

## *The Golden Age of Indianapolis Theaters*

By Howard Caldwell

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. Pp. xii, [208]. Illustrations, bibliography. \$29.95.)

Howard Caldwell's *The Golden Age of Indianapolis Theaters* details the stars, plays, and eventually movies that could be seen in Indianapolis's largest theaters from 1858 to the 1960s, when big box theaters, sprawl, and urban flight, along with the spread of television, triggered the decline of these ornate movie palaces. Like every large American city, Indianapolis featured many opera houses and theaters, starting in 1858 with the opening of the Metropolitan. Over the next fifty years the city could claim dozens of theaters, but five rose to the top as the largest and most acclaimed: the Murat, the Circle, the Indiana, the English, and the Lyric. Over the ensuing decades various smaller downtown venues housed companies, shows, and events. Unfortunately, few remain today; most were destroyed by fire or razed after years of vacancy.

Early on, traveling artists stopped in Indianapolis – sometimes for a single night, other times for weeks – to perform opera, dance, music, or vaudeville. Eventually, some theaters established in-house companies who varied their performances. Troupes faced both praise and criticism from local papers and community leaders. At times, their performances were denounced as blasphemous, at other times they were praised for being highly professional. More frequently however, it was financial troubles that

threatened the troupes and theaters; the arts were seldom profitable. As motion pictures replaced vaudeville in the newer downtown theaters, the Indianapolis scene once again changed. Nickelodeons and other small movie theaters drew customers away from the movie palaces causing more troupes to disband and larger theaters to close.

Caldwell's encyclopedic listing will be useful for readers wanting to understand the popular acts, groups, and performers who visited Indianapolis. Caldwell's text, however, fails to examine the significance of their presence in Indianapolis. More useful than listing who performed over the years might have been an analysis that helped to account for the success or failure of various acts and theaters. Caldwell's relative lack of social context shows further in the fact that segregation in Indianapolis's theaters receives just a few sentences in a section devoted to the Walker Theatre (a bit more information lies in a photo caption).

As he covers the city's history of theatrical performers, Caldwell also draws in the reader with his own experiences as a child attending various events, especially showings of black-and-white film. It is clear that Caldwell loved, and still loves, the theater. It is difficult not to smile along with him during these anecdotal narratives.

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### *McClellan Street*

By David and Peter Turnley

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In the fall, I will be eager to bring *McClellan Street* by David and Peter Turnley into my photography classes, and I can imagine talking about it with my students. So stop texting for a few minutes, students, and let's take a look at this very interesting book.

Twin brothers David and Peter Turnley were only seventeen when they decided in 1973 to photograph McClellan Street in their hometown of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. At first, they shared one camera and passed it back and forth. They returned to McClellan Street often, developed relationships with their subjects, and earned their trust. There is an intimacy in these photographs that reflects the time that the Turnleys spent and the access they gained. The first lesson to be learned from this book: these photographers clearly defined their subject and dug into the project with great commitment.

The second lesson: While there was nothing newsworthy or dramatic about this street and the people living there, the Turnley brothers clearly thought that careful observation could reveal the significance of the details of ordinary working-class life.

Much of the best documentary photography uncovers significance, interest, and beauty, after all, in the commonplace. Photography can remind us to pay attention to everything around us.

In this case, the passage of almost forty years adds so much. These photographs hold so many small details from their historical moment – the cars, clothes, postures, and all the cigarettes. Documentary photographs gain value as the world changes, and ordinary details become interesting and poignant. As the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson said, if the photograph wasn't made, you can't print and look at a memory. It's important to get out there and photograph our time. Thus *McClellan Street's* third lesson: descriptive photographs get more interesting as time passes.

The brothers cite as their inspiration the 1955 exhibition and book, *The Family of Man*, which stressed the common humanity of all people. The photographs from that collection have been revered, yet also derided as portraying a view of life that is too simple and predictable. For young and idealistic photographers like the