



Cinema Classics

HOW SIX HISTORIC MOVIE THEATERS MAINTAIN THE MAGIC OF THE BIG SCREEN

by Meghan Drueding

To catch the latest new-release arthouse film in Missoula, Montana, you can head to the **Roxy Theater**, a nine-lives sort of place that almost burned down in 1994.

But the Roxy also offers an international action-movie series called “Inferno of Danger,” in which stars like Bruce Willis, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Bruce Lee rule the screen. (Attendees often wear costumes.) In fact, the 1937 theater hosts many different film series a year, all created and curated by staff members with an infectious passion for cinema. “Our programming is the only reason the Roxy is here and is not some kind of North Face store or parking lot,” says Executive Director Mike Steinberg. “It’s just the way the movie fanatics who work here like to experience movies and community together.”

That mix of culture and community is key to the survival of

the nation's remaining historic movie theaters, even while streaming services and the aftereffects of the COVID pandemic have wreaked havoc on the industry. Deep-pocketed corporations and film directors have occasionally stepped in to buy and preserve classic movie houses like the Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, which Netflix recently purchased and restored. But more common approaches to sustaining a theater's operations include converting to a non-profit organization and diversifying offerings to include food, drink, repertory films, or live performances. Hosting film festivals is another popular way to build audiences. "Folks who do film festivals bring together people from all walks and all different intentions," says Kate Markham, managing director of the independent movie-theater alliance Art House Convergence.

The nonprofit Roxy has housed the International Wildlife Film Festival since 2001. In addition to that annual event, it also produces and presents other festivals, such as the Montana Film Festival and QueerWest Film Fest. This strategy enables it to employ full-time staff members who work on the festivals and other programs. The theater ties some of its regular series to festival-related topics, helping it to retain loyal audiences year-round. Steinberg and his team are constantly dreaming up new projects to keep people engaged. In the past few years, they've replaced the seats with new ones that suit the Art Deco building and created extra screening spaces like a garden area and a "microcinema." The Roxy Lounge, a small gathering space next door serving



drinks, opened this past fall.

In Houston, the **River Oaks Theatre** is also using beverages to help draw in patrons—but in this case, dining and drinking are integral to a for-profit business model. The 1939 Art Deco cinema closed in 2021, but Culinary Khancepts, a Houston-based company that owns multiple restaurants and movie theaters, won the rights to its lease over several other contenders. "We thought to ourselves, what a cool thing for our group to be able to [own] one of Houston's most iconic movie theaters," says Jason Ostrow, vice president of development. The company restored the building's exterior as well as interior architectural highlights such as original statues and terrazzo flooring. New elements include personal dining tables inside the theater and a bar on each of the building's two levels.

Another big move was adding a commercial kitchen. Part of this new space

Opposite: In 2022, the Missoula Downtown Association named the Roxy Theater its Business of the Year. *This page:* River Oaks Theatre in Houston is the first historic rehabilitation project for Culinary Khancepts, which owns other cinemas and restaurants.

serves a full lunch and dinner menu to moviegoers, and the other part is dedicated to Leo's River Oaks, an upscale restaurant that Culinary Khancepts opened next door. Leo's adds to the company's revenue from the property, as does the income from food and beverage sales at the theater. Live performances and events round out River Oaks's offerings, and Ostrow says business has "exceeded our expectations" since the space reopened in October 2024.

Comedy shows, concerts, and other performances make up about half of the programming at the **West Shore Theatre** in the borough of New Cumberland, Pennsylvania. The other half is devoted



This page, from left: In Washington, D.C. the Avalon Theatre's facade comprises limestone, brick, and wood; Gardena Cinema in Gardena, California, still uses its original marquee letters. *Opposite, from left:* Mediterranean detailing at Chicago's Music Box Theatre; the West Shore Theatre's Art Moderne exterior remains intact.

to first-run and repertory films. Managing Director Dustin LeBlanc says the split programming is essential for the theater's survival in its market. "Opening as a one-screen movie theater would not be enough to financially sustain it," he says. The 1939 Art Moderne theater was purchased in 2019 by a group of local citizens who formed the nonprofit Friends of the West Shore Theatre. They hired architect Chris Dawson to revamp the interiors and restore the front facade and entrance area. The theater reopened in 2022, and LeBlanc says that several new businesses

have opened downtown since then. West Shore's distinctive sign now uses LED tubing rather than neon, but the letters on the original marquee beneath it are still changed by hand.

