

**THE HISTORIC FARGO THEATRE:
A SYMBOL OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY
AND COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS**

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ABSTRACT

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The Fargo Theatre has been the gem of the Fargo, North Dakota, area for eighty-two years and is at the epicenter of the community's collective history. The theatre has hosted independent films, musical productions, vaudeville, social and political meetings, festivals, celebrations, and most importantly, memories of the people of this community, past and present. It is a physical structure that has evolved into a symbol with diverse meanings for all who know of its existence. Individual experiences and the symbolic meanings that make up the collective consciousness of the theatre, and therefore the community, are the focus of this study.

By representing diverse threads of collective memory far beyond those of mere entertainment, the Fargo Theatre is a significant and enduring symbol of Fargo's collective memory and community consciousness. Relying heavily on the theoretical work of the symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner, this study encapsulates a community spirit by exploring the life of the theatre through the memory culture of theatre patrons, theatre employees, and citizens of the Red River Valley. The accumulation of symbols and stories about the Fargo Theatre provides insight into the memory culture of our region, as well as focused insight into the Fargo community itself. The theatre is a vital part of the community consciousness via other realms of experience that are not necessarily divorced from the entertainment and pleasure aspects of the theatre. Exploring these various realms reveals unexpected symbolic richness.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The Fargo Theatre has been a part of the landscape of downtown Fargo, North Dakota for over eighty-two years (Fargo Theatre 2007) and is at the epicenter of the community's collective history. It is the type of venue where one goes to cavort with strong emotions and grounded presence through various art forms whilst partaking in memory making moments. The theatre hosts independent films, musical productions, vaudeville, social and political meetings, festivals, celebrations, and most importantly, preserved impressions of the people of this community, past and present. Evolution from an elegant Vaudeville-movie house to a multi-faceted community space has enabled the Fargo Theatre to become a symbol with diverse meanings for all who know of its existence. A symbol is "an object or other sign that has a range of culturally significant meanings" (Miller et al 2004:18). They are "arbitrary, unpredictable, and diverse" (Miller et al 2004:18). According to the anthropologist Victor Turner, the symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior (1967:20). Individual experiences and the symbolic meanings that make up the collective consciousness of the theatre, and therefore the community, are the focus of this study.

The history of the Fargo Theatre and the impact that the American movie house has had on American culture as a whole is well known. We do not always know, however, how specific theatres, built during the time of silent film and vaudeville, have impacted the communities they belong to, nor what these celebratory theatres symbolize (Abrahams 1995:vii). How has the Historic Fargo Theatre impacted the community of Fargo? What

does the theatre symbolize for the community and how has it created a memory culture? This thesis attempts to answer these questions with the aid of personal stories and memories about the theatre.

This study encapsulates a community spirit by exploring the life of the theatre through the memory culture of theatre patrons, theatre employees, and citizens of the Red River Valley. This thesis also explores the Fargo Theatre's symbolic meaning by channeling Victor Turner's need "to celebrate the richly systematic ways by which culture" finds "its most intense expression" (Abrahams 1995:vii). In order to display the many symbolic facets of the Fargo Theatre, this thesis not only exposes the beautiful art-deco architecture of the theatre in a way never seen before, but it also interviews people who have been associated with the theatre as members, actors, musicians, producers, directors, historians, artists, educators, employees, administrators, and theatre goers. Furthermore, pictures within the thesis include vintage images of the theatre and the Wurlitzer Organ, the organ that is still played before film showings and screenings of silent films, and current pictures are utilized for visual understanding and interpretation.

In 1994, a short, ten-minute documentary titled "The Fargo Theatre: Surviving Change," directed by Jason Wiltse, covered some of the basic history of the theatre and the process of restoration that occurred in the 1990s. This thesis is more ambitious, delving deep into the human aspects of the theatre, and the lives of those who have passed through its doors and performed on its stage. To my knowledge, there is no in-depth ethnographic work concerning the Fargo Theatre or any American movie house. Thus, work undertaken within this thesis is groundbreaking. Understanding the complex symbolic nature of American movie houses and the people's stories and memories about them is an important

aspect of American culture that needs to be researched, studied, and understood. It proves a viable way to better understand collective community conciseness as well as the symbolic meanings of institutions and the movie industry within American culture. One is able to come to these insights and understandings through an in-depth analysis of the Fargo Theatre.

Furthermore, the memory culture and symbolic meaning of the Fargo Theatre are important historical aspects for the theatre to preserve in order to ensure that the theatre will be around for many more years to come. The value and service to the community that this study provides is paramount. With the rich stories and data that have been collected the Fargo Theatre and the surrounding community may move forward with serious attempts at funding for future projects and study, potentially catapulting the educational and cultural reach of the theatre; an exceptionally valuable asset.

CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

American Vaudeville and Movie Theatre History

The history of performing arts and theatre in the United States is lengthy and detailed. For purposes of this study, I thought it important to understand the roots of both vaudeville and movie houses in America and the Midwest, as I found there to be a direct link with the conclusions I came to by the end of my research. Knowledge of what led to the inception of the Fargo Theatre is paramount to understanding why the theatre is so symbolic for the community. It is not only about historical symbolism and community activism, but it is about a sense of pride and connection to the arts; a community that feels artistically superior to its peers. Most “vaudefilm” houses, particularly in city and towns the size of Fargo, fell into dilapidation and were eventually torn down, left only to be a memory, but the Fargo Theatre remains (Sobel 1961:94). It is one of the few that has been rebuilt by its community and utilized for what it was originally built for—variety shows and movies. Most of these vaudeville and movie-house theatres, even in the larger cities of Chicago and New York City, have been turned into nightclubs, concert halls, art galleries, or movie-plexes. The Fargo Theatre truly is one of a kind, showcasing art films, documentaries, plays, musical concerts, comedy shows, rallies—truly nodding to its vaudeville and silent movie roots. The community of Fargo is proud of this, proud of its excellent understanding of and thirst for the arts. The Fargo Theatre is a symbol of Fargo’s perception of its artistic superiority.

Vaudeville can be traced back to many different forms of theatre, from circus acts to Greek tragedies, but American vaudeville is popularly believed to have been born out of traveling medicine acts of the mid-nineteenth century, which were in turn inspired by

Native American variety entertainment (Sobel 1961:22). The typical vaudeville performance consisted of many unusual acts, ranging from comedy, music, drama, and dance as can be seen in the following picture of the Fargo Theatre announcing a vaudeville five act show. Dr. John E. DiMeglio a former professor of history at Mankato State College (now Minnesota State College) wrote extensively on the culture and history of Vaudeville and claimed there were over two thousand vaudeville theatres throughout North America (1973:11). According to George Jessel, vaudeville actor and writer (Cullen, et al 2006:566-68), in his foreword to the book *A Pictorial History of Vaudeville*, there were “at least a thousand vaudeville engagements throughout the country” in the early twentieth century (Sobel 1961:9). The first time the word vaudeville was officially used in the United States was when a “Boston Vaudeville Saloon” declared itself a place to take in a variety program in 1840 (DiMeglio 1973:1). The first theatre committed to presenting vaudeville acts was opened in New York City in the late 1840s by William Valentine (DiMeglio 1973:1). Then, in 1871, a troupe called “Sergeant’s Great Vaudeville Company” was formed in Louisville, Kentucky (Sobel 1961:24). These events were the inception of the vaudeville form of entertainment, making it the most popular form of entertainment in a period of American history when there were many significant changes, such as World War I and II and the Great Depression, to name a few (DiMeglio 1973:1).

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, during the summer of 1896, the Bijou Opera House showed one of the area’s first moving pictures, *Persimmon Winning the Derby*, on a hand-cranked Animatograph motion-picture machine (Kenney 2007:4-5). From this point on, film grew rapidly in popularity. In 1914 the Grand Opera House in St. Paul, Minnesota, was converted into a motion-picture theatre and renamed The Strand (Kenney 2007:8).

The Miles Theatre in Minneapolis went through four incarnations, ranging from strict vaudeville to wide-screen motion-picture house, but eventually closed for good in the 1960s and was demolished (Kenney 2007:9). Many theatres in the area, however, began booking vaudeville with films, causing many theatre owners to undertake makeshift conversions in order to show the movies (Kenney 2007:9). Soon there were a plethora of theatres being built exclusively for showing cinema and most vaudeville houses were undergoing complete renovations into movie houses (Kenney 2007). As stated earlier, however, the majority of those vaudeville houses turned movie houses have been either restored to strictly live performance theatre venues like the Orpheum in St. Paul, Minnesota, or the Paramount Theatre in St. Cloud, Minnesota, or dilapidated like the State Theatre in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The Fargo Theatre survives today as one of the few dual film and theatre houses in the region, truly a rare gem from the era.

Many vaudeville performers transcended the vaudeville stage when the moving picture was invented and achieved greater popularity, for example, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Sophie Tucker, Milton Berle, and Bob Hope (Jessel *in* Sobel 1961:10). The vaudeville performer was of utmost importance to the rise of film, as the many of the first films were movies of vaudeville performers like Al Jolson and Charlie Chaplin (DiMeglio 1973:159). Countless vaudeville houses installed movie screens and became “vaudefilm” houses, while many new buildings were built specifically to house both types of entertainment, as is seen with the Fargo Theatre (Sobel 1961). Eventually, the movie house became the center attraction and the picture show replaced vaudeville acts that had been the “mainstay of popular drama for more than a generation” (Lewis 2003:17-18).



Figure 1. The Fargo Theatre, circa 1926 (Photo by the Fargo Theatre, found in the Fargo Theatre basement, 1926; Fargo, ND).

Fargo Theatre History

Built in 1926, the Historic Fargo Theatre was and still is a focal point of Fargo, North Dakota's Broadway Street. The Fargo Theatre initially housed vaudeville acts as well as silent films (Fargo Theatre 2007). The opening of the theatre included a ten-piece orchestra to accompany the showing of silent films. The theatre had an elaborate Wurlitzer Theatre Organ built into the structure and uniformed attendants opening its doors (*The Forum* March 15, 1926). The total cost of building the theatre in 1926 was \$350,000 and it was finished off with a large electric sign "bearing the letters F-A-R-G-O which alternatingly" flashed on and off (*The Forum* March 15, 1926). Margie Bailey, current executive director of the theatre, claims the Fargo Theatre was one of the first places to be air-conditioned when the technology became available. Before then, the giant theatre was cooled with large fresh-air shafts, according to the original architectural renderings from 1926.

The organ and all its pipes still work today and as seen below, are used throughout the year by the theatre when showing silent films or hosting organ concerts. The organ is the largest theatre organ between Chicago and the West Coast (Fargo Theatre 2007).

Originally designed and built in a classical style by the architecture firm of Buchner and Orth, the theatre opened lit by thousands of "mellow candle power" and decorated with art panels adorning the wall and ceiling (*The Forum* March 15, 1926). Unfortunately, there are no interior photographs of the original 1926 theatre. Bailey claims that there was a big chandelier, a much higher ceiling, and smaller seats. The exit signs were hand-crafted stained glass and there were hand-painted murals on the walls. According to Bailey, Fargo Theatre employees, and historical architectural documents, the State Theatre housed in

Sioux Falls, South Dakota, is an exact replica of the Fargo Theatre, built with the same blueprints from the same architecture firm (Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008). Fortunately, because the State was built after the Fargo Theatre, there are preserved photographs of its interior and we can see in the following picture what the Fargo Theatre interior might have looked like at its inception.



Figure 2. Interior main level seating of the State Theatre located in Sioux Falls, South Dakota (Photo by the State Theatre, 1928; Sioux Falls, SD).

In 1936, the theatre underwent reconstruction in order to fashion it into the Art Moderne style popular of the era. This was followed by two more renovations in the 1950s and 1980s to keep up with architectural needs and interior design trends (Fargo Theatre 2007). Finally, the Fargo Theatre was renovated to return its appearance back to the Art Moderne exquisiteness of the 1930s (Fargo Theatre 2007). During these years leading up to the renovation, the Fargo Theatre was used strictly as a movie house. The vaudeville shows that were popular when the theatre opened had fallen out of fashion and the theatre found more money in film and children's programming (Fargo Theatre 1950-1960).

The theatre was slow to offer its audiences refreshments and relied on outside vendors to supply them with drinks and popcorn. The “Popcorn Man” became a popular staple of trips to the theatre and many people during this study had memories of him. Michael Boosalis, a first generation immigrant from Greece, ran his popcorn stand for sixty-five years. His stand was a fixture of the Fargo downtown scene before the theatre was even a pipedream, opening in 1911, but once the Fargo Theatre was built he had the business savvy to move his cart right next door and it stayed there, even after the theatre installed its own popper, until his retirement in 1976 (*The Forum* August 26, 1976). Boosalis was such a beloved community character that *The Forum* ran two two-page articles with large pictures about his retirement and move back to his hometown in Greece (*The Forum* August 26, 1976; May 1, 1977).

Another interesting piece of the Fargo Theatre’s history is the amount of proposals and weddings that have been held in the venue, many featured in *The Forum* as well. Some couples had met at the theatre as employees and some were simply avid moviegoers, and some had their first date at the theatre (*The Forum* October 11, 1987; September 28, 1987; February 15, 1990; May 3, 1992).

In 1987, the “Save the Fargo Campaign” began a lobby renovation driven by the American Theatre Organ Society of the Red River Valley (ATOS) and dedicated volunteers. Peter Kelly remembers, “It was really threadbare carpet in the lobby. The seats were really uncomfortable with springs and coils and stuff that were often coming through. It was a red curtain that was pretty big, velvet looking, badly worn” (Interview conducted with the author on July 19, 2008). The Theatre’s managing company felt the best solution would be to sublet the building to the ATOS so they could run it as a specialty house,

showing classic, foreign, and second-run films. The management group, in a rare move, donated the theatre's equipment and paid a large amount of the monthly rent the first year of the deal (*The Forum* May 31, 1983). The ATOS was well aware of its rare gift from the management company stating, “. . . they are the ones who made this all possible. Now we're ready to roll up our sleeves and get to work” (*The Forum* June 12, 1983).

Concerned community members formed the Fargo Theatre Management Corporation. This corporation moved the theatre from a for-profit to a non-profit organization and along with the ATOS, voiced its intentions to restore the lobby and bring it back to its grandeur of the Art Moderne look of 1937, created by the firm Leibenberg and Kaplan (*The Forum* February 29, 1984). The group planned to complete the rest of the renovation at a later date due to the large expenses it would entail as the theatre's infrastructure, electrical, mechanical, and technical aspects all had to be restored.

For the giant task of renovating the theatre, the group in charge wanted to make sure everything was done exactly to the 1937 specifics. According to Margie Bailey, they used pictures of the 1937 interior to recreate the carpet patterns and visual elements in the lobby (Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008). The organ was dismantled and restored and then finally, in 1984, the theatre opened up as a movie house and live theatre venue. The first live theatre seen at the film house since its vaudeville days, the Mahkahta Dance Theatre presented original dances and poetry set to the music of the organ, the F-M Chamber Chorale sang, and a 16mm film was shown (*The Forum* March 11, 1984).

In 1993, the theatre began efforts for the rest of the renovation. This time, the marquee, the main stage, and interior were brought fully into the 1937 look. The

community was enthralled and fully supportive of the undertaking; they rallied behind its beloved theatre. Margie Bailey remembers the community response:

[During the renovation and once they had the marquee reinstalled and lighted] it was one of the kind of unplanned things where people just sort of came in from the outside and we did these sort of spontaneous mini tours. [During the grand reopening] we had seven nights of different things where we displayed, illuminated, all the capacities of the Fargo Theatre. That was a really wonderful and exciting time. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

The renovation in the 1990s also saw the theatre bring in art house films and more live productions, driving the organization to implement a large capital fund drive in order to accrue members and donors (*The Forum* October 31, 1993). The following photograph highlights the before of the Fargo Theatre restoration.

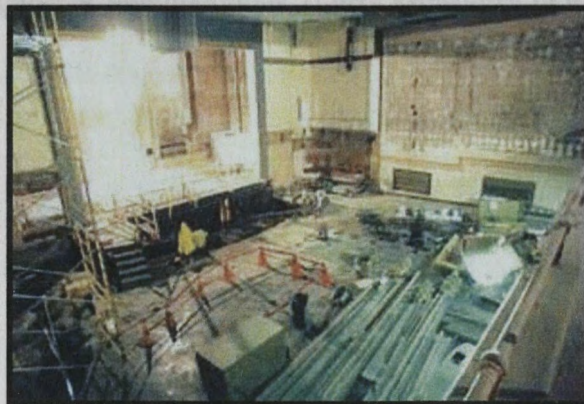


Figure 3. 1997 Fargo Theatre renovations, looking toward the stage from the balcony (Photo from the Fargo Theatre personal collection, 1997; Fargo, ND).

Throughout the years, the theatre has expanded its repertoire from vaudeville and movies to political rallies, discussion panels, special events, concerts, musicals, plays, and weddings (Fargo Theatre 2007). The movie component of the theatre increased as well when, in 1999, the Fargo Film Festival was established and the Library of Congress held their film preservation tour at the institution (Fargo Film Festival 2007). Since 1999, the

Fargo Film Festival has grown in scale and importance within the Upper Midwest, as well as the greater film festival community, and has brought international attention to the entire Red River Valley area. The Fargo Theatre beyond doubt is one in a million, fortunate to have been saved as is evident in the depressing scarcity of movie houses today. Author and Pulitzer Prize winner Larry McMurtry has projected this same sentiment in an excerpt he wrote for the book *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater*:

. . . and now from one coast to the other and from the Gulf to the Dakotas the picture shows stood dead. There were so many of them, and the starkness of their blank marquees and posterless fronts was so eloquent of other styles of living, other times, that one could hope that some present-day Walker Evans would photograph a few hundred of them before they all cave in, or are sold and turned into restaurants, antique shops, garages, and boutiques. [Larry McMurtry in Putnam 2000:25]

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Generally, anthropologists try to be objective participants and observers. I was compelled to approach my study in this way. However, just as anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker found when studying the culture of Hollywood, it grew increasingly difficult to separate myself and be a neutral observer when the staff progressively shared more details and emotions concerning the management of the Fargo Theatre (Powdermaker 1950:4). I did, however, attempt to stay as neutral as possible, allowing the staff to share their sentiments with me without making any strong statements about the topics and gossip. No direct quotes concerning the nature of these conversations are used in the study. Instead, I have opted to use more generalized statements that concern the overall culture of the theatre.

