

# Off the beaten track

## Film buffs track down alternative theaters

By Brian Lysaght  
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Here's an acronym for you: PFAWTRTS.

People Who Are Willing to Read Subtitles.

Subtitles, in this case film subtitles, refer to the wording that appears along the bottom of a frame to interpret dialogue, usually in foreign films.

PFAWTRTS can be seen at the Detroit Film Theatre, Tele-Arts Theatre, Ann Arbor film co-operatives, the Royal Oak Cinema Society, the Redford Theatre and some others — the Detroit area's alternative film houses and film groups. They show foreign, cult, classic and independently produced films — films beyond the typical Hollywood fare.

These theaters are off-beat if not off the beaten track, a haven for film buffs and even casual fans of film. But are PFAWTRTS becoming more scarce?

Maybe, unfortunately, but there is still plenty of alternative film fare.

This is the era of the mushrooming multiplex, with its \$5 tickets, 8, 9, 10 or more screens per building, and endless offerings of mainstream films.

This is also the era of the video cassette. The neighborhood video rental store has replaced the neighborhood movie theater.

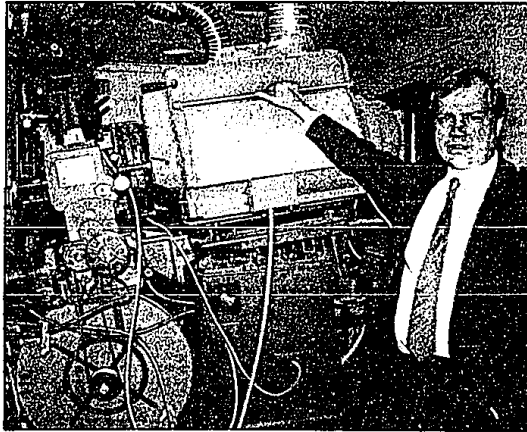
THESE TRENDS may be causing some alternative movie theaters to struggle, but they struggle on regardless. There is still plenty of alternative film fare around town.

This was not always true. Several Detroit art film houses shut down in the 1960s and early 1970s, but for other reasons. The Coronet, The Gem, The Variety and The Surf went belly up. The Studio theaters became defunct.

The Detroit Film Theatre was established at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1973 with seed money from the National Endowment for the Arts.

DFT started because specialized, or art, films "were not getting any exposure at all locally. They weren't being shown in commercial theaters in the Detroit area," said DIA film curator Elliot Wilhelm.

"We believe that the marketplace



Manager Carl Allison shows off the projection room of the Tele-Arts Theatre on Woodward in Detroit, the area's newest art film house.

ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

shouldn't be the only place that determines what films should be shown," said Wilhelm, who learned about movies at the old Detroit art film houses.

The DFT has been paying for itself since the beginning, said Wilhelm. Last year was particularly bountiful for both the DFT and specialized films, he said. Highly acclaimed films like "Wings of Desire" and "Au Revoir Les Enfants" helped push up average attendance to 1,000 per night, an increase from 1987, he said.

But things could be better. Several Ann Arbor film co-operatives have struggled in recent years.

The Cinema Guild, founded in 1950, has limited its movies to Friday and Saturday nights because Sunday and Thursdays have become too risky, said Guild president Harry Todd.

"I'M SURE we're going to survive, but everybody has been scaling back," he said.

The Guild and two other co-ops, all non-profit, share headquarters in a U-M building and screen their films in university auditoriums but aren't university supported.

The Michigan Theatre, recently restored and now supported by the Michigan Theatre Foundation, is the only alternative Ann Arbor film house showing films week days.

Todd reckoned the large Michigan Theatre program had cut into the Guild's off-campus market. So too has mainstream theater expansion in the area, and probably the home video rentals, he said. For example, he said he doesn't see many families with children at Guild films anymore.

"It's a helluva lot easier to rent a movie and watch it at home than to take two or three kids out to see it."

To serious film viewers, the theater screen is the proper place for films.

"First run films are still in theaters first. Some people don't want

to wait for . . . a film to get on video cassette," said Carl Allison, manager of the Tele-Arts Theatre, the area's newest specialized film theaters.

Still, Allison said the home video market "hurts and that's why classic films don't make it."

An exception may be the Redford Theatre, an old-style movie house that shows only old films. The Royal Oak Cinema Society often shows older foreign and classic films.

THE TELE-ARTS opened April 8 in a refurbished theater on Woodward Avenue in Detroit. Allison said business is increasing.

"We knew we wouldn't make money right away," although crowds are good enough "to get us excited," he said.

