

Proud movie house tradition lives on

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By Beth D'Addono, Globe Correspondent | February 21, 2007

BANTAM, Conn. -- It doesn't take long to realize that the Bantam Cinema in this little town in northwestern Connecticut is not your average movie house. First of all, there's the marquee. Or rather, the lack of one. The exterior of the state's oldest continuously operated movie house looks more like a barn than a theater, with its redwood siding and freshly painted white trim. It fits right into the bucolic countryside prized by locals and weekenders alike for its understated charm.

Inside the theater, the concession stand favors organic snacks, herbal tea, and even real butter for the popcorn -- you don't get that at your local multiplex. And in each of the two intimate 90-seat screening rooms, the films favored are artsy, foreign, independent movies, the kind of entertainment that doesn't appeal to the mass market. In other words, "Jackass 2" is out, and "The Last King of Scotland" is in. Oh, and one more thing. Unlike the typical mall movie theater, patrons can pay for their \$9 ticket by cash, credit card, or check.

"The theater holds a tremendous amount of sentimental value to the community," said Lisa Hedley, who sold the theater last month after owning it for 16 years. Hedley, whose parents own the nearby Mayflower Inn, now runs the inn's new destination spa with her mother, Adriana Mnuchin.

"The theater is one of those things in life you can't really own. I had a sense that my stewardship had come to its natural end," said Hedley, whose background is in the film business. She spent summers as a child in Connecticut and holds the Bantam Cinema partially responsible for her lifelong love of film. "When I heard it was for sale 16 years ago, buying it just made sense." Over the years, Hedley tapped her celebrity friends for meet-the-filmmaker programs, with local luminaries like Mia Farrow and the late Arthur Miller participating. Her buddy Richard Belzer even did a stand-up show once. "We had a lot of fun over the years," she said.

And when she put the theater up for sale last year, another family of film buffs stepped up to the plate. Purchased for an undisclosed sum by retired financier Sidney Koch, his son David, and family friend and local resident Betty Merz, the Bantam's mission remains prized and protected.

"When we heard it was for sale, we turned to each other and said, 'Let's buy it!' " said David Koch, a location assistant on "The Sopranos." "It's not something we got into for the money. It's a labor of love." Koch, like Hedley, grew up with the Bantam and discovered art films there. "We've made some cosmetic changes and installed a computer management program, but we're not putting up neon or a marquee. The community likes the Bantam just the way it is, and so do we," he said. One of the changes they have instituted is an upgrade to the theater's website, and an e-mail newsletter telling 1,450 film buffs about coming attractions.

Two Italian brothers who screened Hollywood hits along with silent films opened the theater as The Rivoli in 1927. "It reminds me of 'Cinema Paradiso' -- which is one of my favorite films," Koch said. "It always amazed me that they'd open a theater in the middle of what was then the boondocks," Hedley added.

Sidney Koch has been going to the Bantam for almost 30 years. He loves that after the show you can have interesting conversations about film with fellow patrons. And he enjoys the kind of thought-provoking films that draw a well-heeled, intellectual crowd. "I absolutely despise the national advertising that audiences are subjected to in most theaters," he said. "We'll never do that at the Bantam."

What Koch and his partners will continue to do is offer indie and foreign films like the upcoming "Venus," starring Peter O'Toole in an Academy Award-nominated role, and "Pan's Labyrinth," Guillermo del Toro's story of postwar repression in Franco's Spain.

And since even artsy cinema fans get peckish, plan to stop by Woods Pit BBQ & Mexican Cafe, a down-home eatery next door, specializing in pulled pork, ribs, and hearty Tex-Mex. Cold beer, sloppy barbecue, and cinematic discussion -- now that's a perfect combination.

If you go. . .

Bantam Cinema

15 Bantam Lake Road, Route 209

860-567-1916, 860-567-0006

bantamcinema.com

Wood's Pit BBQ & Mexican Cafe

123 Bantam Lake Road

860-567-9869

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