To truly observe and understand the symbols and narrative history of the Fargo Theatre, I completed a large number of interviews. Since this thesis was to be developed in tandem with a documentary concerning the same issues, many of the interviews are videotaped with the audio portions recorded for transcription. The interviews include a variety of people associated with the Fargo Theatre, such as current and former employees, community members, movie patrons, and others who have been impacted by the Fargo Theatre in some significant way. Arranging these interviews was relatively easy, as there were many people that had heard about the project and came forward to offer their time, insights, and stories.

At the point of first edits of this thesis, the documentary, characteristically, was still in production and was progressing at an increasingly sluggish tempo. During my final edits the documentary project had ceased all together. The moment I observed videotaped

interviews growing further apart on the schedule, I took it upon myself to arrange audiotaped interviews, sans camera crew. Alas, I felt compelled to venture about and collect the interviews I believed were indispensable to this thesis project. Many of the interviews were easy to obtain, as stated in the aforementioned paragraph, and people were quite interested in discussing the Fargo Theatre. Loitering at the theatre proved constantly favorable, as several strangers I met there were exceptionally open and eager to give me their narrative about the Fargo Theatre.

The category of informants I selected exposed enough of a varied section of the population for a proper study. I elected to interview not only those who had been directly affected by the theatre in some way but also those who harbor a more tangential relationship with the space. I feel these informants make up the greater culture group of the Fargo Theatre. I attempted to make “the sample as representative and as complete a picture of working relationships as possible” (Powdermaker 1950:4). I am not doing a quantitative study to expose social groupings and their impressions of the theatre, but rather a description of the culture of the Fargo Theatre as representative of the grander community consciousness concerning the theatre.

I did periods of participant observation, partaking in festivities and gathering notes and thoughts during certain key events at the theatre. Events that I attended in order to complete participant observation were the Fargo Film Festival, the Celebration of Women and Their Music, Classic Movie Week, Silent Film Night, Take Back the Night March and Rally, and impromptu days hanging out at the theatre with the staff and patrons, as I felt it was “important to encourage spontaneity” (Powdermaker 1950:5). There were times I would drive by the theatre and impulsively stop in for a visit. Those were occasions when I

did not have pad and pen or recording device and those also seemed to be the times when I gathered some of my richest information and intimate knowledge. Many anthropologists experience this phenomenon during participant observation as stated by cultural anthropologist, Hortense Powdermaker—Powdermaker’s focus of study was on Hollywood and movie stars in the 1950s: “When I want fairly intimate data, I get more by not writing during the interview even at the risk of forgetting some details” (1950:6).

Additionally, I completed extensive background research concerning the theatre’s history and culture through artifact investigation. Lying beneath the theatre itself is an extensive basement filled with photos, props, playbills, documents, furniture, and scenery drops that never have been catalogued or inspected. With full access to these material items, I was able to photograph, document, and organize some of the findings for this project. Fragile scenery drops, perhaps from the early days of the theatre when there were regular vaudeville acts taking place, have been located, along with a photograph showcasing one of them during an organ concert from the 1970s. These scenery drops appear to be in dire need of documentation, archival restoration, and further study. Tucker Lucas, former Fargo Theatre employee speaks directly about this issue:

A serious undertaking needs to happen to physically preserve the elements of the theatre. Especially documents and boxes in the basement, old artifacts, things like that. I wish they had taken the proposal more seriously. They need to do that at some point. Whoever Margie’s successor is, I’m hoping it’s someone who’s young and understands that, because that needs to be a major goal. It’s going to cost money but it’s going to be worth it. That needs to happen at some point. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]



Figure 4. Stage backdrops dating from the theatre's beginning hanging in the Fargo Theatre basement under pipes (Photo by Jessica Rau, June 20, 2008; Fargo, ND).



Figure 5. Basement walls plastered with old movie and vaudeville posters (Photo by Jessica Rau, June 20, 2008; Fargo, ND).

In the beginning of this project, the Fargo Theatre expressed interest in developing a museum within its walls to showcase the history and culture of the theatre. I thought it might be possible to produce a virtual reality recreation of the theatre throughout its many renovations, along with a possible restoration of the scenery drops, by utilizing the technology available through the North Dakota State University Archaeology Technology Lab. In order to construct this portion of the project, a trip to the Sioux Falls State Theatre was planned and contact with the people in charge of the State Theatre was made. According to architectural renderings and documents from the original buildings, the State Theatre was built with the same blueprints as the Fargo Theatre, yet it has not gone through renovations or redecorations like the Fargo Theatre and has been left relatively untouched since its inception. To get a better understanding of the original architecture and historical context for the stories that were going to be unearthed, a visual of the past was imperative in my mind. Unfortunately, the disorganization of the documentary took over the scheduling and we were unable to get all parties in Sioux Falls at the same time. At another time during the study, a colleague of mine and I decided to see if we could make some movement on this front with a formal proposal. Travis Kitch, North Dakota State University lecturer and historical archaeologist, and I visited the basement of the theatre to document and photograph some of the findings. Kitch drew up a formal timeline and proposal for the Fargo Theatre board and presented it to Margie Bailey. The proposal was never adopted and neither Kitch nor I were contacted to take the matter further. I chose to approach the topic with Margie Bailey again and was told there just was not enough time or money but that it was a good idea. I selected to shelve this fraction of the study, as it looked as if it would be too great a project for one researcher, with the hopes of either

completing it at some time in the future with the documentary crew or with Kitch, or at least giving the idea to the theatre to exploit when they feel inspired to.

This study examines interviews in terms of their symbolic significance and semantic dimensions. Anthropologist Victor Turner spent most of his career writing theory on the symbolic nature of culture and to this day is the foremost expert on symbolic interpretation, his ideas of which “provided an important epicenter for symbolic anthropology” (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:502). According to Turner, symbols have three aspects: the exegetic, the operational, and the positional (1973:1103). Defined, this means that the structure and properties of symbols can be acquired three ways, from the external observations of its characteristics, the specialist or layperson interpretations, and the significant contexts determined by the anthropologist (Turner 1976:20). An attempt to use these three dimensions within the investigative and diagnostic methodology of this project has been made.

Employing the exegetic, operational, and positional aspects clearly defines specific symbols within the Fargo Theatre and within the larger Fargo community. First, an examination of the direct explanations given by the interviewees during the interview as to the importance of the Fargo Theatre and symbolic qualities of its existence will be discussed. This develops the exegetic portion of any symbolic importance and allows for native interpretation and understanding (Turner 1973:1103). Following exegetic examination, an operational assessment of said symbols follows. Under the operational examination, one “equate(s) a symbol’s meaning with its use,” i.e., observe how the interviewees utilize it and relate to it (Turner 1973:1103). To achieve this, I paid special attention to other nonverbal actions and the cultural values they represent as they relate to

each symbol (Turner 1973:1103). Finally, the positional aspect of the symbol is considered. During positional analysis, one is able to find correlations or relationships between symbols of both the Fargo Theatre and those symbols housed within (Turner 1973:1103). Through the examination of groups of symbols utilized together, messages concerning the culture's "thought, ethics, esthetics, and law" are discerned (Turner 1973:1103).

Turner also states that symbols have three properties: condensation, unification of disparate significata, and polarization of meaning (1967:27-28). The property of condensation means that many things and actions, i.e., symbols, are represented in single formation. The unification of disparate significata explains the connection of symbols through common qualities, facts, or thoughts. Polarization of meaning shows how dominant symbols can have distinguishable poles of meaning, the sensory pole and the ideological pole, in which norms and values and desires and feelings are represented. This method of symbol property classification has proven useful within this study. The method affords one the ability to properly describe and understand each symbol of the Fargo Theatre (Turner 1967:28).

Through this methodological approach, as stated prior, I am cognizant and aware of any persons, categories, and groups that may be absent from the symbolic situation. Any evidence of exclusion provides further clues as to cultural values and attitudes of the Fargo Theatre and the Fargo community, but is not microscopically observed at this time, in this study (Turner 1973:1103).

CHAPTER 4. THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

To understand the culture of the Fargo Theatre, an in-depth analysis of its traditions and narratives via the model of Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology theory has proven beneficial. According to some writers, Turner skillfully combined theory with artistic meaning, recording a culture "with the same abundance of meanings that literary critics brought to the analysis of great works of art" (Abrahams 1995:vi). The theatre structure, the Wurlitzer organ, the events and the movies, all symbolize important artistic aspects of the Fargo Theatre. The accumulation of symbols and stories about the Fargo Theatre provides insight into the memory culture of our region, as well as focused insight into the Fargo-Moorhead community itself (Turner 1969:8).

By analyzing the narratives concerning these artistic symbolic structures, one is able to better understand how the Fargo Theatre group "develops ways for channeling common energies" (Abrahams 1995:vi). Culture can be found in people's understandings and stories of rituals, events, artifacts, and things, therefore the culture of both the Fargo Theatre and the larger Fargo area is revealed within the stories of the people who take part in this study. If indeed "dominant symbols represent sets of fundamental themes," and the dominant "symbol appears in many rituals," then one can conclude from these narratives that the Fargo Theatre is a dominant symbol for the Fargo community (Turner 1973:1101). In other words, one discovers how the people of the Fargo Theatre and the Fargo area give meanings to their reality and how that reality is expressed by the cultural symbols within the theatre itself.

Since a society's rituals are comprised of cultural symbols, the ritual of attending events at the Fargo Theatre has provided an unusually rich source for theoretical

application. One of the most important symbols is of that of the Fargo Theatre marquee. The symbol of the marquee is one for which I found multiple meanings for individuals and for the community as a whole. According to Turner, “Each symbol expresses not one theme but many themes simultaneously” (1973:1101). Moreover, the marquee expresses the ability of both an “instrumental” and “dominant” symbol, as it is a “means to the ends” with an explicit purpose when it is used and is “present in any number of ritual events and being used for a variety of meanings” (Erickson and Murphy 2003:138). The multivocality of the marquee leads one to affirm the Fargo Theatre as a “dominant” symbol of community memory.

Through the ubiquitous, dominant symbol of the Fargo Theatre and its internal wealth of meanings, one is able to garner information, “not only about the natural environment as perceived and evaluated by the ritual actors” but also about the community and individual “ideas, ideals, and rules” (Turner 1973:1103). The messages of the symbols studied in this project speak of actions and circumstances, as well as the “culture’s basic structures of thought, ethics, esthetics, law, and modes of speculation about new experience” (Turner 1973:1103). This furthers the concept of the Fargo Theatre as “the repository of the whole gamut of the culture’s values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships” (Turner 1969:103).

The Fargo Theatre, its ability to “stand for unity and continuity . . . embracing its contradictions,” such as the continual showcasing of silent films and current independent films, and its many groups within, can be understood as Turner’s *communitas* (Turner *in* Erickson and Murphy 2003:138). The concept of “*communitas*” denotes a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals and is the ideal view of a culture

(Turner 1969:131 and Bohannan and Glazer 1988:502). The people of the Fargo Theatre as well as the structure itself are an example of this through their exhibition of an “increased awareness of the social order” and importance of the theatre for the Fargo-Moorhead community (Erickson and Murphy 2003:139). For example, within the theatre there are various groups of employees, board members, patrons and so forth all of which make up smaller *communitas* within the larger *communitas* of the Fargo Theatre and all of which have had to arise through various states of liminality and growth. Liminality, a stage of being neither here nor there within rites and rituals of a culture, according to Turner, develops *communitas* (Bohannan and Glazer 1988:502). It is argued that the three types of *communitas*, existential or spontaneous, normative, and ideological, have all been found within the theatre. Existential or spontaneous *communitas* is represented by the groups that gather during any event at the theatre, normative *communitas* are found within the employees and board members of the theatre, and ideological *communitas* is represented by the Fargo Theatre structure (Turner 1969:132). Each *communitas* is aware of its collective classification, yet each *communitas* comes together in a performance of solidarity to create the larger whole (Erickson and Murphy 2003:139). Without all the various groups and rituals within the theatre there would be no Fargo Theatre.

The Fargo Theatre reached its solidified *communitas* state through varying states of liminality (Turner 1969:96). There have been many times, throughout the history of the theatre, in which it was not as active in the community, the organ was not played, and its seats were only used to screen movies. Yet it slowly became part of Fargo-Moorhead’s consciousness over and over again until it emerged completely, having gained “full membership in” its “status” (Bohannan and Glazer 1988:502). The Fargo Theatre has

reached a state of aggregation and is fully reincorporated into the community having become a symbol that would laugh with the community, respect the community, and welcome everyone within the community (Turner 1969:94,105). It has emerged from liminality (although some could see the theatre as in a constant state of liminality do to its endless fundraisers and building projects) as a symbolic cultural chief, the “ideal view of” Fargo-Moorhead (Bohannon and Galzer 1988:502).

I found the obvious salient symbols and *communitas* in my interviews – the Mighty Wurlitzer organ and Fargo Theatre employees – but also I found the unexpected. After all, the theatre has been used by the community for education, political events, funerals, and even weddings. The theatre is a vital part of the community consciousness via other realms of experience that are not necessarily divorced from the entertainment and pleasure aspects of the theatre. As Victor Turner points out, “All human act is impregnated with meaning, and meaning is hard to measure, though it can often be grasped, even if only fleetingly and ambiguously” (1986:33). Exploring these various realms reveal unexpected symbolic richness. Theory concerning how the collective consciousness of a community has developed through symbols was attempted with my primary focus on the Fargo Theatre and the varied aspects within it.

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS

The words that one chooses to use to emote the feelings of a memory are significant and are usually thought of clearly and with accuracy and intention by the one remembering. The subjects of this study are wonderful examples of this phenomenon as they carefully and purposely explain the memories and feelings the Fargo Theatre invokes for them. The following excerpts are from various conversations I had with people within the Fargo community and those removed from it. Specific categories appear throughout the conversations. Memories, Employee Culture, The Mighty Wurlitzer Organ, The Marquee and Architecture, and Special Events were organically occurring categories within the discussions, each symbolizing an impression about the Fargo Theatre. Within the individual vernacular of each informant, central feelings and emotions and memories are able to come forth as representatives of the collective whole, symbolizing the deep collective meaning of the Fargo Theatre.

Memories

This first category, “memories” seems to be a fairly obvious grouping to represent the collective memory and consciousness of the community concerning the Fargo Theatre. Many are predictable memories, yet all are individual to the subject. More importantly and perhaps counter-intuitively, these foreseeable, single memories are collective. Most memories consist of the first movie watched at the theatre, a first date, a particularly moving moment, and so forth, all representing what the community as a whole has experienced at the Fargo Theatre. The memories range from beautifully simplistic to complicated and filled with deeper symbolism. The best way to learn of these memories is

to read the stories directly as spoken by the informant, as he or she was remembering them at that moment. The following memories are straightforward and need little explanation or introduction.

We start with John Lamb. John is quite well known throughout Fargo. He writes a column for the local newspaper, *The Forum*. John lives downtown and has lived in Fargo most of life, excluding a brief year in Duluth, Minnesota. John likes to joke around and remembers vividly and accurately names and dates of the important moments in his life. He has a deep love for Fargo as well as a deep Fargo accent. His first memories of the Fargo Theatre consist mainly of movies and concerts:

On my twentieth birthday, I went there to see *Miller's Crossing* with my mom. [But] the first time I can remember going there was probably like in the early 80s, going there with my dad to see some Earl Flynn Robin Hood type thing. They would have two movies at the same time so you could go to the double feature. I saw *The Last Temptation of Christ* there and the theatre was being picketed for showing a quote, unquote sacrilegious movie. Quotes don't show up on audiotape. I've seen concerts there. I remember going to see some Madd Frank. Do you remember who Madd Frank was? Madd Frank was [known] as Deltavorchek. He had this kind of spooky movie thing on KVRR (local television channel). It was a scary movie night and it was some bad movie. I remember going there with some friends in high school. . .being a little rambunctious and making more noise than we probably should've. I saw Arlo Guthrie, Lyle Lovett, Steve Earl and more. I've used it pretty well. I've gotten some mileage out of it. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]

John continues to talk about his memories and comes across an important and liminal time in his life when he was just starting out as a young writer, living on his own in downtown Fargo:

There's been times where I've come out of work and gone to the five o'clock movie, especially when it's hot out. I was behind on my payment for Excel Energy [the local electric company] and so my power at home was cut off and I couldn't even have a fan, so I scraped up enough quarters and went to the movie theatre. I

paid my bill the next day. There's been times when I've gone there and been like the only person there and you know it sucks for the staff that has to wait on one person. . .I've been that guy. I think one night I went in the middle of winter and I was going to go to the midnight movie. I paid for it and I went in and came up before the movie started to get something to drink and the guy behind the counter said, "Look, ah, there's no one else here, you know we'll give you three movie passes." I can't remember how many it was but I got a couple of movie passes for leaving. I got paid for not going to my movie. It was pretty sweet. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]



Figure 6. John Lamb during an interview in his office at *The Forum* (Photo by Jessica Rau, September 28, 2008; Fargo, ND).

Peter Kelly is a Fargo resident who has recently returned to the area after a few decades living in New York City. Kelly returned to the area to be with family and to take care of his aging mother. His speech is happy and upbeat, yet he harbors the sarcastic undertone known of most New Yorkers. Peter is part owner of the Green Market, an

organic and gourmet catering and lunch spot located in the Plains Art Museum of Fargo.

