

THE SENATOR'S LOVER BARES ALL!

PART 1

Since January, I've been reporting on the saga of Baltimore's iconic Senator Theatre during the most uncertain time in the theatre's 70 year history.

I moved to Baltimore from the west coast nearly three years ago, and I chose my neighborhood partly because The Senator was nearby. I love old theatres, and I fell in love with the place at first sight.

The Senator itself has a vibe, a positive energetic feeling that hits you as soon as you enter. That welcoming feeling is often reinforced by the theatre's manager, Gayle Grove. On occasion, Natty Boh and Nipper, her two beguiling border collies will greet you and make it quite clear that they are glad you came to visit just to kick the ball for them. It's best to just give in and kick the ball from the get go. Resistance is futile.

When I first moved to the neighborhood, I was a concerned, but ill-informed community member who had no understanding of the nature of The Senator's struggles over the years. I had read some snarky criticism of The Senator's owner, Tom Kiefaber, and like many, I believed it to some extent at first, I had no reason not to. My personal experiences at The Senator with the owner and the staff, however, didn't jibe at all with what I was reading here and there in the press. How could a struggling but yet award-winning historic theatre, which consistently provides optimal movie-going experiences to its patrons, be owned, programmed and operated for over two tumultuous decades by an owner who receives national

accolades on a regular basis, who didn't really know what he was doing?

The word in the hood was mixed. Some spoke in glowing terms about Tom Kiefaber and The Senator's stellar operation and community events, particularly the folks who were residents when Belvedere Square was in decline. Others cited some of the same negativity about Tom that I had read, mostly in the Sun, that cast aspersions at his periodic financial difficulties and the fact that the theatre had not been expanded, and that The Senator Diner has yet to materialize, despite Kiefaber's best efforts over the years.

Whether thumbs up or down on the owner of The Senator, a common element that everyone noted was his intensity and commitment to his theatre and staff, and to the community. No disagreement there.

After the economy went into steep decline late last year, Kiefaber, along with other prominent business and community leaders, held a press conference at The Senator, noted the severe impact the economic downturn was having on the theatre's bottom line, and called for the city and state representatives to join with the community, the consultants and the ownership, and assist the theatre's ongoing transition to non-profit ownership status. I attended the press conference and decided at that point to take the professional objective approach and investigate the situation. What I found during my queries however, was not at all what I expected.

From my first communications with Mr. Kiefaber, I noticed an odd phenomenon. There seemed to be two different Tom Kiefabers in town: the one they occasionally carp about in the

press, and the one I was getting to know directly and through his long time staff and friends who would visit the theatre.

The composite character that has been formulated by the local media is reportedly difficult to deal with (“prickly” was the word used in the Sun), does not suffer fools graciously, and fiercely guards his beloved Senator Theatre like a protective mother bear with a cub. In my personal experience over time, however, the real Tom Kiefaber is an affable and considerate individual, who is focused on a mission to insure a viable non-profit future for The Senator, and he has somehow remained enthusiastic, functional and upbeat in an overwhelming and stressful situation.

The guy the press describes is not a likeable guy. The Tom I have come to know is an intelligent charmer with a great sense of humor and irony. The steady diverse parade of well-wishers and others from all over who stop by The Senator to commiserate pretty much all seem to love the guy and the feeling appears to be mutual. At times there are so many hugs going around, it's like a church service with Reverend Tom presiding.

I was expecting to see Mr. Hyde at times but according to the folks on the scene, with Tom what you see is what you get. What's not to like and admire?

I have been told, however, by his staff that those who abuse The Senator or harass the staff can quickly come to know a different Tom Kiefaber, who is not so affable and charming.

A key turning point in my thinking about The Senator Theatre and the nature of Tom's accomplishments over the years came in early February, when I had a one-on-one breakfast meeting with my city councilman, Bill Henry.

By this time, I had been privy to a few private conversations with Tom Kiefaber and The Senator's long term staff, where I had learned some alarming, behind-the-scenes information about a few problematic individuals in city government and a local foundation and how they have approached their relationship with Tom as the owner of The Senator and interacted with the surrounding community over the years. The same few individuals in this core group are still involved in this dysfunctional dynamic with Tom and The Senator for close to 15 years now. This aspect of the Tom and The Senator story has never been reported as far as I can tell from some pretty extensive searches.

Belvedere Square figures prominently in the sweeping municipal tales I've heard with their complex twist and turns, as does the BDC, "Smalltimore's" culture of corruption, the city council, the CHAP commission, The Abell Foundation, and The Sun.

