

VARSITY THEATER

BREAKING AWAY FROM THE SILVER SCREEN MAINSTREAM

~ by ~
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Have you ever flipped through the movie section of the paper and been disturbed to discover the existence of yet another Arnold Schwarzenegger film? Do you wake in the middle of the night and find yourself screaming, "No more Rambo!" Are you afraid that "Friday the 13th: Part XXVI" might be created within your lifetime? Well, cast your worries to the wind and check out the Varsity Theater at 25th and University. The Varsity has been the stronghold of unique film in Des Moines for over 50 years. It has a history of showing the independent films that are too intellectual, too "small" or too foreign for the larger chain theaters.

The Varsity Theater opened in its current building on Christmas Day, 1939, featuring "In Old Chicago" with Don Ameche. The Varsity had moved from just down the block on the corner of 25th and University, where Zander's now resides, into its current home, which

used to be a Coca-Cola bottling plant.

As the only independent theater in the Des Moines area, the Varsity has had the liberty to play an extensive array of films, ranging from the controversial to the sublime. "They play the films that are a too risky or intellectual

for the other theaters," says Karen Davis, a junior news-editorial major.

Recent films to play at the Varsity have included David Lynch's "Wild at Heart," Kenneth Branagh's and Sir Laurence Olivier's "Henry V," "Drugstore Cowboy," "Hannah and Her Sisters," "For all Mankind," "My Left Foot," and "The Tall Guy."

The Varsity has set out on its own cinematic path, showing films that don't play anywhere else in the city and usually not anywhere else in the state. "I like the off-beat, more academic films," says Kerry Reed, senior English major. "The Varsity's really the only place around where you can see them."

"Local Hero," which ran for 22 weeks straight, was the best-drawing film in recent Varsity history. It is a Scottish film about an oil company executive in a battle to take over a small Scottish town, says Bev Mahon, who bought the Varsity in 1954. The executive flies over to Scotland to check out this town, falls in love with the countryside and decides not to buy. "It was a good-feeling movie," says Mahon. "One couple saw it eighteen times."

Another long-running recent movie was "The Gods Must be Crazy," which played for 20 weeks.

The Varsity is a small theater — about 470 seats and only one screen — so when Mahon searches for a film it has to be good. He calls studios to order previews, reads recent reviews from premieres and film festivals, and writes letters to distributors to check on films in progress.

"You have to do a great deal of



PHOTO: KARISSA SELLMAN

reading in a lot of out-of-town papers to get a cross-section," says Mahon. "A lot of people go by what an actor did in his last movie," but, he says, "We are in an era where a lot of new actors nobody's heard of are making good films," which makes selecting films to show a little more difficult.

He occasionally calls other independent theaters such as the Musicbox in Chicago to see what is playing well there. "Sometimes you learn what not to do as much as you learn what to do," Mahon says. Many times he has decided not to order a film due to a negative review from his colleagues.

He orders films about two to three months in advance, so sometimes he may not have an option but to replace a popular film with the next one in line. But, sometimes films may have to be kept on for extra weeks if the season is at an ebb tide, such as between Labor Day and Christmas.

"When I heard about the sequel ["The Gods Must Be Crazy II"]," says Mahon, "I wrote the director and told him I was interested in showing it."

Mahon contacted the studio which originally produced the film, and after three years of holds and legal hassles, he finally received the film and showed it for four weeks.

In the early '40s and into the early '50s, the Varsity experienced quite a bit of success, says Mahon. Since the big movie studios, like Paramount and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, were turning out as many as 60 movies a year, he says, the Varsity was running six days a week and showing a different double-feature each night. "We had pictures running out our ears," he says.

But when television really caught on in the middle to late fifties, the theater business went way down. People were sitting in their La-Z-Boys and watching a show at home, so when they came out to the theater they expected to be comfortable, says Mahon. The way the Varsity had to separate itself from the other chain theaters was to put more money back into improving the atmosphere.

PHOTO: KARISSA SELLMAN



Before the advent of television to compete with the theaters, the movie houses crammed as many seats into each theater as they could, Mahon says. "Often, your knees were knocking against the seats in front of you," says Mahon. To solve this problem, he removed 100 seats from the Varsity to give more leg room to each aisle.

But more than just comfort, says Mahon, the key to surviving has been to give the customers what they want. The theater business is dedicated to making the audience happy, and the Varsity is no exception, says Mahon. He runs the Varsity with the goal of pleasing the customer, something very much lacking at the larger chain theaters, "where the employees work for the paycheck," he says. "You know it when someone honestly loves what they do, and that is rare these days."

"We depend on a word-of-mouth following," he says, which makes repeat customers all the more important. "We don't want anybody to badmouth the theater because of a problem we could have taken care of." If the Varsity gets a bad reputation it will fail, he says.

In this spirit, he keeps the Varsity clean and the prices low. People often complain about the high costs of movie popcorn, pop, and candy. But although the costs at the Varsity are, of course, higher than they would be in a store, they are significantly cheaper than in

other theaters. Reed says, "It's a clean theater. The prices are pretty competitive. The other theaters are charging \$5-6 and you don't get as much [as the Varsity offers]." The Varsity's admission price is \$4 and popcorn and pop prices are 20-30 percent lower than the larger chain theaters.

Mahon doesn't really worry about food sales. "The food sells itself," he says. "We don't open the door until the butter machine is up and running at least five minutes. The smell will bring them over to the popcorn more than anything else."

Mahon says he loves what he does; he lives and breathes the movie industry. "Some people make make fun of us as a mom-and-pop business," he says, but that doesn't seem to bother him. As a matter of fact, he says it gives him pride, because there aren't many businesses left that truly care about their customers.

"The best thing about this business is to see people leaving who have been well-entertained," says Mahon.

So if you're getting tired of the same old movies with the same old formulaic plots, the Varsity Theater has some unique films to offer — and plenty of leg room. DM

The Varsity plays two shows a night, Monday through Saturday, and a matinee on Sunday.