THE STATE OF THE ART HOUSE

L.A. THEATERS’ LOST SUMMER AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE

BY NATHANIEL BELL
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L.A. Theaters’ Lost Summer and Uncertain Future

BY NATHANIEL BELL

Movie theaters are still closed in the movie capital of the world. While AMC, Regal, Century, and other major theater chains in Orange County have been liberated to screen Tenet, Los Angeles is still stuck in Governor Newsom’s dreaded purple tier, indicating widespread COVID-19 transmission. Until that color turns red, theaters in the county are prohibited from indoor operations. Among the most vulnerable of these are the art house spaces. Supplying the local cinephile community with a variety of indies, foreign titles, and retrospectives of all kinds, they are struggling under the weight of the pandemic, but they are hanging on. Here, we take a look at L.A.’s art house movie business and what owners are doing to survive and keep movie magic alive.

Arena Cinelounge

You may have heard of Christian Meoli, who owns and programs the Arena Cinelounge, the slick 48-seater located on Sunset Blvd. just a few blocks west of the iconic Cinerama Dome. The Cinelounge was to be the first physical movie theater to reopen in L.A. since the initial lockdown. One of the most eclectic avenues for independent cinema in town, the single-screen art house regularly exhibited 4-6 movies per week, and on June 19 was slated to release festival darling Babyteeth along with a sparkling 4K restoration of Philip Kaufman’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being. “We sold out for the opening weekend,” Meoli remembers. Then, the evening before the relaunch, the news came down from the National Association of Theater Owners: movie theaters must remain closed. Local health officials confirmed this in short order. Meoli was disappointed but not defeated. His first thought: “Can we do a drive-in?”

Arena’s 23-foot screen has been dark for more than six months. The theater received some financial relief through the Art House America grant campaign, a fundraising effort administered by the Art House Convergence nonprofit. Meoli, a shrewd and tireless entrepreneur, has kept a modest revenue stream flowing through the theater’s gourmet popcorn line. With names like “Natural Corn Killers” and “Truffaut Truffle,” each delicious, non-GMO bag is available for home delivery. But these signature concessions are no bulwark against the ticket revenue shortfall. When the county jumps a tier, Meoli will be ready with air purifiers, disinfectant, and socially distant seating. “We feel like we can open,” Meoli muses. “People want to come back to the movies.”

Laemmle Theatres

Greg Laemmle is CEO of Laemmle Theatres, the family-owned establishment with roots dating back to the beginnings of the movie industry. Founded in 1938 by the nephews of Carl Laemmle — the legendary mogul and founder of Universal Pictures — the theater chain operates seven locations throughout Los Angeles County, with an eighth financial final inspection in Newhall. Laemmle’s wife was hanging art in the unopened theater while COVID cases surged.

A staple of L.A. moviegoing culture, the Laemmle name is synonymous with the discovery of new and classic cinema. The recently refurbished Monica Film Center, a block south of the bustling Third Street Promenade, is the company’s longest continuing operating theater. Their Pasadena Playhouse 7 theater boasts the largest seating capacity at 250, but the business strategy lately has been to embrace smaller auditoriums reminiscent of studio screening rooms. Whether roomy or cramped, the compartments have been vacant since that fateful week in March when the coronavirus outbreak was declared a national emergency.

Greg Laemmle, who runs the chain with his father Robert, is wise and practical as he takes stock of the sobering state of affairs. “As we were shutting down we had some confidence that our employees would be taken care of,” Greg Laemmle observed. “Now that’s less certain.” The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), a loan that incentivizes small businesses to keep their workers on the payroll, doesn’t deal with businesses that have shut down. “You need to be open to take advantage of that,” Laemmle says.

The Laemmle brand has continued to attract the masses through a variety of virtual offerings. Almost immediately after the doors were shut and locked, the company inked a deal to release titles through Kino Marquee, Kino Lorber’s virtual theatrical exhibition initiative. One of the first movies released under this model was Bacurau, the stylish Brazilian thriller which took home a Cannes jury prize last year.

