

THE **independent**

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LEE DANIELS

COVERS NEW GROUND

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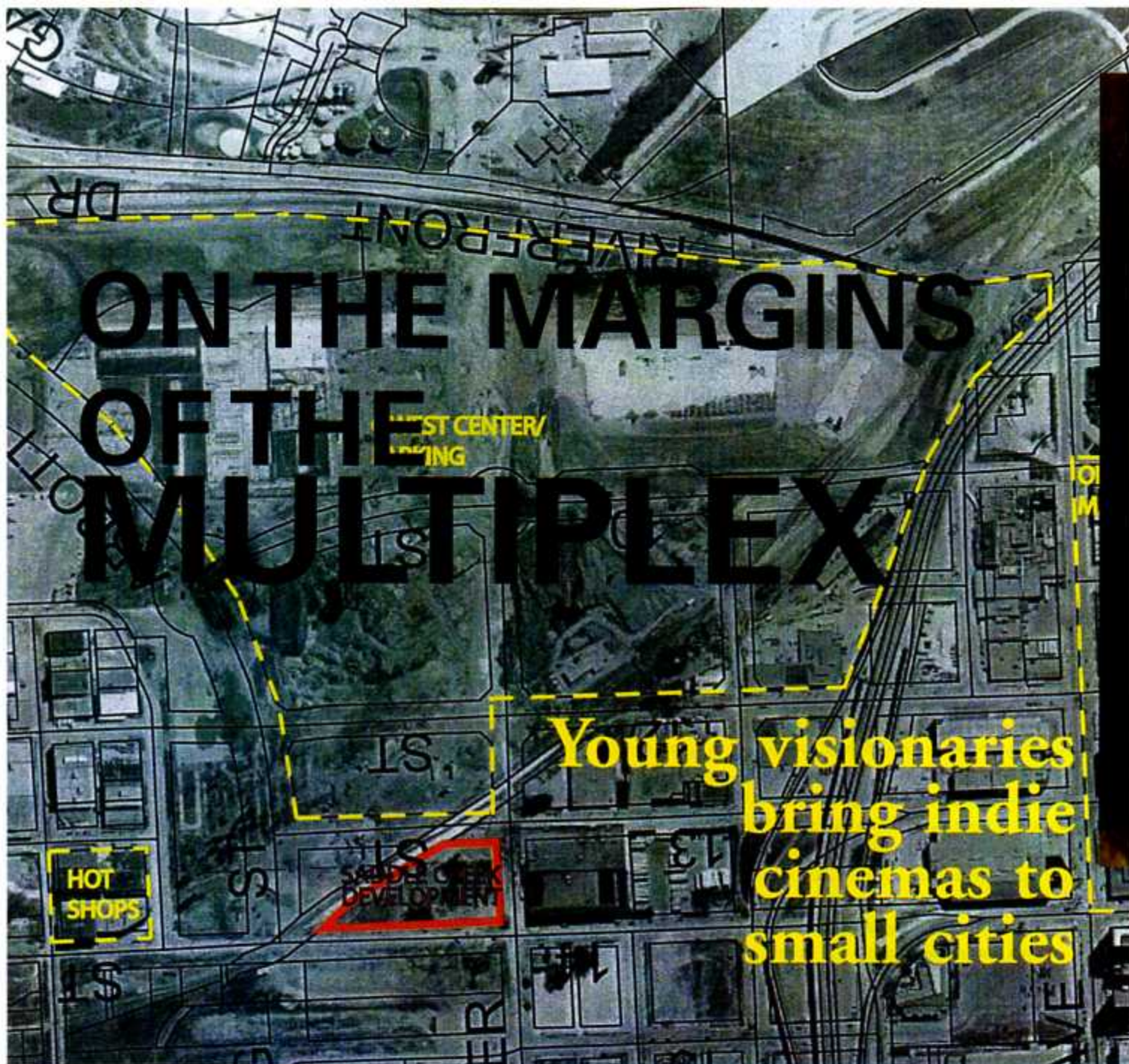
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BY DANIELLE DIGIACOMO

