

March 3, 2023

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City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

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RE: Critical film history in proposed South of Union Square Historic District

Dear Mayor Eric Adams and Hon. Sarah Carroll,

I write to call to your attention multiple sites of tremendous significance to the history of film within Village Preservation's [proposed South of Union Square Historic District](#). Several of these sites remain without protection and are vulnerable to demolition, while many have already been lost. While today the movie business is synonymous with Hollywood, prior to 1915, New York City and the surrounding tri-state area were the center of the nascent film industry, and the area South of Union Square was in many ways at its heart. The area continued to play an important role in the film industry throughout the 20th century, even as the largest film producers moved across the country.

The central role New York City played in the early film industry was thanks in large part to Thomas Edison and the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), which was headquartered at 80 Fifth Avenue. This rendered the area South of Union Square the business center of [the film industry](#) from 1909 until the company's dissolution in 1917. However, the neighborhood's significance to film history did not end there. Early and later notably grand venues for showing film developed around this area. And as the mainstream movie industry shifted to the West Coast, critical players in the creation of alternative voices in the film industry, which had a profound effect upon shaping this art form, continued to take



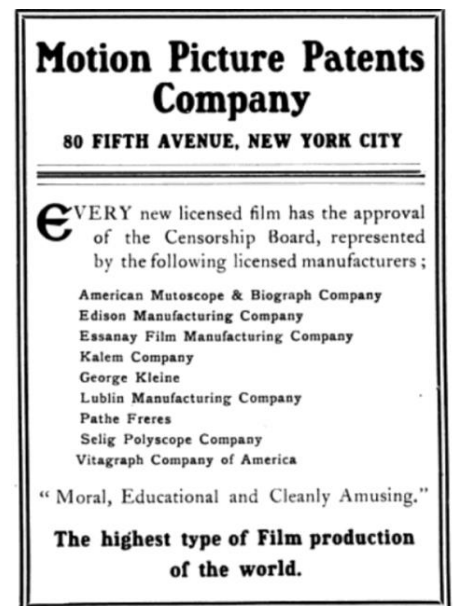
*Sites of significance to film history within proposed
South of Union Square Historic District*

root here. In addition, multiple important figures in both the mainstream and alternative film industry lived here, while incredibly important institutions in the regulation and oversight of the film industry were also located here, exemplifying the intersection of art and commerce, residence and industry, found in this proposed historic district which warrants recognition and protection.

Around the time Edison's Motion Picture Patents Company took up residence in the neighborhood, cheap and accessible nickelodeons began cropping up throughout the area as well, followed by grand movie palaces. These institutions were a hallmark of the neighborhood's reputation as the "Poor Man's Fifth Avenue," offering bargain shopping and bawdy entertainment to working class New Yorkers. These theaters remained an important feature of the neighborhood throughout the 20th century, alongside the art house theaters and experimental film spaces which eventually joined them.

What follows are some of those sites which speak to the area South of Union Square's enormous importance to the history of film, and the need to recognize and protect this area.

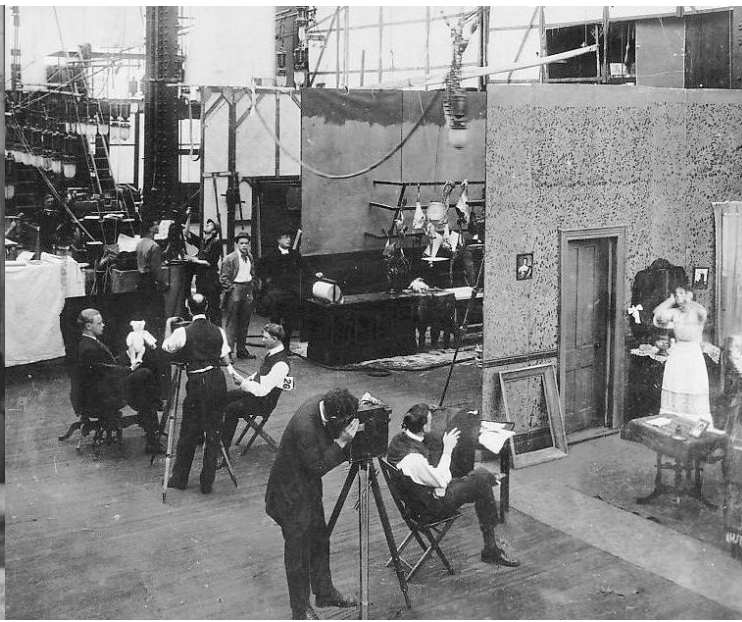
UNPROTECTED SITES



Left: 80 Fifth Avenue, today. Center: 80 Fifth Avenue, 1942. MCNY Digital Collections.

Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) - 80 Fifth Avenue

From 1909 to 1917, the [Motion Picture Patents Company \(MPPC\)](#) was headquartered at [80 Fifth Avenue](#), a 16-story elaborately detailed Renaissance Revival style office building built in 1907 by Buchman and Fox that was dubbed by the Real Estate Records and Builders Guide "14th Street's First Skyscraper." The MPPC was a trust of all the major American film companies and local foreign branches, as well as the country's leading film distributor and the biggest supplier of raw film stock. Thus MPPC thoroughly dominated the American film industry in the early 20th century as it grew to become the world's largest producer, distributor, and supplier of film. The MPPC not only ended America's reliance on foreign films, it standardized the manner in which films were distributed, and improved the quality of motion pictures by internal competition.



Left: Executives of film companies newly licensed by the Motion Picture Patents Company gather at the Edison Laboratory on December 18, 1908. Right: Interior of Edison Motion Picture Studio's main facility in the Bronx, New York City used between 1907 and 1918.

The MPPC was preceded by the Edison licensing system, which operated between 1907-1908. The licensing system

came by way of Edison's control over nearly all major U.S. patents for film production and projection in the early 20th Century. Edison was the driving force behind the United States' film industry in the late 19th century, and he was extremely protective of the technology he invented. The Edison Company used its hold over the film world to suffocate its competitors. Starting at the turn of the century, if one of the notable film companies (Essanay, Kalem, Pathé Frères, Selig, or Vitagraph) used any other machinery than the Edison company's, they were sued for copyright infringement.

This reduced the market to two companies: Edison and Biograph. Biograph used a different design for their camera which didn't infringe on Edison's copyrights and therefore was not affected by Edison's continuous lawsuits. Biograph was also headquartered South of Union Square at 841 Broadway (see below).

While the other notable companies were not able to produce their own films, they began importing British and French films. Then, these companies approached the Edison Company to strike a licensing agreement, one from which Edison notably excluded Biograph with the hope of shutting the company out of the market. When excluded from this deal, Biograph retaliated by purchasing the Latham loop, which allowed film strips to be shot and projected for extended periods of time -- a crucial piece of ingenuity at the turn of the century. Edison tried to sue for control of the patent, but was unsuccessful. Subsequently negotiations began and the Edison licensing company was restructured into the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), with 16 members, including Biograph. With the joining of Edison, Biograph, and the other film companies, MPPC thoroughly dominated the film industry and determined its development over much of the next decade, as its reach greatly expanded.



Cartoon Published by former member Carl Laemmle in the film trade press, 1909.

ORDERS MOVIE TRUST TO BE BROKEN UP

**It Violates the Sherman Law,
Federal Court in Phila-
delphia Holds.**

EXCEEDED PATENT RIGHTS

**Government Confers No License,
Court Says, to Do What Anti-
Trust Law Condemns.**

*New York Times Oct. 2, 1915, headline announcing
the court decision to break up the MPPC.*

However, by the nineteen-teens, [major cracks in the MPPC's viability](#) began to form. The conglomerate sought to tightly control licensing and production, so that neither independent film companies nor actors would have too much control or access to resources. The independent film companies that the MPPC had refused to work with sued or began moving west to Hollywood. Hollywood boasted cheap labor, open land, year-round sunshine, and a multitude of filming locations within a short distance. In addition, the courts out West did not look as kindly on the overreach by Edison's multiple patents. If the patent restrictions were upheld, the distance made regulation hard for court marshals or Edison's hired hands to enforce.

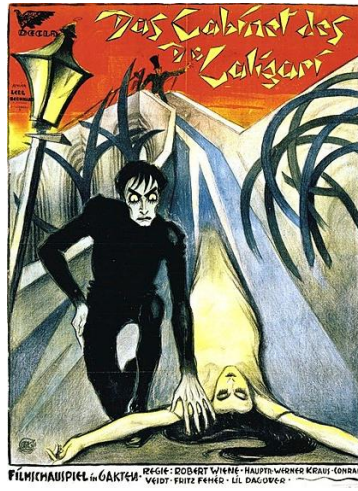
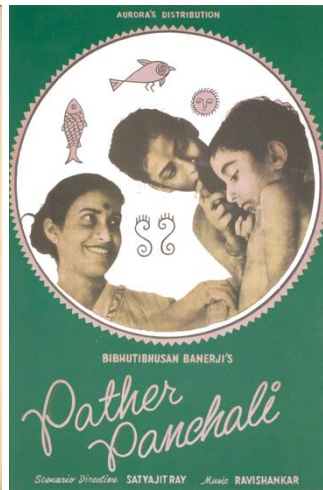
Then, in 1915 a civil antitrust suit was brought against the MPPC for violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act by forming a monopoly of the film industry. The MPPC was found to be in violation of the law, which they appealed to the Supreme Court. But while appealing to the Supreme Court, another case, [MPPC V. Universal Film Co.](#), came before the court. This case not only invalidated MPPC's patents on the Latham loop, a keystone of the company, but is an early application of patent misuse doctrine. The Supreme Court found that MPPC had violated the Sherman Antitrust Act, and both parties dropped the lawsuit. Soon after, the MPPC was dissolved and the old Edison Trust died. The center of the film industry shifted west to Hollywood, where it had already moved to escape the tight reins of the MPPC, and it remains there today. Nevertheless, the near-absolute power this organization held over the early film industry, along with the extremely consequential Supreme Court cases with which it was involved, profoundly shaped intellectual property law and the global entertainment industry as we know it today.

