

BY TANYA HEINRICH

Gordon Brinckle has maintained a lifelong consuming fascination for movie palaces of the 1920s, and he spent his career working in every occupation associated with the presentation of films. Driven by a desire to hold on to a time when the theater rivaled the movie for the audience's attention, he also constructed his own private working theater, the Alvin Shalimar, in the basement of his modest home in suburban Delaware, beginning in 1959. Photographer and filmmaker Kendall Messick grew up in the house across the street; while he was home for a visit in 2001, he became reacquainted with his neighbor, now 91, and his carefully preserved creation. The vivid panorama he rediscovered there prompted him to film a 32-minute documentary, *The Projectionist* (2003), which offers a penetrating glimpse into the self-created fantasy world. Brinckle's candor and natural storytelling abilities imbue the film with a poignancy that underlies the Alvin Shalimar itself. My conversation with Messick reveals how extraordinary ambitions can manifest in one seemingly ordinary man.

TH Tell me how you met Gordon Brinckle. **KM** In 1969, my family moved into the house across the street from the Brinckles—Gordon, his wife, Dot, and their daughter, Sandy. I was 4 at the time and my brother was 2. Sandy was our babysitter. **TH** Do you have any memories of Gordon Brinckle from that time? **KM** My boyhood impressions of him are somewhat vague, since Dot typically did the conversing while Gordon silently looked on. He spent most of his spare time in the basement building the Alvin Shalimar, but it was a private endeavor. Its mere existence was known by a precious few. Although I saw the basement theater only once as a boy, a distinct

impression of something wonderful remained with me though the years. **TH** How did you rediscover it? **KM** In December 2001, I was home for a visit with my family when we received word that Sandy had recently died after a long battle with cancer. We crossed the street for a condolence visit, and I began to wonder if the theater was still there after so many years. Gordon had the look of someone who wanted a reprieve from the onslaught of concerned neighbors, and when I asked about the theater, he invited me down to the basement to see it. It was decorated for Christmas. I knew then that I wanted to do this project. **TH:** Was the theater as you remembered it from your

childhood? **KM** My recollections consisted of a vague impression of a stage, theater seats, and a box office. However, I was unprepared for the experience of seeing the Shalimar that day. The reality of Brinckle's self-described "picture palace of renown" was beyond anything I had ever imagined. Everywhere I looked there were intricate details in the design and decoration that spoke of his passion and obsession. You never know what people have in their basement. Who would believe that a house whose exterior reflects the familiar "cookie cutter" architecture of the 1950s could contain a fully operational 1920s-style movie palace? **TH** Let's review his life story. He was born in Philadelphia in 1915, was a sickly child, and developed a fascination for film projectors. As a teenager, he demonstrated early artistic talent. After completing vocational school, he became an apprentice to a prominent Philadelphia theater decorator. **KM** For three years he learned to upholster theater seats, make and hang drapes, design paneling for walls, and scale draw—cross sections, floor plans, interiors, exteriors. In those days, according to Brinckle, each theater had its own personality, and the company would "revive dumps, leaving behind houses that were a pleasure to walk into." Beginning at this time, Brinckle began to design and draw theaters that he would have liked to build given the resources. Interestingly, in his own personal drawings, he chose to design primarily modest theaters with a high degree of originality rather than ornate movie palaces like those that so inspired him. When asked about this, he said he had always aspired to create smaller theaters where people would be comfortable.



Gordon Brinckle in his Alvin Shalimar theater, Middletown, Delaware, 2002

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENDALL MESSICK

Right: Alvin Casino usher uniform design, 1938; Far right: Theater design, c. 1934; Below: Tickets and program, c. 1936;



Brinckle has continued drawing his dream theaters now for more than 70 years. In fact, I believe that it is one of the creative outlets that keeps him going today.

TH In addition to drawings, he also created scale models of his theater designs, and then he built a real theater in the basement of his parents' home. **KM** That was in 1936. The modest but amazingly intricate movie palace, which he named the Alvin Casino, was created using skills he had acquired as an apprentice, and it was authentic to the last detail: a fully functional projection booth, a stage framed by multiple drapes, an art deco proscenium, a marquee, and a ticket office just outside the theater entrance. In addition, Brinckle created linoleum block-print designs for stationery and tickets to be used in

his theater; he even went as far as to design the usher uniforms that should be worn. A Philadelphia newspaper story from 1941 included photographs of the now dismantled theater. These images, coupled with Brinckle's early drawings and designs, attest to the originality and ingenuity of this early construction. **TH** After his apprenticeship and a four-year stint working as an usher and ticket-taker in two movie theaters in West Philadelphia, Brinckle

was drafted into the army. This was during World War II, and it was during his military service that he had his first opportunity to project films. **KM** Brinckle had always wanted to work as a projectionist, but at that time it was a union job that was not so easy to secure. But on his initial army paperwork, he listed his occupation as "projectionist." This was quite a stretch, since he had never before projected movies for audiences. His commanding officer subsequently

called on him to work as a projectionist of training films in forts located in Virginia, Georgia, and Texas. This lasted from 1942 to 1944. **TH** He was eventually posted in China, and because of his experience, he was asked to construct a theater for the troops, a theater called the Fox. **KM** He built what he called a "walk-in" outdoor theater. He built the free-standing enclosed projection booth out of old airplane parts, and the screen was made of a