Growing up in Fargo, Peter has many memories of the Fargo Theatre, mainly from his teenage years in the 1970s:

I remember the popcorn, really sticky concrete floors, the sense of freedom, cause your parents would drop you off which—was a big deal, so we could play, run around, go up into the balcony, popcorn fights, the organ was always interesting to me, the curtains. When I was a kid they had a lot of matinees for children. The parents would drop their kids off and there would be a lot of screaming kids. For a while in the 70s they closed the balcony to kids. They were misbehaving in the balcony, throwing things, sodas on people. They were mostly *Godzilla* movies and the original *King Kong* in the early 70s and late 60s. I remember when *Star Wars* played there. I think I took my little brother there around ten times. When it first started to show art films I remember being really pleased that there was any kind of venue in town that showed those films. It was really amazing to see it at the Fargo Theatre. [Interview conducted with the author on July 19, 2008]

Muriel Domm grew up on a farm in southern North Dakota. Today she lives in Fargo. Twice widowed and once divorced, she has five sons. She is tall, wears wide-brimmed hats, always has her make-up done, and proudly displays every diamond she owns on every finger of both of her hands. As a young woman, she attended a business school in Fargo, living in a boarding house with other women from the school. Her earliest memories of the Fargo Theatre are from that time:

We would go there on Sunday afternoons to go to the movies. I know Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies, dancing, Gene Kelly, *Singing in the Rain*. . .we had a lot of neat movies back then, we didn't have this terror and guts and blood and it was neat. They had these big velvet drapes, they were closed and then when the movie started they would open and just look so neat. I think it was dark burgundy and blues and bright colors and the carpets were all swirled and gold and blues and reds and it was a fun time. We lived on South Eighth Street and all my girlfriends and I would go. We lived in a boarding house. A little fat man played the organ. [Interview conducted with author on July 14, 2008]

Janet Letnes Martin is a local writer, playwright, actress, and comedian. She grew up near Fargo and now resides in Hastings, Minnesota. Janet and her writing partner have authored many humoristic books and plays concerning the culture of being Norwegian Lutheran and Norwegian Catholic. Their play, "Church Basement Ladies," opened at the Fargo Theatre. Subsequently, Janet has vivid memories of the theatre. The following recollections were told during a family picnic with screaming children and adults everywhere. Janet, a reformed chain-smoker, speaks with a scruffy and sarcastic voice dripping with a Minnesota-Norwegian accent:

When we got a little older and in high school we would go, but the Fargo Theatre was kind of falling into disarray at that time. Of course now it's completely renovated and it's just a jewel in the Red River Valley. I know my most memorable experience, but here's my first. I grew up in a very conservative Lutheran home where you could not go to movies. But that doesn't mean we didn't go to movies. I got to go to the Fargo Theatre to see the Song of Norway. But my best friend from high school, her mother let her go to movies, so I went down with her to see movies, and I saw Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, *Cleopatra* down there. I saw *Ben Hur* there and it was amazing coming from Hillsboro cause Fargo was like the BIG city to go to a big theatre. We were just excited to be in a theatre. It was a big thing for us growing up in a Lutheran community. You weren't supposed to go to shows because that was a sin. It was big time. Another memory of the Fargo Theatre is my mother like anybody in that era kept scrapbooks. And of course they told us that we couldn't go to show. But once they died we started looking at their scrapbooks, we saw they had gone to show and one of the neighbor ladies said, "Oh yeah, we always used to go to the show with them before we were married and had kids." My mother would save the stubs of the shows. Well, we didn't know this until after they were dead, you know. . .it's like you never knew your mother was pregnant until the baby was born, so they weren't going to let us know they went to show when they told us it was wrong. [Interview conducted with author on June 28, 2008]

Prairie Rose is a principal informant for this study. She is what anthropologists call a "star informant," as she has worked for the Fargo Theatre for many years. Prairie Rose has been involved in Fargo society her whole life, having been raised by community

activists and being one herself as an adult, her name is well-known throughout town. She speaks softly but with precision and finds humor in much of her memories, particularly the memories dealing with the employees of the theatre. A few months after giving this interview, Prairie left her job at the theatre in order to go back to college. These are her significant and early memories of the Fargo Theatre:

I remember going there for school productions. We'd go there and sit in the balcony and watch children's productions on stage, storybook fantasy-like productions. As kids it was really cool to be up in the balcony. We sat very comfortably in the front row in the balcony at that time. I remember that those were good experiences. I may not remember what was on stage [but] being at the Fargo Theatre really provided this quality that we were someplace special. It was a cool experience.

My first movie that I remember actually going to in high school was *Barbarella*. The one with Jane Fonda. But my earliest memories of the Fargo Theatre are going in some Saturday when I was little and those big, crappy, just nasty chairs to watch cartoons. That was the only time we ever went when I was little. I was pretty young. The place was packed.

I've been there for several weddings. There's been four weddings since my time there. We don't do them anymore. They don't go into our mission. The only way we'd do a wedding at the Fargo Theatre is if one of our employees decided to get married there and we may accommodate that. The funerals we had were Ted Larson's, who was a great filmmaker in the Fargo area who contributed a lot to education. He helped start the Fargo Film Festival. He's got a legacy. We've had tributes to those who have passed on as well. Like Bill Snyder who was another phenomenal filmmaker in the local area. We had his tribute at the Fargo Theatre. Packed the houses for all of these things. A sad but joyous occasion. A celebration of the life of these phenomenal people. Rusty Casselton recently. Rusty was a filmmaker. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Many people, when asked about their most vivid memories of the Fargo Theatre, bring up the popcorn man. He seems to be a symbol himself, representing the Fargo Theatre even though he was never affiliated with the organization. The popcorn man's location, in the parking lot next to the theatre, unconsciously places him within the realm of

Fargo Theatre memories. Prairie Rose illustrates his importance among the community while recalling more memories of her own:

The popcorn man who was downtown, I don't know how long he was there. Maybe in the 60s or 70s or 80s there was a guy who sold popcorn on the street, and that's what the folks brought into the movie theatre. To hear all these people who remember the Fargo Theatre as this great movie house, they can even tell you what movie they saw, that they heard the organ, and then they mention the popcorn. The Fargo Theatre never sold popcorn. They got it from a guy on the street so it was really interesting. Now popcorn is one of our biggest moneymakers. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Margie Bailey is the current Executive Director of the Fargo Theatre. Margie, pronounced "Mar Gee," did not move to Fargo until she was a young adult, married, and starting a family. She moved here with her husband who was from the area. Margie is a musician and was extremely involved with the arts upon her arrival. She didn't get involved, however, with the Fargo Theatre until much later. Margie is vibrant, talkative, colorful, and expressive. Her office is filled with movie posters, pictures of movie and music stars that have visited the theatre, and boxes and piles of paper-work, the filing system of the theatre. Her memories are interesting, as while she was remembering she would slip in and out of her public relations vernacular concerning the theatre. The following is a short first memory, but Margie, like Prairie Rose, is a star informant and will be frequently visited within the other categories:

My first memory is 1977, bringing the kids here. I was pregnant with my third son and brought our two older kids here for a Saturday afternoon matinee. I remember I was freezing to death. I was so cold. I can't even remember what the film was, actually. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

Local boy done good Chuck Klosterman is quite famous. A writer, Klosterman has penned more than his share of articles for *Spin* and *Esquire* magazines, as well as a few best-selling books. His books and many of his articles deal with life in small town North Dakota, juxtaposed against pop culture. Klosterman grew up in Wyndmere, North Dakota and lived in Fargo for many years before becoming famous. Subsequently, he has many friends who still reside here and John Lamb, one of my informants, happens to be one. Through this connection, I was able to obtain a few words from Klosterman during a recent book-signing tour. We met for dinner and drinks after a reading he did at North Dakota State University. There were approximately ten other people at this dinner, but I was lucky enough, and strategic enough, to sit directly across from him. Klosterman's memory of the Fargo Theatre:

I had this great date experience there in the balcony. I had been trying to get this girl to go out with me and she finally said yes when I told her I had passes to the Fargo Theatre. When we arrived we decided to sit in the balcony. It was because of those passes to the Fargo Theatre that I got that date! [Interview conducted with the author on September 30, 2008]

After telling this story, many people at the table, some of who were on the Fargo Theatre board, told stories about the balcony. They were so excited to tell stories that it was hard to differentiate them and pay attention to just one. Everyone was talking over one another. One man, who is an active Fargo Theatre board member, said that he used to "make out" with one of the projectionists in the projection booth. He and his friends call this girl, this memory, "the blonde chick projection girl story."

Harriet Hendricks is an eighty-two-year-old woman who has lived her whole life in North Dakota. She grew up an hour south of Fargo. Harriet is a lively woman with a

sparkle of life in her eye. She speaks very clearly and softly, yet confidently and with drama. She has spoken about her memories before, not specifically about the Fargo Theatre but at a conference workshop that focused on elders in the community and their lessons on life. Harriet is very proud to give her wisdom and history away to others and so she was very proud to be interviewed for this project. Harriet has many memories representing the collective whole of her generation. A generation that grew up during World War II and the Great Depression, her memories are based on the senses:

The first memory that comes to my mind is the elegance of it. The looks of it, not only the interior but also exterior. It was like a diamond in the street. In Broadway because it had the neon lights that shown up brilliantly it looked really majestic to me. I also recall always seeing that popcorn stand on the outside of the theatre and they had good popcorn. So if we were shopping in Fargo we would stop by the theatre and get our popcorn before we'd go home. We maybe were really lucky if we went in the theatre. We got to buy tickets so we couldn't have treats. I still yet have that picture in my mind of touching that plush and how you kind of felt special 'cause you were in some place that was really neat and special and beautiful. Many years later after we came here to Fargo we went there and it still had that same air, aura. It was still here, something in the past but it still was magnificent and lovely. You know that there was a lot of happiness that came from it. [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

William "Tucker" Lucas is a former employee of the Fargo Theatre and resident filmmaker. Tucker is a young man, full of excitement for his projects. He wants to be a known filmmaker and loves Fargo. He is also full of wit and introspection and is another star informant for this research. He has lived in Fargo most of his life so his memories begin as a young child:

The first memory I think of would be when I went to go see *The Little Mermaid* there as a kid. I think that was the first time I ever went to the Fargo Theatre. I remember specifically because I was terrified of Ursula [the main evil character in the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*]. I remember the theatre, being in there and Ursula getting huge, she grows really big in it. I remember covering my eyes. I

was way too afraid of Ursula. I went with my parents. My dad probably laughed. Of things I would call memories [of the Fargo Theatre], that's the first. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

Employee Culture

The feeling of importance within social activist movements and movie culture radiates from the *communitas* of the employee within the Fargo Theatre. In a 2007 article about sacred spaces in *The Forum*, the staff were quoted saying:

From when we open the doors in the early morning, [until] we lock them in the late hours of the night, there is a feeling all of its own within these walls. We provide a service for the people and a preservation of a place that serves the people – a creative space, a place that we consider a sacred space. It's a place of beauty and inspiration.

This is a place of history, evolving entertainment innovation, a jewel in our community, sometimes celebrated, sometimes forgotten, for us, a refuge, not just a place of employment. This isn't just a job for us, this place creates a family, though over time will change, this place allows us to connect to a living history that will grow even more in the years to come and we, we are a part of that [*The Forum* November 10, 2007].

Throughout history, the staff of the Fargo Theatre has felt a genuine attachment to the space. Part of the basement was even, at one time, converted into a makeshift apartment and lived in by a manager. Numerous myths about the former resident of this “apartment” abound in staff storytelling, mainly in the realm of the “crazy strange guy who lived in the basement.” They named him the Phantom of the Fargo Theatre in homage to the well-known story of the “Phantom of the Opera.”



Figure 7. Makeshift apartment in the basement of the Fargo Theatre. Picture showcases the shower and medicine cabinet (Photo by Jessica Rau, September 12, 2008; Fargo, ND).

Current staff members have their own stories and narratives that are repeated within their communities. The following stories concern a specific game called Sardines. This game is apparently practiced among many groups. However, one story concerning the game has become popular among the Fargo Theatre staff. The following excerpts are from three Fargo Theatre staff members telling the story about a particular game of Sardines regarding former employee William Block. The first is a narrative from Prairie Rose. It is the initial account of the Sardines stories told to me during my research that led to asking the other employees about it:

Sardines is like Hide-and-Seek. The theatre and all of its grandeur and great construction is the best place for hide and seek. It's the opposite of Hide-and-Seek. One person hides and everybody finds that person, then hides with them until the last person finds them. So we have on occasion had midnight staff parties where we go and play Sardines. Sardines is such a fun game where we play for hours. Seriously, four hours can go by and we have a great run of Sardines. You can hide anywhere but the administrative offices, the roof, and the catwalk. We don't want anybody in the fly systems 'cause it's just too dangerous. We had an employee named Will Block who was awesome, a great guy. Somehow he didn't understand catwalks or that you can't be in the fly systems. We were looking for hours for this guy! Hours! We were just going to give up. I had a nose for finding everybody. I always found everybody right away. I don't know what it is, you know, my native tracking skills?? So we started a new game and he wasn't allowed to hide first anymore. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

William Block is a former employee of the Fargo Theatre. He has lived most of his life in Fargo, but currently resides in Chicago, Illinois. He is the quintessential movie buff. He knows everything about movies, everything about how to make movies and everything about the Fargo Theatre. William and I became fast friends after meeting him for this interview. He is a friendly person, concerned about the welfare of the arts within all our communities and especially Fargo. He is also the star of the Sardines story. The following is his version of the story:

It wasn't my fault. I was just in the lobby talking to a friend while Prairie was explaining the rules of the game. I came in and she said, "Now who wants to hide?" I said, "I'll hide!" Except I missed the whole part where you couldn't climb on ladders. I was really pleased with myself cause nobody was finding me. It kept going on and on and finally I was like, "Maybe I'm doing something wrong." I believe it's called Sardines. I'd never heard about it before. Basically, you pick one person to go and hide. They sit there and then you run around looking for them. If you find them, you sit next to them. You don't say anything. You scrunch up into a ball and hide with them. The game ends when the last person finds everyone scrunched up like sardines. No one was supposed to go in the rafters or climb the ladders or anything dangerous. It was the staff party, so everybody had a little alcoholic beverage. I ran to the back to make sure everyone thought I was going to go hide somewhere else and then I went through the maze systems and popped up through the green room in the back, ran up there and sat there watching everyone run around like chickens with their heads cut off. They were getting more

and more annoyed. They came and got the microphone working and started telling jokes on the main stage 'cause they just gave up. I was like, "I'm really too good at this game." I climbed down. They were like, "You can't do that! You aren't supposed to go up there!" I haven't played it since. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

Finally, we hear a version of the story as told by Tucker. It is important to point out, if the reader has not done so already, that the versions of the sardines story are somewhat different:

Sardines. . .how stupid. It has nothing to do with the Fargo Theatre. Prairie just likes to play it there. It's like the reverse of hide and seek. It's not like a tradition there. Prairie just liked to do it. No one liked to do it but Prairie liked to do it. One person hides and everyone tries to find that person. When you do find that person you have to hide in there. When the last person isn't able to find anyone, he or she loses. It can be fun, but usually when we're playing it after a few drinks. We wouldn't want to. She wouldn't make us, but she would be so earnest about it that most of us would cave. It was okay. I would rather just have been drinking really hard instead of running around exerting myself. There's so many places to hide in that place that it gets frustrating after a while; it's hard to find people. Often times I'd just give up and go drink instead. Or just go sit in the projectionist booth and do my own thing. Maybe they'll still play it now that Prairie doesn't work there anymore, maybe not. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

Sardines is only one aspect of the culture that is the Fargo Theatre employee communitas. Fargo Theatre employees have many things to say about what the theatre and the relationships they have cultivated there mean to them. We hear again from Prairie Rose, William Block, and Tucker about the meaning of the Fargo Theatre for them.

Prairie Rose:

We have a creative staff in general. I think it's a rarity to go to work every day at a great place, then to work with phenomenal people. I don't know if they would actually be in each other's circles in any other way, in any other environment other than working at the Fargo Theatre. It has a high turnover rate. I suppose we have a

new group of staff every two years or so 'cause it's a creative environment and young people leave this area. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

William Block:

I'm so happy that I got a job there. Fargo would have been hell. I was living in my parent's basement, I'm that guy. When I got back here there were only like three or four people that I would still hang out with. Only one of them was a really good friend. I really like things that are extremely chaotic. I love working in chaos and the Fargo Theatre has a little bit of that, especially during the big events, the Blenders or Film Festivals. It was like a playhouse. I became friends with everyone right away. It's been the only job where I've been like, "I sort of want to come in today and hang out and have fun." I worked there ten months. I could never work at another theatre again. I'd go crazy. I didn't really care that I was getting paid \$7.50 an hour. Keeps me sane while I'm in Fargo. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

Tucker:

I took the job 'cause it was job. I fell in love with the theatre when I was there. I wasn't in love with the theatre before. I didn't know a lot about it before I got there. I got the job from a referral from a friend who was the head projectionist at the time, Kevin Bauer. Who had taken over after David Knutson had left. . .I mean fired. He's the one that trained me in cause he was leaving; they needed to bring in another projectionist as well. It almost fell into my lap (wasn't looking for a projectionist job). It was serendipitous. I had never really thought about [it] before. I thought, "Hey this is cool." [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

Finally, we hear about some of the favorite moments from the Fargo Theatre staff, shown in the following picture. These are moments and memories that they will forever hold in their minds when the image or vision of the Fargo Theatre is presented to them.