The Fifth Avenue Playhouse and Cinema – 66 Fifth Avenue

64-66 Fifth Avenue between 12th and 13th Streets is a striking Romanesque Revival structure built in three stages – in 1892 by architect R.H. Robertson, with additions in 1907 and 1915. No. 64-66 Fifth Avenue housed the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, [arguably the first art movie house in America](#). While the center of mainstream filmmaking in America shifted to Hollywood by 1920, in the decades which followed, the area South of Union Square became an important nexus for arthouse, independent, and underground film production and showcasing. While the large studios drove the main currents of the American movie industry from the inside, art films (both domestic and imported), independent films, and underground films profoundly shaped the film industry from the outside, introducing new ideas, methods, motifs, artists, and innovations which would be adopted by and become central to movie making over time. Thus this neighborhood continued to have a huge impact upon the film industry long after it was no longer a major center of mainstream production.



Left to Right: 64-66 Fifth Avenue, today and circa 1940.



The Fifth Avenue Playhouse opened on December 16, 1925 at 66 Fifth Avenue, showing *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. In 1935, [the Jewish Telegraph Agency](#) reported that the “little playhouse brings to New York movies of interest to lovers of France and to those

familiar with the French language...Beginning Friday night, the Fifth Avenue Playhouse is showing ‘Criez-le sur les Toits,’ or ‘Shout It from the House Tops,’ featuring two of France’s well-known stars, Simone Heliard and Saint-Granier.” The theater was renamed the Fifth Avenue Cinema in 1954 when it was operated by Ragoff & Becker. A premiere New York art house for many decades, it was where Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* was introduced to New York and Pasolini’s *Accattone* had its first commercial run. It closed its doors in 1973.

The Film-Makers’ Co-op and Jonas Mekas - 56 Third Avenue

This three-story brick building was erected in 1906 by architect L. Gilles for Luder Reinken. It was the home of a noted sculptor and housed one of the Tenth Street Galleries, Brata Gallery, which participated in the emergence of the underground film scene. Opened in 1957 by brothers John and Nicholas Krushenick as an artist-run cooperative, Brata Gallery showcased work by a diverse group of artists. By 1963, the gallery had moved to 56 Third Avenue, where it participated in the growing underground film scene. That year, avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas organized and wrote about screenings that took place here, programmed by his Film-Makers’ Co-op. The Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, sometimes referred to as “[the floating cinematheque](#)”, presented Mekas’ film showcases organized through the Film-Makers’ Co-op throughout the Village at both formal and makeshift cinemas.



Left to Right: 56 Third Ave. circa 1940 and today.

In his [March 21, 1963 “Movie Journal” column for The Village Voice](#), Mekas wrote about an art film screening at Brata Gallery:

“The Center, 106 Forsythe Street (two blocks south of Delancey) is a new and enterprising East Side art center. jazz, lectures, poetry readings, movies etc. Their film showcase at the Brata Gallery (56 Third Avenue, at 10th Street, every Friday at 8 and 10 p.m.), programmed by the Film-makers' Co-op, is the newest addition to the city's fast-growing swing toward the underground cinema. Last week's showing was a sell-out. A crowd of people were turned away. Program for this weekend: films of Robert Breer (including 'Pat's Birthday,' which he made with Claes Oldenburg.)”



Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol, NYC, 1965. Photography Stephen Shore.

Several film works by [Gregory Markopoulos](#), [Stan Barkhage](#), and [Claes Oldenburg](#) showed at these Brata Gallery programs. Around this time, Andy Warhol began to frequent Film-Makers' Co-op showcases, and his attendance at these screenings shaped his future film work. The art films shown at Brata Gallery are evident in Warhol's film work. Jonas Mekas and the Film-Makers' Co-op remain influential figures in the history of underground cinema. In addition to their influential showcases, the [Film-Makers' Co-op](#) revolutionized the distribution process for avant-garde film through its

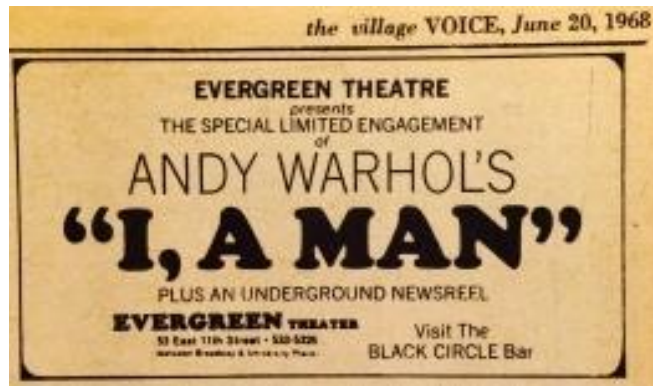
rejection of censorship and outside influence of commercial producers, distributors, and investors. Beyond his column in *The Village Voice* and role in the Film-Makers' Co-op, Jonas Mekas founded [Anthology Film Archives](#), dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of independent and avant-garde film. It was the first museum devoted to film as an art form. Both the Film-Makers' Co-op and Anthology Film Archive are still thriving organizations today.

