Often seen around town on his purple Harley, Turner is a bike-riding, cinema-slinging, celluloid-junky rebel who draws parallels between himself and the Harley-riding heroes of *Easy Rider*.

lels between himself and the Harley-riding heroes of *Easy Rider*. “They traffic in drugs, and I traffic in fantasy,” he said.

He's obviously not concerned that his decentralized, downtown five-screen exhibition plan flies in the face of all conventional wisdom about modern film distribution — the indie Avalon has survived for eight years.

Turner has competed with chain distributors Regal Cinemas, and more recently Carmike Cinemas, by providing a diverse lineup of films in a fun, eclectic atmosphere. What he offers in his movie picks is an experienced blend of taste and judgment, balanced with a willingness to take chances on films whose drawing potential is iffy at best. He shows mainstream Hollywood fare one week, followed by some obscure film from Outer Where's-It-At-istan the next, reminding us that film is a universal language. A steady core of filmgoers has rewarded him by showing up week after week, often not even knowing or caring what’s on the bill.

But to call his lineup “art” films is just plain wrong. And to call them independent is pushing the envelope of irony. With an industry focused on fast-tracking the latest blockbuster through the system, it’s a strange world indeed that would cast recent Avalon films like *Kinsey* or *House of Flying Daggers* in the role of alternative cinema. The truth is that over the years, come Oscar time, if you can say that you saw most of the nominated films, it means you were a regular at the Avalon.

But like so many things in life, and especially true in business, the Avalon’s greatest strength has also been its biggest weakness. The Avalon’s single-screen format is the same that has helped kill many a small-town movie house: the feast or famine syndrome, all eggs in one basket. With the opening of the 12-screen Carmike Cinemas and its ensuing film-booking skirmishes with Regal’s Ninth Street Cinemas, Turner realized that he had to find a way to increase his presence in order to stay viable.

“My seniority over Carmike does have some benefits with distributors, but with only one screen, my ability to leverage that has often been limited,” Turner said. “I’ve missed chances at films that went to Carmike or Regal because I didn’t have a screen to show it.”

Those problems should disappear with the Darkside. When Turner says, "The Darkside will give me lots of room to play around in," he's not just talking about the movies he plans to show. Step into the Avalon, with its strings of multi-colored lights, retro vinyl chairs, toys and dolls, for a taste of Turner's penchant for kitsch and eclectic anarchy. A statue of Mary inside the theater is a popular decoration, and when Turner removed it for a few days, customers demanded that it be returned right quick.

"People walk into the Avalon for the first time and say 'Is this really a theater?'" he said with a smirk. "Yeah, they're probably thinking it's a whorehouse or something."

"How about a secondhand store," quipped Lainie, Turner's wife and business partner.

"OK, fine," Turner said. "A whorehouse slash secondhand store."

The Darkside is no "whorehouse slash secondhand store." It's a mini-movieplex with style to spare. "We plan to keep the Darkside a little classier," Turner said.

Entering at street level off Fourth Street, you're greeted by a large theater marquee Turner rescued from some theater demolition. He decided that Mary just had to be part of the Darkside mélange as well and as you exit the staircase, a row of Virgin Mary nightlights (look up, above the moonscape panorama) escort you into the theater proper.

The lobby is lit by an unholy collection of horridly wonderful chandeliers donated to the cause by Avalon regulars who answered Turner’s call for their worst and dimmest. While the Darkside is still too young to match the Avalon’s hard-earned entropy and its gradual settling of cultural and cinematic debris, many cool touches already abound. Check out the retro pop dispensers, the Elvis wall clock, the benches rescued from some ’50s diner.

On the way to the restrooms, be sure and look up and to your right: What’s that you see? That’s right, it’s some kind of mysterious, unexplained doorway to nowhere — what the hell is that all about?

The auditoriums have been carefully designed for proper ratios between screen height, projection height, angles of view and other projection nerdspeak. To the average cinephile, the small-capacity theaters should provide a snug, cozy fit for those who relish the prospect of sequestering with a movie for a couple of hours.

Now in his 40s, Turner has held a number of jobs over the years: therapy aide, roofer, construction worker (he built much of the Avalon’s interior himself) and photographer. Throughout his career, each of these jobs has somehow led him back to running a movie house.

But even with all his experience, his ordeal with opening the Avalon taught him many hard-earned lessons about zoning and code compliance. The Avalon Theater’s opening day was Turner’s personal three-ring circus of flubs and bloopers.

As he began construction on the Darkside last June, he expressed his belief that the Darkside’s opening would much smoother. Since that day was almost here, was his prediction coming true?

“It’s funny you should mention that,” he said. Troubles? Oh, yeah. He rattled off a few: an amp burned out in one of the auditoriums, and a replacement amp was waylaid on its way from Portland by a gas leak that forced the driver to abandon his car; the cooling unit on a pop machine just “blew up”; a printer for credit card receipts disappeared in transit; and the fun never stops.

April 1 was a “soft opening” for an anticipated month-long shakedown test drive. Two of the four theaters are now in operation, with a third well under way, and the fourth acting for now as a catch-all room for construction supplies. The first hardy souls to visit the theater, he said, will have the extreme honor of “paying us to use them as test subjects while we work the bugs out.”

On the other hand, the same patrons will be able to say that they “were there when.” Imagine being able to say now that you were there in 1922 for the opening of the Whiteside. Except now you've crossed over to the Darkside. ★

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