Allison said he sees audiences getting larger for specialty films, citing "My Life As A Dog," a Swedish film the Tele-Arts showed last year.

## Where to find the alternative films

There's plenty of places to see alternative films. And they're not concentrated in one specific area. Just take a look at these:

**ANN ARBOR** — Good films show here nightly, between the three major campus groups, Cinema Guild, Cinema Two and Ann Arbor Film Co-op, and the Michigan Theatre, which shows two films per night in the refurbished building.

There is the annual 8mm Film Festival, Tournee of Animation and a variety of other special film events through the year.

A free, monthly entertainment guide, called "Current," has an all-inclusive listing of screenings. Otherwise, call the recorded schedules of the Guild (994-0027), Cinema Two (865-4628), Ann Arbor Film Co-op (769-7787) or The Michigan Theatre (668-8397).

**DETROIT FILM THEATRE** — The DFT celebrates its 15th anniversary with a festival format, showing films that have made a cinematic splash. If you will, at the world film festival.

The season opened with "Murmur of the Heart" a 1971 Louis Malle film that is showing again this weekend, and includes two Detroit premieres, "Pelle the Conqueror" from Denmark, and "Woman on Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," from Spain. The Detroit Institute of Arts has been showing specialized and avant-

garde films for 50 years in its ornate auditorium.

"Film is art and it must be treated that way by someone," said DIA film curator Elliot Wilhelm.

The DIA also has a program called Afternoon Film Theatre, which screens one film Tuesday through Sundays. Each AFT season explores a cinema theme, most recently "Films of the Weimar Republic."

The DIA is at 4829 Woodward. Most tickets are \$3. Call 832-3736.

**MAPLE THEATRE** — The Maple shows quality art films rather than cult, bizarre or underground films, said manager Marjyo Champlin.

"We're classical music rather than New Wave," Champlin said. The Maple also has something of a lock on the art film market in the area. It shows films daily on three screens and is the only chain-owned art film house in the Detroit area. AMC, which bought the theater just over two years ago, has one other art film house, in Texas, she said.

A corporate office in New Jersey decides which films to screen, although the theater also responds to requests from customers, she said. The audience is probably similar to the DFT's, said Champlin.

"It's really an audience interested in quality films," she said. Maple is at Maple and Telegraph roads, phone 855-9099.

**REDFORD THEATRE** — In 1974, the Motor City Theatre Organ Soci-

ety bought this west side theater, which was built in 1927.

The emphasis is on fun and nostalgia here. Tickets are \$2, and shows are preceded by a society member's half hour recital on the house organ, a Barton, three-manual, 10-rank.

The society was founded to save such instruments, which in the 1920s were installed in theaters en masse as a cheaper version of the orchestra. But with the arrival of talkies, the theater organ became obsolete.

The Redford screens films every two weeks, Friday and Saturday nights. The society has a selection committee to pick the films to screen, usually older movies, often musicals. Last month's selection included "Goodbye Mr. Chips" (the 1959 version starring Peter O'Toole) and "Happy Landings" (1959) starring Sonja Henie, Don Ameche, Cesar Romero and Ethel Merman.

"Let's not call them old films. Lets call 'em classics," said Society president Robert Duerr.

"It's nostalgia — that's what brings them."

It may also be economic. "Who can you take a date for under \$10 these days?" Duerr asked. Redford Theatre is at 17360 Lahser, just north of Grand River. Call 537-2560.

**TELE-ARTS THEATRE** — The Tele-Arts dates back to the 1940s; the newreel days. It reopened this spring showing alternative films. Manager and part-owner Carl Al-

lison is putting great energy into guiding the theater to survival. He needs to draw suburbanites and urbanites, and is hoping the Fox Theatre and the People Mover, both nearby, will help.

He hopes free parking, promotions like a recent live version of "The Dating Game" and real butter on the popcorn will help.

Allison gave up his job as a financial planner to concentrate on the theater. A casual film fan originally, he said he continues to learn about movies.

Films, including some Detroit premieres, are shown Wednesdays through Sundays, but Allison said he is not interested in competing with the DFT, located further north on Woodward.

Tele-Arts has a nice balcony. It's at 1540 Woodward, near Grand Circus Park. Call 983-8960.

**OTHER FILM** film houses include the Royal Oak Film Society, which has suspended its film showings this winter, but had shown a variety of films, often classic and cult films, each week at the Studio on Washington, 821 S. Washington, or Oakland Community College auditorium, at Lincoln and Washington. Phone 541-0889.

Windsor has the Park Theatre, 804 Erie St. E. (at Marston). Films are shown Wednesday through Sunday. Cost is \$4 Canadian. Phone (519)971-9983 for information.