

# Downtown Promotion Reporter

## Arts & Entertainment

### Outdoor movie nights appeal to all ages

A night at the movies. In the middle of downtown. No theater required. What better way to take advantage of downtown's public space, festival-friendly weather, and the worst time of year for television programming than an outdoor summer movie series? More than a people magnet, such a happening can improve how people relate to downtown.

"People rediscover the pleasure of coming downtown on a Friday evening," says Sally Bates, business and economic development officer with the City of Bangor, ME (pop. 31,470). For the third summer, downtown Bangor's Pickering Square is the site of a free weekly film series produced by River City Cinema, a local film society.

On a Friday summer movie evening, the square is "packed with people from all walks of life and all ages," Bates says; a welcome change from the narrower range of people who'd otherwise hang out aimlessly.

"It really brings the community together. We get people anywhere from 7 to 97 coming to these," concurs Kathlyn Tenga-Gonzalez, artistic director, River City Cinema. "It's just amazing to see the diversity of people that attend this. It's particularly wonderful to see younger people watching older films on a big screen. They really enjoy it."

Downtown eateries realize a direct consumer spending benefit from the movie series, Bates says. What's more, downtown users have come to appreciate the acoustics and convenience of the square as a

public gathering space. "Prior to the movie series, we thought the square needed some major and expensive landscaping changes. Now we realize that it is already ideal for this type of activity," she says.

#### Each summer, a new movie night theme

In the summer of 2004, River City Cinema produced its first free outdoor film festival, dubbed "Noir Beneath the Stars." Nine sponsors made it possible for a nightly audience of over 350 to turn out with their lawn chairs or blankets and enjoy six weekly film noir classics.

Last summer, "Smiles on a Summer Night" was the title for an outdoor comedy series. This year, travel is the theme and the title, "If It's Friday, This Must Be Bangor," plays upon a phrase people who have been on whirlwind travel itineraries, especially in Europe, would be familiar with. The films feature travel around the world in the context of various storytelling genres — even sci-fi travel inside the human body in *Fantastic Voyage!*

Among attendees as well as sponsors, excitement about the summer movie series has remained strong, with 11 sponsors and crowds of 400-plus turning out last year.

#### Poster art plays big role in marketing

Marketing for the festival includes saturating the downtown area with poster art produced at Quantum Corral, Tenga-Gonzalez's ad agency. "I'd highly suggest if you don't have an in-house designer or an

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advertising agency that's willing to help, to pay somebody to do something good," she says. "Make it look professional and make it look fun."

Downtown merchants often provide space in their windows for the posters. For the festival's introduction in 2004, some businesses participated by "adopting" a Bogie — for a donation, they were given life-size cutouts of Humphrey Bogart to display.

River City Cinema also sends a schedule of film showings to various websites that have cultural and community event listings, including those of public broadcasting, the regional chamber of commerce and convention and visitors bureau, and downtown. A good rapport with the press is also essential to promoting a film festival.

### **Who you can work with to stay on the right side of the law and creative judgment**

River City Cinema provides phone numbers and website links to six distributors it works with on its website page about public performance laws (<http://rivercitycinema.com/Distributors.html>). A number of suppliers provide film rentals starting at \$250 per public showing.

There are also suppliers that specialize in providing equipment and related services for outdoor theater screening, such as Fresh Air Flicks ([www.freshairflicks.com](http://www.freshairflicks.com)). River City Cinema opted to purchase its own equipment and have a fabric screen made with a grant from the Stephen and

This page and opposite, poster art by River City Cinema plays a key role in promoting downtown Bangor's summer film festival. Above, poster art for last year's comedy series. Opposite, postcard-style art for this year's travel theme.

Tabitha King Foundation.

A film star, filmmaker, or well-known critic, if your downtown can develop its ties with one, can be a terrific resource. Lower Manhattan has Robert De Niro as a co-creator of its Tribeca Film Festival; Champaign, IL, has native son Roger Ebert's Overlooked Film Festival, a.k.a. Ebertfest.

Tap your local knowledge, passion, and panache. If the mayor happens to be a great film connoisseur, or the newspaper film critic a downtown backer, there you go. Often you won't have a well-known person but a capable group of people who simply love film. Many downtowns would do well to work with their local film societies as festival organizers.

"Usually we work directly with a film society, an individual theater, or a film club," says Josh Levin, chief marketing officer of Film Movement, a full-service distributor of independent and foreign films. "In terms of the public sector, we work with more than a thousand libraries around the country to screen our films on a monthly basis, which we do at a discounted institutional price."

### **Picking the films — start early, stay clean**

"Start your plans as early as possible, to get your theme picked out and get your sponsors lined up," Tenga-Gonzalez advises.

When it comes to selecting the films for a summer series, Tenga-Gonzalez advises: "Start early.

Once you pick a theme that you want to show, get as many titles as possible. Because from those titles you're going to start really whittling down because of the public performance considerations."

Films rated PG and G are the safest bets, she says. PG-13 can be okay as long as you tell the public why the film received that rating. Avoid nudity.

"The most successful screening series for public attendance are appropriate for children as well as adults," Levin says. "A lot of people in the summer, when the kids aren't in school, want to feel comfortable bringing their kids with them."

**Don't shy away from challenging fare**

"You should never underestimate people's interest in alternative films. And by alternative, I mean world cinema,

*rivercitycinema.com; Josh Levin, Film Movement, josh@film-movement.com.* ◆

independent film," Levin adds as a last point on programming. "It seems to me that the ideal film series for a downtown would represent some diversity — diversity of world view, subject matter, and of tone."

Even if all the films you show are in English, Tenga-Gonzalez adds, "You might want subtitles. We play our films with subtitles for those who are hard of hearing or deaf." Subtitles are also a helpful backup for dialogue amid the noises that go along with being outside in downtown.

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**Downtown Promotion Reporter**® a publication of the Downtown Research & Development Center  
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*Downtown Promotion Reporter*® is published twice monthly by the Downtown Research & Development Center. The Center provides news, information and analysis for successful downtown revitalization through its newsletters, books, reports, and website.

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