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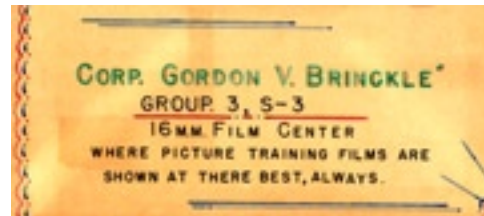
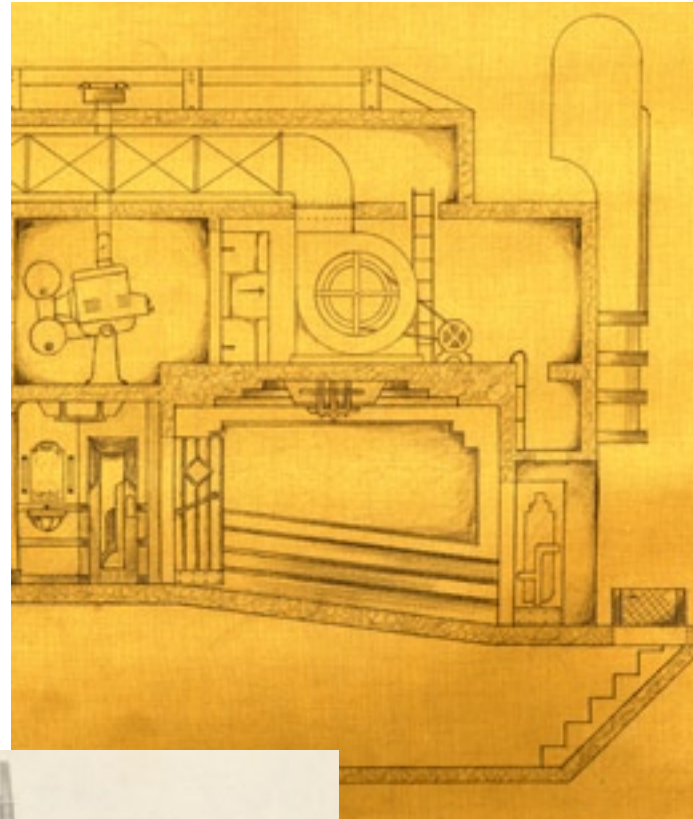
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33

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33

recycled piece of old sailcloth. He even added curtains, which he pleated, because he “was a decorator,” as he is quick to point out. The drapes weren’t functional, and because of the wind on the mountaintop where they were situated, he had to nail them into place. **TH** And the awning below the Fox marquee on the projection booth read “Comfort,” which I love, because as one gets to understand Gordon Brinckle, it’s pretty clear that by comfort he means not only the pleasure of escapism a movie could provide but also the physical comforts of the moviegoing experience, the theater as haven. He decided to relieve the tedium of training films and newsreels with musical accompaniment,

and so he played Victrola records of popular music to boost morale. Departing servicemen often thanked him for the entertainment. His recollections of this experience nearly 60 years later in *The Projectionist* brings tears to his eyes. **KM** He maintains very fond memories of his army service, and he describes in the film how he cried on discharge, and how he dreaded the reality of needing to

Right: cross-section drawing of theater projection booth and ticket window, c. 1934
Below: and-penned Army card, c. 1943
Bottom: The Fox, China, 1945



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find a job back home in the States. The job he found was at the Everett Theatre in Middletown, Delaware, which was built in 1921. He did maintenance, took tickets, and even managed the theater until finally he was given the job of projectionist. He worked there for 33 years until

competition from multiplexes forced the single-screen theater to close. **TH** When did he start building the Shalimar? **KM** In 1959. It is a larger, grander version of his Casino. It has four working curtains that open to reveal an actual movie screen and an auditorium decorated in the

