

## Good Movies? Good Luck

Written by Jeff Ignatius  
Tuesday, 29 May 2001 18:00

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If there was any doubt, the past month has shown that the Quad Cities have pretty sophisticated taste in movies. After a months-long dry spell in which the local cineplex showed no independent or limited-release movies (excepting the blink-and-you-missed-it one-week run of the Oscar-nominated *Before Night Falls*), audiences were treated to *The Tailor of Panama* and *Memento* in consecutive weeks.

And they responded. *The Tailor of Panama*, a spy drama based on a John Le Carré novel and starring Geoffrey Rush and Pierce Brosnan, lasted three weeks on local screens, and the breathtaking *Memento*, starring Guy Pearce of *L.A. Confidential* in what is the most fun and intriguing puzzle movie since *The Usual Suspects*, is now in its third week.

But those two movies have been the exception. Many high-profile independent or limited-release movies never made it to the Quad Cities.

You only had to glance at the most recent Academy Award acting nominations to see what you haven't been seeing: *Pollock* (starring Best Supporting Actress winner Marcia Gay Harden and Best Actor nominee Ed Harris), *You Can Count on Me* (Best Actress nominee Laura Linney), *Requiem for a Dream* (Best Actress nominee Ellen Burstyn), *Quills* (Best Actor nominee Geoffrey Rush), and *Shadow of the Vampire* (Best Supporting Actor nominee Willem Dafoe). All the Best Picture nominees played here, but making guesses on acting prizes for an Oscar pool based on the movies themselves was pretty tricky this past year.

That's only a partial list. Other prominent "art-house" movies over the past year that didn't play

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in the Quad Cities include *Dancer in the Dark* (as divisive as it was, on many people's lists – mine included – of the best movies of 2000), Joel and Ethan Coen's

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

, the restored version of Hitchcock's  
*Rear Window*

,  
*Jesus's Son*

,  
*The Tao of Steve*

,  
*The House of Mirth*

, and on and on.

What's shocking is that much smaller communities have exhibited some or all of the independent pictures we've never gotten the chance to see. Iowa City has shown many of the movies mentioned above. College towns Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, and Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, support an art/revival house, and both hover around the 100,000-people mark. So does Decatur, Illinois, an industrial town where one could have seen *Dancer in the Dark*, *Shadow of the Vampire*

,  
*You Can Count on Me*

, and  
*Quills*

, as well as  
*Memento*

and  
*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

before they opened in the Quad Cities.

So why, in a community with more than 300,000 people, is it so hard to see a good independent movie on the big screen? It's certainly not because the multiplex is packed with quality entertainment.

### Would You Like Shoe Polish or Soap?

In his recent book *Movie Wars: How Hollywood & the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*, *Chicago Reader* film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that the studio system and exhibitors block the public from seeing some of the best movies the world has to offer in favor of middlebrow studio fare.

Rosenbaum's book questions the assumption under which most studios and theatre chains operate: that people just aren't interested in black-and-white or foreign-language films. "If someone dying of thirst is offered a choice between liquid soap and shoe polish, can the selection honestly be equated with what he or she 'wants'?" Rosenbaum asks.

The studios and distributors are mostly to blame, Rosenbaum says. The most obvious way

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studios prevent you from seeing movies is by choosing which movies to make and distribute widely – largely based on perceived profit potential.

But the studios also tie the hands of movie theatres. Distributors make exhibitors sign contracts guaranteeing a certain movie will run for a certain period of time on a certain number of screens – a technique George Lucas employed for *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, ensuring that it would rule the box office whether people liked it or not. Some studios (most notably Miramax) will rent a print only if the theatre agrees to rent other specific titles. Both practices limit the number of films in small- or medium-sized markets.

On the production side, independent and limited-release movies typically have a small number of prints, and they tend to drop off the planet after showing in major cities and college towns. By the time a movie is through running that circuit, its buzz has typically died down.

And if the movie is truly independent – that is to say, without financing or distribution by a major studio, such as *Memento* – there will be little money for prints or marketing; the movie will have to break out from word-of-mouth.

But the exhibitors shoulder some of the responsibility. They, after all, book the movies you see.

Independent, foreign-language, and art-house movies are frequently a self-fulfilling prophecy for theatre chains. The chains don't push them by highlighting them in their ads or aggressively marketing them in other ways, and consequently not many people show up, so the theatres refuse to book any more. But that assumes the theatre has tried; most chains never book independent movies in the first place.

(Even so, limited-release movies regularly outperform big studio pictures. Over the Memorial Day weekend, for example, *Memento* pulled more money per-screen than all other movies in the top 10 except for *Pearl Harbor*, *Shrek*, and *The Mummy Returns* – in its 11th week in release.)

With 29 screens at the Showcase 53 and Showcase Milan, National Amusements showed only 13 different movies last weekend. That number is reduced by summer releases hogging multiple screens, but a few weeks ago, the chain showed 17 movies in the Quad Cities, and six of them weren't even among the weekend's 12 top-grossing movies overall.