It was apparent that Tom and the staff and community members believed what they related in conversation, but I was frankly skeptical, because some of the machinations and manipulative behavior of others they cited seemed a bit like fanciful paranoia. I found it hard to fathom why just a few folks with power would mess with Tom and The Senator here and there and throw up road blocks and obstacles over a 10 to 15 year period.

Councilman Henry managed to quickly change that impression by confirming aspects of what Tom and his associates related, but twisting it in an obvious manner while trying his clumsy best to convince me that the present challenges facing The Senator and the threats to its survival are all essentially Tom's fault and his alone. The Senator Theatre must be seized from Tom

Kiefaber as soon as possible so that Bill Henry could save it for the community.

My first reaction was that Bill Henry is a lousy actor. Next was that he can jettison all pronouns but I, because he never uses them and probably never will. Then I experienced a creeping feeling of horror at the realization that this guy is fronting an overt effort to take over The Senator by force at this vulnerable time, and incredibly, banish Tom from his beloved theatre altogether. The barbarians are at the gate alright, and that's not paranoia.

He went so far as to try to convince me that anyone who's concerned about The Senator's future must now gang up together and collaborate to quickly sever Tom from any future involvement with The Senator.

Incredibly, he casually dismissed all of the positive national accolades and awards that Tom and The Senator have regularly received over the years, including a prestigious National Business Leadership of the Year award from The National Trust and Main Streets, as inconsequential, coming from "historic theatre nuts."

During his extremely revealing monologue, Bill Henry pointedly trashed Tom Kiefaber and his reputation, and cited his difficulties with the city's leadership, for a good half hour while I listened politely and said little. My immediate conclusion after meeting with Bill Henry was that Tom Kiefaber's travails are not paranoia, and that he has indeed been unjustly targeted for personal and professional destruction for years by a few key individuals within city government, and our district's city council representative has crossed over to the dark side and is doing their bidding.

Councilman Henry's two primary reasons why the city should take over Tom's theatre as soon as possible and he must go away forever is that the theatre has debts that are too high, and Tom has people downtown that don't like him, find him difficult to deal with, and they won't work with him.

So it's hit the road Tom Kiefaber, we'll take your incredible theatre that you both saved and made into a national icon with little money, and we'll take all your properties around it too, and you better go quietly or your family goes out on the street. And oh yes, we're going to trash you behind your back, and in the media, cast all kind of aspersions, and then throw you under the bus.

It was also immediately clear from my meeting with Bill that these same city officials who are most likely to decide The Senator's future have no real appreciation for what an extraordinary and precious facility it is, and no appreciation whatsoever for the seven decades of sustained effort by the family that built The Senator and made it what it is today. Using a phrase that's often heard around The Senator, they just don't get it. That was my initial epiphany, and what I have subsequently learned and am still discovering has only served to validate that assessment.

They do clearly get the theatre's value as a nationally renowned landmark theatre and as the key entertainment component and anchor smack in the midst of a 20 million dollar redevelopment. That they get. So grab it now while Tom's vulnerable, turn the public against him and then plow him under. For them that's a twofer.

I moved to Baltimore from California where they say "you're either on the bus or off the bus." Let me take this opportunity to

affirm that I have done my homework and wholeheartedly taken sides and that my choices are informed ones, based on extensive direct experience. I am decidedly on the “team Tom” bus, and I can no longer make any credible claims to impartiality. This passive observer has gone native and become a pro-active participant. For that I primarily credit Councilman Henry for opening my eyes and converting me from a concerned skeptic trying to remain impartial, to an enthusiastic partisan in support of Mr. Kiefaber, The Senator Theatre's key management staff, and a transition to community oriented not-for-profit ownership.

Since then, I've been trying to help shed some light on The Senator's imperiled situation that bears little actual resemblance to what the media and the public think they know from all the rampant misinformation going around. My efforts to disseminate accurate information through blog postings have been hampered by an off-the-record embargo on many of the particulars because Tom has been treading lightly, under dire threat by the city of losing his home, pledged as collateral to The Senator's financing. As others have noted, he has been uncharacteristically mum and reticent to allow a stray observation or controversial comment slip on-the-record, with potentially disastrous results. In late January of this year, he wrote to me in an email:

“Off-the-record for now, it looks as if there is a concerted effort going on behind-the-scenes, and a few influential folks in the city are taking steps that will put full control of The Senator and its future in the hands of the BDC and the downtown power brokers. It's a scary development that may derail the Senator's conversion to non-profit, community-oriented ownership which is critical to its future viability. I will apparently be held hostage

under threat of the city going after the only property I will retain, my home. Please be aware that I may not be in a position to speak out and will be forced to communicate in a pretty benign manner. For the time being my comments must be from the perspective of perilous confinement in a kidnapper's lair."

