



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

www.lisaross.com

BEST IN SHOW: DEL MAR THEATERS GO CINE-MUCK

It's really not a great idea to say unkind things about a neighborhood movie theater. With the region awash in movie screens, communities are losing their local movie theaters as megaplexes suck up a finite big-screen business and a persistent quality film drought keeps audiences stuck to their leather Barco Loungers, (or Eames chairs, depending on where you live), glued to the little screen.

Nevertheless, craving a big-screen experience on a Sunday afternoon, my husband and I, admittedly victims of the battered customer syndrome, braved an interminable single ticket line at Carmel Valley's Del Mar Highlands 8 to see a film ironically titled, "Best In Show" in a theater that looked and smelled like the floor of a high school senior's bedroom.

As we exchanged our tickets for stubs that certainly would end up like chads in a Florida Registrar of Voters' office, I imagined the management arriving to work on skateboards. My husband played connect-the-dots with the holes in the screen during the film credits while I made up riddles about what was happening in the part of the movie consumed by the black frame around the screen.

The Edwards Del Mar Highlands 8 multiplex, and to some extent, the Del Mar Flower Hill sister movie theaters, were built in the manner of new community planning principles that picture shopping and entertainment within walking or biking distance of home. The euphemistically named Highlands Town Center would be just another bleak strip mall of chain fast food and retail venues if not for the weekend movie crowd who keep the unique restaurants and shops alive.

And so, who wants to contemplate that the cine-muck globbed on the movie screen like a Rorschach ink blot test or that the blank page on the *Sign-On San Diego* movie website under Del Mar Highlands 8 are harbingers of the Darwinian demise that has been attacking neighborhood movie theaters everywhere. Similarly, I'd also hate to think that the deferred maintenance policy at the Highlands theaters is simply a deliberate "dis" to our community.

By all accounts, the Edwards chain has been sputtering and lurching for a while. Along with several national movie chains, Edwards filed for Chapter 11 reorganization some time ago. This is not surprising given that analysts estimate that nationally there are 36 percent more screens than the industry can support.

But, this is a company that eats its own. Around the region, the Edwards chain has been hatching mighty-megaplexes close enough to their smaller multiplexes to choke the older houses out of business. Note that in today's move-going climate, an 8-theater complex is considered small and obsolete by large chains. The new megaplexes average 18 theaters, complete with rock concert sound, stadium seating and espresso.

In Rancho California and San Marcos, Edwards' movie houses like the Del Mar Highlands 8 have already closed down after the company opened new mega-theaters near by. In Poway, an older Edwards theater is struggling to compete with a new monster Edwards in Mira Mesa.

Last year, the Del Mar Fairgrounds pushed a plan to build such a movie megaplex in the heart of the San Dieguito River Valley, on a dusty dirt patch that serves as a summertime parking lot. The plan died after noisy protests from River Valley Park advocates, local community groups and a city-wide petition that drew 13,000 signatures made clear how people felt.

The Fair Board plan that would hasten the extinction of two endangered species—the neighborhood theater and River Valley animal life—never got far enough to identify a potential movie megaplex operator. But, surely the Highlands and Flower Hill theaters were looking down the barrel of a gun—perhaps happily.

In 1917, Alfred Hamburger, president of the Hamburger movie theater circuit, observed that the neighborhood movie theater had evolved from a lowly improvised storeroom into a community palace that "has to be made attractive, inviting and pleasant." While clawing their way up the megaplex evolutionary line, I wonder if it's too much to ask the good folks at Edwards for a couple of new screens and some fresh popcorn in our neighborhood theater.