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Retro movies flourish in Miami

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By Rene Rodriguez

As recently as five years ago, luring Miami moviegoers away from their home theaters, Heat tickets and jet skis to see older films with an audience was an impossible mission. Today, with the advent of Netflix, iTunes, online streaming and video on demand, the challenge might sound even harder.

Instead, Miami's moviegoing habits are thriving, buoyed by the success of seven stand-alone arthouses that have cultivated their own audiences. Nearly every documentary, independent and foreign-language movie released in the U.S. now plays here, which has helped nurture and grow Miami's filmgoing habit.

"Over the past decade, we've seen an exciting trend of new theaters coming on line with a clear mandate to provide more specialized film programming," said Mark Boxer, senior vice-president of sales and distribution for IFC Films. "There's a theatrical renaissance taking place that is benefitting Miami's adventurous filmgoing community. The market has become a very important one [for us] when opening a film."

And much like music lovers have rediscovered the vinyl LP, Miami movie buffs are in the throes of an ardent love affair with retro films — from popular hits to esteemed art films, projected on 2K digital or, whenever possible, 35mm film. On any given week, you can choose to see cult favorites (*Pink Floyd: The Wall*, *Heavy Metal*), popular hits (*Taxi Driver*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Blade Runner*) and classic art fare (*Rebels of the Neon God*, *The Wages of Fear*, the esteemed *Apu* trilogy) on the big screen in the company of like-minded fans.

Abraham Brezo, 36, worked for Blockbuster Video for 10 years and has built a "massive home video collection." But he still attended a recent midnight 35mm screening of *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, a movie he has seen countless times, at the Coral Gables Art Cinema.

"I love film so much and attending these screenings only nourishes that love," he said. "The films are great, and the people I've met there are just the nicest. There's something about the look and feel you get from watching a film projected as opposed to a digital exhibition, much like spinning an analog record is different to streaming music off iTunes. It's a whole different experience, and those that do it, do it for the sheer love of the medium."

The retro-movie boom is not unique to South Florida. From Tampa to Houston to Chicago, audiences are turning out to see older films in theaters — a trend that used to be exclusive to major markets such as New York and Los Angeles.

PARTY FACTOR

In Miami, the main factor driving the current surge is the same that has fueled the growth of the city's other cultural realms: Personal interaction and word-of-mouth buzz. Able to spread their news via social media, individual movie clubs and art cinemas have built their memberships and stoked their excitement. These aren't just screenings: Spiritually, they're more like celebratory parties. Some draw small but devoted crowds.

Others often sell out, particularly the ones hosted by [the Secret Celluloid Society](#) (SCS). The brainchild of inveterate film buff Nayib Estefan, SCS holds weekly screenings of cult and classic movies — *Forbidden Zone*, *The Holy Mountain*, *Taxi Driver*, *Ghostbusters* — at the Coral Gables Art Cinema and Shirley's at

Gramps Bar in Wynwood. This fall, SCS will unveil the city's first "mobile film projection booth," a former bookmobile from 1986 Estefan retrofitted with the help of Steven Krams, founder of North Miami's Magna-Tech Electronic. The truck will be capable of 16mm, 35mm and high-definition digital projection, accompanied by a trailer housing a system of vintage tube speakers and subwoofers — "a towable wall of sound that will blow your cap back."

Estefan, 34, son of Gloria and Emilio, moved to Los Angeles in the late 1990s to pursue a filmmaking career. He returned to Miami in 2012 because he wanted to raise his first child with his wife Lara Coppola in his hometown.

"The Secret Celluloid Society (SCS) grew out of my desire for us to have the same kind of movies I was able to see in L.A.," he said. "A lot of people underestimate Miami audiences. They think we're yokels who can't operate on the same level as New York. I wanted us to have our own kind of screenings — rabid midnight movie and cult film fanatics who are willing to stay up late and be weird. Our motto is 'What's low is high, what's high is low.' I believe these movies are as essential to a film education as *Casablanca* or *Citizen Kane*."

Estefan launched SCS with a poolside screening of *Superfuzz* at the Broken Shaker bar at the Freehand Hotel on Miami Beach. He moved on to the [Blue Starlight Mini Drive-in's](#) former Wynwood location with showings of *Scarface* and *The Gate*. He then launched two weekly series: Wednesday nights at Shirley's, a screening room designed after the Black Lodge in Twin Peaks in the rear of Wynwood's Gramps, and an "After Hours" Saturday midnight series at the Coral Gables Art Cinema. Since he started, he has hosted more than 160 screenings at various venues.

Estefan believes in making each screening as memorable as possible. People showed up in full costume for a showing of *Ghostbusters*, during which the audience was sprayed with liquid nitrogen. He cranked up the volume a little louder than usual for Andrzej Zulawski's bewildering *Possession*, managed to track down a rare 35mm print of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and got Paul Williams to show up in person to introduce a screening of *Phantom of the Paradise*.