Like in the movies, it sounded a bit melodramatic at the time, but since then I have subsequently learned that he was relating the truth. As such, much of what I have learned about The Senator's situation, I have been unable to share publicly, because I had no on-the-record source to back up some of the most compelling and controversial information to enlighten readers as to the behind-the-scenes struggle that's taking place for the soul of The Senator Theatre and its future.

Now, with The Senator slated to go to public auction on July 22nd, with the BDC and the Mayor's office determined to play Russian roulette with the theatre's future, Tom has determined that despite the inherent risk, he must step up and "go there" in a lengthy and revealing in-depth interview that I am honored to publish and post on my blog. Thank you, Tom, on behalf of everyone who loves The Senator Theatre, for your courage and candor and for putting your trust in me to help inform others of your story and what's going in the midst of this real life cliffhanger.

The vast majority of the interview took place during an extended late afternoon into evening session at The Senator Theatre. For those of you who know Tom and have seen him on the job in his otherworldly habitat called The Senator Theatre, he generally remains in a constant state of perpetual motion, attending to a dizzying array of details to ensure that the show doesn't merely go on, but that each and every

element of the experience is just so. It's a focused, multi-tasking, labor of love to behold; like a mash-up of the roadrunner, the coyote and the Tasmanian Devil in overdrive.

When, and only when, The Senator was finally rolling along in an operational groove and put on cruise control, Tom quickly switched gears and relaxed in the theatre's luscious art deco mezzanine lounge and to my delight, proceeded to answer each and every inquiry without the stressed hesitant responses that I had come to expect when discussing these issues. It was quickly apparent that we weren't in Kansas anymore, and that Tom had come to a point in his tumultuous life where he was ready to tell his story, without the internal editing that had inhibited our past discussions.

I suppose that almost everyone who reads this account wants to better understand the current situation at The Senator, and what the future may hold. To understand where things stand now, however, I have come to see that it's important, if not crucial, to also understand some of the past and its significance, since the cast of characters has remained mostly the same. I started out the interview by asking Tom about the past as background, and its relation to present circumstances.



L: You have made few public statements in the past few months since The Senator Theatre has been in the news and you've declined past requests for interviews from me and others. Why are you breaking your silence now?

TK: Until recently my family was in too precarious a position for me to be forthcoming and publicly discuss the situation with The Senator and what's taking place behind the scenes. While we're still stuck in an agonizing double-bind, The Senator's future is also precarious, the situation is being badly bungled, and what is happening over all is a corrupt outrage with a virulent grudge at its core. It's madness really when you examine what's happening, who planned it and why, and the rush to get there. The bottom line is, this homie don't play that.

With this much at stake I've come to terms with the fact that it's now or never, so it's time to speak up and assess the situation from our perspective. For years the prudent advice I've received has indicated that if I ever really "go there" and publicly relate what's really gone on between me and a small group of these characters from my perspective that I would

surely lose ownership of The Senator in the process. Well, that's no longer an issue at this juncture. What's at stake now is not my ownership of The Senator, because that should change. The critical issue is will The Senator and its future ownership entity be not-for-profit and oriented towards the arts, education and the extended community, or from a commercial development perspective. That crucial difference is not well understood, and it should be, because there's so much at stake for all concerned at this fork in the road.

The public should better understand that this is not all about me, or all about The Senator or all about the community, or all about Belvedere Square. It's about how to make this next evolutionary leap forward with The Senator in the right direction. We can't lose sight of the fact that The Senator that has an extraordinarily bright future ahead, even in this economy but not without non-profit ownership. That's not simply my conclusion, it's common knowledge in theatre preservation circles nationwide regarding what should occur with a unique theatre like The Senator at this stage in its existence. If we all get on the same page and make the right moves at this auspicious point in time, sky's the limit!

The State of Maryland DHCD folks want to see non-profit ownership of The Senator and they have for some time, but the city is really blowing them off and that's seemingly a big reason for the city's risky auction, to erase the state debt forcibly and leave them only my home as their collateral with any equity. The State may well give up the lien on The Senator voluntarily to facilitate a bona fide effort to help The Senator make this transition, or they may convert the debt to a grant under the right circumstances, but from what I understand, no one from

the city has even asked them to do that or even kept them informed about what's going on.