In 1973, a young, cinema-loving bohemian couple fled the high rents of Manhattan for the more affordable suburbs of Huntington, NY. Once there, Vic Skolnick and Charlotte Sky found that they had also fled, inadvertently, the vibrant independent cinema scene in New York City, which was then in its heyday, with more than a dozen arthouses sprinkled throughout the boroughs. Without Netflix, or even (gasp!) home video, Skolnick and Sky were not content to suck it up at the local multiplex. So, in what is now legendary in the annals of independent film theatre history, they rented a few 16mm reels and a projector from the library, tacked a white bedsheet to a wall, passed out flyers, and invited fellow film lovers to a screening of Robert Rossen's *Lilith*, accompanied by the W.C. Fields' short, *The Fatal Glass of Beer*. Attendees were asked to bring their own chairs.

The Skolnick-Sky dilemma is not uncommon—jaded consumers become too full to enjoy the big city's cultural feast, and it's only when they move from uber-urbanity to a smaller city or the suburbs that they appreciate what they once had. This is especially true in film. Small towns and cities have been shortchanged cinematically, as if only the most cosmopolitan sophisticates can appreciate the non-big-budget blockbuster. As the Skolnicks continue to demonstrate, this is simply not the case.

Thirty-three years after hanging that bedsheet, this pioneering duo, along with their son Dylan, continue to run what is now known as the Cinema Arts Centre. With three screening rooms and two cafes, it is nationally renowned, attracting dozens of big-named filmmakers, actors, and critics. Their annual budget is \$1.8 million dollars, and they have over 8,000 members.



Group shot of The Film Streams Cinema Project, which is made up of (from left) Autumn Campbell, Pablo de Ocampo, and Jeremy Rossen

Huntington's Cinema Arts Centre, which now seems like a wizened old-timer in a tragically small family, has inspired a few small-town visionaries to follow its lead. More film fanatic than economically oriented entrepreneur, these intrepid young cinema-builders are trying to fill a cultural gap in the towns they love.

Film Streams

Rachel Jacobson, born and bred in Omaha, is a movie nerd—one of those list-making, spreadsheet-keeping, ticket-stub-saving fanatics. Her transformation from casual moviegoer to bona-fide cinemaniac occurred in 2000 while she was a senior at the University of Illinois. Courses in documentary film and French cinema opened her eyes to the potential of film as both a unique art and a social tool. Jacobson realized that, rather than make movies, she wanted to "promote film as an art form somehow." While visiting her family during a break from school, she realized that "a true arthouse was something that has always really been missing from Omaha," and she decided then and there to open one. First step: move to the Big Apple.

In New York, she adapted so well to the city's frenzied pace that her "outsider" origins were always met with surprise. Living in the East Village, the refreshingly open and stylish blonde with an infectious laugh created a social orbit with her many creative friends, connecting

a web of artists, filmmakers, and writers for social and collaborative purposes. Still, she didn't waiver in her plan to return home bearing a gift that would (hopefully) wield decades of perpetual returns. With her eye on the prize, Jacobson took a course in arts administration at New York University and took jobs in cinema and nonprofit arts—in distribution at Miramax, in fundraising at Theater for a New Audience, and finally, in individual giving and marketing at WNYC, New York's public radio station.

Jacobson kept in touch with an old Omaha friend, Robb Nansel, the head of a not-so-little indie label called Saddle Creek Records, which, together with its star musician, indie rock heartthrob Conor Oberst, helped put the city on the hipster map. Jacobson and Nansel used to brainstorm over beers about opening a cultural centre in Omaha, which would house both a concert venue and a nonprofit cinema. Jacobson considered this merely drunken dreaming until January 2005 when she got, as she put it, "the phone call that changed my life." Unbeknownst to her, Nansel had been in talks with the City of Omaha, which agreed to give him space in a developing area of the city to build a concert hall and cinema as well as apartments, offices, a restaurant, and a retail store. All Jacobson had to do was move home and run the cinema.

The decision was a no-brainer. Jacobson immediately met with

lawyers to establish nonprofit status and, since permanently moving back, has worked manically to raise money and awareness, and to build a board of directors, which now includes Kurt Anderson, host of NPR's culture program "Studio 360," and acclaimed filmmaker Alexander Payne (*Sideways*, *Election*). She named the center Film Streams, a dual ode to her beloved city (Omaha means "above all else on a stream") and her favorite director, John Cassavetes, who directed *Love Streams*.