William Block shares beloved moments first:

When I was in there by myself, at the end of the night, you have to wait fifteen minutes for the bulb to cool down before you can turn off the projector. I'd send

home the concession workers. I'd just pace up and down the stage and I got into the habit, you know the song, "Hello My Darling, Hello My Baby, Hello My Rag Time Girl?" (He sings this line to me.) I would sing by myself on this stage, just waiting for it to end. Also, the way the seats are arranged, you can get up on the armrests and walk across 'em. That's a lot of fun. It's my favorite image I have, just being by myself in the theatre. It's a weird feeling. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]



Figure 8. Fargo Theatre Staff (Photo by *The Forum*, November 10, 2007; Fargo, ND).

The Mighty Wurlitzer Organ

In addition to the numerous presentations of community events, pre-movie Wurlitzer Organ concerts are common most weekends. The Mighty Wurlitzer rises up from the stage with the organist sitting at the helm. The organists wear white-tailed coats and garner excited applause at the conclusion of their mini-concerts.

It is this organ, along with the organists, which makes the Fargo Theatre of pinnacle interest. The organ has its own unofficial history and is a symbol that is continually brought up during informal discussions of the theatre with various people. For example, in a discussion of this project with friends, the memory of the Wurlitzer rising out of the floor of the theatre was a prevalent image. The tour I was given of the organ and its piping and sound effects systems proved that the stories and culture of the Wurlitzer organ is an important symbol of Fargo's identity as it is an important symbol of the Fargo Theatre. The following are excerpts concerning the organ given by informants that represent what all the community members I talked to about the organ conveyed.

John Lamb:

The Wurlitzer, [it's] just different. It's a big old organ. It's kind of like playing in a clam shell 'cause its got these kind of curves, these slow curves and ridges. Then there's usually some dapper guy in a more dapper suit coat playing and looking over his shoulder in a dapper kind of way. I should have my picture taken with the Wurlitzer. That's what the Fargo Theatre should do, especially during the street fair. Who wouldn't want their picture taken with an old-time organ in a great setting? That's an awesome Christmas card. It'd be a great Valentine card, "I'm keying on you." It's pretty impressive. We're pretty lucky. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]

William Block:

The Wurlitzer Organ? I wish I could play it. I think it's definitely one of the defining features of the theatre. I think it's fantastic that they kept it and keep it working and that it goes up and down. All the organ players are strange dudes and they really like what they do. It's just one of those things where you're like, "How do you even get into that?" I wish they would make more use of it instead of it just being used for the old movies. I wish when bands would come in someone would try to make use of it for a concert. If I was touring and I saw that I'd insist on playing it. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

Harriet Hendricks:

That amazed me to think it come up. I suppose I was fascinated by that to think that it come up to floor level. I love music. I love that kind of music. I think it's such a beautiful sound coming from that. It's wonderful how well it was taken care of. That was very fascinating and it's almost like an "aw-ca-straw," with all the different stops that they could pull out. I think Hildegard Uprand (seen in the following picture) or something like that played it. She was all over the keyboard. .keyboards! [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

Along with the physical organ, its stops and pedals and keys, there are a handful of organ players. Each player brings something unique to the organ. The Fargo Theatre employees give ample details when discussing the people who play the organ. We hear and sense the personalities of the organ group, as well as the feelings the employees have toward individual players within the greater Fargo Theatre employee communitas. Prairie Rose speaks at length of her engagement with the artists:

You know Lance Johnson who created that Organ Society; he's an incredible guy, I tell you, he really is. He's extremely dedicated. We have about 1,200 different instruments in the theatre itself for the organ. It's incredible. It's a phenomenal thing at the theatre. There are four dedicated organ chambers all taken care of by this one man who is so dedicated. He comes in every weekend at six in the morning. Taking care of the whole maintains of the organ and I don't think people realize how significant of a contribution that is to the Fargo Theatre and to the community. This aging population of the American Theatre Organ Society, there are so few in this area. We have just a few organists who play regularly. Lance is one of them. Tyler Inberg is another one, Steve Anabole, he's the youngest one. A feisty guy just moved in from South Dakota, Steve, he's in his thirties. Tyler, I'd say he's in his late fifties, and Lance, I think almost eighty. Then we have Lloyd Collins who is famous for hanging out with Peggy Lee, [for] being her accompanist. A phenomenal player as well. He's the organist who will come in and just get lost in his own playing. It's incredible. They all really get lost in their playing. It's that type of experience for them. Those are the four folks who really contribute to playing the Mighty Wurlitzer on a regular basis, on weekends, live events, and tours.

Lance probably does twenty tours a year, which is pretty significant for our schedule. Kicking them out during a live event [was my most interesting

interaction with them]. We'll have load-ins for live events in the morning. They'll be here working in the chambers. They're pretty dedicated. That's uncomfortable. "Sorry guys, gotta leave. Organ's going to be fine. It will be here tomorrow. You can definitely come back." But these guys are in their routine. You know, they're at that age. It's phenomenal to hear them play during Silent Film Movie Night every October. There's two nights they played the whole score for an entire film. The last couple of years those films have ran about two hours. These are elderly musicians who are on that organ for two hours. It's phenomenal. They get standing ovations. They come out, they get all this applause. That's a great experience to witness. How often do these guys get to experience that? Once a year in their lifetime. It's pretty amazing. You can play a piano, you can play a church organ, but playing the Mighty Wurlitzer is a whole other monster. It's phenomenal to see these guys play that. Lance is kind of the ringleader. I shouldn't say ringleader; he's the one who organizes all of them most times of the year. He provides a lot of the leadership. We have a million dollars of pipes in the theatre.

Tyler, Tyler's kind of your diva of the group, where he expects an audience. He can come in, they all have keys to play at any hour when there's nothing happening in the theatre, where most often they come in before Saturday and Sunday productions 'cause we don't open the theatre till noon to the public anyway. Tyler, he's a great guy, always has suggestions on improvements to the theatre, or comes in and does it himself.

Lloyd is kind of the quiet guy. He's like the celebrity of the bunch, though. He hung out with Peggy Lee. He performed with all these greats in that time. It's a great moment to see he. He's so quiet. He'll come in and ask for his popcorn, he and his wife sit down and he'll go play the organ. She just watches him with this awe in her eyes and looks at him like, "Look at him doing it. He's still got it."

Steve, the young guy. He's cool. He plays a lot more recent musical productions. He'll play "Inagottadavita." He'll play lots of cool rock and roll songs, so he livens it up a bit more. Like I said, they had a lot of ownership in the Fargo Theatre and what happens there. To just kind of close the door on him would be like a punch in the stomach for them because they've invested so much personally, financially. Their livelihood has all been into the theatre. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]



Figure 9. Organist Lance Johnson at the helm of the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ (Photo by Jessica Rau, June 5, 2008; Fargo, ND).

Margie Bailey's concept of the organ focuses on the look and the feeling of the organ. She also discusses the main organist, Lance Johnson:

The new console, they took it out in one state and it came back in this totally gorgeous state of a technical instrument [with] all kinds of additional bells and whistles and this beautiful black lacquer case that was a replica of the Radio City Music Hall. It's the heartbeat. It's the soul of this theatre. It sits right in the center. The cool thing that we did in the renovation is bring it out and surround it with its own railing and the mechanical stage behind so that it was no longer covered up. It's always on display. That's extraordinary. Every time you come in here for any event, there it is. It is an icon for this building and an icon in general. In terms of having these kinds of instruments is very, very rare. It's very rare that you have somebody like Lance Johnson who comes in Saturday mornings and tunes it and keeps [it] in extraordinary condition. He's built it. It's a huge gift. Usually they have not been preserved. The challenge is to find somebody who can do it and find somebody who can play it and somebody who does both and then have additional organists is really extraordinary. . .very rare. You never take that for granted. Never take that for granted, this little magical box that makes this music hidden away.

Lance Johnson does show tunes like nobody else. He also does war tunes. "Stars and Stripes Forever," "There's No Business Like Show Business," It's so familiar,

it's become so familiar to me, the feeling it gives me every time. It's such a privilege to have that instrument there. The uniqueness of the sound. A couple of the musical groups that have come in have asked to play it and one of them used it in their performance. I always call Lance. He oversees it. He's never not been available if somebody's come in and wanted to play. Lance is totally unique. He is unique to anyone else that I know. He's totally committed to the preservation of the Mighty Wurlitzer at the Fargo Theatre. It's been his perseverance, his strong will, that's kept this place together. That is absolutely the bottom line. The ATOS, it's because of them that we're sitting here today talking about this great place. The theatre became a non-profit in 1984. Then it was second run and got some first run film. It was basically doing everything they could possibly do just to keep the doors open. Thanks to the American Theatre Organ Society, they were the ones who wanted to make sure that the building that surrounded their beloved Mighty Wurlitzer didn't fall down around their ears. They virtually did everything they possibly could. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

So many of my informants had something to say about the Wurlitzer Organ. In fact, even without asking about it, the organ would come up in conversation—particularly when I asked what images stood out. It seems the organ is a figure important to the character of the Fargo Theatre for many. Tucker Lucas has some deep insights concerning the Wurlitzer:

There was a moment where I sort of viscerally connected to, that sort of had an impact on me. I can't remember what day of the week it had been, but it was in the middle of the day. We would have tours or classes that would come in and I had to be there to run a DVD of silent movies and usually when tours come in, one of the organists will come and they'll play a few songs on the organ for the people. I was standing up in the booth and the organist that day was Lloyd who is the oldest organist there. Been there for the longest. He's old, he's up there. I was listening to him play "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," which is one of his favorite songs. I was zoning in and out and just paying attention to the music 'cause it sounds so cool on this old magnificent organ. After a while I realized that like nine minutes had passed and the song was still playing. He was still playing the song. I was waiting for my cue, waiting for him to finish so I could play my movie. I kind of looked down, thinking maybe he's killing time for me, maybe I spaced out. But no, he was just playing. He played for a couple more minutes and kept looping back through it again. I saw Margie slowly inch up to the side and see if she could get him to stop playing, but then she had a moment where she kind of stopped and felt too embarrassed and sat back down. So he finished after another minute. We started the movie and I thought about that. I thought about what that was. What

that could have meant. One way of taking it was you've got this old guy, he's kind of losing his faculties, he messed up he just didn't realize, he just kept playing it over and over again 'cause he's not all there. His wife was in the audience too, by the way, she always comes with him. I'll never know what the reason was. What I prefer to think of it as is an old man who has done this one particular thing his entire life and he's done it well and he loves it very, very much. Besides his wife, it's probably the only thing he really has left of his life. Obviously he's retired, he walks around with a cane. He's not out jumping rope or anything. But he's got this one thing that he can still do just as well as when he was young. Playing one of his favorite songs he got caught up in that. Not wanting it to end. I wanted to think of that as a moment where he was just sort of living in the music and not making it stop. His time there and his experiences there meant something to him. It gave me a sense of history of people there, not just a history of dates and showings. So at that point I thought there's such a human element to this place that exists here that needs to be documented before it's gone.

It's the Mighty Wurlitzer. Various owners over the years of theatre have had sort of a love/hate relationship with organ. Lance Johnson, who is the one who sort of maintains the organ, is the head organist there now, had some interesting things to say about one previous owner, Ed Kraus, who knew absolutely nothing of music and didn't think it had any place in the theatre. The old version of the organ they dismantled and put in a back closet somewhere. It took some members of the community, including Lance, to step in and volunteer and piece it together to play it. Someone finally relented and said sure. From the start, the placement has been one of passion and pride for those who were involved. The organists, as far as I know, never being paid for it, just do it cause they love to do it. It's not like it's a resurging art form or you have a lot of people who do it these days.

If you want to hear some good organ music you go to the Fargo Theatre on the weekend when one of them is playing. It's technically a marvel the way these things work. There are so many hundreds of thousands of pounds of air pressure that this thing is controlling through this thing's pipes. The ingenuity it took of Lance and those guys to recreate some of these things and rig up instruments in the little alcoves that would sound like a train or a timpani or other kinds of pianos. And it's all hidden behind the theatre itself. You look at the organ, if you look at it and you hear the sound but when you watch it you go, "that's the organ right there," but you don't understand that, this right here is the control panel of the organ. The organ is up on the sides and it's too big for you to see the exact size. That's really cool to think about it that way. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

Interestingly, commercial recordings of the Fargo Theatre's Mighty Wurlitzer recently went on sale to the public. Lance Johnson is at the keyboards playing renditions

of Christmas songs. This is the first time any such recordings have been made available to the public, showing how beloved the sounds and symbols of the organ presently are to the Fargo community.

The Fargo Theatre Marquee

The original Fargo Theatre marquee was taken off the face of the building because they could not restore the marquee as it existed, as it was too fragile. Subsequently, the marquee was rebuilt and restored by a local sign company, Cook Sign Company. When the new and improved marquee was finally placed back on its home on New Year's Eve of 1998, many community members came to the theatre to celebrate and cheer the lighting of the enduring symbol of Fargo (Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008). Many Fargo community members exploit the icon that is the Fargo Theatre marquee as a symbol of the Fargo community for their holiday, wedding, baptism, and engagement pictures.

In the picture following, a family creatively changes the marquee to reflect their Christmas holiday wishes. Thanks to the movie *Fargo*, the marquee has become a symbol for those far beyond the community proper. Many tourists stop and take pictures in front of the sign. Such photographs directly reveal the Fargo Theatre and the Fargo Theatre sign as symbols of collective memory and community consciousness. People use the structures to create individual memories and moments, that, when grouped together form the shared perception that surrounds the Fargo Theatre. More marquee pictures can be seen in the appendix.



Figure 10. Speilman-Peldo family holiday card taken under the Fargo Theatre marquee (Photo by Meg Speilman-Peldo, December 2007; Fargo, ND).

The next passages showcase the community's feelings about the marquee through words and reflection. Starting with Harriet Hendricks, one of the older informants, we hear important clues as to the marquee's symbolic meaning:

I think that it's kind of like a diamond in the rough, which is my point 'cause it stands out there as a symbol of the bygone days, but it's surviving. It's really neat. [It's a symbol of the past and future] and I remember it! The theatre certainly stands out there with its marquee hanging over the sidewalk as something important from the past. I think that's good. We can't forget our past. That's part of our history and it shows the dedication of those people. They knew that they had something of the past. How wonderful. Like I said, the marquee looked like a diamond in the rough because of the neon lights. They were either flashing or going in a straight line. It just looked magnificent. [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

Harriet called me some time later to edit her “diamond in the rough” quote to more accurately reflect her sentiments, saying, “I have been thinking about how I said the marquee is this diamond in the rough. Well, I think it’s better to say it’s a diamond in the prairie” (Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008).

Margie Bailey, of course, has profound reflections concerning the marquee and its identity for the theatre and community:

When you’ve got FARGO hanging on the front of the building, in flashing lights, you can’t ignore it. I think people are really appreciative. You really can’t think of another building in Fargo that everybody knows. It’s a great privilege, but a pretty significant responsibility too. We don’t have replacement insurance because it is irreplaceable. It truly is. The spirit would be gone and [we’d] never be able to recreate it. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

As stated prior, many former community members harbor a deep respect for the Fargo Theatre marquee. Recently, Missy Wilson-Walpole moved from Fargo to Des Moines, Iowa. During a trip back to Fargo, she visited artist Meg Speilman’s photography studio and looked through many different pictures of Fargo, but settled on buying the a large black and white photograph of the theatre displaying the marquee. Missy explains her choice:

I recently moved down to Des Moines, Iowa, from Fargo. I went to college at Concordia College. I work with people who have never been up to this area. I often talk about living up here and college and family that still lives here today. I thought by purchasing this photo I could bring a piece of Fargo back to Des Moines and have it in my house so when friends come to visit, there’s a story to tell. [It’s] a great symbol of Fargo. When looking through all her photos, there were some other ones that had Fargo on them, but this was just a really special picture, I think. I picked it because it’s a sign that I recognized for many years. I’ve never been in the theatre, but when I see it I know where it’s located in town. I recognized it for the first time when I was in college at Concordia. I drove by it many times. I’ll put the picture in the living room area, so when people walk in I know right away they’ll recognize it.

It's not just a symbol of the theatre, but a symbol of family. [Interview conducted with the author on July 3, 2008]

Predictably, Fargo Theatre staff members have their own ideas about the giant marquee, not to mention some great stories starring the Fargo sign. William Block tells of one shenanigan with the icon:

One of my favorite things to do was after bar close. Projectionists have keys to the theatre. We'd go out to the marquee and hang out. It's not dangerous or anything, but you're doing something you're not supposed to do. Sam was a projectionist. One day he showed up ridiculously hung over. He was in the projectionist booth and couldn't hold it in. So he opened up the door and just let loose on the marquee. He thought it was really funny, so he updated his MySpace site and wrote, "I just puked on the Fargo Theatre marquee," but Prairie was downstairs on her computer and saw the update. She made him clean it up. That was dumb of him. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

Architecture

The beautiful Art Moderne architecture of the Fargo Theatre entices patrons to collect their tickets days in advance for the show they are attending, creating memory moments even before the event happens. The following picture shows a couple looking around the theatre for the first time, finding their seats for a show that will not take place for two months. This couple's pre-event memory moment is not uncommon, as this is a consistent phenomenon for the theatre. This couple's architectural memory moment mediates the theatre's collective identity. As the architecture and symbols draw people into the building, memory culture is created.