There is no real communication there on the part of the city as far as the state is concerned as far as I can tell, and that's not just regarding The Senator, it's happening with just about everything at city hall that's in limbo land for the time being. It's appalling that with this potential fiasco approaching fast, with all kinds of inherent conflicts of interest and actionable things going on, that there no real political leadership being demonstrated. This ship has veered off course and is headed for the shoals, yet it seems Captain Andy Ahab has mistaken my butt for a white whale while he's orbiting Jupiter, the Mayor is a wee bit preoccupied with her upcoming trial, and the City Council President's staff is gearing up to start moving the furniture around at City Hall and measure the drapes.

Yet this convoluted, public auction of The Senator is rolling down the road to perdition, reeking to high heaven and those who would otherwise care are all confused as to what's up, and our fearless leader Councilman Henry is hiding and gone to ground mumbling lame excuses and whining about his name being on The Senator's marquee, although he can't refute the message it conveys.

I suppose we should be thankful that at least Bill Henry serves as some comic relief to all this tension. What crass chutzpah this guy has. First he cajoles to get "Elect Bill Henry" put up on The Senator's marquee with a passive-aggressive combo of barely veiled threats and promises, long since broken, and now that he's been elected and crossed over to become Bill the Shill, the BDC's go-to guy in North Baltimore, he wants his name taken down from the marquee? And if this is really the guy who has vowed to save The Senator for the community, apparently

from me, then why did it take him over 5 days to even notice it was up there!

OK, AstroGirl, I'm sufficiently warmed up...let's get rolling.

L: I am rolling and apparently so are you, so please fasten your seat belt and note the emergency exits.

L: OK, now before we continue with what's currently up with The Senator, please relate some of your personal history with the theatre. The recent media coverage reports that your tenure at The Senator dates to your purchase of the theatre in 1989.

TK: Yes, in early 1989 I purchased the theatre and its parking lot, where the Staples store was later built, along with two partners. My lifelong personal involvement and deep bond with The Senator, however, goes back over 50 years, as far back as I can remember.

My family built, owned and operated motion picture theatres in Baltimore for over 100 years now, and during that century in the business we've run over 50 movie houses in town. The Senator was my neighborhood movie house and living close to the family business, I spent a lot of time here and essentially grew up inside this extraordinary structure. Behind the little hobbit door down at the base of the mezzanine stairs was my fort, which was great because the adults couldn't really fit in there and left us alone. So I have an intense and lifelong love affair going with this beautiful building. In some ways it's been both a blessing and a curse in my life, but it also makes what's happening now particularly traumatic. It's The Senator's future that at stake here, and not my ownership of the real estate.

L: I can imagine it must be like losing a dear member of the family. I've personally never known of someone who is so head over heels in love with a building. I can't help but notice that you will still stop and gaze at it with obvious delight.

TK: A more accurate word is arousal. It's always been that way with The Senator and me. I have a serious "jones" for this incredible structure that started out as a crush, but intensified after puberty. I've learned, however, that I'm not alone in that regard. The Senator Theatre is a truly magical place that casts its mesmerizing spell over some individuals more intensely than others the moment they cross the threshold.

L: Well don't hold back Tom, but this may also lead to more than we need to know about your relationship with The Senator. Should I leave you alone with the theatre for a while?

TK: Yes, would you please? Three's a crowd. Seriously though, The Senator turns me on and it always has. Just look around you at this place, is she spectacular eye candy or what? Thank you, John J. Zink, what a genius! He designed The Senator and many other beautiful theatres for my family.

L: Yes it most certainly is a stunner. Did you run around with other theatres before settling down with The Senator?

TK: Yes, I strayed but she took me back. Seriously, I had learned a lot about day to day theatre operations by the time I officially went to work at Durkee Theatres in 1977, the year Star Wars was released. Ten years later, in the late 80's, most local chains like ours were being bought up in a major industry consolidation and The Senator was apparently on its way to become a neglected, twinned theatre in a national chain. At that juncture, I made the move to purchase the theatre independently, have it listed on the National Register of Historic

Places, and then move forward to develop its unlimited potential and unique brand.

L: That was in 1989, so can you summarize the past 20 years owning and operating an historic, independent, single screen theatre in a consolidating industry dominated by the chains?

TK: Summarize the past 20 years? Well.[long pause] I'm reminded of what Robbie Robertson of The Band replied when Scorsese asked him to describe his 20 years on the road in "The Last Waltz." He not only couldn't describe it, he said he couldn't even discuss it! Seriously though, it's generally been an ordeal beyond description. When you live this life as an independent owner/operator, it's an insular existence and you come to think of others as civilians, who can't quite conceive of what it really takes to stick with a commitment to something as demanding as this, seven days a week for 20 years. As in the military, it also requires a collaborative, team effort to succeed in the mission. The Senator only exists today because of an extraordinary crew of committed fellow compatriots. And committed is the operative word there, as this profession can also lead to fittings for the white jacket, particularly in this town that was once known as a city of theatres.