The same holds true for the marquee letters at the **Avalon Theatre** in Washington, D.C. Surrounded by leafy residential streets, the Classical Revival theater has operated as a nonprofit since 2003. "It's been around the neighborhood for over 100 years now," says Bill Oberdorfer, the Avalon's executive director. The two-screen theater shows mostly arthouse films, but Oberdorfer says 15 to 20 percent of its business comes from special programs, such as its Avalon Docs documentary series. Schools across the city have access to Cinema Classroom at the Avalon, a free program that invites sixth through 12th graders to film screenings and expert-led discussions. The

latest preservation work at the National Register-listed theater included a 2023 facade restoration and a 2024 exterior repainting in period-appropriate colors. Oberdorfer and his team have also added solar panels to the roof, cutting electric bills and creating an income stream from a program providing cash payments for solar power production.

Judy Kim of **Gardena Cinema** in Gardena, California, hopes to follow the nonprofit friends group model. Kim's Korean immigrant parents bought the midcentury movie theater in the South Bay area of Los Angeles County in 1976, and her 84-year-old father still occasionally works in the ticket booth. (Her mother died in 2022.) Kim has set up a 501(c)3 called Friends of Gardena Cinema, to which she'd like to sell the property if she can raise enough money. But the cinema is also for sale on the open market, with



Kim torn between her competing wishes to save the business and to spend time with her father. “I feel like I have a deep obligation to preserve the place, because it was my mom’s dream,” she says. “But I also want to take care of my dad.”

Physically, the theater hasn’t changed much since it opened in 1946—the marquee and seats are original. While its future may be in question, the moviegoing community’s love of its old-school vibe is not. Once word got out about Kim’s dilemma a couple of years ago, volunteers stepped up to help her keep the 800-seat, single-screen theater going. They sell tickets and snacks, operate the projector, and assist with social media and fundraising. At her volunteers’ suggestion, Kim switched to showing repertory films, which pose fewer scheduling challenges than first-run films. “Going repertory has really increased my market,” she says.

“Now we’re considered a destination.”

Another destination cinema, **Music Box Theatre** in Chicago, draws visitors from across the city, state, and region. The 1929 movie palace was designed in the Atmospheric style, with Italian- and Spanish-influenced detailing and a ceiling illuminated by twinkling lights resembling stars. The original developers included 32 rental apartments and several commercial storefronts in the overall structure, providing a built-in economic hedge against the ups and downs of the movie theater business.

The building’s longtime owner, lawyer and film distributor William Schopf, has made a point of investing in the theater—upgrading and expanding concessions, creating a garden and a bar/lounge, and modernizing acoustics—so it can continue to operate as a for-profit business. Last year, Music Box Theatre spent about

\$900,000 on a renovation that included replacing its 700 main-theater seats with more comfortable versions, improving sound quality for hearing-impaired viewers, restoring much of the ornamental plaster, and refinishing the concrete floors. “If you come in, it looks just like it did in 1929,” says Ryan Oestreich, the theater’s general manager.

Art House Convergence co-hosted a conference in Chicago in the summer of 2024. It held a showing of the 2007 Ang Lee-directed drama *Lust, Caution* at Music Box Theatre, which presented the film in the fan-favorite 35mm format. Kate Markham says the event perfectly illustrated how historic movie theaters can pull a community together. “You’re there with 699 other people,” she says. “There’s a beautiful ceiling and a proper curtain and an organ. It was such a different, magical experience.” 