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103 years strong: How the Manlius Arts Cinema weathered the pandemic and a changing movie industry

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This story was produced for syracuse.com by a student enrolled in The Goldring Arts Journalism program at Syracuse University.

Inside the small but well-kept lobby of the Manlius Arts Cinema, the buttery scent of popcorn infuses the air.

A glass case displays classic movie theatre candy--Mike and Ikes and Reese's Pieces--in neon-bright rectangular boxes.

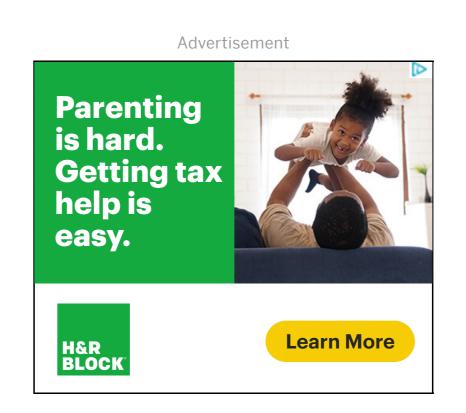
Vintage film reels adorn the wall behind the concessions counter; a hand-lettered chalkboard sign lists the prices for snacks and drinks.

Married couple Nat Tobin and Eileen Lowell, the owners, work the ticket and concessions counter; they greet their guests, most of whom are familiar faces, with enthusiasm. If a customer asks for a hot tea selection, Lowell produces a small box.

"We're the only theatre in Onondaga County with a tea chest," she quipped.

The tea chest isn't the only thing that makes the Manlius Arts Cinema special. It's also the oldest cinema in Onondaga County; in December of this year, it will be 103 years old. It opened in 1918 as a silent film theater in the midst of the influenza pandemic, and despite some inevitable challenges, it's enduring through the current pandemic, too.

Manlius town historian Barbara Rivette said that the Manlius Arts Cinema was the first theatre of its kind in eastern Onondaga county.



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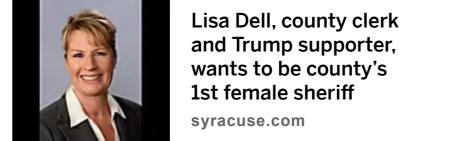


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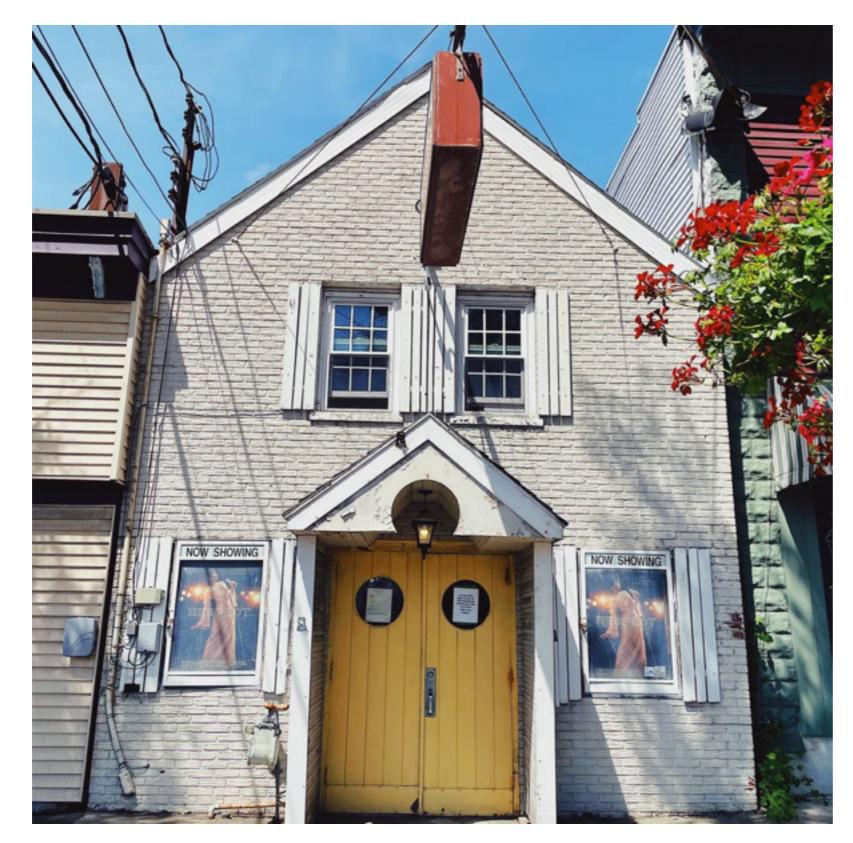
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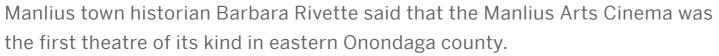


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"Movies were such a new thing, and there were several storefront operations that were not really theatres," she said. "This building was built specifically to show moving pictures."