“semi-atmospheric” style of the ‘30s, with nine authentic movie seats bolted to the floor. There is a 1940s-style marquee and ticket office, a projection booth with 16mm projectors, and an organ alcove complete with working organ. He designed, constructed, and decorated his theater with a meticulous attention to detail that some might say borders on obsession. Upon close inspection, however, one is most stuck by his use and adaptation of mundane household items to evoke feelings of opulence and grandeur. **TH** Brinckle describes the Everett not as gorgeous or beautiful but as pretty and homey—“just home.” And he decorated the Shalimar in an exceptionally homey style—it’s like a parlor, as though he just borrowed decorative objects from

Gallery on Greene
35

House Ad
35

Americus
35

upstairs. He created each meticulous vignette to evoke a sense of “class,” yet the individual objects represent a very middle-class or middle-American notion of class. It’s as if he adapted the style of the ornate and very glamorous art-deco movie palaces of the 1920s that he so reveres (where people who “wanted to know what the life was like for people with money” would go) to a more inviting space for the ordinary man. Large figurines of fawns and swans stand on the floor; porcelain German shepherds share tabletops with carefully aligned candlesticks and plants; a teddy bear rests on a seat; gulls hang overhead. **KM** Brinckle describes the Shalimar as “a hodgepodge of this and that, that dovetails pretty well.” At the front of the stage he created a tiny Kimball organ complete with organist. In the projection booth, he included all the necessary functional elements, including a lacing light so that he could lace the film into the projector without turning on the house lights. It’s all conceived in the “atmospheric” theater tradition



KENDALL MESSICK



COURTESY GORDON BRINCKLE

Brinckle in his Alvin Casino theater, Philadelphia, 1941

of palaces designed to evoke an Italian or Egyptian garden. He added what he calls “artistic pizzazz” and designed the décor in ways that were discouraged at the Everett. He’d be told “when you get your own theater, you can try it there,” and so he did get his own theater, in a sense, and no one could tell him “no.” The Shalimar was also his own personal retreat. This is clear when Brinckle relates during the documentary, “if I had a bad day at the Everett, I’d come home to the Shalimar and things were all right.” **TH** There is a poignant

moment in the film when Brinckle relates an event from his childhood. His father denied his request for a projector like the one his friend had because he was afraid he’d burn the house down, so his grandfather Alvin helped him create a facsimile out of a shoebox and clippings of magazine illustrations. The significance of this gesture is evident in the formal names of his two theaters, the Alvin Casino and the Alvin Shalimar. **KM** He continues to credit his grandfather for being one of the few people that encouraged his interest in movie

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theaters and projection during his formative years. **TH** One of the most striking things about your film is how Brinckle becomes almost an extension of his theater—it is part of him and he is part of it. The walls of the auditorium are painted an intense salmony pink hue, with accents of red, and in the film he wears a vivid red suit jacket with a salmon-colored shirt and matching tie. In other shots, he wears a bold jacket with a pattern that emulates the swirls he dabbed in silver paint on some of the walls. He is an accessory! Is this his everyday attire, or does he dress for his theater? **KM** During Brinckle’s final years at the Everett Theatre before it closed in 1979, he was unable to climb the stairs to get to the projection booth. As a result, he took on the role of taking tickets and walking the aisles with the flashlight to show people to their seats. He felt that it was important to dress the part by outfitting himself with brightly colored jackets. These are the same jackets that he wears throughout the documentary. Brinckle bemoans the loss of professionalism in modern movie theaters—“such cheap-looking affairs”—and the esteem a theater manager, dressed to denote his rank, once held. He says, “Today, anyone can do it.” **TH** What’s so remarkable to me is that he doesn’t appear to be at all interested in film itself. He expresses

awe for the technology—film, lights, lens, “a wonderful thing”—but it is almost as though the story told on film is irrelevant. One would think a nostalgia for old cinema would be the primary motivating factor behind this endeavor, but for Brinckle it seems the passion is solely about the experience of the theater itself. **KM** He derived his pleasure from “hearing the responses of the audience,” the laughter and applause, and knowing that he was making it all possible. In fact he rarely screened films at the Shalimar. He created it more as a peaceful, solitary retreat. **TH** You’re planning to incorporate the Shalimar, the actual construction, into a traveling exhibition to accompany the film. How does Brinckle feel about the project? **KM** He has been very enthusiastic. He shared with me that his greatest fear in recent years had been what would happen to the Shalimar after he was gone. His nagging worry had been that it would ultimately end up in the trash, never recognized or experienced by a larger audience. In addition to the documentary, I have been making still photographs of Brinckle for the last five years. These photographs, along with many of his original drawings, will also be included in the exhibition. With *The Projectionist*, and in all my films, I seek to explore the nature of memory and to reveal universal truths that surface through the intimate experiences of the individual. I am most often drawn to photograph and document people and places that have been overlooked or forgotten. ★

The Projectionist is available on DVD; see www.theprojectionist.net for more information.

Bowman 37