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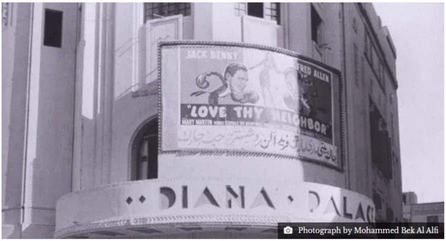

Photograph by Mohammed Bek Al Alfi

THE ART DECO CINEMAS OF CAIRO

BY: DAN MOREY ON: SEPTEMBER 15, 2016

I'd just returned from a month-long sojourn in Shanghai, and was regaling a friend with stories of life in the "Pearl of the Orient." When he asked me what my favorite part of the trip was, I told him about seeing Ang Lee's latest film *Lust, Caution*, at the Art Deco Cathay Theatre in the old French Concession. The perfect venue for a movie set in 1940s Shanghai!

"You were in China," he said, "a country most Americans can only dream of visiting —and the best thing you did was go to the movies?"

This wasn't the only time I've been chastised for cine-centric travel.

Some years later, I found myself in Cairo, another of the East's great cosmopolitan cities. Cairo, like Shanghai, was controlled by various foreign powers (Great Britain most recently), and is full of Western architecture, including Art Deco cinemas. It's fitting that Egypt's capital should retain a wealth of Art Deco, since the Egyptomania that followed the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 was an early influence on the exuberant style.

In the 1930s and '40s, Cairo's downtown theater district was a jeweled necklace of elegant cinemas, though many Egyptians resented their Western designs and foreign owners. By the mid-1940s, the theaters had become targets for violent revolutionaries intent on overthrowing King Farouk and expelling the British from Egypt. Those that survive today are largely dilapidated, and struggle to compete with suburban multiplexes.

I stayed a few blocks from the theater district at the Windsor Hotel, a former British Officer's Club that has barely changed since colonial times. The manual elevator, a wooden Schindler carriage, is the oldest in Egypt, and the rotary telephones in the rooms still connect to an antique switchboard behind the reception desk.

I spent my first evening in the hotel's famous Barrel Bar quaffing Jazz Age cocktails. In the morning, after an eye-opener in the breakfast room, I went straight to the Diana Cinema (1932).

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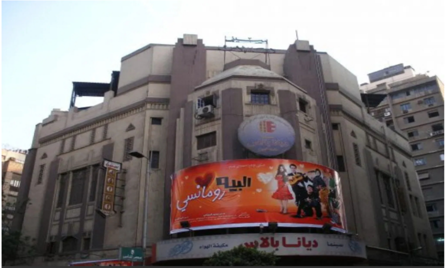
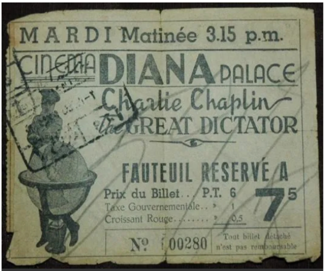
Though somewhat neglected, the Diana's Art Deco design is still transporting. I snapped photos of the façade, with its twin decorative shafts, rising skyward like miniature skyscrapers, and imagined knee-socked British soldiers milling about under the marquee, girls on their arms.



Diana Cinema: Photograph by Dan Morey

One such soldier, Bernard Welburn, attended at least two movies at the Diana (originally the Diana Palace) during World War II. We know this because he was an incurable ticket-saver, and his grandson, Andrew Welburn, has preserved images of his mementos at andysarcade.net. One of the tickets features a picture of Charlie Chaplin, in his role as The Great Dictator, sizing up a globe.



MARDI Matinée 3.15 p.m.

CINEMA DIANA PALACE

Charlie Chaplin

The GREAT DICTATOR

FAUTEUIL RESERVÉ A

Prix du Billet... P.T. 6
Taxe Gouvernementale.. » 1
Croissant Rouge........ » 0,5

7 5

Nº 00280

Tout billet détaché n'est pas remboursable

Diana Palace Ticket: Courtesy Andrew Welburn

The Diana showed English-language films and catered to Western tastes. On January 26, 1952 ("Black Saturday"), it was hit with an incendiary bomb. Egyptian protestors, infuriated by the slaughter of 50 Ismailia policemen by occupying British troops, burned and looted 750 buildings that day, including 40 theaters frequented by Britons and upper-class Egyptians.