Vince Giordano, 79, has lived in Manlius his whole life, and fondly recalled going to the Manlius Arts Cinema just about every Saturday afternoon as a child in the '40s and '50s. Giordano remembered the projectionist who worked at the cinema when he was growing up, painting a colorful picture.

"He was the scariest guy in the world you ever saw. He was a Halloween special!" Giordano said.

The projectionist would also help people find their seats and keep an eye on the rambunctious town youth.

"If you were down in the front, and you were a little bit rowdy, Scary would have to go down and break up whatever was going on," Giordano said.

During Giordano's childhood, Manlius had a population of about 800 people. His parents would send him off to meet his friends at the cinema starting at age 10; they would pay a dollar and change for a ticket, popcorn, and candy too.

"We just were all there," he said. "You raised hell, you watched it, you laughed, you did whatever you were gonna do."



Nat Tobin and Eileen Lowell have owned the cinema for 29 years.

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Tobin, who has a background in film advertising, has owned the cinema for 29 years. He used his business acumen to make it profitable, but he and Lowell, who have been married for 15 years, have poured their love for the arts into the theatre as well. They personally select which films they show based on their tastes and sensibilities; the couple shares a love of foreign and independent films.

Neither Tobin nor Lowell has an easy time naming one all-time favorite film. Both love Wes Anderson, especially "Moonrise Kingdom;" Tobin mentioned "Mediterraneo," a 1991 Italian film, which was the first film he chose to show when he bought the theater. Lowell simply said, "I love the one I'm with."

When Tobin made the switch from film to digital in May 2012, it allowed the theatre to show filmed live productions of the ballet and the theatre, including Russia's Bolshoi Ballet and a London production of "Kinky Boots." It's important to Tobin to show content at the cinema that audiences may not be able to see otherwise.

The theater has had to adapt plenty of times over the past century, but the COVID-19 pandemic has not been easy on the Manlius Arts Cinema.

"We shut down shortly before the governor shut everybody down," said Tobin. "I didn't want to present a target for customers at that time. I mean, it was scary."

The cinema was allowed to re-open in October 2020; because there were not many new films coming out, Tobin selected some old favorites to show, such as "Cinema Paradiso." The couple was not taking a salary at that time, instead doing everything they could to keep the doors open, but the customers just weren't coming. They shut down again in early January 2021, hoping to wait until conditions got better. They received a grant from the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant program, part of the American Rescue Plan Act, which helped the theater survive.

"It's not just the pandemic, but it's the pandemic coupled with the changes in the industry that create a challenge," said Tobin.

Although the advent of streaming has hurt their business, Tobin and Lowell strive to create a special experience for moviegoers. Tobin often gives a speech before the film begins, offering audiences some background and telling them about what the theater is planning next. He and Lowell extolled the virtues of seeing a film in a theater with an audience, a more emotionally resonant and connected experience than streaming. Lowell explained that research shows humans mirror each other's emotions, even on a neurological level.

"This setting just helps the perception of the story to be that much brighter and louder and stronger," she said, her eyes shining.

Tobin grew sentimental talking about the incomparable value of the theatrical experience. "There's nothing like seeing a film with a room full of people, where comedies get funnier and dramas get sadder," he said. "It's just an honor for me to have been a part of this, to have this thing for 29 years. It hasn't made me rich, but it enriches me personally."

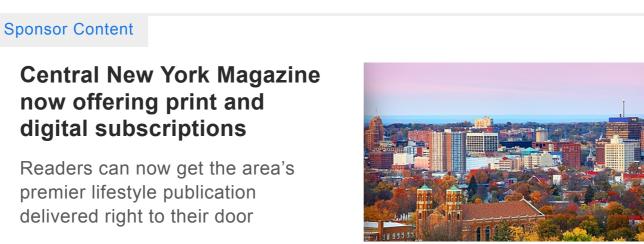
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