Grove Press Offices and Evergreen Theater – 53 East 11th Street



Left to Right: 53 East 11th Street today, circa 1980, and circa 1940.

The current three-story appearance of 53 East 11th Street dates to an alteration from approximately 1894. NYC tax photos show that the current configuration of the façade dates to at least 1940, and possibly to the 1894 alteration. Since 1976 the building has been the home of the Baha'i Center of New York, the center of the Baha'i faith in New York City; the building has been refaced but the fenestrations have been left substantially intact. Beginning in or just prior to 1963, the building began operation as an Off-Broadway playhouse known as the Renata Theater.



At mid-century, the neighborhood South of Union Square played host to a number of revolutionary art and literary

movements. This wellspring of avant-garde creativity coupled with the area's art cinema houses, movie palaces, and lofts allowed for a burgeoning independent publishing and filmmaking industry to flourish. Grove Press, helmed by Barney Rosset from 1951 to 1986 and known for its commitment to freedom of expression, was at the forefront of this movement. In 1963, Barney Rosset created and located at 53 East 11th Street the Evergreen Theater ["to originate and produce motion pictures by prominent European writers and playwrights."](#) One of the few original productions from Evergreen Theater was *Film*, a short featuring a

script by Samuel Beckett and starring Buster Keaton that premiered at the 1965 Venice Film Festival. The success of Beckett's *Film* raised the importance of cinema substantially at Grove Press.

In 1967, Grove Press moved its offices to and opened a small theater at 53 East 11th Street. The same year, Grove announced the acquisition of the prestigious [Cinema 16 Film Library](#), consisting of two hundred shorts and experimental works, including films by Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Peter Weiss, all darlings of the cinematic avant-garde. They opened a small office in the building but began operating a theater for both films and live productions here as well, which became an increasing priority for Rosset.

However, only a single film became an actual source of income for Grove: Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious (Yellow)*. A protégé of Ingmar Bergman, Sjöman's film caught the interest of Rosset at the 1967 Frankfurt Book Fair with its sexual frankness and political critique. After arranging to distribute *I Am Curious (Yellow)* in the United States, the film was seized by U.S. Customs in 1968. Following an intense legal battle, Grove Press finally won the right to screen the film at the Evergreen Theater. The film played for the rest of the year to sold out, reservation-only audiences. *I Am Curious (Yellow)* brought a who's who of New York's social elite to the theater, including [Jackie Kennedy](#). The film ultimately made over \$14 million for Grove Press and Evergreen.

Grove Press and Evergreen Theater also championed art films. In June 1968, the theater partnered with Andy Warhol to show *I, A Man*, an experimental and blue take on the erotic Swedish film *I, A Woman*. Warhol had a strong relationship with Rosset and Grove Press, and collaborated with them to publish the accompanying art book *A, A Novel*.

Left: Samuel Beckett (left), Alan Schneider (in baseball cap) and Buster Keaton (right) on the set of "Film." Right: Samuel Beckett, left, and Barney Rosset in 1964 on the set of "Film," taken from the 2008 documentary "Obscene."



Barney Rosset - 61 Fourth Avenue



Left to Right: 61 Fourth Avenue today, 2010, circa 1980, and circa 1940; Barney Rosset documentary, "Obscene."

This six-story brick building was designed by Benjamin E. Lowe in 1889 in the Romanesque Revival style. Barney Rosset, publisher of Grove Press, both lived and worked out of a loft at 61 Fourth Avenue from [at least 1981](#) until his passing in 2012. Rosset's commitment to celebrating film is evident in the rich collection of film writing published in the *Evergreen Review* and Evergreen Theater's distribution of films created by important international directors. Rosset's fight to screen *I Am Curious (Yellow)* in the United States was an important victory against censorship and created sweeping changes throughout the film industry. Even after leaving Grove Press, Rosset worked on several documentaries and films about his life and accomplishments while here, including *Rosset: My Life in Publishing* and *How I Fought Censorship*, as well as the film *Obscene*.

Rosset also began and created a decades-long art project at 61 Fourth Avenue, a 12 feet high and 22 feet long mural that became the consuming passion of his life. As [described by Bedford+Bowery](#) "Rosset would stay up all night working on the mural, often painting for four hours at a time without taking a break to eat or drink or do anything

but focus on his the wall. It was never finished — he would repaint it over and over, using different colors until eventually it became a completely different painting." The mural was the subject of its own documentary, [Barney's Wall](#).



Barney Rosset working on his mural.