L: I understand. In the past 20 years do any stand out with particular significance?

TK: Yes, 1989 because the acquisition had occurred, we had just gone independent, anticipation was high, and it was The Senator's 50th anniversary year, which led up to Thursday, October 5th, 50 years from The Senator's inaugural day and date. 1939 was also the golden year of Hollywood's golden age so we had some wonderful events celebrating The Wizard of OZ, Gone with the Wind, Wuthering Heights and a slew of

other terrific films that were released that year. Cast members like Butterfly McQueen, who played Prissy from *Gone With the Wind*, and Meinhardt Raabe, the Munchkin coroner from the *Wizard of Oz*, were our Guests of Honor and they both helped dedicate their commemorative sidewalk blocks. Barry Levinson, who was in town shooting *Avalon*, including here at the theatre, was our 50th anniversary Guest of Honor. Producer Mark Johnson was here as well. It was a heady year that honored and celebrated the past, but was also chock full of hope and promise for the future. We were thankfully unaware of the enormous challenges and many setbacks that lay ahead.

So that year is a standout but, in general, since the theatre is open every day, we don't tend to chronicle the past in years. It's an odd thing, but we tend to think instead that we're over 7300 successive days into the mission, and counting. And despite the way the public thinks of The Senator in terms of its storied past, among the inner circle here, this high-tech, streamlined jewel has always been oriented towards the future and as a showcase for emerging, cutting-edge technology. The future is our primary focus here and it's how we really relate as a team to The Senator.

L: We'll get to what the future may hold for The Senator but first give us a sense of why the past 20 years were so challenging for you and your staff.

TK: And my family. It's been a particularly difficult odyssey for them, perhaps even more so. Our core staff members are bona-fide true believers with an abiding passion for The Senator and its potential to evolve and achieve a glorious future. As we already discussed, we literally love the place. For our family members though, the sacrifices of our theatrical duties and

what it really takes to do this often become a burdensome responsibility for all concerned. That's a downside aspect of this life that's not well understood outside of the industry.

Luckily our daughter Grace, our only child who will soon be 18, had the opportunity to grow up here too, as I did. Despite whatever happens in two weeks or two years, or whatever, seeing her and her buddies enjoy this cosmic playground as a child with the run of the place was heaven itself, for which I will always be eternally grateful. It meant everything to me and kept me going through the most trying times. Her entire life so far spans the same 20 year period we're discussing.

And that 20 year period has presented us with enormous challenges that have essentially threatened our day to day operation almost every step of the way. One of the primary impediments to progress was the little known, and less understood, but nonetheless devastating film clearances that slammed us and tragically shuttered thousands of historic theatres over the years across the nation. In our case, we were initially cleared by the nearby chain multiplexes for over a decade and later by The Charles' five screens after their expansion, which was financed for the most part by the Abell Foundation. We were working with Abell as well back then, trying to expand our capabilities out back beyond our single screen, but alas it was not to be. When those five screens at The Charles came on line, which were publicly subsidized, they severely restricted the availability and selection of films we were able to run. The media and the public could never quite grok the pivotal strategic significance of what had occurred in that whole dynamic, but that's showbiz!

Film clearance is the X factor that figuratively asphyxiates independent theatres, yet the restrictions and how they work

are too arcane and Byzantine to be understood by the public. It's like a disease that doesn't show, but will kill you off nonetheless, and fast.

L: You're right about film clearances and the public. It's clear that the average moviegoer or resident has no clue about them. In fact, some of your detractors say they don't exist and are a figment of your imagination.

TK: Believe me I know, I've learned some bitter lessons over the years the hard way and that's one of them. Ultimately it was folly to try and get the media and the public to understand them or care. All we were trying to achieve was equal access to all the films in release but never got there. Hell, even John Waters told someone he didn't think they existed in the case of the Charles' clearance over The Senator. He was dead wrong, but when he scoffed about The Charles' clearance over The Senator it put it in the same category as Big Foot. That was our final wakeup call to just drop the subject because the effort to enlighten folks was clearly doing more harm than good.

In the end, film clearances are what they are, they are well understood within the industry, and they've been devastating to thousands of independent movie theatres and to the Main Streets of the nation because they're like the stealth bomber. They're invisible to the public, but once the bombs they carry hit their targets, if you have the misfortune to be underneath them, there's no doubt then as to their existence. The Justice Department used to be actively involved in helping the independent locations around the country get out from under the chain-gang's clearances, but once a former president of the Screen Actor's Guild became president of the US, that all stopped abruptly and there were no more anti-trust or related anti-clearance actions by the feds. It's a shame really, because

we lost thousands of theatres since 1980 that anchored our nation's Main Streets, and too many of them were shuttered because of the clearances.

