

**CINEMA from page 1A**

As the first scene ended, the audience gasped with shock.

"It started off like the movie 'Psycho,'" Okonski said. Some people behind him started to talk. "The girl next to us yelled 'Shut the hell up!' very early in the movie. Tomfoolery wasn't going to be allowed."

While talking wasn't allowed, cheers were, along with guffaws at the various in-jokes spread throughout the three-hour film. Of course, there were tears throughout the film, though it would take some major spoilers to say why.

After the final scene played out, the audience waited through the credits to see a tra-

ditional post-credit scene that every Marvel movie released has had. Except this time, there wasn't one.

"Oh yeah, people were up in arms because they waited around for the end credits scene and there was none," Okonski said. "Lots of groans there."

But it was all in good fun. As the audience streamed out of the theater, one person yelled their summary of the evening: "That was awesome!"

Thursday was almost a record-breaking night for City Lights, which hadn't seen such a sell-out crowd for a film since 2017's "Star Wars: The Last Jedi," which beat Avengers by a mere 20 tickets.

"The industry has been abuzz for weeks at the giant potential opening of the final Avengers in its current incarnation," City Lights Cinemas co-owner Michael Falter said.

And the experience the audiences felt in "Avengers" is exactly what makes movie theaters special.

"Seeing a film in a theater reminds me of what we have in common, and at the end of the day, we have way more in common than how we differ," said Susan Tive, who co-owns City Lights with Falter, her husband. "You may not feel like you have something in common with people. But if you have that visceral, communal experience, you can't help but remember. You're connected to these peo-

ple, and they're connected to you. We're a community. The more we can remind ourselves of that, and create experience to make us aware of that as the overriding reality, the more hope there is as our society to hang together."

Falter agreed, saying, "When I experience something with other people, we have empathy with each other. We all are sad at the same time, laugh at the same time. Empathy is such a critical word when it comes to film and how audiences share and experience things. I think for me, at least, empathy is what City Lights offers."

But the success of "Avengers" also shows some troubling signs for the industry as a whole.

"We're certainly grateful and excited anytime we can draw a crowd, and its boffo box office comes after weeks of films that haven't drawn more than 50-100 people in a week's worth of shows. To me, that's a troubling sign for the industry. Studios must continue to make films that a wide range of audiences would like to see — not only superhero movies," Falter said. "People love to see good movies on big screens and get out of the house, and we rely on studios to deliver a wide variety of (preferably) good to great films."

Falter and Tive spoke about the issues facing small town theaters. From the threat from streaming services such as Netflix, to the problems with booking genre films, there are multiple landmines when it comes to surviving the difficult world of the theater business. But to Falter and Tive, having a working movie theater in a small town is vital to a community, as it promotes empathy, discussion and breaking down barriers in an increasingly partisan world.

**'Netflix has a lot of money'**

"It used to be that Netflix would kill the video store because they're a better way of renting a DVD," Falter said. "We all believed in the theater business that there's no replacing a big screen in a community."

Netflix and streaming services did kill off the video stores. Only one Blockbuster remains in the entire world, located in Bend, Ore. Florence's own 321-Video shuttered its doors in 2015.

Theater owners were also getting nervous as ticket sales began to decline, so they started going for gimmicks such as 3D and rumbling movie seats like D-Box to bring people into theaters. City Lights had 3D for a few years.

"For the first couple of years, it was quite popular," Falter said. "But they overused that gimmick. It's not desirable for most

films to have that gimmicky kind of aspect."

"I don't think any of that has panned out the way the industry thought it would," Tive said. "3D kind of failed and didn't change the industry the way people thought it would."

Panic began to set in in 2017, which saw the lowest attendance since 1992. But then 2018 saw some major hits.

"2018 was a banner year for the film industry in the modern era, achieving over \$12 Billion in sales for the first time and selling 1,319,295,693 tickets versus 2017's moribund 1,225,312,616," Falter said. "Even art houses had a strong year with a raft of films, like 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?,' 'RBG,' and 'Free Solo' — and that's only the docs."

Falter saw this as a sign that the theater industry wasn't suffering — it was the quality of films.

