

Clamoring for the communal?

by BROCK WEIR

It's been a few weeks, so now it must be asked? have you had your full ?Barbenheimer? experience yet? That is, the pleasure of seeing both the ?Barbie? movie and ?Oppenheimer,? the biopic of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called ?Father of the Atomic Bomb,? in reasonably quick succession?

Both films, wildly different in content, but in some ways not all together polarized in terms of some of their messages, have become nothing short of cultural phenomena this summer, together and separately, reigniting North American box offices in earnest after COVID-19 and breaking financial records across the boards.

Given the cultural disparity between the two films and the fact that they were released to audiences, some of you have challenged yourself to see ?Barbenheimer? back-to-back, risking numb posteriors by the time the six-hour-ish experience draws to a close, but guaranteeing social media cache in the process.

Others were ?over? the Barbenheimer phenomenon before it was even released as jokes, memes, videos, and more were early signals of the cultural juggernaut that was to come, but those individuals were definitely in the minority come opening weekend.

Most curious to see a film about a venerable children's toy that wasn't dismissed from the outset by critics as simply a herculean-length exercise in product placement, I first dipped my toes the plastic-fantastic pond on opening night.

It was an evening showing, so seeing Oppenheimer immediately afterwards wasn't the most practical option; it was therefore decided to see the ?back half? the following day. Such was Barbie's power, however, in the cold light of day it felt more time was needed to marinate in its message, so Oppenheimer had to wait for the following Saturday.

A longer unspooling that was anything but a slog, Oppenheimer was just as satisfying, scratching a very specific cinematic itch for this film fan who is also a history buff.

And yet?one of my biggest takeaways from the entire Barbenheimer experience, even if it wasn't as intensely packed as some of yours, was, quite literally, the experience itself.

My screening of Barbie, as you might expect, was a sea of people clad in different variations of bubble gum pink (I opted for bright turquoise, so maybe I'm just a Ken) representing almost the entire age spectrum, background, group configuration, families, singletons, and more. All were ready to have the time of their lives and, from my not-so-lofty perch near the screen (tickets were in short supply), everyone did.

People were grinning from ear to ear as they left the theatre, joining a lengthy line to have their photos taken in a larger-than-life Barbie box ? that is, if they didn't have time to do so on their way into the theatre ? and, during the walk through the parking lot, it was clear that new friends were made in the audience that night.

Given its subject matter, of course, spirits leaving Oppenheimer weren't nearly as buoyant, but it seems just about everyone I encountered on the way out was thrilled to have not only been able to take in this pop cultural experience, one with two truly beautifully-made movies at its core, but to do so together.

At this point, it seems painfully obvious to once again point out how polarized our world has become since the start of the global pandemic. People are still grappling with the lingering impacts of more than two-years of comparative isolation. People have sought out views that merely echo their own rather than challenge their viewpoints. As much as we were ?all in this together? for many that only lasted so long before the weight of individual inconvenience began to take its toll.

Now, as evidenced by blockbuster concerts in Toronto, and, indeed, the Barbenheimer phenomenon, people are once again getting back in the groove of these communal experiences, seeking them out, and reaping the benefits.

This past weekend, as we have most Civic Holiday weekends for the better part of 20 years, we took our annual family trip to Jamestown, NY, for the annual Lucille Ball Comedy Festival, which is held each year in the beloved redhead's hometown, about 90 minutes from Buffalo.

The once-bustling city is now home to the National Comedy Center, a museum that has become a significant international destination in recent years, saluting the art of comedy in all its forms, the pioneers who blazed a trail, and the newbies who continue their path.

Since its inception, scores of these pioneers and their descendants have made the Center the repository of their comedic history, including such luminaries as Joan Rivers, Betty White, Carl Reiner, and, of course, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. At the heart of the Centre is an immersive tribute to comedian George Carlin and just a few days prior to the festival, his actress-writer daughter Kelly Carlin shared some of her insights on its success with me for a freelance piece for another publication.

On the interactive nature of the Center, which asks that you fill out your own comedy profile for an experience tailored around what makes you smile, Ms. Carlin hit the nail on the head.

‘The real potential and power of the Comedy Center is removing all of the identities that we have beyond what makes us laugh. When we do that, we get to our hearts, we get to our souls,’ she said. ‘My dad used to say when people are laughing their minds are open, their hearts are open, there is a part of your physiology that happens when you're laughing. You're no longer in a space of putting your walls up, you're letting things in and things are affecting your mind and your body at the same time.

‘There is something about walking into a place where all you hear is laughter for two, three, or four hours’. If we can all walk out of there feeling a little bit more connected to each other, just a little bit more, maybe there's a chance we can feel connected and start to collaborate on the big things we need to work on with this planet.’

That's certainly how I felt returning home this week after reconnecting with friends I have known for the better part of a quarter-century, having made some new friends along the way, as well as a boatload of memories that will sustain until next August.

And, I suspect, many people who took in the Barbenheimer experience at its zenith, also left feeling a little bit more connected with each other and the shared experience.

Maybe there's still time for all of us to rediscover our connections and sense of collaboration wherever we can ? and, if it's at a place of laughter, in the darkness of a movie theatre, or even just through conversation, so be it ? and let's get to it.