L: Apart from film clearance, what other challenges have you faced in keeping The Senator in operation?

TK: Another primary challenge to our survival was the defunct decade when Belvedere Square sat empty and abandoned by the developer. That situation was neglected by the applicable economic development agencies for way too long. The public has a short memory and tends to forget just how devastating that was and what a long drawn-out ordeal James Ward, the square's prior owner, inflicted on the business and residential communities back then and how much that set us back. It was a 10 year nightmare that played a large part in The Senator's economic woes today, in addition to the clearances.

L: That's what I've learned from my neighbors and from searches of the local press accounts during that time. And you're right about the public's institutional memory; it tends to be quite short. Many community residents are essentially unaware of what took place in the past with Belvedere Square and those that do recall it say it lasted about 5 years, but it was apparently twice that long that the square was on the skids.

Please give us a sense of what occurred during that time from your perspective and how it impacted The Senator, both then and now.

TK: That sounds like an exam question...which fits because keeping any historic theatre in the game is like a test you take each and every day. Let me compare and contrast! We ultimately prevailed at The Senator and stayed in operation

during that difficult period by joining forces with the Belvedere Improvement Association. Once we finally approached the problem with a united front we were able to force the issue by becoming vocal and increasingly strident to eventually focus the city and the state's attention on the need to take decisive action and invest in redeveloping a defunct Belvedere Square. Our then Mayor O'Malley was a prime mover at that point. It still dragged it out for another year or so, but thankfully they eventually got in gear. Andrew Frank had the responsibility for the project at BDC before he later switched over to city hall to become Deputy Mayor.

The challenge of operating this historic single-screen movie house during that period, when our key commercial district sat neglected and abandoned, added to The Senator's debt...and our vocal concerns in conjunction with Catherine Evans and some other stalwart community leaders over the Belvedere Square situation apparently ruffled a few feathers downtown along the way. It had to be done though. It was a pretty difficult battle all along, but all of us who worked together to prevent a blow out commercial plan that was off the scale, are proud of what was accomplished, and we have the scar tissue to show for it.

Our staff's tenacity and dedication were critical to surviving that difficult period, and although those of us who went through it would like to forget it entirely, the fact remains that The Senator's forward motion and its finances were severely hobbled by that era in the theatre's history. Once when I made that point to someone at the BDC, the city's economic development agency that's primarily oriented towards the big developers, the shocking reply was for us to get over it, get lost and don't expect any help with our "past sins." It was a specific

moment in time I will never forget, because it was indicative of the BDC's mindset regarding The Senator and me. It was crystal clear to me at that time that they were letting their own personal animosities and prejudices cause them to lose sight of the critical synergistic role these theatres play in the commercial Main Street dynamic. Despite our best efforts over the years, it's essentially the same folks we're dealing with today, the situation has not improved, and that's an understatement.

L: It's interesting to note that you highlight these two issues, film clearance and Belvedere Square's defunct decade, as the most difficult past challenges for you and your staff, yet in all my discussions with others about you and The Senator and the troubles that have been covered by the media, few if any people ever mention these things.

TK: You got that right. It's the crux of the dual reality we have been living for over 20 years now. While the challenges many businesses face are usually not well known outside of their respective industries, there has always been a much bigger divide between what the public thinks theatrical film exhibition is, and what it is in actuality. It's part of why we are so simpatico with our fellow independent exhibitors and when we get together it's like a UFO believers cult. We tend to converse at great length about things like clearances because we do see the little green men, and those who deal with the chains in their markets have also experienced the anal probes, repeatedly! Yes, it's probably the most frustrating aspect of living The Senator saga in the past 20 years; folks tend to think they know what's up from what the media tells them, but there is actually very little correlation between what they think they know and the truth.

L: Yes, although I'm not a film exhibition cult member just yet, but I have learned a lot in my investigations and experienced the great divide. When it comes to you and *The Senator*, the disconnect between perception and reality is staggering. That's why I asked you to do this interview.

TK: I understand and I appreciate the opportunity to correct the record, but it's frankly like trying to bail out the ocean with a thimble. Some things you just have to accept and work around as best you can. This industry has always been a black box in terms of public awareness since Edison, and my family has lived it for a century.

L: I suppose the difference here is, unlike other industries that folks know they are clueless about, since the public loves movies as consumers, they think they understand film exhibition. As one of my neighbors expressed when we discussed you and *The Senator*, "I don't get it. You pop the popcorn, sell the ticket, and show the movie. What is the problem?"