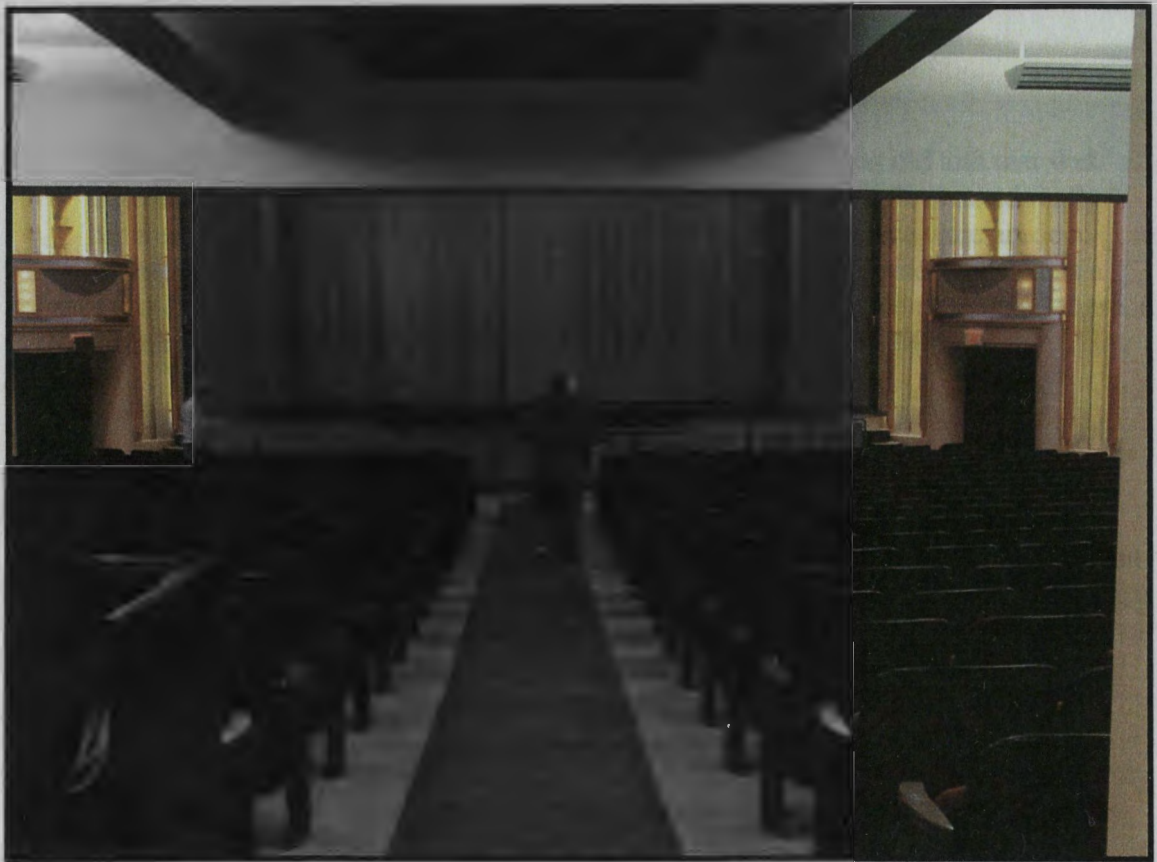


Figure 11. A couple looks for their seats for an upcoming show and takes a peek at the architecture (Photo by Jessica Rau, September 12, 2008; Fargo, ND).

The community members of Fargo express their symbolic pride and investment in the Fargo Theatre culture almost immediately upon anyone asking about it or mentioning to them to the symbols and structures within the building. During one of my trips to the theatre, a Fargo community member was looking through Fargo Theatre artifacts in the theatre's basement, where so many of them are strewn about the haphazardly, verging on a fire hazard. She proclaimed, "This [disregard for the history] makes me want to join the Fargo Theatre board!" Upon research, the some of the posters she was looking at were dated to 1928 and many of the plaster murals, pieces of façade, and projectors were from the original building. The following passages are excerpts from interviews where informants discussed the architecture of the Fargo Theatre:

Peter Kelly:

What stood out to me about the whole building was that it was old and that was interesting even when I was really young. The *King Kong* movie seemed really interesting, because it had art deco elements in the film and there were art deco elements in the theatre and that was interesting to see. . . I do remember that as a kid. The damaged walls, stained, but the basic decorative elements were all there, a little rough. [Interview conducted with the author on July 19, 2008]

Thomas McCurdy:

The neon lights on the walls, that's fantastic. All the light fixtures toward the front. The big great lights and the red seats and the curtain, the balcony. To have a film played in the Fargo Theatre due to the history and space and how beautiful and unique it is. It's really fabulous. It's not just your average theatre. A lot of small towns in North Dakota have old theatres but they just sort of show movies, big Hollywood films, but the Fargo Theatre shows those that don't always come to those theatres. I remember the space. [Interview conducted with the author on July 19, 2008]

Harriet Hendricks:

I was always fascinated by the ticket booth. This gal sat in there. They were always attractive. It was just like a booth, not very large, had a window that face to the outside [where] you could buy the ticket. I remember the seating. I touched the covering on the seats and they were velvet. It kind of moved so that the little tufts would kind of bend over. So soft and elegant, elegant! The interior with the lighting on the walls to me, it just added an air of exquisiteness because there were different colored lights. I was amazed at the sound system. It was fascinating because that was our chance to see something special and eloquent. Coming off from a farm you were very prohibited on recalling elegance or beauty because the farms are a workable place. The first memory that comes to my mind is the elegance of it. The looks of it, not only interior but exterior. It was like a diamond in the street. In that, Broadway, because it had neon lights that shown up brilliantly, and it looked really majestic to me. [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

Margie Bailey:

Just sitting in the theatre and realizing that you are part of preserving this space, this period of time, that you can play a major role in making sure this is here for children and grandchildren sounds really hooky but I do have a son and granddaughters. This is for them. This is so they can be rooted to their history and to Fargo's history. That's the privilege. [Why they choose Art Deco instead of original style] I don't know for certain. I think that's where all the memories were tied. There were very few actual photos of the original theatre. The history is really tied to the art deco style and look. The hook was historic preservation and what keeps me here is small independents films. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

Tucker Lucas:

I fell in love with the people I was working with there first. I feel in love with the texture that the theatre provides when you walk in. There's no other place in town like it. And if you're like me and you're not someone who's used to spending a whole lot of time in older buildings, that looked older and that had a sense of style, to spend so much time in there, it's like entering a time warp and it just feels special. I feel in love with its position in the community. It's sort of geographically positioned at the heart of the city. So much revolves around it. Everyone knows about it and everyone has different feelings about it. When someone mentions the Fargo Theatre, people are usually thinking about not necessarily the Fargo Theatre itself, but their first date that went on there or the movie they saw there or the show they went and saw there or the people they met there. It isn't cold like other commercial establishments which are really just about you getting in there, watching something and shoving your face full of food, escaping for a bit. Escape is at the Fargo Theatre but there's more to it. It was just welcoming. I liked it. You just watch people as they walk in and they take it in. They're obviously impressed. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

Special Events

The Fargo Theatre hosts many special affairs and community events throughout the year. Some events concern causes and non-profit fundraisers, while others specifically relate to film. The following section displays the atypical and typical events that take place

at the theatre, through myself as a participant as well as others' experiences and understandings.

The Fargo Film Festival

I attended the opening night of the Fargo Film Festival 2008. For the opening night of the festival, the independent film *Raiders of the Lost Ark: The Adaptation* was shown. The movie was a recreation of the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, scene by scene, completed by two teenagers who had become obsessed with the movie when it was originally released. It took the filmmakers well into their thirties to finish the movie. The movie was visually fascinating, complete with fire and explosions and stunts as well as the documented growth spurts and voice changes of the two filmmakers. Furthermore, like most movie experiences, there was the familiar smell and sound of folks eating popcorn between silences, and the comforting laughter and collective sighs throughout the movie.

Prior to the beginning of the movie, the audience members gathered in various groups such as, Fargo Theatre employees, visiting filmmakers, and various community members. There appeared to be many first time Fargo Theatre and Fargo Film Festival goers in the audience as well, as I overheard many proclaim this moment to be their first followed by comments about the beauty of the building. Finally, they all culminated into one large collective at the start of the movie. However divided they were prior to coming through the doors, they were united inside once the festivities began.

There was a pre-show organ concert. The organist wore a white coat with tails. The audience exploded with generous and gregarious applause when he finished. Prairie Rose introduced Margie Bailey, the executive director, and then Margie, dressed as Indiana

Jones, came running down the center aisle chased by a giant rolling boulder, an obvious and humorous nod to the movie everyone was about to see. She welcomed the board members and filmmakers, and seemed jovial, displaying smiles and laughter. She told what appeared to be inside jokes pertaining to the festival, speaking about how cold it was outside and thanking those coming from all over the world to experience our cold North Dakota culture even though many of the participants had come from a plethora of different countries. The general feeling from the group was one of community solidarity and pride. William Block, Prairie Rose, Margie Bailey, and Thomas McCurdy tell their favorite memories of Fargo Film Festivals past:

William Block:

It was a ton of fun. Sam (another projectionists at the time William worked at the theatre) and I got screamed at by a director and that was really fun. She was the quintessential bitchy director. "I'll know more than you'll ever know about film," and just treating us like the help. We had all the directors come in. Sam and I went through and played all their movies to make sure they ran right, where to get them synched up. If we had any issues we could call the director in and see if we could adjust the volume or screen or color correction or sound. She came in and had her friend or assistant stand downstairs. She stood upstairs. She was on her cell phone having him move throughout the stage for the sound. "No up a little bit more, no you went too high. . .just let me do it." I was like, "No, this is our job!" So we showed her film. Sam said he didn't do it on purpose, but we started the volume down really, really, really low. I was distracted doing something else. I said, "Sam, it sounds a little quiet." Then all of a sudden du du du du du du [William is making a knocking sound]. I open the door and she's like, "What are you doing? My producer is here, blah, blah, blah, blah." But even that was cool. She was from California, of course. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

Prairie Rose:

I've been a part of the Fargo Film Festival since 2002. 2007 was phenomenal. 2008 we stepped up in the world. We really had a coming out with the Fargo Film Festival. We had more actors, directors, and artists come in than any other film

festival year. We had more submissions than any other year, more international submissions than any other year. We just kicked it up a notch, which was really incredible. This was the first year that I got to step back and kind of enjoy myself a little bit because we had such a great team. We had a great head projectionist, we had a great concessions manager, we had a great crew working with us to have this very synergistic flow of operations. It was incredible. So to sit back and relax and enjoy some of it, we had a lot of fun. I met some up-and-coming stars. These guys road-tripped from California all the way to Fargo and then didn't even sleep, because once their midnight screening was done they had a road-trip back to Utah for another film festival. It was quite a Hollywood experience 'cause they all wanted to take care of small-town little Prairie Rose who is usually overworked. They took me out, showed me a good time on the town. I mean, they really lived it up. Helen (name has been changed) wanted to do something kind of naughty just to celebrate her win as best actress. Put the cherry on top of her Fargo experience at the Film Festival and got this Louis the Fourteenth shot to share around the table. It was incredible. They begged me to take it. They said, "Come on, Prairie, it's like our peace pipe," and I was like, "Oh gosh, you got me that way?" So I took this sip and everything got all warm, it was really smooth. So I can't afford to drink 'cause now all I like is Louis the Fourteenth, I guess. Really expensive taste. It's an incredible time. Jam packed with five days of events. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Margie Bailey:

It has the potential for involving the entire community. Movies are that common denominator art form. They really are. That's the really cool part about the film festival. We get all these films that may never be shown in this community ever again. Giving film students an opportunity to see their work on the big screen as well. It's the essence of our being. . .storytelling, and so many stories to tell. That's the power of someone's passion. It's a little edgy. "I survived the Fargo Film Festival." I survived the weather, etc. We're very assessable geographically. You can walk to all the venues and pre-parties. That creates this great sense of camaraderie. We celebrate this art form and these filmmakers. We love having them here. Love that they made an effort to get here. Audiences are willing to come and see something they have absolutely very little idea about what they are going to see. It's a film festival that wraps everybody in this warm glow of movies in March. We've had freezing cold, snow, melting snow, feels like spring, everything. The city doesn't get us funding but they support us philosophically. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

Thomas McCurdy:

I've gone to the film festivals. It's one of those things that's different and the crowd is really responsive at the events. It's really fun. I know a lot of people who are involved in that kind of stuff. It'd be totally different if it was held anywhere else. It'd be a completely different experience. [Interview conducted with the author on July 19, 2008]

Community Events

On August 11, 2008, I attended Classic Film Week. The ages attending were very mixed but leaned more toward the elderly side of the community, with a lot of groups assumingly from the World War II era. There also seemed to be many mothers and daughters there together, some young, some old, some very, very old. The theatre was filled to about eighty percent capacity on the main level. There was food and drink available before the event, chocolate-covered strawberries, and meat rollups, wine and beer and regular concessions like popcorn and candy. There were more women than men judging from a quick scan of the audience. Many people in the audience wore tiaras, dressing up as their favorite characters in homage to the movie they were showing that night, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. One of my main informants, John Lamb, was there to partake in the festivities. John had never seen the movie, something that was somewhat shocking to me, considering how film-literate he seemed to be during our initial interviews. He was excited to be able to see the film in the space of the Fargo Theatre and proclaimed it the best place and way to see the classics.

Silent Film Night is one of the very special events unique to the Fargo Theatre. It is an event that many people in the community look forward to all year. As you approach the theatre, you see that they have placed an antique car under the marquee, adding to the

nostalgic environment. People are gathered outside, talking with one another about memories of the movies they saw or the movie they are about to partake in. I met and talked with many people during this time, as there was a queue waiting for the doors to open. One lingering woman I talked with was with a group of people that had come down from a small town north of Fargo in a bus. She and her husband had arranged for the trip, and when the rest of her party arrived you could feel their excitement. She took pictures with me in front of the theatre and was eager to get in to see the organ and the movie. Once in the theatre, you were greeted by organ music, the smell of popcorn, and the murmur of the crowd. There was a pre-movie organ concert in the lobby and a pre-movie big band concert. The big band concert garnered a lot of response from the audience, as they recognized songs, sang along, clapped with the beat, and even danced in the aisles. As the movie of the night, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* was about to start, the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ arose from out of the floor with Lance Johnson in full organist regalia, and the crowd erupted with applause. See following picture. When the movie ended there was another eruption of applause with the addition of a standing ovation for Lance. He had played the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ through the whole movie. It was a magical and impressive moment.

A play called "The Church Basement Ladies" continually came up during many interviews. This play was an important part of the culture of Fargo, as well as the Fargo Theatre. The play is the brainchild of Janet Letnes Martin and Suzann Nelson, writers of the locally famous *Growing Up Lutheran* series of books. The play is a culmination of their writings dealing with Norwegian cultural issues of funeral food, weddings, and other morays of the Norwegian Lutheran. The following two passages concern this play.

Harriet Hendricks:

I went to a play, “The Church Ladies,” “Church Basement Ladies?” Oh, that was funny. I guess because I experienced some of the things that those ladies were experiencing in their skit. It touched home for me. It was very hilarious. I walked out of there with a smile on my face. Kind of a sore diaphragm because I laughed so. It was a good thing for a lot of people to see. It was very well done. [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

Janet Letnes Martin:

We opened our play there. I was like, “Oh yeah! I want to open in Fargo. I want it in Fargo. That’s my roots, my people. I want it in Fargo.” They contacted Margie Bailey and opened it up. The actress said the first performance in Fargo is what it feels like to act and be recognized. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]

During my interview with Margie Bailey, many of the events that take place at the Fargo Theatre came up naturally in conversation. She had as a result many memory moments that were centered on these events, differing from each other in content but similar in community essence and involvement:

The movie *Fargo* came out in 1996 and we were able to do the regional premiere here. We had lines backed way up ‘cause we only have one screen. It was just the premiere not the full run! So we had two screenings. They gave us tickets and we just handed them out. We didn’t make any money on it, other than selling concession. That was awesome ‘cause we were in the middle of a fundraising campaign. Then when it got the seven Academy Award nominations, I was right in the middle of writing grants for this project. So I would go from wearing overalls for *Fargo* stuff to sitting with the Bush Foundation (a foundation which fiscally supports artists and arts organizations) onsite people to see if we were a worthy foundation to fund. What better thing to get people interested in this community. Everybody loves movies. Everybody knows about the movie *Fargo*. You find very few people who don’t or they’ll pretend they’ve seen it even if they haven’t.

CCRI (Creative Care for Reaching Independence), when we brought in Chris Burke, who's a performer, that whole community (adults and children with different abilities) came in. It was hugely powerful. At the end of the program he called these kids on stage and they were rock stars. It was extraordinary. It was really extraordinary. That's just one example of a very specific demographic that we served.

Obviously people who love silent film and want to hear the Mighty Wurlitzer. We have a responsibility to do that at least once a year. Jazz Arts Series is one community performing group that we have four or five times a year. The Symphony and their children's series at Christmas time is on our stage. Those are specific audiences, some of them outside the Fargo Theatre. A lot of it is strategic, but quite frankly a lot of it is serendipitous too. They were doing an environmental film and we got the environmentalists in the community, they were doing homeless week and so we did stuff around that. We did a whole thing on mental health, a whole day of vignettes and film pieces that talked about issues surrounding mental health and experiences with significant mental health problems. We did *Jupiter's Wife*, about a schizophrenic woman in Central Park. We have films that relate to those issues but then sometimes it just morphs into something else as well. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

The Fargo Theatre seats comfort and relax community members during the numerous educational panels that take place after documentary screenings. These documentaries may be heartwarming or controversial. Recent screenings include *For the Bible Tells Me So* and *Young @ Heart*.