“Virtual cinema is not a replacement for us in exhibition or for the small distributors that are in business with us,” said Laemmle. “Replacement VOD has not been a success for studios, either. When you look at the overall revenue there’s a giant hole. That’s theatrical revenue.”

The Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program, designed by the U.S. Small Business Administration to assist with utilities and rent, didn’t even cover a month of rent for the seven theater locations. “We were putting all our eggs in that basket,” Laemmle explained. “But we have a plan that we think will get us through.”

In the meantime, all of Laemmle’s venues, including the Laemmle Royal on Santa Monica Blvd., with its English club room ambiance and decades’ worth of accumulated memorabilia lining the lobby walls, will remain closed to the public.

The American Cinematheque

The American Cinematheque, the indispensable year-round film festival with locations at the Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Blvd. and the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica, is in a slightly more advantageous position than its small-business counterparts. In May, Netflix finalized a deal to purchase the historic Egyptian, whose handsomely appointed halls first opened in 1922 at the height of silent-era glamor. “There’s no way we would have survived the first week of the pandemic,” says Gwen Degliese, head programmer at the Cinematheque. “There are not many nonprofit art houses that can survive without revenue for six months. We’ve been able to retain a lot of our team. We have stayed focused.”

Like many other nonprofits, the Cinematheque reinvented itself during the health crisis. When COVID threw the population into
peak panic mode, they were in the middle of one of their signature annual events, Noir City: Hollywood, a classic crime film retrospective co-presented by the Film Noir Foundation.

To keep their member-based community engaged, the organization pivoted to virtual screening engagements, premiering a rare Agnes Varda short, The Little Story of Gwen from French Brittany, and Peter Sellers's long-lost 1961 directorial debut, Mr. Topaze. A seed grant from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association allowed them to digitize Q&As from their analog archive. In the wake of the George Floyd protests, a gentled Barry Jenkins appeared on Zoom to interview an energized Spike Lee about his new Netflix film, Da 5 Bloods. Werner Herzog, Miranda July, and Jude Law subsequently made memorable virtual appearances.

In June, the Cinematheque forged an ingenious partnership with the Mission Tiki Drive-In in Montclair for a series of retro double features, allowing them to salvage what would have surely been a lost summer. Beyond Fest, a roving series co-founded by American Cinematheque programmer Grant Moninger, launches on October 2 at the new drive-in residence.

Although these crisis-averting strategies have kept Cinematheque members fed, they have not replaced the sense of belonging one immediately feels when crossing the lavish carpeted foyer of the Lloyd E. Rigler Theatre at the Egyptian. The lack of a communal experience, powered by living bodies in a shared space, is still keenly felt. “What drives me is the connection between the film, the filmmaker and the audience,” says Deglise. “Someone has poured their passion into this film. Here’s the audience to discuss it. It has found its home.”

UCLA Film & Television Archive

The Billy Wilder Theater has stood silent since March 8. The last film to screen there was Better Luck Tomorrow—a 35mm print, to be precise, on loan from the DGA to mark the 50th anniversary of the UCLA Asian American Study Center. Now the pink vinyl seats lining the stadium are vacant, its proscenium stage deserted. Located in the Hammer Museum in Westwood, the Billy Wilder is the official venue for the UCLA Film & Television Archive, the visual arts nonprofit with a collection second only in size to the Library of Congress.

For quarantine season, the Archive initiated a “Safer at Home Cinema” in which staff members offer diverse streaming recommendations. Notable virtual events included a new restoration of Béla Tarr’s Sátántangó (co-presented with Arbelos Films) and Women to the Polls, a festival celebrating the centennial of the passage of the 19th Amendment. The latter was originally scheduled to play in-person but was cancelled after opening night in response to the spread of coronavirus.

