

Blockbuster

IN A NETFLIX AGE, BROADWAY METRO IS EXPANDING DOWNTOWN

By Rick Levin



ED SCHIESSL AT BROADWAY METRO

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

If movies represent our collective dreams of modern myth — our populist religion — then movie theaters could be considered our modern churches, our secular synagogues. Movies tell us who we are, who we were, who we want to be. And darkened theaters are where we assemble, a rapt congregation, to dream together.

Or at least, that used to be the case. The advent of television forced Hollywood to go bigger, more lavish, and the more recent onslaught of new technologies, including on-demand streaming and infinite cable outreach, has driven the film industry — and especially theaters — to devise new ways of getting people out of the house and into the seats.

Call it the Netflix Challenge: Why in the hell would I leave my house and my flat-screen TV and my microwave and my comfy couch to sit in a movie theater when I've got everything I need at the end of my remote?

Broadway Metro managing director Ed Schiessl appears up to that challenge. Having taken the significant risk of opening the downtown theater in May of 2013, Schiessl is now ready to see his original vision to completion — of expanding from a niche, limited-run and second-run theater into a full-blown movie house, complete with larger theaters that can accommodate the Metro's traditional indie spirit while opening more high-end, popular releases.

The brass tacks of the expansion are as follows: The Broadway Metro is expanding into a portion of the space vacated by Scan Design, located around the corner from the theater on Willamette Street; the two spaces share a rear wall, which will enable the theaters to be connected. The expanded Metro will house three larger theaters that create an additional 200 seats, tripling the current capacity, as well as a large lounge that will offer food from a full kitchen and bar.

Both theaters will be updated with wide luxury seats with rocker backs, similar to recent upgrades to seating seen at Gateway's Cinemark 17. To upgrade the seats in the existing theater, making them the same as those in the expanded space, the Metro is hosting a Kickstarter campaign to raise \$48,900. The total cost of the entire new theater project will be released at a later date.

The tentative grand opening for the new and expanded Broadway Metro is July 1.

The idea, Schiessl says, is to offer audiences a lush but affordable cultural experience.

"This is what we've always wanted to do," he says. "This has been the vision. It's been really, really clear what's been successful. We can't just offer a seat to sit in anymore. We need to deliver an experience that is more attractive than what movie theaters have done in the past decades."

The construction project at the former Scan Design site is already underway, and patrons likely will be surprised at the spaciousness, not to mention the sheer artistic vision, of the new digs. Entering the site from the street is like walking through the proverbial looking glass, as you stroll into an expansive lobby and lounge area accessing three theaters, one with more than a hundred seats. The screens are big.

"This is more seats, better screens, better viewing angles," Schiessl points out. "All of the shortcomings that we have at the Metro are because we've gotten too big for our britches."

Size matters, of course, but Schiessl says he is also taking advantage of the expansion to improve concession services. To that end, he's hired chef Andy Steinmeyer, formerly of Plank Town Brewing, to create fresh menu items daily in a full kitchen, and the Metro will be offering a menu of handcrafted cocktails and house-made beverages and desserts, along with more traditional fare.

Concurrent with this, Schiessl says, the theater will move away from all single-use plastics in an effort to create and maintain a more sustainable business model.

"This is a thing that's happening everywhere," he says of all the changes to Broadway Metro. "You have to present a new experience, a new identity, if you want to stay relevant. This is the thing that people are overwhelmingly demanding."

According to Schiessl, however, these technical and architectural changes will have a direct impact beyond the comfort and luxury they provide. The additional screens and greater seating capacity will allow the theater to pick up more "high-end" mainstream movies (everything from *Manchester by the Sea* to *Avengers*) while still offering smaller, independent and foreign releases.

What's more, films that in the past haven't had strong box-office showings despite critical success — say, *Dragged Across Concrete*, to name a recent example — will have the space to stick around an extra week, which gives time for word-of-mouth to spread in the community. More capacity bucks the trend of "here and gone," which has been bad news for slower-burning independent films that can take weeks or months to gain momentum.

"We're going to go in all directions, with a ton more flexibility," Schiessl says. "We'll have the flexibility to pick the small niche movies, on smaller screens. A lot of films never come to Eugene at all. It's a huge difference for us in terms of how much more content we can bring into Eugene and community events and local filmmaker showcases. We'll be able to support a lot more of those local efforts." ■

For more information on the Broadway Metro expansion, as well as the luxury seat Kickstarter campaign, visit broadwaymetro.com.