Prairie Rose:

One of the films that I really appreciated seeing at the Fargo Theatre that really proved social context on different issues was our religious films, *Jesus Camp* and *For the Bible Tells Me So*. *Jesus Camp* really gave you this perspective of these fundamental Christians. How young people are a part of this movement to spread the word of God, but in such a way that it's controversial. *For the Bible Tells Me So*, same thing but you add the element of homosexuality into it where people are so strongly against people in our life. It just hit me because I grew up in a way of life that all life is created in the same way. Where we're no greater than anybody or anything. Those kind of opened my eyes to truly opposite thinking in my world. There was a huge community dialogue with both of those films at the theatre. There were campus talks at Concordia and NDSU based on those films. The

discussion that the community had after those films were screened at the theatre was incredible. I think it changed a few minds, even opened a few eyes. A lot of the issues, especially in our community, get lost in apathy. I think what hit home or what I appreciated was that it hit home with a few folks whose parents were so against homosexuality. They went and saw this movie, were part of the community discussion and it opened their eyes that there were people there who were providing testimony of their own lives. What it meant for either them to be homosexual or to have a loved one who was homosexual. It really opened their eyes. They said, "Okay maybe I'll take a different look." We had a dialogue facilitated by pastors. . .and Margie Bailey and two parents from the film. That dialogue really provided an opportunity and platform for members of our community to express themselves and their experiences being homosexuals in the Fargo-Moorhead area. There was an elderly couple there, they changed their minds. They were open enough to go and have that experience and talk about it. Good outcomes. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Numerous non-film events take place at the Fargo Theatre. In September 2008, a march to promote peace and non-violence called "Take Back the Night" concluded at the Fargo Theatre with a ceremony inside the theatre. When asked about the ceremonial finale, people asserted that it crystallized the march's importance for the community. Lynn, the event's organizer, deliberately chose the theatre as a place that uniquely represented the whole of the Fargo community. She said, "They (their board and employees) wanted something different and unique that represented the community as well as a known location." Lynn furthermore proclaimed how she was proud when she told the speaker for the rally about the organ and gave him a tour. (Interview conducted with the author on September 25, 2008)

I attended the "Take Back the Night" rally. The march takes place simultaneously throughout the country with thousands of people, making the march. During this event, I asked a few people what they thought of the theatre and what their feelings were of the event. Sam, a student from North Dakota State University, told me she felt the Fargo Theatre is symbolic to the community, a great way to get more notice (for the event) and

that having it at the theatre makes the event more special (Interview conducted with the author on September 25, 2008). Heather, a Fargo young professional, said that by having it at the theatre, “You can see better, there’s climate control, you can sit, and it makes it seem a little more important” (Interview conducted with the author on September 25, 2008).



Figure 12. Take Back the Night March (Photo by Jessica Rau, September 25, 2008; Fargo, ND).

One of the larger annual affairs that comes to pass at the Fargo Theatre is a fundraiser to provide scholarship money for high school women involved in music. The event is called “The Celebration of Women and Their Music.” The weeklong concert series is produced with a grand finale concert at the Fargo Theatre. Prairie Rose talks about her favorite experience during this event:

You know I remember being backstage for the first time in 1998 during the Celebration of Women and Their Music. . .and the Fargo Theatre was my first experience with looking at a full house from behind the scenes, and it wasn’t me going on stage; it was me helping the people who were going to shine on stage. But to see that full house was just an incredible feeling. I mean it made you feel good that you were engaging the audience, engaging the community, doing something good so that’s kind of my first really great experience with the Fargo Theatre, is

looking behind the curtain and saying that's so cool. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

As stated earlier, the community seems to utilize the Fargo Theatre in many different ways. It is, as John Lamb says, "Easily *the* spot of significance [for the community of Fargo]" (Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008). Prairie Rose furthers this reflection:

Beyond just being this little gem in downtown Fargo and a piece of history, I think we've really been able to capture and engage the community in the performing arts. We don't just do film, we don't just do live productions, we do community dialogues, we engage people with topics of relevance, whether it's religion or other social issues. We engage people. That's our job, to engage the community in something in life, in art.

I've always been a part of the community and engaged in civic dialogue, but working at the Fargo Theatre has just added another dimension to that work that I do and helped me further my mission of making the world a little bit of a better place and I think making those connections and making lasting connections has created this viable movement or discussion in the community on whatever issues, so I guess it's benefited me. . .but I'm not so much different than how its benefited the community in general. . . [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

Upon the close of my study, I have analyzed the interviews and quotes used in the earlier sections in terms of their representational substance and semantic scope. To restate and bring forth the basis of my analysis, symbols have three aspects: the exegetic, the operational, and the positional, which allows for acquisition three ways (Turner 1973:1103). The resources for acquisition are the external observations of its characteristics, the specialist or layperson interpretations, and the significant contexts determined by the anthropologist (Turner 1976:20). I have attempted to utilize this method of analysis within this portion of the project in order to explain the specific symbols within both the Fargo Theatre and the community that surrounds it. During this discussion I will examine the explanations given by the subjects during their interviews as to the importance of the Fargo Theatre and symbolic qualities of its existence; the exegetic aspect; allowing for subject interpretation and understanding (Turner 1973:1103). The operational assessment of said symbols follows allowing for a look at the absolute use of the symbols juxtaposed with their understood meaning according to how the interviewee utilizes and relates to them. Finally, the positional aspect of the symbol is considered to find relationships between the symbols of the Fargo Theatre. Delving deeper into the symbolic analysis, I will also define each symbol by their properties of condensation, unification of disparate significata, and polarization of meaning as explained in earlier sections of this study (1967:27-28). I will look at common qualities and poles of meaning as they pertain to norms, values, desires, and feelings of major Fargo Theatre symbols. Through this type

of assessment of symbols, messages concerning the culture's "thought, ethics, esthetics, and law" will be revealed in this section (1967:27-28).

The categories seen in the results section of this study will be visited again as will specific quotes from key informants. Memories, employee culture, the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ, the marquee, architecture, and special events will all give symbolic insight, as they embody many meanings and are directly characterized by many meanings. The multivocalic and polysemic characteristics of these symbols all point toward the building of the Fargo Theatre as the dominant symbol. The Fargo Theatre, the building, symbolizes a general culture, inclusion, exclusion, and personal culture, of which most people, especially those living in superficially heterogeneous communities, think they lack.

The symbols within the Fargo Theatre exude their own *communitas* as well, deepening their respective symbolic significance. The concept of *communitas*, collective bodies within the Fargo Theatre culture, will be examined within each section. There are many *communitas*, some stagnant, others ever dynamic. For example, the Fargo Theatre shows the Academy Awards Ceremony on the movie screen every year. Anybody may attend; it is an event, a symbol that pulls assorted people together as a community, forming a temporary and dynamic *communitas*. Other examples of *communitas* within the Fargo Theatre are the audiences for specific film genres, such as documentaries, 1980s film kitsch, film noir, silent movies, and classics, the Fargo Film Festival's attendees and filmmakers, the organ concert audiences, the music concert attendees, the Fargo Theatre's past and current employees, the board members, the donors, and the tourists.

Memories

Memory is a symbolic bond, as it “connects the individual and private with the social and public in complex ways” (Cole *in* White 2006:329). Memory mediates collective identities. Therefore, the memories of the Fargo Theatre symbolize the shared characteristics of the Fargo community. Community identity is wrapped within the memory moments each individual has experienced at the theatre, whether it be attending a movie, a rally, driving by and noticing the marquee, or seeing a picture of the theatre.

The past has different aspects, depending on one’s place in relation to it. The present generation will see [these images] as representations of history. For me they are reflections of experience. [Putnam 2000:100]

There is memory present, which is itself a symbol in the minds of most everyone who comes across it. The Fargo Theatre memory, in all its grandeur, is an iconic mediator of the past for Fargo. An example of this can be seen in Harriet Hendricks’ memory of the theatre as “a diamond in the rough, which is my point ‘cause it stands out there as a symbol of the bygone days, but it’s surviving. It’s really neat. [It’s a symbol of the past and future] and I remember it” (Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008)!

Through this explanation of the memory as symbol we become aware of the direct explanations, the exegetic aspect of the symbol, given by the interviewee, the cultural participant. They provide their own interpretation and understanding of the theatre as a living memory. Tucker Lucas explains, “It’s a sense of history. It’s a grounding in time. It’s a reminder of where we’ve been and how far we’ve come” (Interview conducted with

author on September 11, 2008). Tucker goes relatively deep into his analysis of what the memory of the Fargo Theatre symbolizes:

It's the intersection of the lives of so many people in this town. Some may not even totally realize it. That it's played such a part. We get old couples coming in all the time saying, "Hey we had our first date here," or, "We met here," or, "We worked here," or, "I went to a wedding here once." Everyone in this town passes through the doors at least one time, even for a moment. To use the bathroom or check out a poster, find out movie times, buy some popcorn for the Street Fair. Everyone moves through it at least one time. You almost have to. It's at the heart. It's not the heart, but it's at the heart. It's the soul; the blood doesn't pump through it but without it the city would be empty. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

The exegetic aspect of the memory symbol as given by every single participant in this study is strengthened by the operational assessment of said symbols. The interviewees utilize and relate to the theatre exactly as they say they do. The proof of which can be seen in the resurgence of Fargo's historic downtown, stemming from the resurrection of the Fargo Theatre. Its renovation catapulted the rebuilding and repopulation of the downtown area. If community members had not truly related to the Fargo Theatre as a symbol of the collective memory and identity, the theatre would have been left to deteriorate, fall into disarray, and dissolve into extinction along with the rest of the downtown culture. Instead, this grand theatre kicked off downtown Fargo's resurrection, culminating in downtown Fargo being named by the American Planning Association in their 2009 Great Places in America: Neighborhoods top ten list (APA 2009).

The positional aspect of Fargo Theatre memory is understood through its relationship with the other symbols of the theatre discussed following this section. The memory symbol is tied to many aesthetic aspects, such as the marquee and the architecture of the building, and correlates with the events, the movies, and the employees. Without the

other symbols, the memory symbol would cease to fully exist. Further discussion of the positional aspect of the symbols seems more fitting during the final analysis of the Fargo Theatre building as the chief symbol. The grand interpretation of the memory culture of the Fargo community heavily relies on all of these symbols working together within the wall of the physical theatre space. Memory as a symbol of collective community consciousness relies solely on the additional essential symbols to make it whole.

We understand, therefore, that the symbolic property of condensation, many things and actions, are represented in the memory as a single formation. The distinct development of the memory symbol is connected to the other symbols through their common quality, their unification of disparate significata; they all live within the walls of the Fargo Theatre. Finally, we recognize that this symbol of memory is both sensory and ideological. While one remembers the look, the feel, the touch of the physical space of the theatre, their value of that memory is evident. An example of the polarization of meaning is clearly displayed in Harriet Hendricks' memory of touching the velvet seats. To her, the velvet seats represented the feeling of magnificence she embraced for the Fargo Theatre and is a memory which represents the collective.

The collective memory naturally leads toward the development of a *communitas*. Those with memories of the Fargo Theatre have exceptionally similar feelings of the theatre as this extremely grand icon, representing the history and future of the community. Most use the same vernacular, body language, and even vocal tone when relaying memories of the Fargo Theatre. They describe their memory as being wonderful, or they say things such as, "I'll never forget. . . ." They look up smiling as they recall their memories, their voice softens and many sigh and become outwardly contemplative as well

as experts on what the Fargo Theatre means for the rest of the community, as is evident in Tucker Lucas' memories and consequent interpretation of them. While the community might not outwardly see themselves as a culture or group, when you begin discussing the memories of the Fargo Theatre, those with memories fall naturally into a specialized faction amidst the larger community.

Employee Culture

The employee culture of the Fargo Theatre is symbolic of the greater Fargo culture, a microcosm of the larger community. Many of the thoughts and feelings toward the Fargo Theatre the employees retain symbolize precisely the community's emotions with the only difference being that the employees take their devotion deeper, almost sanctifying the space. They are the symbolic hands of the community. They are the ones who build it, operate it, take care of it, and cultivate its future so that the community may see its cultural awareness continue. The employees are completely aware of their task:

This is a place of history, evolving entertainment innovation, a jewel in our community, sometimes celebrated, sometimes forgotten, for us, a refuge, not just a place of employment. This isn't just a job for us, this place creates a family. . .this place allows us to connect to a living history that will grow even more in the years to come and we, we are a part of that. [*The Forum 2007*]

Through the awareness of both their symbolic and tangible existence, the Fargo Theatre employees' exoteric aspect is exposed. They see themselves as representatives of the community, representatives of the desires of the community to see the Fargo Theatre grow and flourish. This is furthered when considering all the opinions and suggestions the staff has for theatre improvements and continued success. The Fargo Theatre employees

are the ultimate experts on what the community wants in relation to the theatre. For example, William Block talked for great length about what the theatre was doing wrong and what the community yearns for from the space:

There's a ton you could do. . .with this new screen that they're building. . .when I found out that they're not going to have the two projectionist booths connected, it just drove me up the wall! 'Cause the whole reason to get that other screen is to get the distributors, 'cause they're like, "We need our movie to run for three weeks straight, no interruptions." Which we can't do with one screen 'cause we constantly have things like the Blenders coming in or something else. So the whole point was so that we could tell distributors, "Oh yeah, we can play this movie for three weeks straight, no problem," and that it would just switch from screen to screen but now the booths aren't connected so if we want to move a film. . .they're on these big platters (makes gesture with hands to denote large size) and they weigh 50 to 70 pounds. You have to put these weird clamps on them, and you'd have to load it and then you'd have to take it down the stairs. Doing that, one, damages the film, two, it's a gigantic pain in the ass, and three, a lot of stuff can go wrong. You could break down the film again but that takes a full hour; it's just a lot more work for people who aren't getting paid enough to do that much work. It comes back to money. While I was there we had a ton of theatre people working there for no money and she didn't utilize us at all. It was almost insulting, 'cause I was like, "Margie, I went to school for this, I went to school for film." I've helped start my own theatre company, I know how to run lights, and it was like, "Oh yeah, can you be nice and run concessions and smile." [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

The Fargo Theatre employees clearly see themselves as the voice of reason and expertise for the community, the symbolic connoisseurs and the symbolic vehicles of participation and attachment. Prairie Rose discusses the latter:

I may not remember what was on stage [but] being at the Fargo Theatre really provided this quality that we were someplace special. It was a cool experience. To see a full house was just an incredible feeling. It made you feel good that you were engaging the audience, engaging the community. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

The operational aspect of the Fargo Theatre employees' symbolic importance is, however, not as forthright. The community, while comprehending the importance of the

theatre employees in regards to running the facility smoothly and efficiently, most likely does not see the deep symbolic connection. The only employee that continually came up during interviews with members of the community was Margie Bailey. As the executive director, it is her face and name that is recognizable by the public and it is indeed the one staff position that operates as a symbol for both the theatre and the community. There were times when a group from within the theatre would come up in conversation. However, these people were modestly classified as “the people who renovated the theatre” or “the ones who believed in it.” Harriet Hendricks provides an excellent example:

I think the theatre for one thing has been very stalwart in the fact that it remained and that again I always say that that’s a credit to the people who believed in it. Dedicated their time and effort to preserve it and not let urban renewal tear it down. That they kept that gem, so to speak, staying right there. . .I compliment the people that have been so diligent about this preservation. [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008

Therefore, it is derived that while all employees of the Fargo Theatre see themselves as symbolic representatives for the community and the theatre, the only operational symbols are those of Margie Bailey and the ubiquitous and anonymous people in charge of the renovation.

Not surprisingly, the employees of the Fargo Theatre and their positional relationships to the other symbols are paramount. Without the employee, the marquee would not be lit; without the employee, the Wurlitzer Organ would not play; and without the employee, the events would not take place. Most importantly, without the employee, the Fargo Theatre would never have been renovated. Proof of this last statement is seen in the direct relationship between the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ and the organists who worked so hard to renovate and keep it in the public sphere within the walls of the Fargo Theatre. The organists were paramount to the renovation and are themselves symbolic of community pride for the theatre.

The employees of the Fargo Theatre naturally manifest as a normative *communitas*. They are their own culture within the walls of the theatre, comprised of even smaller, subtler *communitas*. There are the organists, the projectionists, the concessions staff, the light and soundboard operators, and the administration. All these various *communitas*

come together to form the larger *communitas* of the Fargo Theatre employee. They are a *communitas* with their own language and rituals and stages of liminality. Proof of this is seen in the games they play, such as Sardines, and the language the projectionists use when discussing the various technicalities of their work.

The Mighty Wurlitzer Organ

There seems to be enculturated symbolic understanding prevalent about the organ, even within the minds of the tourist, as most seem to know that this is a symbol of great significance. People want to take pictures with it, learn about it, and tell others about it. It is a symbol of their trip and exposure to the culture of Fargo and the Fargo Theatre. It is a symbol of community pride and history. It is symbolic of artistic delight for the community. It was the first symbol to be renovated and the catalyst for the “Save the Fargo Theatre” project the community rallied behind. The organists, the ones who began the conversation to save the organ and theatre, are also looked upon as icons. They belong to the organ as part of a symbolic conglomerate. One does not survive without the other, as is apparent within an important passage we looked at earlier from Harriet Hendricks:

I think it's such a beautiful sound coming from that, and so that amazed me. . .and how well it was taken care of. So that was very fascinating and it's almost like an “awe-k-stra” (orchestra), with all the different stops that they could pull out and they would play. . .I think Hildegard played it. I remember that also, I think I saw her play. She was all over the keyboards! [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

There were many direct explanations given by informants in this study. They discussed the subject of the organ and the organists, usually without prompting, during every single conversation. Explanations of its symbolic importance were given by

employees of the theatre, but were never conveyed by community members. The employees were all very aware of its symbolic importance to the theatre and the community. They spoke at great length about both the organ and the organists, how important they are to the environment of the theatre, how symbolic they are of its integrity and survival. Most spent a great deal of time during the interview talking about this subject, explaining each organist, the songs, the rebuilding process, the tours, the history, and the stories. The following passages are some direct examples of how the employees perceive the organ and organists as central symbols for the Fargo Theatre.

