

Fans of indie movies want art cinema in Greenville

Posted Sunday, April 3, 2005 - 12:26 am

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Every two months, Sandhya Manian and her husband sojourn from Greenville to Spartanburg to a rented theater where films from their native India are screened for three nights over the course of a weekend.

The couple attends all three showings, hungry for foreign-language films that are hard to come by here.

"The only other place to go is Atlanta," Manian says. "That's just too much for us, so we wait for the cassette to come out."

For many film fans, this predicament is all too familiar.

While chain theaters Hollywood 20 and Cherrydale Cinemas (the only two in Greenville) are able to flex their muscle to secure award-winning independent films like "Hotel Rwanda" and "Fahrenheit 9/11," others like the highly touted "Kinsey" and "The Motorcycle Diaries" are relegated to a debut on local video store shelves.

The rising popularity of independent films — evident in the number of limited-release films nominated for Oscars at the Academy Awards in February — has shone new light on Greenville's lack of an arts cinema.

It is a long-missing piece of Greenville's cultural tapestry, supporters of an established home for limited-release films say.

And as the idea gains new momentum, they hope non-vocal supporters like Manian will be a large base to draw from to help make the dream a reality.

Whether an arts cinema will work here is no sure bet.

They generally aren't known to turn an easy profit, and they must rely on creativity to stay afloat.

The path to realization is one of hope and, ultimately, a willingness to take risks.

"That's the roll of the dice," says Jeff Sumerel, president of the Upstate Film Society, which has played a lead role in the push to establish an arts cinema in Greenville. "Is there enough of an audience to support an arts cinema? There have been several opportunities over the years. However, as with any cultural venture or step like this, the timing plays an important part."

A leap of faith One Greenville couple says the time is now, and they believe they are ever so close to bringing an arts cinema to Greenville.

Christina and Taylor Vandiver have their eyes on a particular building in downtown Greenville, and are conducting studies to see if the building would work for a three-screen, 300-seat arts theater they would own.



Fans of indie movies line up for tickets to see 'Vera Drake' at Cherrydale Cinemas.
ALAN DEVORSEY/Staff

Even the staunchest of supporters — the Vandivers among them — say there's no way to know for sure if an arts cinema will work. Any such venture at the grass-roots level is a leap of faith buoyed by a passion for quality films ... and the hope that enough people share the same desire.

"The Upstate Film Society has really wanted to do it, but no one could make it a lifestyle," says Christina. She and her husband are in their late 20s and have yet to have children. "We're just at a really good point in our lives to take a risk on something like this."

To operate an arts cinema is to accept a calculated risk, the chief drawback being that ticket sales alone aren't enough to keep such a venue open.

Whoever is to open an arts cinema — whether private or public — must think beyond the number of tickets they can sell, say those who have had success operating such venues. Concessions unconventional for movie theaters (beer, wine, gourmet candies) help, as do memberships, additional money brought in from in-house cafes and corporate rentals, and, with a not-for-profit entity, public money.

"It's a tough business, especially for independent business owners," says Neal Reed, manager of the Asheville Fine Arts Theatre, privately operated since 1997 in an historic, art-deco building downtown that had at one time fallen into disrepair as a porn theater. "The industry is big. It's controlled by big companies with thousands of screens."

Arts theaters are guppies in an expansive sea.

And that reason alone makes the prospect of survival tenuous, says William Dougan, a Clemson University economics professor who studies the movie industry. The popularity of home video today cuts more into a small arts theater than a megaplex, Dougan says, because small arts theaters get films later and blockbusters are seen as more "must-see-on-the-big-screen" films.

A popular independent film can have as few as 100 prints available, Reed says, placing small theaters in a wedge between the large arts theaters in bigger cities who have first dibs, and the corporate megaplex owners who cherry-pick independent films they think can cross over to the mainstream.

The opening-day appearance of "Fahrenheit 9/11" in June at Hollywood 20 was basically a luck of the draw, according to Ted Hatfield, marketing director for Regal Cinemas, which owns Hollywood 20 and has considerable sway in securing films because of its size and presence in larger markets.

The Upstate Film Society has found success partnering with Cherrydale's Consolidated Theatres for its independent film festival in spring and fall, during which four movies are shown during weekdays over the course of four weeks.

Metropolitan areas like Greenville, Columbia and Asheville are considered "tertiary markets" that are near the bottom of the independent film distribution food chain, says Anne Raman, executive director of Columbia's 25-year-old Nickelodeon Theatre.

Because of Cherrydale's leverage with 16 screens, for instance, the film society was able to show "The Chorus" before the Nickelodeon, despite the small theater's established relationship with distributors.

The 77-seat Nickelodeon has kept its head above water, Raman says, as a not-for-profit, depending on charitable donations, public grants and tax breaks that come along with being a public organization to subsidize the theater where admissions and concessions sales fall short.

The theater almost folded in the late 1980s, but its demise was staved off by public support. Today, the Nickelodeon is conducting a fundraising drive and enlisting the help of the City of Columbia's accommodations tax money to move into a new building that would seat 200.