TK: Yup, there's much more of that sentiment out there than you may imagine. In this instance, I'm explaining these matters for the benefit of those who may want to better understand the true origins of our present economic circumstances, which have most often been branded in the media as the result of my poor business skills and mismanagement of *The Senator*.

While I am admittedly not an MBA, the reality of surviving these little known but nasty threats like clearance, Belvedere Square's defunct era, and the rising costs of doing business in general, is considered somewhat miraculous in our industry, and it frankly required a form of day to day, and at times hour to hour, management and focus that I can only describe as surreal in its demands. From the outside looking in, it's easy to scoff and

label this discussion as Tom's excuses. I can hear it now. The bottom line though, is that the accumulated debt that's undermining The Senator today is directly related to its complex history and what's taken place in many cases beyond our control outside of The Senator Theatre, more so than what takes place within our own walls. I suppose an MBA with better financial connections would have probably done things differently, but those folks abandoned urban historic theatres years ago as if they were on fire and never looked back.

And let me expand a bit on that point. In putting the complex deal together in late 1988 we knew we were in for some dangerous duty, so to speak. Now we had no conception of how some of these relationships with the BDC and The Abell Foundation and others would enmesh us in the city's political and economic mosh pit with all the petty nonsense that goes on with some of these folks and their high school, grudge culture mentalities.

The bottom line is that 20 years ago, at the last perilous turning point in The Senator's history in a changing industry, we were the ones who suited up and headed in to take on the problems that needed solving, figuratively going up the stairs when everyone else was headed down and out of the building. That tends to be forgotten in a situation like this, two decades along, but like the films themselves, what we do is a collaborative effort and some terrific individuals like Gayle Grove, Bill Hewitt, Rebecca Jessop, Mike Wilkes, Kenny Butler, Gilbert Reddish, Austin Crise and others deserve recognition and praise for their accomplishments, and instead they're getting walking papers and a list of second guesses. It's shameful really.

And let's not forget the two hardest working dogs in showbiz, [drum roll please] a great big hand for Natty and Nipper! And

it's not fair that there is no unemployment for working dogs. They're not happy about that.

We kept The Senator in operation and in the process increased our debt in order to keep the sick patient alive to be around for the eventual cure. Hey, I think I heard Obama say that the other day! We reasoned that we were on our own to sink or swim, the cavalry wasn't coming, and therefore it was up to us to also deal with what was happening outside The Senator. So keeping our commercial district as stable as possible for Belvedere Square to be worthy of redevelopment investment was added to our list of duties while the city continually turned a deaf ear. Our real mistake was assuming that if we pulled this off, The Senator would also be included in the eventual redevelopment of our commercial district once the cavalry did arrive.

If the show is to go on, you deal with what you *have* at the time and not what you *should have*. We did all that we could to survive this particularly difficult decade by producing scores of special events and creating as many new commemorative sidewalk blocks as possible to dedicate and uncover for the TV media. The truth be told, it was pointedly done with smoke and mirrors over time to foster a media-driven illusion of commerce and stability for our troubled commercial district, just like in the movies! Surprisingly, it worked.

That period also highlights the crucial economic synergy that ideally exists between historic landmark theatres like The Senator and the business districts that surround them. It's a co-dependent relationship that's win/win when the primary elements remain in balance, with the theatre as the foot-traffic generating entertainment component. The circular dynamic dramatically energizes the surrounding shops and restaurants

and vice versa. When that critical equilibrium is lost, however, the results can be catastrophic.

L: Belvedere Square was thankfully redeveloped, however. It's why I moved into this community, in addition to the amenity of The Senator Theatre. Did the eventual resurgence of the square have a positive impact and lighten the load?

TK: Yes and no. When Belvedere Square was eventually redeveloped, the economics required that a sizable subsidy of public dollars be provided to the property owners to restore commerce and help bring our commercial district back online. It was a cause for celebration when over 5 million dollars in public funds were granted to help to redevelop the square, restructuring a vital neighborhood amenity to benefit our district. It was a commendable investment in our community by the city and state that we all worked on together to bring about.

We rejoiced when the cavalry finally did arrive with Andrew Frank, then at BDC, leading the charge. We were crestfallen, however, when they handed over 5 million in public grant funding to the anointed developers across the street, made a few empty promises to us and to the community, and then they saddled up and rode back downtown, and that was that.

Following the investment of redevelopment funds, Belvedere Square and The Senator began to change places. The square was thankfully on the way back up, but The Senator's cumulative debt load had become problematic. The industry itself was also changing, and the theatre stalled in its incremental forward progress and began sinking.

