

Big screen vs. small: Cinemas get remake to compete for online video fans

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CHICAGO - Today, young movie-watchers look increasingly like Molly O'Connor. A junior at the University of Dallas, she still goes to the cinema occasionally, but is often just as happy to hunker down on a bed or a couch with friends to watch a downloaded movie on a laptop that's perched on a nearby desk or a chair.

Martha Irvine, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



In this Friday, Aug. 14, 2009 photo, movie goers are seen at the start of a film screener at The Landmark Movie Theatre in Los Angeles (THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/Damian Dovarganes)

"Sometimes, it's nice to have a wider screen, but I don't think I gain that much by going to a movie theatre anymore," the 20-year-old student says. "Now, it's more about convenience."

Or as 26-year-old Michael Brody puts it: "I watch movies the way many people listen to music - anytime, anywhere, any way." A freelance writer in New York who blogs about film, he used to go to the movie theatre every week. Now he's there once or twice a month, partly to save money and also because he doesn't think most movies are worth the effort.

Sounds like bad news for movie theatres. But we're talking about an industry that not only survived, but ended up thriving amid the arrival of television in the 1950s, videotapes in the 1980s, and DVDs in the '90s. The reason? An ability to continually remake themselves

and find new ways to generate revenue, by introducing everything from the multiplex and more elaborate concessions to lengthy pre-show advertising.

Now they're doing it again.

Step into some of the more modern cinemas these days, and you'll see increasingly common enticements aimed at keeping the lucrative youth market, even as online video becomes more accessible on sites such as YouTube, Netflix or Hulu - or from movie pirates who steal and distribute movies illegally.

These upgraded theatres' offerings begin with the super-comfortable seating, even lounge chairs and bean bags in some auditoriums. Add 3-D effects and larger-than-life IMAX blockbusters, made possible by new digital projectors. And then come the midnight movie premieres and opening-night parties.

To boost revenues and appeal, many theatres also are broadcasting live sporting events, operas and symphony performances and hosting in-theatre video game competitions on the big screen. Still others are opening in-house restaurants and bars for those old enough to drink alcohol.

It is this century's answer to the movie palace of old - or the "Broadway-ification" of the moviegoing experience, as Charles Acland, professor of communications studies at Concordia University in Montreal, calls it.

"In a nutshell, what you're going to see is cinema-going aimed at people who go less frequently," says Acland, author of "Screen Traffic: Movies, Megaplexes and Global Culture."

It might cost a bit more, he says. "But it will be much more of a special event. People will expect some sort of an experience that you can't get anywhere else."

In Europe, cinemas are taking it a step farther by remaking themselves as entertainment destinations - with bowling alleys, karaoke bars, comedy clubs and children's play areas. Expect that here, too, as well as interior design schemes that appeal to the 18-to-24 set, and that might "dismay" the older crowd, says Toronto-based theatre architect David Mesbur.

He says lobbies of the newer theatres in his city - ones he didn't design - are often mostly black with a few splashes of colour, flashing lights and loud music. Video games, often tucked away in theatres of old, also are scattered around in plain view.

"Those are the theatres that I never go to," Mesbur says, chuckling.

Still, experts who track the movie industry say that, so far, all these kinds of efforts appear to be paying off, even in a recession.

Though domestic movie admissions had flattened or dipped slightly in the past couple of years, ticket sales this year are up, whether some of the most popular movies have been Academy Award material or not.

"A bad or poorly received film can go down a bit easier if one is sitting in a comfortable reclining seat and has the chance to occasionally stretch their legs. In this sense, cinema-going has as much to do today with the hospitality industry as it does with the film industry, per se," says Jeffrey Klenotic, associate professor of communication arts at the University of New Hampshire.

That's a disheartening view to Ron Leone, a film and media studies professor at Stonehill College in Massachusetts. He looks around the audiences at the "uncomfortable, but nice" independent movie theatres he regularly attends, and sees few young faces.

"Apparently, watching the cat flushing the toilet is more satisfying," he says, chuckling as he pokes fun at young people's growing appetite for online videos. Those videos include anything from kitschy amateur pieces to the growing array of short and full-length films found online.

