

High movie prices: One of the last great mysteries

By TOM KOWALSKI

There are three unsolved mysteries today—the Devil's Triangle, Stonehenge, and why consumers pay \$3.50 for a movie they could see for \$1.25. There are a few more factors involved than the price of the movie, such as overhead (including paying off

or renting the theater, maintenance, and staff salaries).

Overhead aside, "there's no reason why theaters should be charging that much for a movie," says Barbara Daniels, manager of the Civic in Farmington.

Disparate ticket prices remain a mystery because it's next to impos-

sible to get an answer from the managers of theaters which charge \$3.50.

One manager was friendly until the subject of finances came up. Then he became uncooperative and rude.

Another manager, during a busy night, understandably asked this reporter to come back the following day. I did. It was her day off.

Some theaters, such as the Cinemas at Livonia Mall and Prudential Towne Center in Southfield, are owned by film companies.

The Livonia Mall Cinemas are owned by the General Cinema Theatres with a home office in Boston. Film companies appear to be suc-

cessful at dodging phone calls, as well as questions.

THE CIVIC however, which charges \$1.25 all the time, had nothing to hide. Ms. Daniels points out two reasons why prices at other theaters are high.

Some theaters incorporate what is called a first-run movie, which costs the theater more money from the distributor than a regular movie because of its popularity.

A first-run movie is one released to a theater for the first time. As long as the movie plays at that theater it's considered first-run. But as soon as that theater gives up the movie, it is

returned to the ranks of the regular movie. The expense is one reason why theaters refuse passes during first-runs.

The "fore-wall" is another reason for high movie prices, Ms. Daniels says.

A fore-wall occurs when a film company rents out a theater, plays its own movie, and charges its own prices. The film company, in most cases, will bring in its own personnel such as ushers and concession-stand workers.

The Civic will have a fore-wall this month when "Across the Great Divide" will play and tickets will be \$2.50 each.

WHEN THE CIVIC dropped its prices to \$1.25, they did so to compete, and the strategy has paid off handsomely.

During the summer when the Oscar-winner "Rocky" was playing, the theater was sold out nearly every weekend.

"We've had old customers that had

quit coming that are coming back now," Ms. Daniels says.

Edward J. Holter and his son, E. Gregory, proprietors of the Farmington movie house, are doing everything to keep their customers, sometimes for the good of the consumer, they say.

When the price of candy bars went up to 75 cents a box, for example, the Civic discontinued them because the Holters wouldn't charge anyone that much for candy.

The management knows that customers can have a good time seeing a movie, as well as a bad time, which is why a refund policy is in effect.

The Civic will issue a refund if there's no seating, if you become ill and have to leave, and if there are projection problems with the film.

What is surprising is the theater also will refund the ticket price to unruly patrons who must be kicked out—depending on how unruly the situation is.

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