The Archive applied for a $300,000 emergency relief grant through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) under the new CARES Act program, but did not receive it. The effort wasn’t wasted. “The proposal allowed us to build a comprehensive plan for what the virtual screening series would look like,” explains KJ Relth, one of the Archive’s chief programmers.

Backed by the mighty University of California system, the staff has kept busy. “We’re focusing on getting things from our collection that we own the rights to, or items where we have a strong relationship with the independent artist who owns them,” said Relth. Programmer Paul Malcolm was also impressed by the collaborations that have been forged during the lockdown. The Chicago Film Archive partnered with UCLA to release the recently preserved The Murder of Fred Hampton, a feature-length documentary about the last nine months in the life of the Black Panther Party leader. “That’s the kind of collaboration we weren’t able to do before,” Malcolm said.

The UCLA Film & Television Archive’s deep collaboration with their preservation team continues despite the extended theater closures. “We’ve already looked at lists to identify prints that have not played in our theater during the last five years, or have been prepped for other theaters,” Relth said. “We’re putting together a Back in Business program, essentially a greatest hits program of everything that’s been restored over the last decade. L.A. Rebellion stuff. Some key Robert Altman films.”

What’s Next?

If theaters reopen in L.A., are people going to come back in significant numbers? The question hangs in the air like a bilious smoke cloud. The filmmaking community has undoubtedly formed new habits during the dramatic paradigm shift of the last six months. With more choices for in-home viewing than at any other time in history, the desire to participate in society has, for many, slowly drained away.

One key ingredient that’s lacking in many streaming platforms — The Criterion Channel respectfully excluded — is a sense of intelligence behind the programming. “The big problem is that nobody knows what to watch,” says Meoli. “Watching movies at home is a search-driven process, not a discovery-driven one. We offer personalization. That is the essence of arthouse cinema.”

“We make it a little easier to find content that’s of value,” adds Laemmle. When late last fall the Laemmle Royal premiered Rialto’s new 4K restoration of Joseph Losey’s classic paranoid thriller, Mr. Klein, it stayed on for three weeks — highly unusual for a retrospective screening of that sort. “It was a perfect example of a film that demanded to be seen in theaters,” Laemmle said. (It should be noted that no one is currently streaming Mr. Klein.)

“We’re very industry-driven in L.A.,” says Deglise. “And that as it should be. We’re an industry town. But our film culture goes deeper than that. Our audience is contributing to the discussion of cinema. It’s as elevated as the discussions in Paris and New York. Virtual screenings should not be the only option. If we don’t connect in real life, we lose a part of our humanity.”

Relth is optimistic about the prospect of reopening. “Look at the dining trend emerging. There’s a huge desire to get out of the house and interact in the world again,” she insists. “I just hope that we’re cravng the excitement of social interaction so much that we can open safely. When we do, it will be a sweet reunion. A homecoming.”

“It’s that aliveness,” says Malcolm. “You can’t pause it. It’s about surrender. You need to surrender yourself to something for a couple of hours. And that’s a commitment. That’s a position of vulnerability.”

Audiences must now weigh a desire for that lost communal experience against the fear of a contagious disease that doesn’t seem to be going away anytime soon. If theaters in L.A. reopen, they will do so only under a strict regimen of regular seat cleaning, recycled air, and other such protocols. This is true not only of the art houses here, but also the Nuart, the CAT, the Samuel Goldwyn, the Vista, the Los Feliz, the Fairfax, and all the other glorious spaces that comprise the film ecosystem in Los Angeles.

“We want to celebrate this idea of what movie theaters mean to us,” concludes Malcolm. “We’re here, we’re doing what we can, and we’ll be there for you when we’re allowed to come back.”

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T he oft-trod path that Sarah Tromley took – moving from her hometown (Portland) to L.A. and living in her car while knocking on studio doors in an attempt to break into the industry – doesn’t usually work out. The streets here are littered with shattered dreams. But as Wayne Gretzky famously said, “You miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take.” Occasionally, musicians score.

