

REELING IN THE YEARS

The former Bijou cinemas reinvents itself as the Art House BY RICK LEVIN

Photo by Todd Cooper

In many ways, a building is the lead character in this story.

The building in question is no mere building, of course, but more an artifact with an actual aura — both a historic marker and a living relic without which Eugene would not quite be Eugene.

Located on 13th Avenue between Mill and Ferry streets, within spitting distance of the University of Oregon campus, the Wilcox Building is home to the former Bijou Art Cinemas, now redubbed and revitalized as the Art House.

Its name is bluntly fitting: every small-to-medium, liberal-minded college town worth its salt does — or at least should — have an “art house,” a quirky independent theater that serves up a heady dose of foreign, cult, old, new and otherwise hip and artsy films.

Architecturally speaking, the place is an anomaly up here in brutalist Niketown: An unlikely example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, with its white stucco walls, vaulted ceilings, cathedral windows and inner courtyard, the building looks like a transplant from the NorCal gold rush — say, from Mission San Juan Batista, where Alfred Hitchcock filmed the final scenes of his 1958 masterpiece *Vertigo*.

The reference is fitting, because *Vertigo* — remastered, cleaned up and splashed huge on a big new screen — is exactly the kind of gem the Art House might feature during a Hitchcock retrospective.

When the Bijou suddenly closed its doors in March 2021, smack in the middle of the pandemic (which, obviously, hit movie theaters particularly hard), a chill went through Eugene’s population of devout cinephiles. The theater had been the area’s hub of independent, auteur and foreign films since 1981, from British historical dramas and Scandinavian bummers to cult hits, offbeat documentaries and grindhouse classics, and everything in-between.

“The Bijou closing was big news,” says Ed Schiessl, the managing director of the newly minted Art House.

“Everybody knows it shut down, but they don’t know it reopened.”

Schiessl has history with the place, to say the least. One of his first jobs in high school was as a projectionist and night manager of the Bijou, in 1998; from there he became a co-owner in 2010, then expanded to open the Broadway Metro downtown in 2013, which he still manages; then split off from the Bijou in 2016; and in August 2022, Schiessl took the leap of reopening the moribund Bijou as the Art House.

One of his first goals was to revamp the aging and sometimes creaky features of the moviehouse, including replacing the cramped seating as well as installing new

projection and sound systems in both theaters. “We’re upgraded and we’re comfortable,” Schiessl says.

For anyone who frequented the old Bijou, the updates are welcome and often stunning, traipsing a delicate balance between honoring the history of the place and giving it a modern yet retro-cool updating — including the pomo-vintage movie posters by local outfit Blunt Graffix adorning the walls of Auditorium 1, the Art House’s main theater.

“Like a lot of community members, we didn’t want to see such a meaningful cultural institution slip away,” says Schiessl, who honored the Bijou’s heritage by incorporating the theater’s beloved late cat, Boo, into the Art House



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