

Return of the Capitol

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues



A 1930s postcard showing Namazie Mansions, which was built adjacent to the Capitol Theatre. Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore



The pristine-white façade of the Capitol building as seen today

Most Singaporeans have fond memories associated with the Capitol Theatre: first dates, movies watched, the striking Pegasus sculptures on either side of the stage, the exquisite zodiac signs mosaic on the ceiling, the Magnolia Snack Bar and its luscious milkshakes, the man selling fried nuts in paper cones (also known as the *kachang puteh* man) outside the ticketing office, the list is endless.

After a 17-year hiatus, the Capitol reopened to the public on 19 May 2015 with a snazzy new persona, just in time for the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence. Quite appropriately, the opening act was *Singapura: The Musical*, its central theme being the turbulent decade (1955-1965) leading up to Singapore's independence.

Mohammed Ali Namazie (1864-1931), a businessman of Persian origin living in Madras, India, came to Singapore in the early 1900s. He quickly realised that there was no luxury theatre in Singapore that screened English movies, seized the opportunity and in 1929, built one at the intersection of Stamford Road and North Bridge Road. The theatre was also one of the first fully air-conditioned theatres in Singapore, making the cinema experience luxurious and memorable. Mr Namazie also commissioned the neighbouring four-storey residential building called Namazie Mansions. This building was completed in 1933, a couple of years after his death.

The first movie screened at the Capitol Theatre was on 22 May 1930. It was an American musical comedy called *Rio Rita*. With the advent of the 'talkies' in the 1920s and 1930s, this theatre became *the* place to watch one's favourite movies from America and Europe. The good times continued until the Japanese occupation of Singapore in 1942.

The Japanese used the theatre as a food depot and stopped the screening of English films, screening Japanese films instead. After the war ended, the theatre was returned to its rightful owners. The Namazie heirs sold the theatre and the contiguous building to the movie giant, Shaw Organisation, in 1946.

In the next four decades, the theatre underwent several revamps under the Shaws' management. It became the favourite haunt of many generations of Singapore's youngsters and their dates. The last movie screening at the Capitol was on 29 December 1998. It was a box office debacle

called *Soldier*, starring Kurt Russell, yet nearly 500 people attended the 9:15 pm show in the hope of taking away souvenirs of the Grande Dame. Even toilet signs were not spared, such was the affection of the people for this iconic theatre.

With a capacity of 977, the refurbished Capitol Theatre is the biggest, single screen theatre in Southeast Asia. It also has a state-of-the-art seating system, with retractable seats that can be hidden in the floor, thus converting the entire theatre into an events venue. This makes it the only twin purpose movie theatre in Singapore. The much-loved Pegasus statues have been carefully restored and the mosaic zodiac on the ceiling has been reinterpreted and continues to take pride of place.

After a three-year renovation costing \$1.1 billion, the Capitol Theatre is now creating a whole new generation of memories.



The original neon sign that was retained to recreate the look of the old theatre

Anne Pinto Rodrigues has lived in Singapore for the past four years and on many occasions, has admired the Capitol building from afar. She is also a docent at the National Museum of Singapore and in her spare time, writes about interesting people and places on her blog No Roads Barred (www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com)

Colour photos by the author