

Sarratt Cinema Offers Colorful Past and Promising Future

The opening of Sarratt Cinema in 1974 blended the film screening efforts of various campus groups into a unified program, under one roof, in a facility that—if not state of the art—would achieve a "decent cinematic experience," according to James Sandlin, Director of Sarratt from 1974 till 1997. "We put in a raked floor so you could see over people, a good sound system, twin projectors, seating that went beyond typical classroom desk chairs, and ultimately, concessions." Sarratt popcorn frequently appears on "Best of Nashville" lists, and one of the greatest improvements was the twin projector system so that the reel did not have to be changed in the middle of the screening. Bob Baldwin, then a planner in Campus Planning, was instrumental in ensuring that the systems and acoustics in the new cinema were the very best that the University could afford.

The grandness of the new Sarratt Cinema was a far cry from the mid sixties screening of film at Vanderbilt, in what was then the army-surplus, converted-mess-hall home of the Vanderbilt University Theatre on Garland Avenue, where Light Hall now stands. The Friday and Sunday screenings offered by VUT were shown with a pair of 35mm projectors built during the silent movie era, to which Timex sound heads had been added. (These projectors, acquired from the Bijou Theatre in north Nashville, have carbon arc lamps, are still owned by Sarratt, and are kept in the Cinema projection booth.) Baldwin reports that "the scenery for the theatre productions was designed so that it could be moved and the film screen exposed," so that theatre and film screenings could take place on alternate nights. He also says that the theatre would sometimes receive prints on highly flammable nitrate film stock. "We worked out an arrangement with the fire marshal to have two firemen standing by during the screening. But we were still very nervous during the entire show."

In the late sixties and early seventies, interest in film had grown, and there were at least five film programs on campus. The Classic Film Society was headed by a student who actually owned prints of silent film classics. Gone with the Wind, and other titles. The screenings were held in Neely Auditorium (prior to its conversion to a theatre), which had a pipe organ. Films were preceded by organ music—or in the case of silent films, accompanied by it. A film might have as many as 400 viewers over its two-day run.

The Cultural Affairs Council scheduled the screening of foreign

films. The sophomore class of the Student Association (predecessor to SGA) offered the most recent popular films available. The Men's Residence Hall Executive Board (one of Interhall's predecessors from which Mr. Hebb's takes its name), used Mr. Hebb's to screen special film packages such as the New York Erotic Film Festival, as well as other films. And, the Nashville Film Society (NFS), which began its program in the Vanderbilt University Theater on Garland Avenue, also migrated to campus from time to time. (The Sinking Creek Film Festival grew out of a retrospective of John Cassavetes' films hosted by the NFS, at which the actor/director spoke. Sinking Creek made its home at Vanderbilt beginning in 1972—in Underwood Auditorium before Sarratt opened in 1974—became the Nashville Independent Film Festival in 1997, and moved to larger facilities off-campus in 1998.)

In preparation for the Sarratt Cinema debut season of 1974, these programs came together to establish a pattern of film programming, which is partially in evidence even today. Initially, there was a film every night of the week except Thursday. This break enabled the cinema to be used for other purposes, such as meetings, concerts, lectures, etc. The sophomore class program of popular films was scheduled for Friday and Saturday nights. Sunday and Monday featured Mr. Hebb's (Interhall) programming of films that were several years old, which people may have missed the first time around, or wanted to see again. Tuesday was the domain of the Cultural Affairs Council, screening literary classics, many of which were requested by faculty teaching Shakespeare, Greek literature, and the like. Wednesday nights featured Nashville Film Society programming, with a strong leaning toward independent and foreign films. On Sunday afternoons, a kiddie matinee offered features intended to appeal to the children of faculty and staff.

On occasion, the Sarratt Film Committee invited film critics such as Pauline Kael to speak on campus to enrich "cinematic literacy," as Sandlin puts it. He also notes that "film programs are forever subject to menace" from one source or another. The menace may take the form of restrictions on audience, as it did in the early years; or in the form of competition from theatres programming for the niche of foreign and independent films that Sarratt occupied virtually alone for many years. The menace may take the form of video rentals and cable TV, or the as yet unrealized potential of movies-on-demand over the internet. It could even be

parking. However, until cinema-sized screens invade private homes, there will be a market for theatrical screening of film because of the nature of the medium. Jon Boorstin in his book *Making Movies* Work writes that "the rules of . . . filmmaking are as good as useless on television. [These rules] are developed from the particular relationship between the viewer and the big screen, and . . . watching television is a different psychological process. Because the screen is small, the eye doesn't scan it as it does a movie screen, instead, it locks in, in a sort of mesmerized parody of the meditative alpha state."

These days, most observers would agree that the weekend begins on Thursday nights for Vanderbilt students, and the Sarratt Cinema schedule reflects this reality, expanding the Friday-Saturday screening of "blockbuster" films to both Thursday nights and Sunday afternoons. Friday and Saturday midnight shows of "cult classics" are also popular. When the titles can be got, the Sarratt Film Committee responds favorably to requests from faculty for particular films, although the availability of videos has shifted the focus of such requests from literary classics to current foreign language films. Other films are scheduled in response to requests from organizations such as the Martin Luther King and Holocaust lecture series. Sarratt Cinema continues its partnership with Bill Myers and the Nashville Film Society in selecting titles of interest to film buffs. More recently, a second partnership with Nashville Premiers has been established. "We wanted to encourage Sarratt to be adventurous by bringing lesser known but important films to Nashville audiences, without its having to assume the accompanying financial risks," said Nashville Premiers co-founder Scott Manzler. [Disclosure: the author of this article is the other co-founder of Nashville Premiers.]

In his semi-annual review of the Sarratt Cinema schedule in January, Nashville Scene film critic Jim Ridley called the spring semester program one of Sarratt's strongest in several years. The Sarratt Cinema program has historically faced the factors that menaced it and developed a response. Whatever the next menace may turn out to be, film committee advisor Michele Douglas, and the student chairs of the committee, will continue to meet the challenges.

See you at the movies!

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Residential and Judicial Affairs