



THE 25-YEAR-OLD ANGELIKA FILM CENTER ANCHORS ART HOUSE FARE IN NEW YORK

ART HOUSE NATION

ART HOUSE MOVIE THEATERS ARE PART OF THE AMERICAN FABRIC, MAKING COMMUNITIES WHERE THEY HAVE SURVIVED MORE LIVABLE. SO HOW DO WE KEEP THEM VITAL?

This year the Angelika Film Center in New York City will mark a quarter-century of screening art house fare. The theater has become well known for its eclectic offerings. Besides a select number of studio-driven films, its programmers encourage independent moviemakers without distribution deals to submit their films directly for exhibition consideration. It stands today among the most successful and recognized movie art houses in the country, with satellites in Texas and Virginia.

BY JULIE JACOBS And its mission to bring smaller, more unique and lower-budget films (at least by Hollywood standards) to the public is the same mission of hundreds of art house cinema programs throughout the country, some of them curated at settings outside the traditional movie theater, such as museums, universities and festivals.

Yet in this current paradigm shift in the way we watch movies—with panicky exhibitors reporting falling theatrical returns—where does the humble art house stand? Does its position left of center let it dodge the VOD meteor hurtling straight towards the multiplex, or leave it adrift without anything to hold on to? The prognosis, it seems, is optimistic—

as long as we the people care enough to act in the footsteps of a number of pioneering art house champions.

How art houses fit into the industry model may seem simple: to lend exposure to films deemed not commercial enough (whether stylistically or in subject matter) to otherwise make it to a screen. But from an audience's standpoint, the role they play is arguably more valuable—promoting culture and community by bringing people together for a singular collective experience, edifying a public that craves a broader, more rounded cinematic education than the commercial stuff can teach.

Russell Collins, CEO of Ann Arbor's Michigan Theater and Director of the Art House Convergence, an annual conference for art house owners, operators and allied businesses, describes the art house as fundamentally community-based and mission-driven. "Community-based means... custom-built for the dynamics of the community, and mission-driven means they're

"DOES THE ART HOUSE'S POSITION LEFT OF CENTER LET IT DODGE THE VOD METEOR HURLING STRAIGHT TOWARDS THE MULTIPLEX, OR LEAVE IT ADRIFT WITHOUT ANYTHING TO HOLD ON TO?"

focused on the art form and benefitting their community,” he said. “It’s both a communitarian and cultural way of thinking about the cinema business.”

“Being connected to your community, you have a role in defining that community,” he writes in his blog at arthouseconvergence.org. “Many of our neighbors seem to need the experience of gathering communally to experience stories and receive information. The art house is that place, because it is the community’s living room, or better still, the communal campfire where people can learn, be entertained and transported by stories that are spun by that most brilliant of story tellers—the motion picture.”

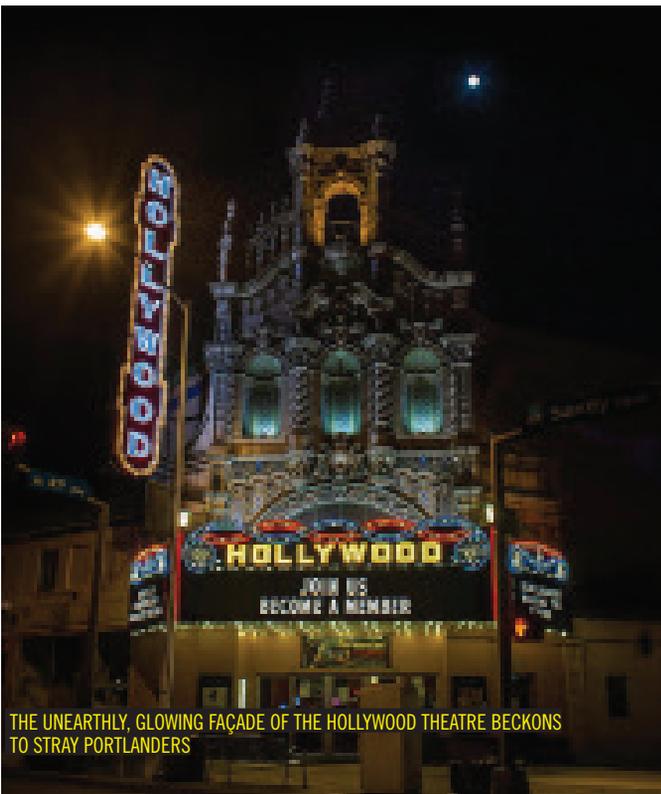
At the Hollywood Theatre in Portland, Oregon, that sense of neighborhood seems alive and well. The theater, which opened in 1926 to host vaudeville in addition to movies, and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, had fallen into disrepair and demoted to a second-run discount movie house. In 1997 the nonprofit Film Action Oregon bought the building and has since transformed the theater into a local center for film screening and education.

“We’ve been very lucky. Portland is a movie-going town. Per capita, we have more screens than anywhere else in the country,” said Justen Harn, the Hollywood Theatre’s Director of Programs and Community Engagement. “People are getting to know their neighbors. I think there’s intergenerational exchange going on. And I think also we’re bringing artists together to collaborate in ways they may not otherwise.