Prairie Rose:

A lot of the Theatre Organ Society have ownership in the theatre because they're such an integral part of why we exist today. Without them, we wouldn't be here. The theatre would probably be another parking lot. They saved us; they saved us from destruction and apathy in our community. They were just going to let us go, let us fade into history. "Remember those great theatres in downtown Fargo?" The Fargo Theatre is the only one that exists today and that's because of the American Theatre Organ Society. So, Lance, Tyler, Steve, Lloyd, they're phenomenal guys. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Margie Bailey:

It's the heartbeat. It's the soul of this theatre. It sits right in the center. . . It's always on display. That's extraordinary. Every time you come in here for any event, there it is. It is an icon for this building and an icon in general. In terms of having these kinds of instruments, it's very, very rare. It's very rare that you have somebody like Lance Johnson who comes in Saturday mornings and tunes it and keeps [it] in extraordinary condition. He's built it. It's a huge gift. Usually they have not been preserved. The challenge is to find somebody who can do it and find somebody who can play it and somebody who does both and then to have additional organists is really extraordinary. . . very rare. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

The community members, on the other hand, gave little exegetic insight into the organ, which forces the operational assessment of the symbol forward. The community members, while not directly explaining what the symbolic importance of the organ and its players, absolutely showed how integral they believe it to be to the fabric of the theatre and community consciousness. Most talked about the beauty of the organ, the magnificence of the organists, and the memory of the organ rising up and down to start the shows. John Lamb shares his thoughts about the organ:

The Wurlitzer, [it's] just different. It's a big old organ. It's kind of like playing in a clam shell, 'cause its got these kind of curves, these slow curves and ridges. Then there's usually some dapper guy in a more dapper suit coat playing and looking over his shoulder in a dapper kind of way. I should have my picture taken with the Wurlitzer. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]

While John downplays the organ as “just different. . . a big old organ,” he clearly sees the organ and the organ players as much more; they symbolize a dapper persona and he displays this pride in the organ by wanting his picture taken with it. John is not alone. During many of the events I participated in at the theatre, patrons would snap photographs of the organ, with the organ, and sitting at the organ while talking at great lengths with the organists. Community members frequently display pride in the organ, as is remembered from the interview with Lynn, the coordinator of the “Take Back the Night” march, when she spoke of how proud she was to show the organ to the visiting speaker: “It was so neat to show that organ to him” (Interview conducted with the author on September 25, 2008). And, as Janet Letnes Martin affirmed with more description, “It's just, just a jewel in the Red River Valley. The organ in there is phenomenal” (Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008).

The organ is used quite frequently during events, ceremoniously and symbolically beginning and ending the Classic Film Night, rock concerts, and weekly movies. The use of the organ and the community's relationship to it clearly shows how important it is to the theatre, as a symbol of historical and artistic pride.

Certainly the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ's position amidst the other symbols of the theatre is tremendously important. The organ represents, symbolizes, the re-genesis of the theatre and therefore the entire fabric of Fargo's downtown community; specifically, the community's sense of artistic importance. Had the organ not been restored and saved by the organists of the ATOS, every single symbol of the Fargo Theatre would absolutely cease to exist, rendering a symbolic interpretation of the Fargo Theatre as collective community consciousness moot.

A *communitas* could develop within the symbol of the Wurlitzer Organ in the form of the organists. However, they rarely coalesce with one another. It seems that in spite of their symbolic magnitude, the only time the organists are together is when they are separated from the Fargo Theatre, meeting as the ATOS. This meeting could constitute an aspect of their *communitas*, but I would argue that the more important *communitas* in the realm of the organ is in the shared feeling of the people who witness the splendor of the organ and the organists. These witnesses tend to describe the organ, the organ concerts, and the organists with similar descriptors. Their memories are similarly analogous. They pass through the moment of witnessing the organ rising from the depths of the theatre and into the main stage — a stage of liminality. And, with every passing stage of liminality, the *communitas* of organ expands.

The Fargo Theatre Marquee

As for the symbolic nature of the marquee, we know it is a strong symbol, a major symbol, a primary symbol. It is a dominant symbol, evidenced by the plethora of pictures taken of the marquee, the overabundance of pictures people take standing in front of the sign, and the use of the sign in the city's paraphernalia and promotion. For example, in a recent article concerning the Fargo Theatre's classic movie week, a picture of the marquee was included as the main focal point of the story. The editors at the *The Forum* chose a large, long picture of the Fargo Theatre Marquee that took up three-fourths of the page. The heading of the article began, "Cinematic Classics At the Fargo," and continued in smaller print, ". . . theatre's summer film series celebrates great American movies" (*The Forum* August 11, 2008). Choosing to use this headline in large, bold type increases the awareness of the Fargo Theatre as the embodiment of Fargo itself. Furthermore, by selecting to showcase the Fargo Theatre marquee, the paper is really choosing the symbol of Fargo. That symbol accompanied by the large type, "Cinematic Classics At the Fargo," shouts to the reader the importance of the theatre and its symbolic significance to the community.

There seems to be an enculturated symbolic understanding prevalent surrounding the marquee, even amongst the tourist, as all appear to know that this is a symbol of great significance. People want to take pictures with it, learn about it, and tell others about it. It is a symbol of their exposure to the culture of the Fargo Theatre, which inevitably adds to the collective identity of Fargo culture. Missy Wilson-Walpole gives insight to this piece of symbolic importance when she proclaims, "[The picture of the marquee] is not just of a

theatre, but a symbol of family. A great symbol of Fargo” (Interview conducted with the author on July 3, 2008).

This established, enculturated representational understanding can be interpreted as the exegetic examination, the direct explanation of the symbolic importance of the marquee for the community. Another illustration of this is seen in the following quote from Margie Bailey, when she gives the symbol of the marquee the characteristic of spirit:

When you’ve got FARGO hanging on the front of the building, in flashing lights, you can’t ignore it. I think people are really appreciative. You really can’t think of another building in Fargo that everybody knows. It’s a great privilege, but a pretty significant responsibility too. We don’t have replacement insurance because it is irreplaceable. It truly is. The spirit would be gone and [we’d] never be able to recreate it. [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

From these exegetic examinations, we can pull the operational assessment of the marquee. The interviewees utilize and relate to the marquee in ways that make its importance absolute. As stated before, there are countless pictures of the marquee posted on photography sites online, and many friends, family members, and interviewees had pictures of themselves posing under the sign. When the marquee was fixed during the renovation, the community threw a big party, celebrating the re-lighting of the iconic symbol and posters and clothing are dotted with the marquee’s image. John Lamb relayed a story he had heard about the North Dakota Board of Tourism using the marquee in one of their promotional brochures, changing the word FARGO to DAKOTA because the sign alone represented the Fargo community too straightforwardly (Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008). The cultural value of the marquee seen through these nonverbal actions is significant, suggesting great community significance.

The positional aspect of the marquee as a symbol is, as stated many times prior, absolutely dependent upon all the other symbols of the Fargo Theatre. The relationship of the marquee to the building, to the events, to the employee culture, to the memories, and to the whole building and its architecture is a reciprocal one. One barely seems to exist without the other. Without the marquee, memories dampen, events are not as spectacular, and the architecture blends into the street façade. The symbol of the marquee is one of the most important, as it is a symbol that allows the theatre to stand out as a symbol of community memory and pride.

The marquee is symbolic of many things in its single formation. It displays the community pride in its history through the detailed and careful preservation. The marquee shows, through the announcements of events on its side, how community activism is recognized—not hidden, but displayed in bright lights for Fargo residences and visitors to see. It is a tangible part of the collective community consciousness, unifying with the other symbols of the Fargo Theatre to validate its significance. It uses the architecture, the events, and the memories, in order to fully exist as a central player in what Fargo is as a culture. Finally, like all the other symbols of the Fargo Theatre, the marquee has strength in its polarization of meaning, being both sensory and ideological. The mere look of the marquee is magnificent, bright, flashy, and proud. The ideology behind the pomp and circumstance is historical, memorable, individual, and altruistic.

Special Events

The symbolic importance of the movies, performances, and other artistic events is unique to the Fargo Theatre in that they speak almost directly to a sense of identity with a

culture. The Fargo Theatre responds to social interests, human rights, controversy, and so on and so forth within the events that take place there. The theatre has exposed and allowed for open dialogues within the building, and therefore within the community. "It's sort of where an agnostic finds religion," as Tucker stated (Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008). This is the one place where this happens in the city. The Fargo Theatre is the community's wise elder. It comforts, helps further thought, gives knowledge and wisdom, and exudes understanding. It symbolizes the ethics and morals of the collective community consciousness. It symbolizes the greater culture that is Fargo. "Opinions on the influence of movies range from viewing them as hope for a better world to the fear of their degrading mankind," so it is no wonder that the Fargo Theatre in all its history and collective community memory houses such vital issues for the area's people and their culture (Powdermaker 1950:11). "Movies meet a person's deepest needs, the need for escape from anxieties, they help provide models for human relationship, a set of values and new folk heroes" (Powdermaker 1950:15).

Much of the symbolic meaning behind the events that take place at the Fargo Theatre is best seen through the exegetic interpretation. Notice how readily and forthright the culture is to give their assessment of the Fargo Theatre's events and their meanings.

John Lamb:

I think it serves a roll; a community roll. . .a real roll for the community. It's an identifiable landmark for Fargo; it is something I think people would be viable for. It's easily the spot of significance. It's maybe not [the] trademark, but it's one of the most identifiable landmarks of the city and so it's become kid of a central place. I used to work with some people and that was the only reason they would come downtown, you know, before downtown started being redeveloped. . .considered a safe place. The Fargo Theatre was the only reason to come downtown. I think it's

always kind of brought people down here. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]

Prairie Rose:

Beyond just being this little gem in downtown Fargo and a piece of history, I think we really capture and engage the community in the performing arts. We don't just do film, we don't just do live productions, we do community dialogues, we engage people with topics of relevance. Whether it's religion or other social issues, we engage people. That's our job, to engage the community in something in life, in art. I think the Fargo Theatre has done a great job at providing something for the fabric of our community to enjoy. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Thomas McCurdy:

I've gone to the film festivals. It's one of those things that's different and the crowd is really responsive at the events. It's really fun. I know a lot of people who are involved in that kind of stuff. It'd be totally different if it was held anywhere else. It'd be a completely different experience. [Interview conducted with the author on July 19, 2008]

Clearly, the community interprets the events at the Fargo Theatre as part of the identity of the greater Fargo Culture. The operational assessment of the events furthers these direct explanations, as the community uses the theatre as the place of significance no matter if it is being used as a movie house or a rally house. A perfect example of this is seen during the interview with a coordinator of the "Take Back the Night" event. Not only was she stating that it was a symbol of meaning within the community, but she was using it as such by holding the event there (Interview conducted with the author, September 25, 2008).

Again, the positional aspect of the event as symbol is only understood through the symbolic importance of the other symbols that interact with it. Without the building, the

events would not take place; without the marquee, the event would not seem as important; without the organ, events would lose an air of nostalgia, and so forth.

The events as symbol of the larger community spirit are fully understood through symbolic properties. The property of condensation, many things and actions represented in single formation, is quite clear. Each event is different from the other, with distinctive purpose. Yet the events, taken as a whole, all symbolize the collective community consciousness of Fargo, which is its unification of disparate significata trait. Ultimately, the events' polarization of meaning becomes clearer as we notice the obvious sensory characteristics of each event, such as the Celebration of Women and Their Music's finale. All the women who performed gather onstage for one last song, and after a few moments of singing and music the entire audience is allowed to join the group onstage. The image is quite powerful. The ideological position of the event is then unveiled: "We are one, united together for a cause and the whole community is supportive."

Of course, the participants of the events represent the community. Yet, due to their explicit nature, one can find varying *communitas* within each occasion. During my participation in many of these events I was able to become a part of the dynamic *communitas* fairly easily and am lead to believe that the events at the theatre are both audience-specific and inclusive. Anybody was allowed to fully participate. It was fairly easy to catch on to the cultural nuances of each group during each event as the members of each were open, engaged, and eager to discuss or explain the occasion to any newcomer. I saw examples of this at events like the Fargo Film Festival, The Celebration of Women and Their Music, the organ concerts, and documentary film showings (in which case the audience breakdown became even more specific and more inclusive according to the film's

topic). Many times I was asked if it was my first time at the theatre or first time participating in a certain event, which usually was followed by an introduction to the event and brief history of the theatre.

Architecture and The Fargo Theatre as a Dominant Symbol of Community Consciousness

The beautiful Art Moderne architecture inspires memory moments that mediate the theatre's collective identity. As the architectural symbols draw people into the building, memory culture is created and the collective community consciousness is developed. The symbol of the architecture is the foundation for the Fargo Theatre as the dominant symbol of this perception and it can be seen in the following quotes, some of which we have visited within earlier sections of this study:

Harriet Hendricks:

I think the theatre, for one thing has been very stalwart in the fact that it remained. That's a credit to the people who believed in it and dedicated their time and effort to preserve it and not let urban renewal tear it down. They kept that gem staying right here. It does mean something. . . I think it added to this urban renewal, all these buildings being revitalized and refaced and cleaned up downtown Broadway. I think it is a wonderful asset for the community. I think Fargo should be very proud that they have had people that are so interested and so dedicated to preserve it. That's our legacy. I will reiterate that it's like a diamond in the rough because it still stands there so majestic. A diamond in the prairie. [Interview conducted with the author on July 17, 2008]

William Block:

There are some other theatres, and sure you have some memories wrapped up in those, but not like the Fargo Theatre. It's a really important part to the community, changing the face of downtown, making it less scary for people to venture

downtown. I think that's why it's so much more important to make sure that we keep it up and running and looking good. I mean, the place needs another renovation, the carpet needs to be ripped out, the concession stand is beat to shit, there's so much stuff that needs to be done. 'Cause if we lose that, there's nothing. [Interview conducted with author on August 11, 2008]

Janet Letnes Martin:

Here's the thing, you're just lucky to have it up there. You know, I haven't been there for years and I think a lot of times you don't appreciate your own little gems in your backyard. To say, "Wow, we've got this," because you go to some other towns that size and they don't have that. When we got a little older and in high school we would go, but the Fargo Theatre was kind of falling into disarray at that time. Of course now it's completely renovated and it's just a jewel in the Red River Valley. [Interview conducted with the author on August 28, 2008]

Tucker Lucas:

The mystique of the Fargo Theatre certainly gives you much more of an experience. . . I feel in love with the texture that the theatre provides when you walk in. There's no other place in town like it. And if you're like me and you're not someone who's used to spending a whole lot of time in older buildings, that look older and that had a sense of style, to spend so much time in there, it's like entering a time warp and it just feels special. I feel in love with its position in the community. It's sort of geographically positioned at the heart of the city. So much revolves around it. You just watch people as they walk in and they take it in. They're obviously impressed. The Fargo Theatre to me is like the dot on the map of Fargo. The epicenter of the city I've lived in most of my life. NYC has the Statue of Liberty Paris has the Eiffel Tower Fargo has the Fargo Theatre. It's that one thing that comes to mind when someone says the name of a place and you think of a landmark or symbol, it's the Fargo Theatre for Fargo. It gives me a sense of history and a place and time and it also is sort of hallowed grounds because of all the important things and people that have been there. It's been utilized by so many people for so many things, but it hasn't lost its identity as being the Fargo Theatre. It hasn't become just a town hall with bare white walls and a bland stage, fold out chairs; it still has this majesty and grandeur about it. It will endure. It's sort of where an agnostic finds religion. If that agnostic just happens to be into movies, you go there. [Interview conducted with author on September 11, 2008]

By analyzing the narratives concerning these artistic symbolic structures, one is able to better understand how the Fargo Theatre community “develops ways for channeling common energies” (Abrahams 1995:vi). The Fargo Theatre is a symbol of the artistic nature, the artistic consciousness, of the Fargo area. Fargo is proud of its artistic integrity as a community. The community built and saved the Fargo Theatre. This building is the proof, the symbol, of their ability to go beyond typical small-town nature, typical small-town reputations. The theatre was built at a time when “incorporating live entertainment was difficult to maintain” and the “changing form of motion picture presentation, as well as the Depression economy, precluded this kind of expense in most locations” (Valentine 1994:51). Cities similar, both smaller and larger, have not gone to the efforts this community has in order save, renovate, and reinvigorate a theatre like the Fargo Theatre, which is evident in the exegetic, operational, and positional aspects of this symbol. The Fargo Theatre symbolizes community greatness, an artistic righteousness: declaring that they are not just the people of a small town but that they are a people of artistic clout and intelligence. The collective community consciousness that the Fargo Theatre symbolizes is one of artist pride and superiority. The beginnings of this idea of artistic pride harkens back to the theatre’s roots in vaudeville, as the “vaudeville patron was king of all he surveyed, the two-bit critic, but certain of his own judgments. . .he was a member of one big happy family, ready to marvel or to guffaw” (Sobel 1961:49).

Informants have given many direct explanations as to the symbolic importance of the Fargo Theatre. Margie Bailey addresses its significance to both her and to the community:

It's been an extraordinary privilege. When I say that it always sounds so trite and doesn't really say what I want to say. Obviously, there have been some really tough times. There are challenges. But when you know that you and your board and staff are holding in their hands this iconic building, then you're pretty committed to riding through whatever those challenges are and making sure that you pass it on when it's time to pass it on. If I didn't, somebody else would be in here doing it. The community will always provide, someone will always be available in this community. Short of a natural disaster that would physically destroy it, there is absolutely no way [it will ever not exist].

It's not a place where you experience pain and suffering; it's a joyful place. We need arts, we need creativity, we need joy, we need entertainment. Stop pretending that that isn't essential to being human. It's not fluff. Just sitting in the theatre and realizing that you are part of preserving this space, this period of time, that you can play a major role in making sure this is here for children and grandchildren sounds really hokey, but I do have a son and granddaughters. This is for them. This is so they can be rooted to their history and to Fargo's history. That's the privilege.