"Usually when naysayers talk about the death of the film industry, it's after a particularly bad run of box office films that haven't met with box office expectations," Falter said. "I would submit that's not because people don't want to see movies, it's because people don't want to see those movies. I think by the end of the year, we're going to see those fortunes turn around. And it's not going to be because of 3D. It's going to turn around because people want to see Avengers and 'Toy Story 4' and smaller films with stars like Diane Keaton."

Even though current ticket sales in 2019 are down 20 percent over 2018, films such as "Avengers" and the final installment of the "Star Wars" saga are thought to rebound the industry. But event films like those present a bigger problem for the industry overall. Hollywood is relying too much on the big-budget films, and foregoing the mid-budget films.

"We're losing content right now," Falter said.

In 2018, Netflix spent \$13 billion on original content.

"Netflix has a lot of money," Falter said. "What's amazing to me is that they're spending as much as every studio combined, which was \$11 or \$12 billions dollars. That hurts theater owners and general audiences. There are a lot of films that are being made and purchased that normally would have gone to theaters, and are now going directly to streaming services."

The problem with Netflix isn't that it's creating big budget spectacles like "Avengers;" it most likely couldn't compete in that realm. Instead, it is either creating or purchasing films that would normally fill up the majority of films shown theatrically — the smaller films that keep in-

dependent cinemas such as City Lights afloat.

"As the industry turns to the big budget spectacles only, and we lose that sort of mid-budget films that people love to go see the dramas, thrillers, the genre films," Falter said. "We're going to have a really long Netflix queue, and those films don't end up being part of the national conversation, I find. When your content disappears at the bottom of your queue, we're all busy people and it's easy to lose sight of those films. Having the theatrical experience is not just about sitting in a darkened room with a stranger and watching it on a screen that's bigger than your screen at home. It's about seeing films that are in the national conversation. But without theaters in business, and without having that kind of opportunity, than I do believe that's going to be a deficit for communities in the future if we can't hang on to that theatrical experience."

This is particularly relevant for City Lights. Streaming services are taking away the type of films that Florence residents like the most.

Netflix has made recent strides in releasing film content into theaters, particularly what it believes will be award winners. Last year, it released the film "Roma" so that it could be considered for Academy Award nominations.

"Once Netflix decided to put 'Roma' up for an Oscar, that created a perception that Netflix films were like any other film out there in the theatrical universe, and it didn't need to play by the rules of other theatrical films," Falter said. "And that's the part that really upsets me. We've had a system in place since the '60s where studios are not able to control the exhibition."

That system includes agreements that state films should have a theatrical window of 90 days before being released to home video or streaming services. But Netflix is attempting to thwart that by only having its films play in theaters for just a fraction of that, and in some cases just days.

"Roma" was for the one-week exclusive. After that, they opened it up to art house theaters. As an operator myself, I refused to play 'Roma,' even if people asked for it. To me, it's endangering the future of theatrical."

Why the 90-day window is important for small theaters like City Lights has to do with how the theaters get films from distributors, and the types of films that play in smaller communities.

**'Frustrating elements for this business'**

Florence filmgoers have a specific type of film that they really want to see.

"Films like 'The Intern' and 'Book Club,' films you would think of as having a slightly older audience, those films have done as well as many of our superhero films," Falter said. "That's definitely outside the norm of national numbers."

But as those types of films migrate to Netflix, City Lights loses the type of content that people want to see. And even if there's a film that locals do generally like, sometimes the studios won't allow City Lights to book them in a timely manner.

"There are tiers based on population," Tive said. "Most films, small or large, get rolled out at the top tiers first, meaning New York and LA. And then they see how they're doing. Then the next week they'll release it to medium sized cities, and then eventually smaller towns. Except for Avengers and Star Wars, you kind of have to wait."

"We wanted to play 'Green Book' when it first came out," Falter said, pointing out that there were multiple requests for it to be played at City Lights. "But the studio started with only 500 prints, which is a pretty small print run. It took weeks for us to finally get that film. And it was around the Oscars. Things get even more interesting around Oscar time, dealing with print counts. 'Green Book' was probably a good strategy, because they kept talking about that film for months and months, and it ultimately won the Oscar. That's a good example of why studios care so much about where a film goes, how far it goes, how quickly."

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