Cinema Village - 22 East 12th Street



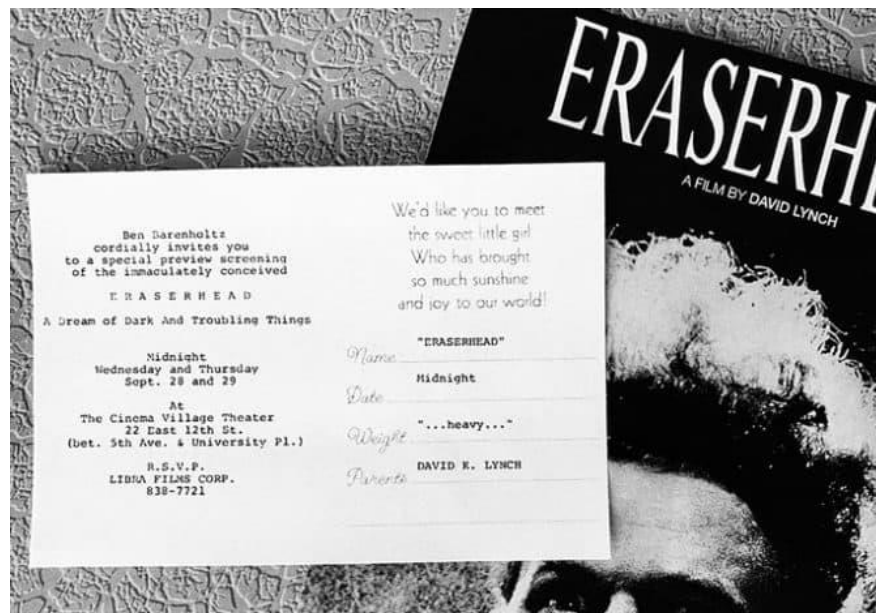
Left to Right: 22 East 12th Street circa 1940, and today.

Cinema Village is the oldest continuously operated cinema in Greenwich Village, and one of the oldest continuously operated art cinemas in the city. Located in an altered former firehouse built in 1898, the theater opened to the general public on October 5, 1964 with Ingmar Bergman's *All These Women*. Through most of its early years, Cinema Village was one of the city's many repertory cinemas, showcasing vintage movies, cult classics, and contemporary favorites on double bills (aka double features) that would usually change three times a week. By

the late 1980s, owing to the surge in home video, buyouts by large-name theaters, and real estate development, commercial repertory cinema all but disappeared in New York City. Cinema Village escaped closure, surviving by presenting limited engagements of unconventional first-run shows, as well as some special midnight shows such as David Lynch's first film *Eraserhead*, which ran for a year. In the early 1990s, before Jackie Chan, John Woo, Michele Yeoh and their stunt coordinators went to Hollywood, Cinema Village became known through its annual festivals and other bookings as the place to see the Hong Kong films of what would soon be acknowledged as a golden age of film making.

The movie selections at Cinema Village reflect a strong bias towards films that Hollywood would typically shun. For instance, Cinema Village was the only movie theater that did not bow down to the threats of a 9/11 type attack on cinemas premiering SONY's film *The Interview* on Christmas day of 2014. According to Cinema Village's website, though they did not support the film 'mocking and defaming the image of another nation,' they played the film to demonstrate their belief that as an art house that freedom of expression should never be suppressed. The showing went on in spite of a campaign of fear and intimidation and threats of retribution by North Korea that the White House labelled a "serious national security matter" and the Defense Department described as "an act of war."

"Birth" announcement for Eraserhead by Ben Barenholtz and invitation to special midnight screening.





Cinema Village is home to numerous film festivals, such as the Manhattan Film Festival, Workers United, Kino from Germany, The Other Israel, African Diaspora International, Winter Film Awards International Film Festival, SR Socially Relevant Film Festival, Reel Recovery, Wildlife Conservatory, New York Short Film, Arab Cinema week, and Dan Savage's HUMP!

New Line Cinema - 119-121 University Place

Built circa 1850, the Federal style row houses at 119-121 University Place are mixed use buildings which later housed the offices of well-known indie film studio New Line Cinema. After major renovations in 1950, Robert Shaye moved into 121 University Place, founding the film company in 1972. Originally starting out as a film distributor of foreign and art films for college campuses in the United States, Shaye and New Line Cinema's first success was through the timely redistribution of cult classic *Reefer Madness* (1936). Recently graduated from Columbia Law School, Robert Shaye's newly acquired knowledge of copyright law helped him identify the public domain status of

Reefer Madness in 1972. From there, he began redistributing the 1936 film, primarily on college campuses. With the success of *Reefer Madness*, New Line Cinema had the funds to continue distributing indie films until 1977, when the company produced its first movie, "Stunts."



Robert Shaye John Waters (right) and at the premier of the 2007 remake of *Hairspray*.

After a handful of New Line Cinema productions were completed, Robert Shaye developed a partnership with director John Waters. Highly influenced by the avant-garde films of Warhol and Anger, among others, Waters was known for his provocative films that often possessed outrageous plotlines and characters. Some of his characters derived from his own experiences in New York, at the Mud Club, Max's Kansas City, and Squeezebox, among other well-known venues. Eventually, New Line Cinema would produce his films *Pope of Trash*, *Pink Flamingos*, and *Female Trouble* featuring well-known drag queen Divine. Later, Divine would play the role of Edna Turnblad in Waters' *Hairspray*, released in 1988.