Such is the case with Tromley, who grew up singing in musicals and choirs, and got serious about her art in 2016. “I always knew I was going to be in music,” Tromley says by phone. “I never doubted it for one moment. My family never really supported it. Growing up, they were always trying to push college on me and what-not. So I did the college thing for about a year and my sister was living down in L.A. When I went down to see her, I just went into the studio and they interviewed me on the spot. I said I wanted to be in the industry, and never went home. I just pretended I lived in L.A., which is crazy. I took that flight home that night, drove my Toyota Corolla from Portland to L.A., and made it happen.”

The studio she’s referring to is in fact Kanye West’s G.O.O.D. Music. Tromley started interning there when West dropped the Life of Pablo album.

“It wasn’t anything super glamorous at the beginning,” she says. “Doing a lot of Fatburger runs at 2 a.m. But I definitely built a lot of great relationships there – people that are still my mentors now. Che Pope, one of Kanye’s part-

ners, he’s still a mentor and actually helping me on my EP. The whole journey has now come full circle, which is nice.”

Regardless of personal opinions about West, that’s quite a break to have made, and the sort of thing that Tromley feels wouldn’t have happened back in Oregon.

“Portland has a great music scene – it’s a little more of a grungy metal vibe,” she says. “Similar to Seattle, I would say. Really, for me to grow as an artist, I just had to get out of Portland. Maybe I could have started my career there, but for me the main thing was getting out of my hometown, and doing it on my own. Getting uncomfortable was a huge part of my growth in the music industry. My parents both went to the same high school I did. If I’d never left I would probably never have been so bolshy, putting myself out there and doing the whole

struggling artist thing.”

It all worked out, and Tromley is about to release her debut EP having put out a string of singles and videos this year so far. All showcase her sultry, velvety soul voice and gift for hooky pop melodies. Her sound, she says, has evolved after she initially played it safe.

“The Adele sound is what I was going for [at first!],” she says. “I really wasn’t sure what my sound was. Growing up in choir, I didn’t realize that the whole first years of my life I was singing in my head voice, and in 2016 I realized that I had a whole chest voice to work with too, working with different vocal coaches. So now, my new EP that’s coming out is going to be more of a Frank Ocean meets the Weeknd vibe with like my own tone on it. I don’t even know what to call it yet but it’s exciting. It’s definitely evolved from singer/songwriter to more current and vibey that way.”

Openly bisexual, Tromley’s lyrics cover sexuality and self-discovery, as well as life in general in Los Angeles, particularly during this current lockdown.

“I’m a cancer at heart,” she says. “I feel very deeply, so emotions always inspire me, whether it’s a new love interest. Now, I’m writing about, in COVID, self-discovery, struggles I’ve experienced so far. One of my songs talks about living out of my car, and another is about the virus and what’s going on in L.A. The opening line to my song ‘Timeless’ is ‘Open up my window, let a little light in, put on a little music, for drowning out the violence. I don’t wanna see the news, I don’t wanna be sad, you’re the one that makes me smile when the world’s going bad.’ So it’s kind of like talking about everything currently and the world that we’re living in today.”

That world is, of course, insane right now. Tromley has been staying sane by indulging in safe staycations and chats with neighbors. Plus work.

“Staycations have been awesome – just driving to the beach for the day when it’s open of course,” she says. “I’m lucky to have a good relationship with my neighbors and we’ve gotten really close. Working with people via Zoom and Facetime has been huge. I actually got more work done during COVID than before I think, because we were all just so focused. My producers here in L.A., we just had to get creative. I’m thankful for that.”

Tromley’s debut EP is due out in October, and she’s super excited for people to hear it. The EP has been engineered by Vic Wainstein (Mac Miller, Frank Ocean, Tyler, the Creator), and she says that it’s better than she expected. Meanwhile, she’s been pleased with the response to the singles she’s put out so far in 2020.