Film Streams has already collaborated with community groups to program a film series at the Joslyn Art Museum. Jacobson has curated a decidedly diverse schedule of movies, including Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, Bergman's *The Magic Flute*, and Jessica Yu's Henry Darger documentary, *In the Realms of the Unreal*. When the cinema is up and running (the projected opening date is Spring 2007) it will have a model similar to New York's Film Forum; a 208-seat theatre will project first-run indies, documentaries, and foreign films not playing elsewhere in the city, while a smaller, 99-seat room will be devoted to repertory series with guest speakers and community partners' involvement.

The Cinema Project

Even further from the megaplex is The Cinema Project, the self-proclaimed "micro-cinema" of Portland, Oregon that was formed in 2003 by filmmakers Jeremy Rossen, Autumn Campbell, and Pablo de Ocampo. In 2000, all three had moved from larger cities, where they found inspiration in the experimental and avant-garde, to Portland where they found, Rossen explains, that "there was a gap in the film community of screenings with this type of work. We all believe that in order to support the continued existence of film, it must be shown." The three formed a volunteer collective that was initially funded by local grants and organizations.

Without the funds to buy their own space, the collective has been mobile. The first few screenings were held at a black-box theater where they built their own projection booth. (The theater, however, was also used for punk shows, so when they set up a screening, they often found hung-over teens and the smell of stale beer.) When the space got sold and the collective evicted, they started screening at the New American Art Union, which had been recently opened by a friend. The space, though admittedly not built specifically for projecting films, proved to be suitable, and Cinema Project has been presenting programs there since early 2005.

Over the last three years, the Project has programmed two seasons a year, with an average of eight programs per season. Past programs have included films by Stan Brakhage, Chantal Ackerman, Robert Frank, Marguerite Duras, Yoko Ono, Trinh Minh-Ha, Lewis Klahr, Paul Chan, and Nathaniel Dorsky; the latter four of these appeared in person to discuss and present their work. A personal highlight for Rossen was fall 2005's complete Peter Kubelka retrospective, for which the 77-year-old, avant-garde legend traveled from Austria to present a food lecture along with his films.

Like Jacobson, the collective offers films not showing anywhere else in the city or in the entire Pacific Northwest for that matter. The three filmmakers share programming duties, which de Ocampo says helps the center have "a nice cross section of different styles and time periods represented." The founders independently choose films and then "meet up to strategize about a season together—is there enough historical work? Are we showing enough films by women or people of color? Do



Raoul Walsh's film played at Cinema Arts, accompanied by composer George Cork Maul and violinist A. Gabriel Kastelle.



Film Streams' Rachel Jacobson brings indie film to the heartland.

we have enough shows that are 'easy' on the audience? Is there a balance between formal work and content-based work?" On the whole, however, de Ocampo, who is partial to work by minority and foreign artists, admits, "I think we're all just looking for work that we like."

Because they don't have their own permanent theater, the trio has to work much harder than Jacobson to get the Project taken seriously. Being unprofessional is "a huge weakness with microcinemas, who might be programming amazing work but have sloppy projection with cheap projectors and slapped together theater space," says de Ocampo. He, Rossen, and Campbell make a concerted effort to buy good projectors that don't scratch the film prints, to know their equipment, and to make the presentation as professional as possible.

Box Office and Budgets

Even with their notably disparate undertakings, Film Streams and the Cinema Project share a mammoth, unending task—funding their cinemas. Cinema Project, with a volunteer staff, no monthly rent and only two seasons to program, had a 2005 budget of \$16,000. Jacobson

projects the expense of operating a seven-day-a-week theatre, with 28 percent going to compensation and 25 percent going to rent, will be \$570,000. Despite different budgets, the two share the same fundraising model, which Jacobson, channeling her nonprofit days, calls "diversified income streams based on a traditional nonprofit fundraising structure: corporate sponsorship, foundations, individual donors, special events, and membership."

Box office will also add a notable chunk of income to Film Streams, which follows the Cinema Arts Centre model of, as Dylan Skolnick put it, "using the popular films to support the not-so-popular films." He compares this method to that of directors such as Stephen Soderbergh, who alternate their bigger-budget Hollywood fare with shoestring budget labors of love. Ticket sales at the Cinema Project, which is dedicated to NOT showing popular work, hardly make a dent. "Showing the type of work that we do," they note, "primarily 16mm films, is inherently expensive. Selling tickets at the door usually does not even begin to cover costs."