As New Line Cinema began to take on larger productions, they released *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). While still an indie film studio, the horror film resulted in mainstream exposure and hefty profits for New Line Cinema, and greatly influenced mainstream filmmaking. The popularity of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* propelled New Line Cinema to the upper echelons of the larger studios in Hollywood. Under the ownership of Time Warner Inc., New Line Cinema was brought along for the eventual AOL Time Warner merger of 2001. It was during this year that the



Left to Right: 119-121 University Place circa 1940 and today.



Left to Right: *Reefer Madness* (1936), *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984), and *Hairspray* (1988).

from the company in 2008. Shaye went on to found his own production company, Unique Studios, that same year.

studio completed its production of the first *Lord of the Rings* film. Robert Shaye, who founded the studio at 121 University Place, was later removed

U-P Film Group and O-P Screening Room - 814 Broadway

814 Broadway is a masonry structure built in 1854. Five stories in height, it has four bays at the second floor, and three bays at the upper floors, all with segmentally arched windows. The building's architectural features are striking and include Corinthian colonettes at the second-floor windows, and additional ornament and anthemia decorating the central upper floor windows.

U-P Film Group and O-P Screening Room Cinema were located at 814 Broadway. Founded in the late 1960s by Palestinian Egyptian immigrant [Rafic Azzouny](#), the collective and subsequent screening room played a key role in the development of the Downtown underground film and video scene. U-P was a filmmaking collective where members contributed either a piece of equipment or money, making filmmaking accessible and inexpensive to avant-garde filmmakers. U-P also had film screenings and performances. These events included work by David Vadehra, Jerry Tartaglia, Jack Smith, Rafic, Andrew Noren, Don Snyder, and others associated with the psychedelic movement. By the late 1970s, U-P Film Group dissolved, and O-P screening room began. There were no specific requirements for O-P screenings, and works by novice filmmakers were encouraged. Artists like Jack Smith, Charlie Ahearn, Amos Poe, Nan Goldin, Vivienne Dick, Scott and Beth B, James Nares, Nick Zedd, Jacob Burchardt, and Sara Driver frequently showed at O-P. Azzouny's impact on the underground film scene in New York was tangible; Village Voice film critic J. Hoberman called him "an exuberant fixture of the downtown film and video scene for over three decades."



Left to Right: 814 Broadway, today and circa 1940.

Terrence McNally - 41-43 University Place



Left to Right: 41-43 University Place, today and circa 1940.

This eleven-story residential complex was built in 1923 by Harvey Wiley Corbett and Wallace K. Harrison, combining the Classical details and modernist geometric elements that characterized Corbett and Harrison's highly influential style of architecture.

Playwright, screenwriter, author, and librettist Terrence McNally (Nov. 3, 1938 – March 24, 2020) lived at 41-43 University Place (also known as 29 East 9th Street.) One of the most successful, prolific, and critically acclaimed American

playwrights of the last half-century, several of his plays were made into successful movies, including *The Ritz* (1976, based on the 1975 play of the same name), *Frankie and Johnny* (1991, based upon the 1982 play *Frankie and Johnny and the Clair de Lune*), and *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1997, based upon the 1994 play of the same name). McNally also successfully translated several films into Broadway musical productions, including *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Ragtime*, *The Full Monty*, and *Catch Me If You Can*.

LANDMARKED BUILDINGS WITHIN THE PROPOSED SOUTH OF UNION SQUARE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company – 841 Broadway

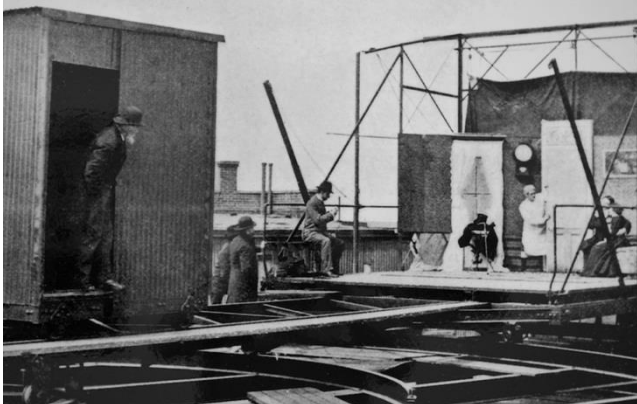
Designed by architect Stephen D. Hatch, the Roosevelt Building at 841 Broadway was built in 1893-94 in a transitional Romanesque Revival/Renaissance Revival style. According to the [Landmarks Preservation Commission designation report](#), it is one the many high-rise commercial buildings



Left to Right: 841 Broadway, today and circa 1940.

built in the area south of Union Square during the late-19th century using innovative new technology such as elevators, electricity, and hybrid steel-iron framing. The building had many notable tenants, one of whom shaped the commercial film industry as it is known today.