Yet audiences still aren't getting much independent cinema out of National Amusements.

Jennifer Maguire, director of corporate communications for National Amusements, said all booking decisions are made at the corporate level. "We're not in the practice of dedicating screens" to independent or limited-release movies, she said.

If an independent movie does well in National's largest markets (the company has more than

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1,000 screens in the U.S.), it will move down to the next largest, Maguire said. And if it does well there, it will open in even smaller markets, and so on. Basically, what the Quad Cities get depends on how well a movie plays in other markets, not how well it might perform here.

Maguire also said that while there might be a market for independent fare, “the public is also interested in seeing *Hannibal*, and it would sustain five screens.”

Yet organizations trying to bring more variety to the area think independent movies could thrive here – with the proper support.

Bob King, a board member of the Open Cities Film Society, which shows a mix of classics and edgier fare Fridays at Nighswander Junior Theatre, thinks the Quad Cities area is large enough and has enough film lovers to sustain showings of independent movies. “This community could support those films,” he said.

### Butts in the Seats

In the absence of a theatre chain willing to take a few risks on art-house fare, the task is left to the little guys. In the Quad Cities, we have the Open Cities Film Society and the Adler Theatre. Open Cities recently showed one of Ken Loach’s typically gritty urban dramas (*Ladybird*), as well as Mike Leigh’s *Life Is Sweet*, but both of those movies are several years old. Both Open Cities and the Adler have done admirable jobs bringing classics to the big screen.

But each organization has issues that make it difficult to bring recent independent movies to town.

The biggest challenge for both is audience. Unlike National Amusements, neither can afford to regularly subsidize less-mainstream movies if people don’t come. Consequently, they need to be concerned about drawing the largest possible audience.

Open Cities attracts about 100 people per movie, King said. Mike Reed, another Open Cities board member, said the organization began more than 20 years ago with the mission of showing films that weren’t making it to area theatres. But in the late 1980s, Open Cities shifted more toward classics.

Even though the group tries to balance older movies with more contemporary independent fare, the newer films sometimes don’t set well with the audience. “A lot of them complained about *Life Is Sweet*,” Reed said.

The Adler ended its first film series this month, and theatre marketing director Heather Kearns said attendance “exceeded our expectations.” With a steady diet of classics and audience favorites such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*, the Adler drew between 300 and 500 people to movies from August to February, with a high of 1,200 people for

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### *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*

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But since February, attendance has dipped to between 80 and 150 people, even though the types of films have remained the same, including such popular movies as *Ben-Hur* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

. (Kearns said epics have drawn the most people.)

The Adler is committed to a second season – “We certainly want to keep films alive in the theatre,” Kearns said – but it’s unlikely to stay the course of older films. “We’re going to regroup and choose another strategy,” she said.

Choosing popular and older movies to draw a larger audience is a double-edged sword. Undoubtedly, it’s easier to get people out to see *Ben-Hur*, *Casablanca*, or *West Side Story* than some movie they’ve never heard of. And nobody can complain about having any of those on the big screen. But is the largest audience drawn by showing the classics? Nearly all the movies shown at the Adler and Open Cities are available on videotape and DVD, often widescreen (for those of us who care) and with surround sound. The convenience and comfort of home are large obstacles to overcome, King said.

But there are movies unavailable in video stores – foreign titles that local video stores don’t carry, and movies that didn’t play here and haven’t yet made it to video.

Yet other issues might make those movies impractical for Open Cities and the Adler.

The Open Cities Film Society has a major technical restriction: It only has 16-millimeter projectors, and 16-millimeter prints are harder to come by. And the distributors of newer independent or foreign movies – such as New Yorker Films – sometimes charge twice as much for a print, Reed said.

King said that Open Cities hopes to continue to work with the Adler Theatre on its film series, as well as hook up with the Figge Arts Center when it opens in a few years. That relationship might bring a higher profile to the organization, he said, which might in turn allow for a wider variety of movies.

The Adler has different issues, most notably a large theatre with high overhead and poor sound reproduction with some movies. Dialogue was nearly indecipherable in a recent screening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

And King stressed that anybody who tries to expand film-going possibilities in the Quad Cities will need to toil to bring people in.

“If somebody’s going to work hard, they’ll be a success when everybody else fails,” King said. “Getting butts in the seat – that’s a lot of hard work.”

Time is precious, he said, and nobody in Open Cities has enough of it to aggressively pursue

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more current fare. “We’re all employed elsewhere,” King said. “Nobody has 20 hours a week, 30 hours a week.”

The options Kearns listed for a second year of movies starting in September – foreign films and art-house domestic fare – would certainly not be the path of least resistance. It would require savvy marketing, an advertising push, smart selection of movies, education of the community, and persistence, but there are plenty of options for partnerships – such as the French- and Spanish-language film festivals at Augustana. And there are lots of great movies out there.