

the Big Wheel, and walked along Riegelmann Boardwalk to Pier 16. The beach was nearly empty, except for a few trash cans cocked at odd angles in the sand. Behind us, the abandoned Steeplechase parachute jump was silhouetted against the spinning glitter of Coney Island. In front of us, the crashing Atlantic receded into the horizonless dark. We couldn't see the shark fins, but we could sense them.

What we *could* see was the Floating Cinema, a barge with a movie screen and a projection house on it, moored about eighty feet offshore. The barge was designed and built by Jon Rubin, an experimental filmmaker based in New York, and Mr. Rubin politely interrupted our contemplation of the waves. Mr. Rubin is medium height, oval-shaped, and getting bald. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, shorts, blue-framed glasses, and pink socks, and was carrying a walkie-talkie. While he fiddled with its knobs, he told us that he was the son of an engineer—a basement inventor, in fact—and grew up in Newton, a suburb of Boston; that he studied art history at Yale, and founded the Bard College Film Department in 1971; and that he now headed the film program at SUNY Purchase. He told us that since 1981 the Floating Cinema had appeared on the Erie Canal and on the Mississippi, Potomac, Ohio, and Allegheny Rivers. It was making its New York *début* this summer, showing nine feature-length films (“Beach Blanket Bingo” and “West Side Story” among them), free, at six waterfronts around the city. “I think of it as kind of sight sculpture,” Mr. Rubin said. “I don’t know that any sculptor would want to own up to it—it’s kind of awkward—but it *is* a made object that both

Floating Cinema

NOT long ago, we received a newsletter called *The Daily Plant* from the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation, which read:

COMING TO A SHORELINE NEAR YOU—THE FLOATING CINEMA. Some might think “Airport” a bad choice as an in-flight movie, but Parks feels “Jaws” is the perfect flick to see while picnicking at Coney Island near the Atlantic Ocean. . . . Spectators . . . are advised to bring blankets, beach chairs and a flashlight.

We do not own a beach chair or a flashlight, but we decided that this was a show not to be missed, so the other evening we took the B train to Stillwell Avenue, Brooklyn, waded through the sweating crowd around



"You're wise, but you lack tree smarts."

changes and reflects the environment."

At about eight-twenty, Mr. Rubin called up the crew of the Floating Cinema—Captain Bill Heintz and Projectionist Jim Coleman—on the walkie-talkie. Soon the unmistakable twang of the Beach Boys drifted out of the darkness. A crowd began to form in front of the barge. "I've always found the waterfront a magic place, because it's a double-sided environment," Mr. Rubin said. "It's both very seductive and very threatening. Especially at night. I mean, it's kind of like sex and death in one. It's everything. I like the idea of putting images in that very loaded environment."

The opener, a Merry Melodies cartoon called "Fresh Fish" and starring the likes of Professor Mackerel Fish-face, appeared on the bobbing screen, and more people came down from the boardwalk onto the sand. "This is a pretty good crowd," Mr. Rubin observed. "I talked to some lifeguards today, and they said that because of the beach waste they've had only a tenth of their normal crowd this summer."

The first version of the Floating Cinema appeared at a summer film workshop at Hampshire College in 1981, when Mr. Rubin used two rowboats held together by two-by-fours, and a borrowed projector and screen, to show students' films on a small pond. It

was a success. Subsequent versions were based on small "party barge" pontoon boats. "We set off to do surprise shows every night at little parks or towns we'd stumble onto on the Allegheny River," Mr. Rubin said. "I don't know why we ended up there, exactly, except that's where we went. We'd never announce our coming, and as soon as it got dark we'd start our show. People would pop out of their tents and go, 'What the hell is this?' It was a little bit like UFOs landing." Mr. Rubin progressed to a larger barge two years ago, for a show in New Orleans.

"What about this year's version?" we asked.

The 1988 Floating Cinema, we were told, features an eighteen-by-twenty-four-foot vinyl movie screen. The film is projected from behind the screen by an Eiki pedestal-type projector. The "barge" is actually two eight-by-twenty-eight-foot fiberglass pontoon boats held twenty feet apart by four aluminum beams to create a platform approximately forty feet long and twenty-eight feet wide. The vessel is powered by two forty-horsepower Tohatsu outboards, and steering is accomplished by thrusting one or the other—"like driving a tank," Mr. Rubin said. Once a show is finished, the Floating Cinema can be decon-

structed and transported overland by trailer to its next venue.

Now Mr. Rubin got on the walkie-talkie again; he was worried about how the surf, which was becoming more energetic with the evening breeze, would affect his cinema. "It's kind of risky, because so many things can go wrong," he said ruefully. "I mean, the whole thing could sink or float away. But I like that."

Perhaps a hundred and fifty people had gathered by the water's edge as the first strains of shark music crept through the night: "Duum-dum; duum-dum; dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum, dum-dum." A group of girls lying on their stomachs squealed and hid their faces; six little boys who had crowded onto a lifeguard chair began punching each other excitedly; a man sitting on a plastic bag dug his toes deep into the sand. Our heart rate, in a Pavlovian response to the music, quickened before there was any sign of a shark. In fact, the screen was showing a nice beach party with a bonfire—much like a little fire down the beach to our left, we noticed.

"They caught a shark, not *the* shark, not the shark that killed Crissy Watkins," said Richard Dreyfuss, as the earnest oceanographer in the movie.

Mr. Rubin got on the walkie-talkie. "Shore to cinema craft. Bill, I'm thinking you could swim around in the water with a big fin on, over."

A garbled reply came back.

"O.K., we'll save it for next year, over." Mr. Rubin grinned mischievously.

"Wait a minute, there's something else out there," Dreyfuss muttered as he peered at his boat's electronic equipment.

The six boys had dismounted from their perch and were sitting quietly in the sand.

"What we are dealing with here is a perfect engine, an eating machine. . . . All this machine does is swim and eat and make little sharks," Dreyfuss said.

At the end of the movie, when Roy Scheider, as chief of police, shoots the compressed-air cylinder lodged in the shark's mouth, exploding it, the audience laughed and clapped and whistled. Then the crowd stood up and shook the sand from its belongings and headed back toward the noise and lights of the arcades.

The song "Choo Choo Ch' Boogie" cranked out from the Floating Cinema.

No one went near the water.