The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, founded by William Kennedy Dickson, was located at 841 Broadway from 1896-1906. A former employee of Thomas Edison and primary inventor behind Edison's Kinetoscope, Dickson left Edison to have more creative freedom in his work and explore technology that would allow audiences to watch films in groups. To avoid infringing on Edison's strict Kinetoscope and Kinetograph patents, Dickson, along with fellow inventors Henry Norton Marvin and Herman Casler, developed a new camera, the



Movable stage for Mutograph filming, 841 Broadway roof, ca. 1890s.

Mutograph, that incidentally produced clearer images. The first Mutoscope movie was created in June 1895 and depicted fellow inventors Henry Norton Marvin and Herman Casler in a boxing match.

In 1896, American Mutoscope and Biograph Company established their first studio on the roof of the Roosevelt Building. To accommodate the company's presence in the building, brick piers supporting a track were installed on the roof, allowing the early cameras to follow the sun and optimize natural light for filming. In addition to early cameras, the business developed the Biograph projector, allowing the film industry to shift from solitary viewers to a group audience. This projector was the beginning of the commercial motion-picture industry.

American Mutoscope and Biograph Company swiftly became one of the most widely-recognized American film studios. In their time at 841 Broadway, American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, later renamed the Biograph Company, produced over 4,000 films from their rooftop studio. Around 1906, Biograph moved to 11 East 14th Street and continued to garner increasing success and recognition for its directors, cameramen, and actors, some of whom emerged as the biggest names in America's early film industry.

The National Board of Review - 70 Fifth Avenue

[70 Fifth Avenue](#), a striking 12-story Beaux Arts style office building constructed in 1912 by architect Charles Alonzo Rich for the noted publisher and philanthropist George A. Plimpton, was the home of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures from roughly 1910 to 1949. Founded in 1909 to fight government intervention in the film industry and still operational today, the Board played a profound role in shaping the motion picture industry in America. The organization single-handedly selected what content would or would not appear in film by either granting or denying their stamp of approval for movies: "passed by the National Board of Review."

In explaining the role and work of the organization in 1926, its Executive Secretary Wilton A. Barrett wrote:

Left to Right: 70 Fifth Avenue, today and circa 1940.



"The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York City, is a trained, volunteer, disinterested citizen organization, composed of upwards of three hundred people reviewing films in New York City before they are released for general exhibition to the public, with associate, advisory members and affiliate citizen groups in many localities across the country. The National Board is opposed to legal censorship and in favor of the constructive method of selecting the better pictures, publishing classified lists of, and information about them, and building up audiences and support for them through the work of community groups, in order that the producers may be encouraged to make the finest pictures and exhibitors to show them, and the people in general helped to a response to the best that the screen has to offer. This places the emphasis on making the public conscious of its taste in and giving it a voice in the selection of its entertainment."

According to the New York Public Library, which maintains the Board's records from 1907 to 1971:

"The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (U.S.) was created in 1909 as the New York Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures. The New York Board became the National Board of Censorship when it took the place the local boards in various cities. In 1916 the name was changed to the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (NBRMP) signifying a fundamental change of policy: the Board would no longer dictate standards of morality in motion pictures. Its primary responsibility became the education of the viewing public; it published reviews and recommended movies which were considered by the reviewers to have achieved distinction. Publications of the Board included the National Board of Review Magazine which was superseded in 1950 by Films in Review."

The National Board of Review was located at 70 Fifth Avenue from the 1910s until at least 1949 – a critical time in the development of the motion pictures industry and in the shaping of its content and regulation by the Board.

DEMOLISHED

Variety Photoplays Nickelodeon - 108-112 Third Ave

The Variety Photoplays Theater was one of New York's few surviving nickelodeon houses from the earliest stages of



moving pictures. It was demolished in 2005 despite a campaign by Village Preservation to seek landmark status for the building. Though its earliest history is somewhat unclear, it seems that the original building that housed the Variety Theater at 110 Third Avenue was constructed as early as 1897. Only 25 feet wide and just under 100 feet deep, it was most likely a store or residence that was altered to convert the space into a two-story theater in 1914. As the moving picture craze swept the city in the early twentieth century, nickelodeon theaters sprung up all around the city to cash in on and bring the new medium to the masses.

While the Union Square area had served as home to the center of legitimate theater in New York in

Variety Photoplays Nickelodeon, 108-112 Third Ave, 2004.

