



Catharine Kendall Emerald

The Bijou Art Cinema, located at 492 E. 13th Ave., celebrated its 20th anniversary Tuesday, and owner Michael Lamont is counting on another 20 years of showing foreign, art and independent films in the only art theater in Eugene.

## Bijou celebrates 20th year

■ The local art cinema offers eclectic films and a piece of Eugene history

By Monica Hande  
Oregon Daily Emerald

For Michael Lamont, success was an accident.

When he was a University student in the late 1970s, Lamont didn't expect to land a career in the movie industry. But on Tuesday, he celebrated the 20th anniversary of his very own theater, the Bijou Art Cinema.

While flying helicopters in the Army, Lamont met a person who taught him to operate 35-millimeter projectors. And in college, he spent some time booking films for a student group that offered showings to a campus audience. But that was more or less the extent of his film experience.

"I wasn't a film buff," he said. "I was just a fan."

In 1980, however, a friend told him about a vacant building at 492 E. 13th Ave. that she thought would be perfect for a movie theater.

The Spanish mission-style building was built as a church in 1925 by Walter Ross Baumes Willcox, a former University architecture dean. When the church's congregation grew too large for the space, the building was transformed into a funeral home.

Lamont said he never dreamed of opening his own business and had no previous business experience, but he took a shot; now, he has two decades of success to show for himself.

"Everything was sort of accidental," he said. "Things don't always go as planned."

But it certainly didn't take a plan for Lamont to find a rewarding career in a field he enjoys.

So far, he said, it's been "really gratifying and exciting. ... It's been a wonderful experience."

The Bijou is the only art cinema in Eugene, and with its two screens, 35-millimeter projectors and stereo sound, it shows a variety of foreign, art and independent films that don't usually make it to the big box offices.

"There are a lot of really, really good films out there that don't make the mega-bucks the Hollywood films do," Lamont said.

The Bijou "is responsible for bringing in many movies," said Lois Wadsworth, the arts editor at the Eugene Weekly. Wadsworth has been writing reviews of movies that have played at the Bijou for almost 20 years.

Louise Thomas, a former Bijou manager, started working at the cinema's concessions counter while she attended the University in 1986 and was promoted to manager in 1992. The Eugene native said she was fascinated with the Bijou when she was in high school and wanted to work there.

"Each film brought in different people," she said. "You never knew what would happen. ... It was like a sitcom in the lobby."

Thomas said she had some exciting experiences while working there, remembering in particular the ghost stories shared among staff members.

"There were a lot of little, dark, cavernous hallways," she said, which were spooky until she got used to them.

Thomas said she always enjoyed being a part of such a unique place.

"I still feel a little possessive about it," she said, "like it's still mine. ... It's been a fun ride; that's for sure."

Although the ride has been a little rocky for the Bijou's business

lately, Lamont said things are looking up. He said he's not sure exactly why business has been slow.

"Maybe people are just not going out as much," he said. "There are so many other choices," such as satellite dishes and digital cable.

Also, he said, Cinemark's Movies 12 at Gateway Mall — which is a "dollar house," charging only \$1.50 all day for showings of previously released movies — has cut into the Bijou's late-night series.

"I think it's very convenient for people to go to movies at a mall," Wadsworth said, but the Bijou has a good location near campus and near downtown.

She said the Bijou is not the only theater that has been struggling lately. Films just have not been as good this year, she said, and it's becoming much more expensive to bring movies into any theater.

"The box office is way down compared to amazing growth in past years," she said.

But Wadsworth said she would like to see the Bijou maintain its business.

"The loss of the only art-house theater in this community would be a terrible loss," she said.

Now, Lamont is forced to revamp some details of his business. In an effort to increase his revenue, he is decreasing his expenses and asking for volunteers to work as little as an hour a night, three times a week, to fill portions of some shifts. Anyone interested should contact him at 343-8313.

As far as his business is concerned, Lamont has faith that he can make it succeed.

"The Bijou's been here for 20 years now," he said. "And I'm going to do everything possible to keep it a Eugene tradition — to show the alternative movies we show for at least another 20 years."

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