[The theatre] is this community space. The people in this community have such ownership in this theatre. I wish they would donate at the level that they have this pride, sense of ownership. This is the Fargo Theatre, this is their touchstone. I don't see us as a community theatre, I see us as bringing an additional thing to the pallet of the culture capacities of Fargo. It's this anchor; it's this historic anchor; it's this touchstone. What could be better than that in an old building that has all of this spiritual essence! [Interview conducted with author on July 24, 2008]

Margie, like most informants, sees it first and foremost as a historic hallmark for the community. She does, however, eventually point toward the operational meaning of the symbol, which is that of artistic pride. The community utilizes the space just as much as a historic entity and as a center of artistic showcase. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker links the two aspects as well, stating, "All art, whether popular, folk or fine, is conditioned by its particular history and system of production" (1950:3).

Continually, informants would make statements similar to, "Where else can you experience a movie and a concert in a space like that?" Testimonials such as this lead to the belief that it is not entirely about the space but that it is about art coupled with the space

that makes the theatre a symbol of great magnitude for the community. There are several artistic and community events that take place in other venues of course, but when festivity is happening at the Fargo Theatre, the community collectively plumps their chests out to declare the theatre artistically superior to the other venues. As Chuck Klosterman said, “There’s nothing like seeing a concert at the Fargo Theatre. It’s so much better! It’s just cool” (Interview conducted with the author on September 30, 2008).

CHAPTER 7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

My study uses many voices and many symbols, it is multivocalic and polysemic—to be powerful, to show that the lot makes up the whole. The use of different symbols with many meanings or polysemy or polysemous, characterized by many meanings, is what the Fargo Theatre embodies naturally, speaking toward the positional characteristic of the theatre. You can look at the theatre, at its façade, and see an obvious symbol. You can look within its walls and see many more. You can look and listen the people who attend and hear variations of the symbol; it is history, future, exploration, and controversy. It is so much more to so many people, but at its essence, at its core, is the symbol of community and collective pride for the people of Fargo. The evidence gathered and discussed throughout the results of this study proves this. The symbol of the Fargo Theatre is the umbrella symbol for all the others, for the employees, for the memories, for the marquee, and the organ. They are all housed within its walls and they all give insight into the importance of art and this building for the community. As Margie and so many others who participated in this study said, “The community will never let this place fall to ruin.” It symbolizes Fargo’s past and present artistic superiority and progressiveness amidst its peers.

If culture can be found in people’s understandings and stories of rituals, events, artifacts, and things then the culture of both the Fargo Theatre and the larger Fargo area is revealed within the stories of the people who have taken part in this study. If “dominant symbols represent sets of fundamental themes,” and the dominant “symbol appears in

many rituals,” then one can conclude that the Fargo Theatre is a dominant symbol for the entire Fargo community (Turner 1973:1101).

Stories are used to represent and transform problems and moral conflicts of all sorts. Time and again the Fargo Theatre allows for dialogues to manifest, which in turn allows for transformation of the community. Again the question is asked: From where else would the community be able to transform? There is no other place of significance on the scale of the Fargo Theatre within the community. The theatre is a place where “the banker, the carpenter, the mechanic and laborer come with their families and enjoy a few hours in a common. . .amusement” which produces the greater culture of the greater Fargo Theatre (Walker *in* Kenney 2007:20). This alone produces the immensely important and rich culture of the Fargo Theatre.

Those who visit the Fargo Theatre, no matter what the event, have a culture in common. They have witnessed the ritual, they have become a part of the story, the history, and they understand its language. Some within the culture hold deeper roles, of course, but all members enjoy a commonality. One can see evidence of this from the interview I conducted at a dinner party, when the mere mention of the theatre brought about a plethora of stories from every single person at the table. The culture of the Fargo Theatre is for everyone to partake in. Entrance is as easy as standing in front of the brightly lit marquee. As Prairie Rose points out:

We get a wide range of people at the theatre. It really transcends those social boundaries. People interact with each other. On any given night you could have your most elite upper class echelon of downtown Fargo, and then walks in some guy off the bus. Waiting for the next Greyhound to leave, but he needs something to kill time. It’s quite the range of the demographic of Fargo-Moorhead. We get tourists in all the time, we get children. People just absolutely love that place. It’s

great to know we're on all the time. [Interview conducted with the author on May 11, 2008]

Borrowing from anthropologist Victor Turner, who “sought to bring the reader into the midst of the experience, especially as it drew upon the entire range of sensory experiences as they found group expression,” the symbolic meaning of the folkways, symbols, and collective memories that the Fargo Theatre invokes was in dire need of in-depth study and analysis (Abrahams 1969:vii). When we pontificate and gaze at the images and symbols of the Fargo Theatre “we see some part of ourselves that facts and figures do not explain” (Putnam 2000:xi). Moreover, interviewing and studying the various narratives and memory culture of the Fargo Theatre got to the heart of its symbolic importance: artistic pride and superiority. Through the ubiquitous, dominant symbol of the Fargo Theatre and its internal wealth of meanings, one is able to garner information, “not only about the natural environment as perceived and evaluated by the ritual actors” but also about the community and individual “ideas, ideals, and rules” (Turner 1973:1103). The Fargo Theatre symbolizes “that which lives, rich and eloquent, inside us” (Putnam 2000:xii).

The Fargo Theatre is not just a brick building with four walls, but a symbolic structure housing the collective memories and artistic dominance of an entire community. The Fargo Theatre is a symbol with many interpretations but with shared perceptions for the community as a whole. Confidently, it can be discerned that the subjects interviewed for this study collectively harbored respect, wonderment, and joy for the theater and the symbols housed within. Their observations can therefore be said to characterize the feelings of a large majority of the Fargo community. Hearing the stories of people who

have been touched by the Fargo Theatre prove fascinating and beneficial to the scholar and to the greater Fargo community. By representing diverse threads of collective memory far beyond those of mere entertainment, I argue that the Fargo Theatre is a significant and enduring symbol of Fargo's collective memory and community consciousness.

This thesis shows that the Fargo Theatre symbolizes and invokes the inventive gratification of the Fargo community, through symbols of collective memory and community ethos, feeling, and attitudes. The culture of the theatre is a lot of little things put together, a collection of symbols, but ultimately the theatre symbolizes collective memory and community, a feeling and an attitude of superior artistic pride. As stated in the beginning of this study, the theatre is a vital part of the community consciousness via other realms of experience that are not necessarily divorced from the entertainment and pleasure aspects of the theatre but there are many more questions to be answered and meanings to be gained with further research. What is the future of the Fargo Theatre? Will it segway into the next century staying true to its core or will it drift? What new symbols will arise from within and about? Will there be a group with enough vigor and film to visually document the Fargo Theatre and the surrounding culture? What type of catalyst will this study be for future research? As Victor Turner points out, "All human act is impregnated with meaning, and meaning is hard to measure, though it can often be grasped, even if only fleetingly and ambiguously" (Turner and Bruner 1986:33).



Figure 13: Fargo Theatre, 1926 (Photo by Bonanzaville, hand tint by Kate Koshnick in Cornejo 1985:Cover page; Fargo, ND).

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- 1983b Specialty Theatre Needs Help for Survival, June 12.
- 1984a Mahkahta Dance Troupe Appears on Fargo Theatre Stage, March 11.
- 1984b Plans Underway to Restore Historic Theatre, February 29.
- 1984c Set to Celebrate Grand Reopening, April 22.
- 1984d Revives 1920s Vaudeville Stage, March 11.
- 1985a Historic Theatre Now in Community Hands, July 28.
- 1985b Save Fargo Theatre Of Course, November 14.
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APPENDICES

Informed Consent

In order to complete a proper academic study, the researcher must insure the study is ethical and legal. One must gain approval from the North Dakota State University Institutional Review Board (NDSU IRB) by crafting a special proposal and form which “is required when faculty, staff, students, or other representatives of NDSU become engaged in research that will involve human subjects/participants” (NDSU IRB 2009). The following is the proposal that was approved by the NDSU IRB for my study on the Fargo Theatre.

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

My name is Jessica Rau. As a graduate student, I am working on my thesis project for my Master’s of Social Science in Anthropology at North Dakota State University. The purpose of my thesis is to collect, describe, and preserve information about the historic Fargo Theatre. The benefits of such a thesis project will help scholars and the Fargo-Moorhead community to better understand the history and culture and traditions of the Red River Valley.

This project is going to be developed in tandem with a privately funded documentary concerning the same issues, therefore the interviews will be videotaped as well as audio recorded. The interviews will include a variety of people associated with the Fargo Theatre such as current and former employees, Wurlitzer Organ players, movie patrons, and others who have been impacted by the Fargo Theatre in some significant way. Periods of participant observation also will be utilized. Many events take place at the

Periods of participant observation also will be utilized. Many events take place at the theatre in which this method will prove useful for gathering data concerning community consciousness and symbolism. Some of these events will be recorded for the documentary with permission from the Fargo Theatre and the participants and will be utilized within this study. I will record responses, as a collective whole, to the events in order try to understand the general feeling aroused during these times.

You are invited to participate in this research study. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from participation at any time. The interview will last approximately 1 to 2 hours. Portions of your videotaped interview may be utilized in the documentary and portions of the audio may be transcribed for use within the thesis and research analysis. If you so desire, your participation in this project may be kept confidential and no personal names or signifiers will be used. If you do wish to be identified by name in this research study, your request will be honored. Please indicate this preference by signing your name below.

The University and the investigator as well as the producer of the documentary film own data and records created by this project. You may view any information collected from you by making a written request to the co-investigator. You may view only information collected from you, and not information collected about others participating in the project. All identifiers, codes and linkages will be retained for the length of the research project and 2 years past this date to be used for analyses and publications. Data will be either archived or destroyed at that time. This information will be stored in password protected computer files at the Fargo Theatre and at my home office.

No identifying information will be used in publications or presentations resulting

from this research without your express permission. Identifying information that may be collected includes your name, city/state of residency, occupation, and ethnicity/cultural background. This information will be stored in password protected computer files. Only the researcher and producer of the documentary has access to these protected files.

Your participation is voluntary and you may quit at any time. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time.

If you have any questions about this project, please call me, Jessica Rau, at (612) 272-3859 or call my graduate advisor, Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz at (701) 231-8922. If you have questions about the rights of human participants in research, or to report a problem, you should contact the NDSU IRB Office at NDSU (701) 231-8908 or ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu.

By signing this form, you are stating that you have read and that you understand this form and the research project, and are freely agreeing to be a part of this study. If there are things you do not understand about the study, please indicate this and I will be more than happy to clarify them for you.

I,

Do () Do Not () give permission to be audiotaped/videotaped

Do () Do Not () give permission to use my full name

Do () Do Not () give permission to identify the city and state I live in

Do () Do Not () give permission to identify me by my occupation

Do () Do Not () give permission to identify me by my ethnicity/cultural background

Researcher's Signature

Printed Name

Date

Many thanks for your participation in this thesis research project. It is greatly appreciated.

Interview Questions

- 1) Vital information: Name, date of birth, place of birth.
- 2) Please tell me about any memories you have of the Fargo Theatre.
- 3) Discuss an image or experience pertaining to the Fargo Theatre that especially sticks out in your mind.
- 4) What do you remember about the Wurlitzer Organ at the Fargo Theatre?
- 5) Which songs on the Wurlitzer Organ do you remember?
- 6) In what ways do you think the Fargo Theatre has contributed to the Fargo-Moorhead area?
- 7) Which movies that you have seen at the Fargo Theatre do you remember the most? Why?
- 8) Discuss the years when the Fargo Theatre was not very active and only showed popular movies (1940s – 1970s)? Any thoughts about this time?
- 9) Describe the people you would usually see at the Fargo Theatre.
- 10) When would you normally attend an event at the Fargo Theatre? Also, what type of events would you attend at the Fargo Theatre?

- 11) What do you think the Fargo Theatre means to the Fargo-Moorhead community? What does the Fargo Theatre mean to you?
- 12) Do you have any other memories or thoughts about the Fargo Theatre?

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

NDSU

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

701.231.8908
Fax 701.231.8098

Institutional Review Board

*Office of the Vice President for Research, Creative Activities and Technology Transfer
1735 NDSU Research Park Drive
P.O. Box 5756
Fargo, ND 58105-5756*

*Federwide Assurance #FWA00002439
Expires April 22, 2008*

April 28, 2008

Dr. Timothy Klobberdanz
Dept. of Sociology, Anthropology & Emergency Management
404D Minard Hall

Re: IRB Certification of: **"The Historic Fargo Theatre: A Symbol of Collective Memory and Community"**
Protocol #: **HS08221**

Co-investigator(s) and research team: **Jessica Rau**

Study site(s): **Fargo Theatre** Funding: *n/a*

The IRB has determined that this project qualifies for exempt status (category # 2b) in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, *Protection of Human Subjects*). This determination is based on the protocol version received 4/23/08, and the participant info sheet/cover letter/oral script version received 4/28/08.

Please also note the following:

- This determination of exemption expires 3 years from this date. If you wish to continue the research after 4/27/2011, submit a new protocol several weeks prior to this date.
- The project must be conducted as described in the approved protocol. If you wish to make changes, pre-approval is to be obtained from the IRB, unless the changes are necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to subjects. A *Protocol Amendment Request Form* is available on the IRB website.
- Prompt, written notification must be made to the IRB of any adverse events, complaints, or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others related to this project.
- Any significant new findings that may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the participants and the IRB.
- Research records may be subject to a random or directed audit at any time to verify compliance with IRB policies.

Thank you for complying with NDSU IRB procedures; best wishes for success with your project.

Sincerely,



Teryl Grösz, MS, CIP
IRB Director

NDSU is an equal opportunity institution.

Photographs

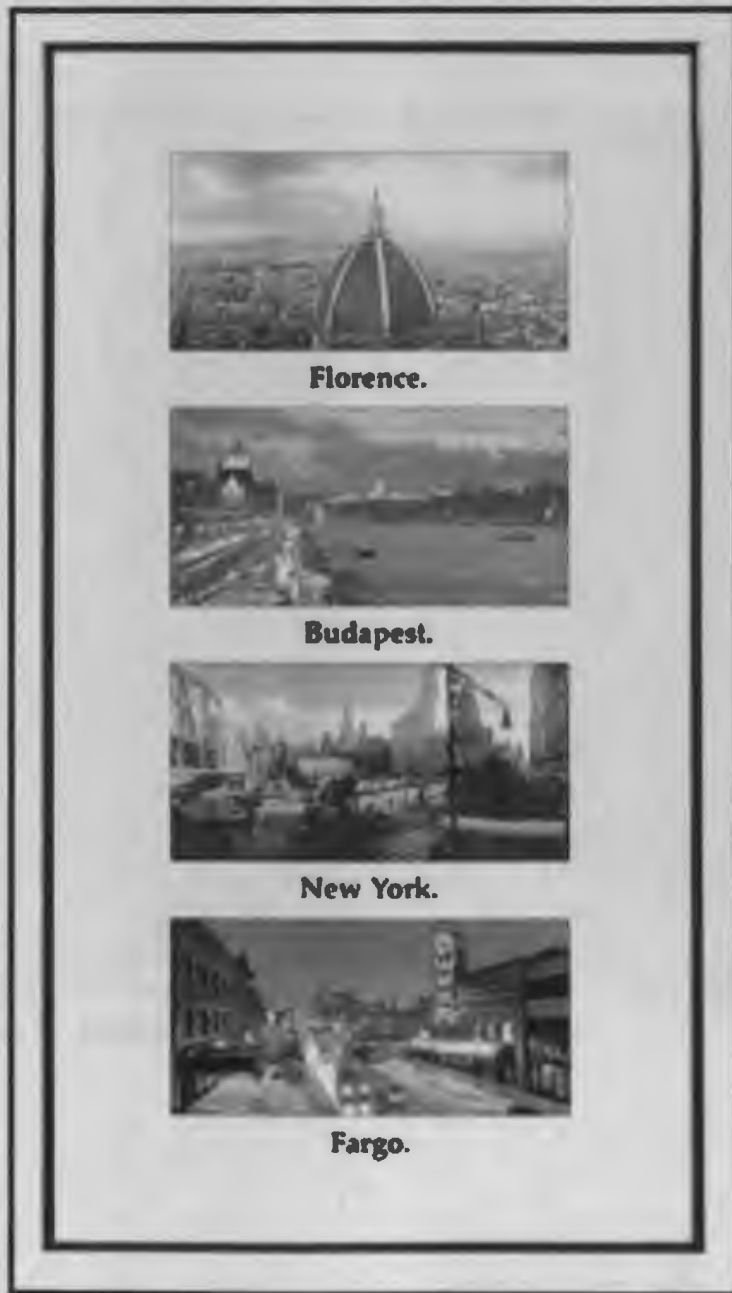


Figure 14. Poster depicting great landmarks of the world, including the Fargo Theatre marquee (Photo by John Borge, 2008; Fargo, ND).



Figure 15. Ticket reservation boxes dated to 1926 housed in the Fargo Theatre basement (Photo by Jessica Rau, June 20, 2008; Fargo, ND).



Figure 16. Before an event, community members get a tour of the organ from a Fargo Theatre organist (Photo by Jessica Rau, 2008; Fargo, ND).



Figure 17. Fargo Theatre organist Lance Johnson gives the author a tour of the inner pipe work for the Mighty Wurlitzer Organ (Photo by Jessica Rau, 2008; Fargo, ND).



Figure 18. Organist Lance Johnson at the helm of the original Fargo Theatre's Mighty Wurlitzer Organ (Photo by the Fargo Theatre, found in the basement of the Fargo Theatre, date unknown; Fargo, ND).



Figure 19. Interior of the Fargo Theatre after the 1997 renovation (Photo by the Fargo Theatre, 1997; Fargo, ND).



Figure 20. The author (left) and a friend attending Silent Film Night at the Fargo Theatre (Photo by Jessica Rau, 2008; Fargo, ND).