little thing / Thumbelina dance, Thumbelina sing...” There was one for the ugly duckling, and one for the emperor’s new clothes.

The whole theater smelled like popcorn, just like movies do today. There was a concession area that sold candy as well—I liked Good and Plenty liquorice and Bit-o-Honey. I still remember the Bit-o-Honey TV commercials too. A monster came on the screen with seven heads and sang the jingle.

I don’t know if I’m confusing this with other showings I went to, but I imagine I could hear the clatter of the projector. It was a clickety-clack sound, and fairly loud.

Afterwards, my mother picked up my father and we all went out to dinner at the Golden Parrot, a very nice restaurant in the city. I remember feeling very grown up, seeing a live film and going to a real restaurant, both for the first time.

Oh yes, I remember the theater now. I can’t believe it, it’s amazing how much comes back. It was RKO Keith’s, just a chain, but it was beautiful. I think they demolished it years later, but we saw a lot of movies there as kids. There weren’t standalone theaters in the suburbs of DC yet, so that was where we went.