“We have really made it a priority to reach out to artists, filmmakers, community members, to incorporate them into our process, what we’re doing here at the theater. We also make sure there are various points of access to people, too, and that we’re showcasing challenging programming, but at the same time just things that are fun, accessible and that help to build community.”

Similar righteous energy courses through the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, Massachusetts, where locals rallied to keep the movie house open after its long-time owner wanted out of the business. According to Andrew Thompson, Theatre Operations Director, the story goes that a group of patrons

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Photograph by John Keel

encircled the building holding hands and eventually raised the funds to purchase it. Today the Coolidge, built in 1906 as a church and then renovated as a movie palace in 1933, leases its space as a nonprofit foundation. It welcomes 200,000 attendees annually to a wide-ranging slate of independent, foreign-language, documentary and animated films.

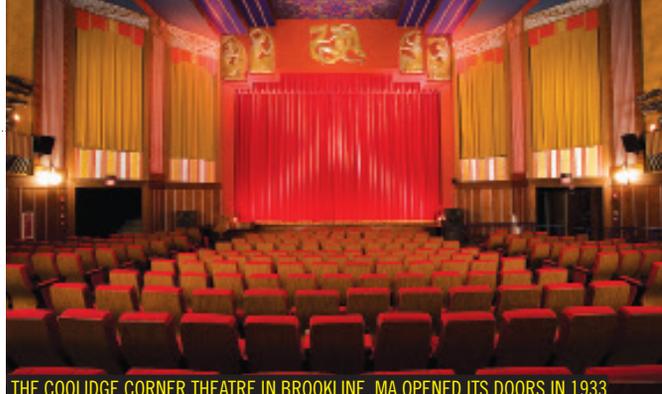
“We’re a destination point. People come to Coolidge Corner to see a movie here and go to the restaurants and shops. I think that’s grown quite a bit in the past 15 years,” Thompson said. “There’s a lot of local families, students from Boston University and other schools nearby, and there’s a large population of senior citizens right in the immediate neighborhood.”

Collins’ Michigan Theater hosts a varied audience as well and maintains a strong relationship with University of Michigan’s Screen Arts and Culture Department (Collins himself teaches at Eastern Michigan University, just seven miles away). He attributes the longevity of his theater, around for 34 years, to Ann Arbor’s “long tradition of celebrating cinema,” even through the cable-TV and home-video booms. His theory is that the town developed its passion for cinema as far back as the beginning of the automobile industry, which drew college students interested in technology to Michigan. At that time, film also was a burgeoning and innovative technology.

But just as discerning art house fare fosters community, so too does community determine what that fare should be. In some areas, better-known indies and even a bit of mainstream commercial stuff may be on the movie menu. As Harn noted, art house cinema is about showing passionate people things they’re enthusiastic about. Otherwise, the outcome is much less meaningful and impactful.

“It’s entirely about your market,” asserted Patrick Corcoran, Vice President and Chief Communications Officer for the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO), which handles the public image of the film industry and assists with industry-wide issues involving the studios, government and regulators. “If you look at a larger circuit or chain that’s known for art house, like Landmark, in a lot of their locations they’ve moved into sort of a hybrid of playing obscure independents, mainstream independents and also just mainstream Hollywood movies, as well, to provide a mix. That again is going to depend on the size of your market, the size of your theater, how many screens you’ve got.”

Collins agreed: “What the expectation is in New York City is much different than a small town in western Kansas. A New York art house may do a few commercial movies and a few movies that may stretch their audience’s interest, some historical retrospectives, documentaries, foreign-language films.” As



THE COOLIDGE CORNER THEATRE IN BROOKLINE, MA OPENED ITS DOORS IN 1933

Photograph by David Fox

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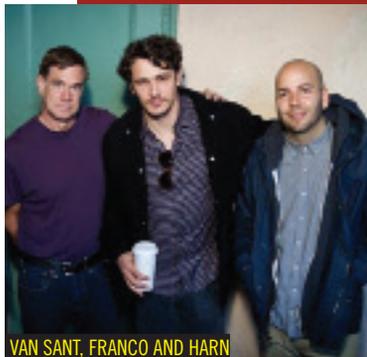
many art houses are nonprofits, in contrast to big-box theaters, their mission allows for a tremendous amount of flexibility and risk-taking in programming. Collins himself embraces smart programming of a broader nature. “At the Michigan Theater this May, we played (Baz Luhrmann’s) *The Great Gatsby*. Why? We’re a 1920s movie palace, so doing a movie that celebrates the 1920s was a nice fit. Second, it opened the Cannes Film Festival, so the art house audience was interested in that.”

Between distributors, film festivals, other programmers and local indie moviemakers, art house bookers have plenty of channels to mine for material. Some even invest in production and then screen their completed projects. The Hollywood Theatre, for example, offers a fiscal sponsorship program that vets applicants with its board. Potential recipients must demonstrate they have the experience and resources necessary to bring their projects to fruition. The theater has worked extensively with Michael Palmieri and Donal Mosher, helping fund their Independent Spirit Award-nominated *October Country* (support for which enabled its release on 35mm), as well as their second film *Off Label*. Their third film is currently in preproduction.