That's why more theatres are focusing on movies with monster special effects that don't show well on a computer screen or in-home theatre and that are all but impossible for movie pirates to steal - and why major filmmakers such as Jeffrey Katzenberg and James Cameron are banking on 3-D and IMAX technology as the future of cinema. (Panasonic Corp. also announced that they're going to start selling 3-D televisions next year.)

So far, movie-goers have been more than willing to pay more to see movies in these special formats.

Earlier this month, Canadian-based IMAX Corp., maker of large-screen movie-theatre technology, reported a second-quarter profit with revenues nearly doubled. The company credited its growing cinema network, which includes about 250 theatres equipped to play Hollywood feature films in IMAX format, which uses digital technology to give what some call a notably richer visual experience, including 3-D.

Those films range from "Transformers," "Pirates of the Caribbean" to the "Harry Potter" films, all aimed at younger audiences. And when IMAX announced a special preview of the upcoming Cameron film "Avatar," "our Web site got more traffic than you can imagine," says Greg Foster, chairman and president of IMAX Filmed Entertainment.

Combining movie and video game themes is a savvy move, says Chris Haack, a Chicago-based senior analyst with Mintel International, a market research firm that regularly monitors the movie theatre industry.

He says theatres also would be wise to offer young theatre-goers more chance to interact, for instance, letting them vote on which previews are shown or which movies stay at a theatre longer than another.

The goal is to keep the attention of the 18-to-24 age bracket - "the most important part of the market," Haack says - and the most likely to watch video online.

A recent survey by the Pew Internet&American Life Project found that 62 per cent of Internet users, age 18 to 24, said they watch TV shows and movies online, compared with just over a third of all Internet users.

Overall, online video traffic has skyrocketed more than 80 per cent, from 10.8 billion videos viewed in June 2008 to nearly 19.5 billion in June of this year, according to tracking firm comScore.

Acland, at Concordia University, predicts that will translate to more blockbuster action films geared toward the theatres, while character-driven films might open at theatres to create buzz, but ultimately get more play online.

Foster, at IMAX, agrees and envisions fewer "mid-range" films, those with some action but weaker plots or little character depth. "I think those movies are going by the wayside," he says.

Of course, there will always be those surprise hits, such as "The Hangover," a character-driven comedy that caught on by word of mouth - some of it by Twitter and Facebook, which is increasingly the case - and ended up doing well at the box office.

And even when a movie is leaked online, that doesn't necessarily stop movie-goers from seeing it at the theatre. That was the case when "X-Men Origins: Wolverine" brought in \$87 million at the box office its opening weekend last spring, even though a version of it had been making the rounds on the Internet.

Still, there's no doubt the landscape is shifting. Some filmmakers - Michael Moore, Wayne Wang and Johnny Knoxville among them - have taken some of their work directly to the Internet on YouTube and elsewhere. And more films also are being released in theatres at the same time they've played on cable or online.

The Internet also has provided new opportunities for young filmmakers, like 24-year-old Philip Wang, who are looking to break into the business.

He and his buddies started making short films in 2003 when they were students at the University of California, San Diego. Now their Wong Fu Productions Web site gets 5,000 hits a day from loyal fans who come to view their frequently updated collection of free short films. They make money by selling T-shirts and other merchandise related to their "brand" and from speaking on college campuses across the country.

While they certainly crave a box office hit, Wang still feels very loyal to Wong Fu's online audience. And he only expects that audience to grow, especially as online video becomes part of everyday life for the up-and-coming generation of movie-watchers.

"I don't think movie theatres will ever be obsolete," Wang says. "But these kids are growing up on YouTube and with high-speed Internet. Someone's going to have to create the supply for that demand."

He muses at the unlikely thought that the Oscars would ever add a "Best Online Short Film" category.

But either way, he says, "Sooner than later, success online will translate to success in the mainstream."

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On the Net:

<http://www.wongfuproductions.com/>

<http://moviesfromeveryangle.wordpress.com>

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