

DRAMA AT THE MOVIES

Bijou Art Cinemas and downtown Metro go separate ways

If this were a movie, it might be a complicated and acrimonious courtroom drama called *A Tale of Two Theaters*, in which a pair of once-united independent movie houses splits over irreconcilable differences, becoming two separate cinemas run by different ownership.

A recent case in Lane County Circuit Court reveals a rift in the business relationship between the majority and minority owners of the Bijou Art Cinemas, and though the lawsuit was dismissed, the theaters now will become two distinct entities: the original Bijou Art Cinemas near the University District on 13th Avenue, and the recently renamed Broadway Metro, previously the Bijou Metro, which opened downtown three years ago.

Although none of the people involved in the suit — neither former majority owner Ed Schiessl and his partners, nor former minority owner Julie Blonshteyn — would comment directly on the case, all parties appear to agree that the change will have little to no impact on Eugene moviegoers and that, in fact, the dissolution of the partnership ultimate may prove beneficial for both theaters.

Blonshteyn says she's happy to be taking over as sole operator of the Bijou Art Cinemas. "Over the past three years," she said in an email interview last week, "running the theater as a co-owner has allowed me to understand the Bijou audience and identify areas where enhancements can be made to make the Bijou experience even better. I'm not looking to overhaul or make too many changes to the theater since it is an institution in Eugene."

As one of three owners of what is now Broadway Metro, Schiessl says Eugene is more than capable of supporting two independent movie theaters, and he's excited about what's to come. "We're going back to our original model at the Metro of having full schedules seven days a week, with early matinees and late shows every day."

A happy ending, then, perhaps — even if the nature and tenor of the recent legal battle shows that, for a while, things were far from chipper.

Court documents obtained by *EW* reveal a contentious and complex lawsuit that speaks to the level in which the relationship among the minority and majority owners of the Bijou had broken down. Filed by then-minority owner Blonshteyn, the suit alleged financial misrepresentation and mismanagement, as well as bad faith and coercion, all on the

part of the majority block, which along with Schiessl included owners Michelle Nordella and Loredana Corallo.

Representing Blonshteyn in the suit, attorney Michelle Blackwell in her filing alleges the Bijou's majority owners of "wrongful, illegal, oppressive or fraudulent conduct," including allegedly "[s]queezing out or freezing out [Blonshteyn] from meaningful participation in management" of the Bijou. The suit sought \$260,000 in damages along with the request to restrain the majority owners from management of the theaters. It also asked that

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— ED SCHIESSL, CO-OWNER OF
THE BROADWAY METRO

the majority members cease receiving \$20 an hour payments as salary.

It appears that a major point of contention — and perhaps the deepest fracture in the business relationship — was Blonshteyn's disagreement with a high-interest OnDeck loan for \$70,000 that was taken out April of 2014 to help with unexpected cost overruns of opening the downtown Bijou Metro. The majority block voted to approve the emergency loan, which was paid off in December 2015.

Blonshteyn, who voted against the loan, thereafter withdrew from ownership meetings.

In dismissing Blonshteyn's suit, Lane County Judge Suzanne Chanti indicated in her findings of Oct. 22, 2015, that although the plaintiff's concerns about the Bijou's financial health had merit, none of the majority practices rose to the level of coercion or oppression. "Rather," Chanti said, "it appears to the court that the fundamental problem here is that the plaintiff disagrees with the voting majority, who are also entitled to vote as they wish."

As for Blonshteyn's allegations that she was frozen out of discussions, the judge stated that, according to evidence, the opposite appears to have been the case. "Plaintiff talked over people, demeaned them and refused to even consider their point of view," Chanti observed. "On the other hand, the defendants did allow plaintiff to speak and appeared to be trying to understand what she wanted, even though they disagreed with her positions and ultimately voted against what she wanted."

Over the years, concerns with the financial viability of the Bijou Art Cinemas on 13th created something of a headache for ownership, and there was discussion among ownership of subletting the theater. Despite the financial drain and acrimony of the recent legal wrangling, it could be that the decision to split is optimal: Each theater is free to pursue its own destiny.

According to Blonshteyn, this involves fine-tuning those things an independent Bijou does best, "namely providing a friendly and interactive movie-going experience for Eugene's film fans." She says this could include such things as free showings of classic films, closed-caption options during select films, midnight matinees and the screening of various ballets and operas.

"The fact that Eugene has embraced and supported two independent theaters in town for the past three years is a real testament to the interest people here have for independent film," Blonshteyn says. "Each theater offers a unique experience for theater-goers and, in many ways, the Bijou and Broadway Metro are not direct competitors."

Schiessl at the Metro agrees, noting that there is no shortage of great films. "Really, as far as the average movie-goer is concerned, things will probably stay more or less the same," he says. "The Metro's been really successful and will continue to be really successful on its own. There's more than enough independent cinema to fill six screens, maybe even eight or 10 in Eugene. It probably means we'll have as many or more good movies coming through Eugene." ■

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EDDIE THE EAGLE (DIG) (PG-13) 11:00, 1:40, 4:15, 7:00, 9:50	THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR (DIG) (R) 11:25, 1:55, 4:30, 7:30, 10:25
GODS OF EGYPT (3D) (PG-13) SPECIAL EVENT PRICING: \$3.00 UPCHARGE ALL TICKETS 12:15, 10:15	TRIPLE 9 (DIG) (R) 3:15, 8:55
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KUNG FU PANDA 3 (DIG) (PG) 11:30, 2:10, 4:55, 7:45, 10:15	ZOOKEEPER 2 (DIG) (PG-13) 10:50, 4:25, 10:10
LONDON HAS FALLEN (DIG) (R) 10:55, 1:45, 4:35, 7:30, 10:20	ZOOTOPIA (3D) (PG) SPECIAL EVENT PRICING: \$3.00 UPCHARGE ALL TICKETS 10:45, 4:20, 9:00, 10:05
THE REVENANT (DIG) (R) 11:10, 2:45, 6:25, 9:55	ZOOTOPIA (DIG) (PG) 12:30, 1:30, 3:20, 6:15, 7:20
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