The Metro Cinema, on Talaat Harb Street (formerly Soliman Pasha St.), was bombed twice, once in 1947 by the Moslem Brotherhood, and again on Black Saturday, when it was completely destroyed. The Metro was rebuilt in the same Art Deco style, and continued as a top theater for decades, even playing host to Princess Alexandra of Kent for a special screening of *Death on the Nile* in 1978.

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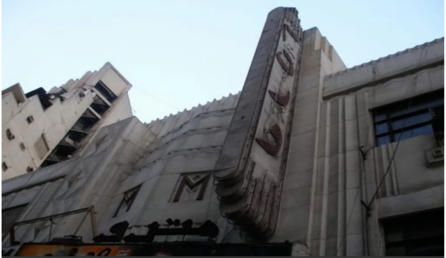
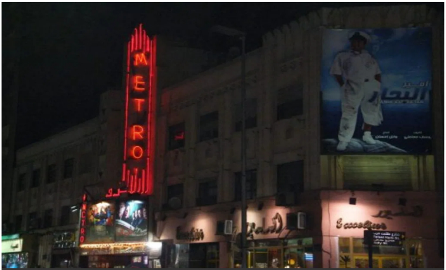


Metro Cinema: Photograph by Dan Morey

The Metro was designed by New York architect Thomas Lamb for Loews Inc. in 1940, and presented MGM's finest films, starting with *Gone with the Wind*. It's still in business, so I went over one day to have a look. The exterior was dusty, but the patterned cornice and Deco Ms over the marquee were unmistakable.

After dark, the theater came alive. Its great red "Metro" sign lit up the street like a torch, and people poured through the doors to see the latest Egyptian blockbuster. It was like 1940 all over again. I half-expected a Rolls to pull up and disgorge a fur-draped celebrity.



Metro Cinema at Night: Photograph by Dan Morey

In fact, had it been 1940, I might've run into Bernard Welburn, the souvenir-collecting soldier. In addition to his usual tickets, Welburn saved an illustrated program from the Metro, advertising the theater's coming attractions: Clark Gable and Charles Laughton in *Mutiny on the Bounty* and William Powell and Myrna Loy in *Another Thin Man*. The text is in English, French and Arabic, and the cover features the Metro logo and nickname "Pride of the Orient."

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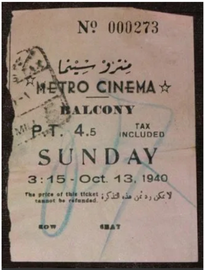

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مترو سينما

METRO CINEMA ☆

BALCONY

P.T. 4.5 TAX INCLUDED

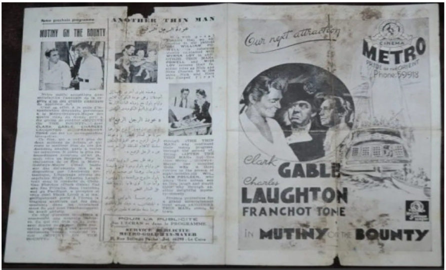
SUNDAY

3:15 - Oct. 13, 1940

The price of this ticket cannot be refunded. لا يمكن رد ثمن هذه التذكرة

ROW SEAT

Metro Cinema Ticket: Courtesy Andrew Welburn


MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY
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Clark GABLE
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IN MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY

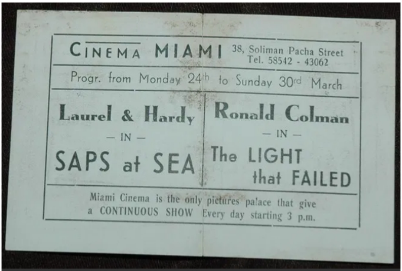
Metro Cinema Program: Courtesy Andrew Welburn

Welburn was also known to haunt the Miami Cinema across the street, notable for being “the only pictures palace that gives a CONTINUOUS SHOW every day starting at 3 p.m.” Its lobby was illuminated by an ornate chandelier, and a double stairway gave access to plush box seats. Egypt’s soon-to-be deposed king, Farouk, a great admirer of all things Western, loved the Miami, and could often be seen chuckling at the screen from his royal armchair.