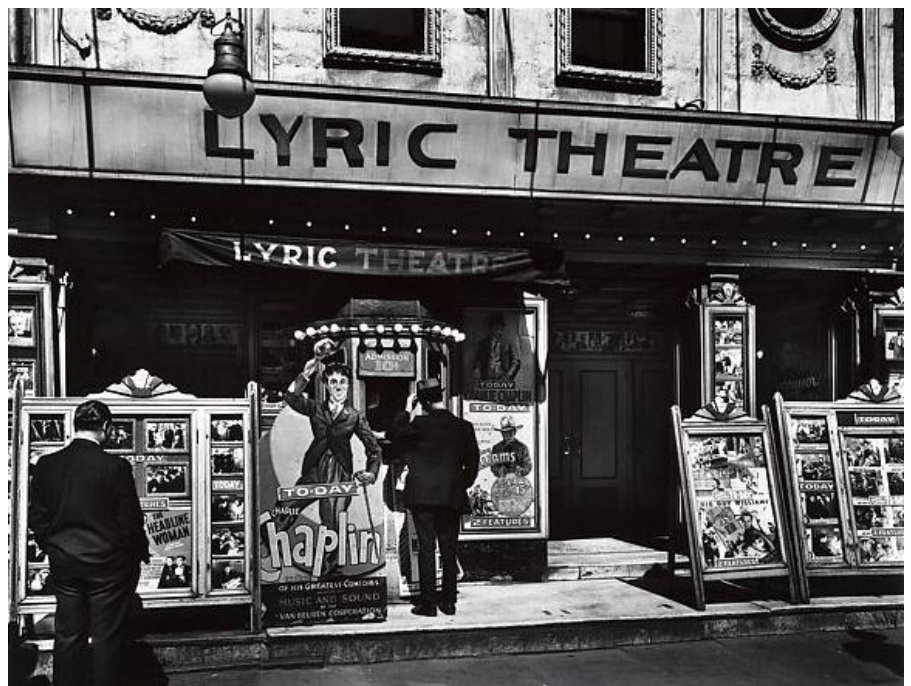
the late nineteenth century, as the twentieth century progressed, that center moved north, and the neighboring East Village became a center of ethnic theater and popular theater, movie houses, nickelodeons, and dance halls. The uses of other nearby sites such as Webster Hall, the Yiddish Art Theater, and the Academy of Music/Palladium on 14th Street all reflect this.

The Variety seated 450 and as the Times notes “first presented groups of two-reelers, collections of individual features, each 15 or 20 minutes long. This was at a period when the feature-length film was still uncommon and films in general were generally considered low-culture —” photo plays or not.” In 1930, a balcony, new lobby, and art deco renovations to the original 1923 marquee sign were made by architects Boak and Paris.

It ran for more than a decade as the Variety Arts Theater, until 2004 when it was closed and demolished in 2005 to make room for a 21-story condominium tower. Village Preservation campaigned to get the historic theater landmarked, but the City refused to act, in spite of the building being one of the few remaining structures in New York which served as a nickelodeon.

Lyric Theatre - 100 3rd Avenue

This building was converted into lofts and a concert hall on the ground floor in 1899. Starting in this era, a saloon and concert hall called Blank’s Winter Garden showcased vaudeville performers and attracted Tin Pan Alley songwriters as a venue to present their works. During the 1900s, different theater companies occupied the space: first the Comet, and then the Lyric Theater in 1936. In the 1960s-70s, it was called the Jewel Theater, known for playing all-male films. In the 1980s it was the Bijou, which played XXX fares until city officials closed it in 1989. For many years it went back and forth between showing classic repertory films and all-male pornographic fare, until the theater was closed entirely in the early 2010s when the building underwent a renovation with a huge addition added.



Lyric Theatre, 100 Third Avenue, Manhattan, 1936. Berenice Abbott.

Palladium Movie Palace - 126 East 14th Street

Built in 1927 as the Academy of Music, the building operated as a deluxe movie palace and then movie theater through the early 1970s. It was then converted to a 3,000-seat live-music venue. The former Academy of Music was rechristened the Palladium on September 18, 1976, with a live radio broadcast performance by The Band. Among the many notable performances here was The Clash’s September 20, 1979, concert, at which bassist Paul Simon smashed his guitar on stage, subsequently immortalized in a grainy image on the cover of their next (and breakthrough) album, “London Calling.”

The building was demolished in 1998 to make way for NYU’s “Palladium Hall” dorm.



Palladium Movie Palace, formerly the Academy of Music, at 126 East 14th Street, mid-1980s (left) and 1962.

The neighborhood South of Union Square contains a rare confluence of significant businesses, theaters, and individuals and entities that profoundly shaped the film industry as it is known today. The impact this area had can be seen in the earliest days of the film industry, with businesses like the Motion Picture Patents Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company; throughout the formative decades of Hollywood with institutions like the National Board of Review; and throughout the latter half of the 20th century with the impact and influence of independent and art film pioneers like Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, and Barney Rosset and the Film-Maker's Co-op, the New Line Cinema, and the U-P Film Group. Its critical role is also seen in the nickelodeons, movie palaces, and independent, art house, and underground showcases for the presentation of films located here. The enormous importance of this area to the history of film illustrates yet another reason for the pressing need to designate the proposed South of Union Square Historic District before any more of this history is lost.

Sincerely,

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Cc: Preservation League of New York State
Historic Districts Council
Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine
City Councilmember Erik Bottcher
City Councilmember Carlina Rivera
State Senator Brian Kavanagh
Assemblymember Deborah Glick
Community Board 2, Manhattan