Any effort to open a theater owned by the public, Raman says, must be planned years out, because it takes three years to secure not-for-profit status. "It's hard," she says. "The theater is not self-supporting in terms of earned revenue."

The City of Greenville has an interest in an arts theater and strongly supports it because it would help with downtown redevelopment and nurture a sense of culture, City Councilwoman Diane Smock says. But providing money, she says, is not in the cards, even if it were a not-for-profit business model.

"I don't see how we could make any grant or loan," Smock says. "We're just not in the business of doing that."

Instead, Smock says, the city could help by easing zoning regulations and teaming its economic development team with any proprietors seeking guidance.

Public funding, even for a not-for-profit, would be problematic, Clemson's Dougan says, because independent films tend to be more controversial, which might not mix well with a conservative community that crusaded against a Black Sabbath concert at the partially publicly funded Bi-Lo Center.

Landmark Theatres, which shows independent, foreign and restored-classic films in 58 venues nationwide on 209 screens, is the closest the arts theater comes to competing with theaters that traditionally show blockbuster fare with 5,000 prints or more.

However, a chain dedicated to arts cinemas, like Landmark, isn't going to locate in smaller markets like Columbia or Greenville or Asheville, says Ray Price, Landmark's vice president of marketing.

Which theater gets the highly sought-after independent films depends on market size. New York, Los Angeles and Chicago are always at the top of the list, not because of population but because of the patron base.

Even though Detroit is a larger city, Austin tends to be higher on the list because it's more arts-minded, Price says. Only in the past 10 or 15 years has Landmark been able to justify having its theaters in Atlanta and St. Louis.

"Art films only appeal to a niche audience, so it's a much smaller market," Price says.

Filling the seats Would an arts cinema stay afloat? So often, the answer is nothing more than another question: Are there enough people to support it?

Reed of the Asheville Fine Arts Theatre has pondered this question as he keeps an eye on his sister city to the south. Greenville, he says, has a growing demographic that appears to be outpacing Asheville but still has one foot in its industrial roots, with an arts scene that is in many ways still developing.

"No one really says, 'It's a slam dunk, it will work in Greenville,'" Reed says. "It's almost something that will have to be tried before we know if it will work. If the demand is there, it will."

Asheville's arts cinema enjoys a loyal following. So does the Nickelodeon, which rests right in the heart of the University of South Carolina and its vibrant culture.

Whether Greenville can tap into any kind of base is unclear.

Greenville, however, does have a thriving international community to draw from, Raman says, which could translate into more interest.

It wouldn't be the same question as "How are your schools?" for anyone assessing Greenville's livability, but it certainly could be another piece of the puzzle as Greenville develops its culture and hopes to attract more newcomers, says Alan Etheridge, marketing director for the Metropolitan Arts Council.

Etheridge points to the number of art galleries, performance-art venues and inventive restaurants that have sprung up, particularly in Greenville's West End, and he says that enthusiasts from outlying areas like Anderson and Spartanburg would come to Greenville instead of driving farther away.

"Look at how evolved things have become in just the past few years," Etheridge says. "There is evidence of spending power. An arts cinema, independent cinema — whatever you want to call it — would be like the icing on the cake in the area."

The film society's monthlong festivals in March and September at Cherrydale are very well attended, sometimes outgrossing mainstream fare on a particular week even though the films play only three days during weekdays, says Marie McClafin, spokeswoman for Consolidated Theatres, which owns Cherrydale.

If a Greenville theater is to succeed, it must develop a distinct character, Reed says.

More mainstream theaters are now picking up either independent films or what are being called now "crossover" films, films such as "Sideways," "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," "My Big, Fat Greek Wedding" or "Lost In Translation" that earn a large amount of money relative to their production costs.

McClafin says she thinks an arts theater in Greenville would succeed and would complement what the larger theaters show, especially if the theater is able to develop a special, grass-roots relationship with distributors that larger theaters can't. In the beginning, Greenville won't be able to trump the competition by character alone; it must earn a reputation with film distributors through hard work and absorbing risk, Reed says.

The Vandivers believe they can develop that relationship. And while crossovers are popular, the small portion the larger theaters show wouldn't make much of a dent, Christina says. If anything, she says, more exposure of independent films would further develop the audience's taste for them.

However, even for Landmark, competition is tight. Landmark plays 400 independent films a year, Price says. Fewer than 25 of the 400 account for half of the company's revenue. Of those 25, he says, about 15 are crossovers played by the mainstream megaplexes.

If it could work, an arts theater in Greenville would be a plus for similar theaters in Asheville and Columbia in strengthening their relationships with distributors for all three, Reed says. Having another stopping point nearby would help develop a film-distribution circuit of sorts that increases leverage for all theaters trying to secure scarce prints.

Asheville would benefit, Reed says, because local media in Greenville that are watched and read in Asheville would be more apt to give publicity to independent films, creating more word of mouth between the two arts communities.

"Someone in Clemson might call their friends in Asheville to tell them they must see a film," he says. "And vice versa. We can only help each other."