Yet both theaters' founders say the smaller cities bring certain advantages. Local pride creates a pool of willing contributors who, unlike New Yorkers, have expendable income not already depleted by or earmarked for other cultural institutions. Jacobson says support from entrepreneurs has been so enthusiastic because, "People are starting to get that in order to build an interesting city here, there needs to be a diverse array of cultural opportunities. Omaha's a city on the cusp of urbanization, and businesses are looking for ways to attract smart, young people." Film Streams, the city is realizing, is a way to not only keep the "creative class" in the city, but also to reel them in.

If You Build It, They Will Come

The Film Streams' official mission statement states its aim is "to enhance the cultural environment of Omaha through the presentation and discussion of film as an art form," while the Cinema Project asserts its goal is to "work to foster an informed viewing public that will support the wider circulation and critical appreciation of film and video art."

Both are clearly kindred spirits of their Huntington, New York forebears, whose son Dylan points out that their cinema was initially called the New Community Cinema, stressing that the community connection is essential to the success of an independent cinema. Now that home theatre systems can be more impressive than public theatres, it is even more of a struggle to attract an audience. "People have so many more options now," Dylan says. "Cable, DVDs, Netflix. You have to make [the theater] into an attractive experience, a night out that people enjoy."

All three cinemas stress the importance of interactivity: dialogue, events, and education. Like Cinema Arts Centre, Film Streams will partner with schools to educate youth through and about film. Both theatres partner with community groups to curate their programs; the Cinema Arts Centre is the site of the Long Island Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the Latino Film Festival, and an International Women's Day Celebration, co-sponsored by the feminist action organization, Code Pink. And Jacobson, even during the budding stages of creating her organization, has partnered with the Omaha Public Library and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, among others, to create event screenings. For Rossen of the Cinema Project, "Having the filmmaker

present to discuss their work in a small intimate format is an amazing experience that is often missing, and what sets us apart from some of the larger national organizations."

That Film Streams, Cinema Project, and Cinema Arts Centre, all at different stages of growth, are all working nonstop to find funding and attract members shows just how difficult it is to create and maintain an independent cinema. Dylan Skolnick laments, not entirely unhappily, "in this business, it's always a rough year." But these courageous cinephiles who all believe that building not only a theater, but a community of people who socialize around the art of film, is worth the struggle, also have faith that if you build it, they will come. As the Cinema Project posse concurs, "We have always felt strongly that this type of work, though challenging and difficult at times, is often just not known; if you can find a way to get an audience to a show, even a small one, your audience will grow as you continue to show work." ★

FIVE MORE CINEMAS HELPING SPREAD THE INDIE LOVE

Balagan Experimental Film and Video Series—Boston, Massachusetts

Created in 2000 by filmmakers Jeff Silva and Alla Kovgan, the Balagan presents experimental film and video works at Boston's historic art deco Coolidge Corner Theatre. www.coolidge.org/balagan/about.html

Aurora Picture Show—Houston, Texas

This award-winning theatre was started in 1998 by Houston-based media artists Andrea Grover and Patrick Walsh. In order to do so they transformed a dilapidated 1924 wooden church into a modern, 100-seat cinema. www.aurorapictureshow.org

Mini-Cine—Schreveport, Louisiana

Formed in 2001, Mini-Cine "is a roving, pop-up suitcase, grocery cart, thrift store, hands on, volunteer-run venue for experimental and independent film and video located in Shreveport, Louisiana. Screening in galleries, coffee shops, or vacant buildings, Mini-cine strives to create an artist/audience interactive environment and welcomes filmmakers and multimedia visual artists to present new works." www.swampland.org/minicine

Denver Film Society—Denver, Colorado

Founded in 1978, Denver Film Society's structure is similar to that of Film Streams and the Cinema Arts Centre. www.denverfilm.org

Sarasota Film Society—Sarasota, Florida

Another nonprofit cinema, the Sarasota Film Society is dedicated to partnering with community groups for educational outreach. www.filmsociety.org