Luckily, neither Welburn nor Farouk were in attendance on March 11, 1946 when a bomb exploded in the auditorium, killing a woman and injuring 30 others, or on Black Saturday, when it was damaged in the fire.

سينما ميامي
CINEMA
Miami
مبروك 1000

Miami Cinema: Photograph by Dan Morey



CINEMA MIAMI 38, Soliman Pacha Street
Tel. 58542 - 43062

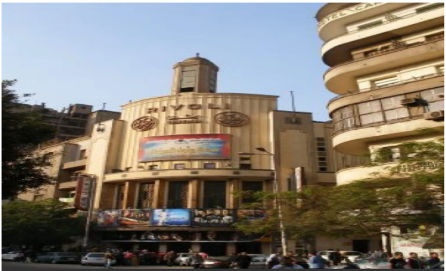
Progr. from Monday 24th to Sunday 30rd March

Laurel & Hardy	**Ronald Colman**
— IN —	— IN —
SAPS at SEA	The LIGHT that FAILED

Miami Cinema is the only pictures palace that give
a CONTINUOUS SHOW Every day starting 3 p.m.

Miami Cinema Ticket: Courtesy Andrew Welburn

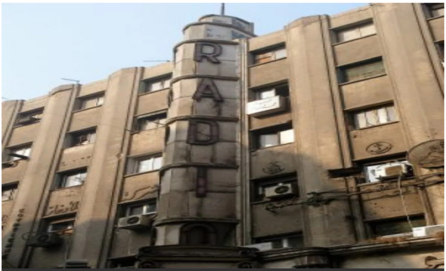
The Rivoli Cinema is another survivor of the 1952 Black Saturday riots. It was financed by the British Rank Organization in 1946, and designed by architect Leonard Allen. Its vertical lines draw the eye upwards to a futuristic finial, and the façade blends harmoniously with the streamlined curves of the neighboring Hotel Carlton (1935).



Rivoli Cinema: Photograph Dan Morey

When the Rivoli opened, it seated 2,150 and boasted the only theater pipe organ (a Compton) in the Middle East. Movies are still shown there today, though the auditorium has unfortunately been divided into eight screens.

The grand Radio Cinema, designed by French architect Max Edrai, has an eye-catching frontage on Talaat Harb Street, with a massive neon sign set into an office block. To get to the theater, you go through a passage of retail shops and emerge into a courtyard where the auditorium (with Deco exterior) resides. The whole enterprise was desolate during my visit—a modernist ghost town—but has since been renovated by the Al-Ismaelia Investment Company and reopened to much acclaim.



Radio Cinema, pre-refurb: Photograph by Dan Morey

Restorations are increasing in Cairo these days, thanks to a government initiative to revitalize downtown. Many Cairenes now see Art Deco buildings as architectural treasures, rather than symbols of colonial exploitation. Perhaps the city's other great movie palaces will return to glory, their owners enlightened by the neon glow of the Radio Cinema.

As for Egyptian moviegoing, I opted for comedic films with plenty of pratfalls (funny in any language), and had a wonderful time. Back home, however, when my friend asked me what I'd liked best about Cairo, I told him the pyramids. "Thank God," he said. "I thought you might've wasted another trip hanging around old movie theaters."

This work was published in the *Coldnoon Cities (Mapping the Metropolis)* Vol II, as part of the *Coldnoon* journal.

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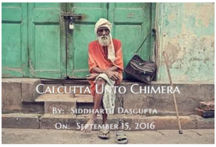

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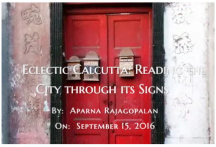

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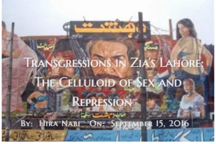

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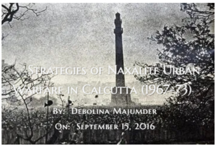

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