Apart from the material, however, related programming and presentation are key to keeping viewers coming, and therein lies the need for constant innovation. Many art houses, particularly nonprofits, provide some degree of education,

JUSTEN HARN OF THE HOLLYWOOD THEATRE, PORTLAND, OR

“My quintessential art house experience took place at the Hollywood Theatre, which has become my second home. The program began with a screening of James Franco’s *My Own Private River*, a reworking of Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*. The film consists largely of shots of River Phoenix’s character, Mike, using footage from the cutting room floor, scored by R.E.M.’s Michael Stipe. Van Sant and Franco were on site to introduce the film. After the screening the artists met with fans, and I watched as Franco was casually introduced to Walt Curtis, Portland’s unofficial poet laureate, and author of *Mala Noche*, which became the basis for Van Sant’s 1985 film of the same name. Standing in the lobby of this historic 1926 building, watching three generations of artists, each having profoundly inspired the next, was surreal. Franco later wrote that visiting the Hollywood Theatre was like walking into one of Van Sant’s films.”



VAN SANT, FRANCO AND HARN

Photograph by John Keel

ANDREW THOMPSON OF THE COOLIDGE CORNER THEATRE, BROOKLINE, MA

“Our 2012 Coolidge Award (honoring an artist whose body of work is recognized as consistently original and challenging) honored Viggo Mortensen, who was a fantastic guest and helped us heave a promotional ice sculpture off the fire escape at the end of the day. In 2009, we gave the award to the Quay Brothers and were able to bring their gallery show to Boston. The very first award we had in 2004 honored Zhang Yimou and was paired with a screening of *Hero*. Martin Scorsese made an unannounced appearance when we presented the award to Thelma Schoonmaker. Oh, and there was that year Meryl Streep showed up. My point is, these amazing people came to our little theatre in Brookline, Massachusetts, because they embrace the spirit of independent cinema and what this sort of theatre represents.”

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Photograph by David Fox



THOMPSON AT THE COOLIDGE

whether it's teaching the art form or offering film appreciation classes. There also are Q&As with filmmakers, themed series such as the Coolidge Corner's Science on Screen, and special tie-ins to create a more immersive experience, like when the Hollywood Theatre served cherry pie, donuts and coffee at a screening of *Twin Peaks*.

“There's more media than ever before... and it's constantly accessible,” Harn said. “So for us, it's really been important to get people excited about just what's special about going out to a film. And that is to create experiences that are event-like, that can't be replicated at home.”

Still, as with every business, art houses today face compulsory changes and challenges in the way they operate. “The biggest thing everyone in this industry has had to deal with in the past five years is this film-to-digital conversion or transition,” said Thompson. “Fundraising for general restoration and DCPs [digital cinema projectors], that was a significant challenge.”

“Thirty-five millimeter is going away. Currently, about 91 percent of screens are digital in the U.S.—about 80 percent of theaters—and that's just going to continue,” noted NATO's Corcoran. “And as those numbers get higher, it makes less and less sense for distributors to release in film, because it becomes too expensive for each print and you have to justify that cost on the return you expect from it. It's also harder for indie distributors. Some of them are having trouble making the transition to digital. It's a different way of distributing and preparing your movie.”

But if evidence of the staying power of community-based, mission-driven art house cinemas is needed, look no further than the Art House Convergence. Attendance at the organization's 2013 annual gathering ballooned to more than 350 people, a far cry from the 25 attending its first conference six years ago.

“They're like weeds, you can't kill them,” said Collins of art

houses, with a satisfied laugh. “An innovation we've promoted with the Art House Convergence is for these independent cinemas to think of themselves not just as businesses, but as a cultural dynamic that can operate effectively within a community.”

Collins also pointed out that before the early 1970s the industry was not organized around blockbusters, but rather a consistent release of all types of films. To this day “there are small, fragile wonderful films and it's nice to have a forum for them.”

“It's the same reason you don't want to have one channel on TV that only shows sports,” said Thompson of the need for art house cinema. “People have many different interests and if there's only one thing available to them, then that's all they're going to know about or understand. It's important to know what else is going on in the world besides the narrow range that Hollywood and big industry is putting out there.”

From Corcoran's perspective, art houses will continue to be a vital part of the film industry and movie-going experience, but he cautioned that with all of the available channels to access product, one of the big difficulties for the industry as a whole is grabbing and keeping people's attention. “You have to know your audience better and you have to know where they're going. I think the art houses, particularly the indie ones that are tied into their community, need to be really engaged with their local audience and use that connection.”

The art house sector has “existed alongside the commercial dynamic for a very long time. Because the well-operated art-house theater is close to its community and passionate about the art form that it celebrates, it can survive changes that might be less accepted in the commercial dynamic,” Collins said. “And cinema is such a valuable, important and psychologically impactful kind of art form, it has transcended being eclipsed by technology.” **MM**

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