Although the State of Maryland provided periodic interim funding at a few critical junctures along the way, The Senator

Theatre was ultimately left by the BDC and the City to sink or swim on its own. Let me take a moment to highlight at this point that the state folks at DHCD have consistently been right on the mark as far as their consistent recognition that letting The Senator slip under the waves for any period is potentially disastrous and very counterproductive economically in our commercial district. So they made the tough decisions when they had to and we have great respect for their professionalism.

That's not to say they always agreed with us or didn't get a bit confrontational on occasion when they felt they should. They have always been fair and open to communication, unlike their city counterparts.

Back to the square, I'm told that siding with the community activists and joining forces to protest the years of neglect and command attention downtown did not endear us to Mr. Frank and his cohorts at the BDC, who apparently took it personally.

This was confirmed by Councilman Henry when he first took office, assessed the overall York and Belvedere situation, and noted from a report that he requested that the BDC and the city were trying unsuccessfully to manipulate the financial statistics to obscure the fact that they had funded the square with large grants, but frozen out The Senator and not provided any redevelopment funding to our side of the street for over a decade. He contacted me about this, and told me that he had informed Andrew Frank and Mayor Dixon that this was unwise and untenable. He also noted that in his past dealings in Patterson Park and in other instances, glaring situations like this that went on for years to the detriment of the area were most often due to a conflict between the city and certain individuals, and that it was usually something personal.

When I confirmed that assessment, he said he planned to get on it, and get beyond whatever it is. While we were optimistic that this would occur, it didn't, and over time Councilman Henry seemingly switched his orientation and allegiance from a community perspective, which he did have when first elected, to a firm alignment with the BDC/Mayor's office axis and the commercial development interests.

The Senator and Belvedere Square have always been attached at the hip, and that remains so today. That critical dynamic has not been well understood and the lopsided investment of public funds on one side of the street, with five million on one side and none on the other, was a huge strategic blunder, and now those chickens of neglect have now come home to roost. So now it's The Senator's dire economic circumstances that are threatening the commercial viability of Belvedere Square and beyond. It's a maddening reversal that should have been avoided and it seem that I have been targeted to take the fall for it.

L: In 2007, when The Senator had a severe cash flow crisis and with the recent financial troubles, city officials noted to the media that they had made significant financial investments to assist your efforts and they were quite critical regarding your management skills. Was that a fair assessment on their part?

TK: Nope. I suppose it may be a fair assessment if it was true, but it's not. Those harsh, critical statements were apparently made and repeated with intent to undermine my personal and professional credibility and shore up past unjust characterizations that aren't accurate. The BDC and Mayor's office statements were picked up as "Kiefaber's is the problem at The Senator" sound bites by the TV and radio stations and repeated so often that within a day or so the public simply

believes what they're told by city officials, and that it must be the case. It's not, however.

L: Yes, I can confirm from experience that the public does believe what has been claimed by the city, that they have made significant financial investments in The Senator Theatre over the past decade, and as a result, they've lost faith in your abilities. They've gone on to loudly demand that you must quickly give up your ownership and no longer be involved with The Senator Theatre. How do you respond to that assessment by the city?

TK: Well, here we go. They say you can't fight City Hall and I suppose it's wise to heed that old saying. Those clichés persist for good reason. On the other hand, the negative statements about me intended to undermine credibility and limit options didn't really start at City Hall, they initially began in the mid to late 90's when our relationship with Bob Embry and the crew at The Abell Foundation went south. It was pretty apparent at that time that my professional credibility in some influential downtown circles went with it. Things really did change dramatically once that happened. In retrospect it's pretty apparent that once you're entered onto Embry's list of untouchables for whatever reason, that's it, and good luck because your goose generally is cooked in this town.

I've had friends who would not go to some downtown gatherings with me out of fear that Bob Embry would see them hanging with me. Now that's absurd, but it's also an indication of the power and influence he's accumulated over the years with a firm hand on the funding valve that involves so many recipients. He's clearly not someone to mess with if you can help it, but that just wasn't in the cards for me. You have to

play the hand you're dealt, and in this instance, sometimes the cards aren't worth a dime if you don't lay them down.

The pervasive negativity about me that originated in select instances then effectively took on a life of their own and later amplified through the BDC and Andrew Frank in 2002 when he was a player there.

To impart a sense and some specifics of how this dynamic works in town with the BDC and others when they utilize the media, I'll describe an egregious example from my perspective that has certainly worked well for them over the years, so far that is.

Stay tuned for Part 2, coming soon.