His enthusiasm has proven contagious. Kiki Valdes, 34, turned out to catch an SCS showing of *Friday the 13th* in June because he had never seen it in a theater..

"I just love being able to see it at midnight at an indie arthouse theater," he said. "When you go to a regular movie, you just buy your ticket and it's impersonal. Here, you see friends and it's a communal experience. It reminds me of how I felt as a kid, seeing *Gremlins* at the theater when I was four or five. It's vintage nostalgia."

POPCORN NIGHTS

Online movie critic Marc Ferman had the same idea in mind when he started [Popcorn Nights](#), a monthly series of anniversary screenings of 1980s staples such as *The Breakfast Club* and *House Party*, often accompanied by themed parties or Skype Q&As with filmmakers. Upcoming screenings include *Rocky IV*, *The Goonies* and *Edward Scissorhands*. Ferman is also teaming up with Miami Jewish Film Festival director Igor Shteyrenberg to launch South Florida's first genre/horror film festival, [Popcorn Frights](#), Oct. 1-4 at O Cinema Wynwood, with occasional screenings of famed and cult scary films year-round.

Like Estefan, Ferman believes word-of-mouth and like-minded comradeship is the best way to reach his audience.

"Social media accounts for at least 90 percent of the attendance," he said. "Getting others to share Facebook posts is critical. And it is important to me not only that people show up but that they have such an amazing time that they want to share photos from the events. I try to make it a personal experience."

Arthouse programmers also believe Miami audiences are open to celebrating cinema's history. The [Miami Beach Cinematheque](#), a longtime bastion of art film retrospectives (including the works of Francis Ford Coppola, Roy Andersson, Orson Welles and Gus Van Sant), has amped up its game with its periodic "Speaking in Cinema" series, which pairs local and national critics with actors, filmmakers and cinematographers for a conversation on specific themes (Andy Warhol's Silver Factory, the cinematography of Benoît Debie, the collected works of Alejandro Jodorowsky). Coming soon are a panel on local female filmmakers and a series of screenings pegged to a discussion of Kent Jones' documentary *Hitchcock/Truffaut*. In September, the theater will start a monthly "3D Mania" series featuring new and restored vintage films projected in the format, including 1954's recently refurbished *Creature From the Black Lagoon*.

In addition to its Saturday midnight screenings, the Gables cinema has launched a "[Matinee Essentials](#)" series on weekends, celebrating art film classics such as *The Wages of Fear*, *Marriage Italian Style* and *Memories of Underdevelopment*. Nat Chediak, director of programming at the theater, has also curated week-long retrospectives of directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, Satyajit Ray and a successful showcase of the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki, which earned the theater one of its highest weekly grosses to date. Earlier this year, actress Geraldine Chaplin showed up to introduce screenings of two of her best-known films, *Nashville* and *Doctor Zhivago*.

"We're going back to watching these movies in the context of a theatrical experience, which we all know is one way to fully appreciate a movie," Chediak said. "The mission of the Gables Art Cinema is to play new great movies. But in the absence of those, we salivate at the opportunity to screen restored gems. We are an art cinema, we are nonprofit, and our mission is to educate the audience. And you're never too young or too old to enjoy movies. I want to broaden the age demographics for our cinema. I don't want to just preach to the converted."

The Gables cinema will be retrofitted with the capability to project 70mm film before year's end, and Chediak says an all-70mm festival is already in the works. Chediak is also teaming up with the Bal Harbour Shops' Fashion Project for [Dressing Down the Movies](#), a free showcase of 24 classics screening Aug. 15 to Sept. 30. Spanning the silent era to 1994, the selections will explore the intersection between fashion and film (titles include *Pandora's Box*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Funny Face*, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, *American Gigolo* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*.)

Other local arthouses have also gotten the retro bug. Miami Dade College's Tower Theater recently screened newly restored editions of three Alain Delon films little-seen in the U.S. The Bill Cosford Cinema on the University of Miami campus has presented rare 35mm showings of classics by Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard.

And O Cinema Miami Beach held three week-long retrospective series this summer, showcasing the films of Stanley Kubrick, Steven Spielberg and Woody Allen.

"This is all part of Miami's ongoing maturation," says Kareem Tabsch, one of the co-founders of O Cinema. "Our film scene is continuing to come into its own. For years we've had Art Basel, the New World Symphony, the Miami City Ballet. These are the canons of the arts, and they've been around for decades ... We have seven arthouse cinemas. Most other cities our size have maybe two or three. And you have a mixture of baby boomers who want to revisit the films of their youth and younger audiences who want to see these movies for the first time. We're going to be increasing our programming of retrospective and classics stuff. They help contemporarize new films."

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