“My first single ‘Maybe’ showed a jazzy sound, and now ‘Burnside’ is the first song I’ve connected with as an artist,” she says. “It’s one of those songs that I put out and thought it would maybe do ok. But it’s gotten the best response and I think it’s because I wrote from a place of home, being misunderstood, having a hard time fitting in and making friends. I think that’s something a lot of people would connect with in L.A.”

When the EP drops in October, Tromley will turn her attention to live performances of some sort. We still have no idea what the end of 2020 is going to look like, so planning is hard. But she’s figuring it out.

“My hope is to tour somehow,” she says. “Whether it’s online. I would have loved to do a festival – that’s what I was really hoping for next year. I really hope the world opens up, but if not I will be putting out a couple of songs after the EP comes out and then next year, I’m already starting ideas for my second album. So a lot more to come.”

Sarah Tromley’s debut EP is due out on October 9.
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Pleasant Holidays.

P ainted Amir H. Fallah is the father of a young son, and they love to read stories together. Every culture has its own universe of children’s literature, from myths and fantasy to more quotidian fables and cautionary tales, cartoons, comics, and coming of age books that are all over the place for style and symbolism but have one purpose in common -- to prepare children for what lies ahead of them in this world. Usually, these narratives try a bit to soften fears, encourage courage and forthrightness, and mostly have happy endings, or at least morals.

But something else is happening with these stories now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult, knowing what he knows now, as Fallah experiences rereading them as an adult. As to Air-Inclusive Offers Only: Other restrictions may apply, including, but not limited to, baggage limitations & charges, for first & second checked bags. Most policies, fees, nonrefundable differential (which may involve pre-notification deadlines), for component of package offer may be nonrefundable. Refunds are subject to supplier & airline terms & conditions. Supplier & airline fees & policies may vary. Contact your supplier & ticketing airline for more information. For baggage fees, see www.iflybags.com. Rates involving round trip air transportation for travel dates or from gateways other than those advertised may differ. Not responsible for errors or omissions. Your local AAA club acts as an agent for Pleasant Holidays. CST 1016202-80. To learn how we collect and use your information, visit the privacy link at AAA.com.

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ART

AMIR H. FALLAH: NO GODS, NO MASTERS

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT
people interesting, unique individuals, Fallah abides by a deep appreciation for what makes stories function. Moreover, as someone who it's shedding a whole new light on how these about life and love and loss and all of it, and them as an adult, knowing what he knows stories now, as Fallah experiences rereading and forthrightness, and mostly have happy try a bit to soften fears, encourage courage them in this world. Usually, these narratives -- to prepare children for what lies ahead of symbolism but have one purpose in common books that are all over the place for style and ary tales, cartoons, comics, and coming of age fantasy to more quotidian fables and caution-

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Every culture has its own universe of children's literature, from myths and tales to contemporary works. Amir H. Fallah, the father of a young son, and they love to read stories together. Every culture has its own universe of children's literature, from myths and tales to contemporary works. Amir H. Fallah, the father of a young son, and they love to read stories together.

Fallah’s eclectic visual and narrative sources are culled from his own childhood memories of Iran, his family’s move to the U.S. during his youth, the good and evil which he subsequently discovered in American culture, the contemporary and classic children’s books that currently occupy his imagination, and a mindfulness toward how cultural values pass between generations. His penchant for visual bricolage and dynamic maximalism, is fueled by an omnivorous appetite for high and low, kitsch and classicism, the cosmic and the commonplace. This juxtapositional aesthetic has been well developed in Fallah across all the works, archetypal symbols of wisdom, including actual wise men, pro-

Across all the works, archetypal symbols of wisdom, including actual wise men, pro-

liferate alongside clowns and characters, caged birds and flowering vines, heirloom textiles, devotional architecture, maps and mosaics and animated creatures, dancing skeletons, and dances of the veil. “No gods, no masters,” reads one painting, and that’s it, that’s the message. The gods both old and new may or may not exist, but the parables imparted in their hagiographies contain essential truths worth salvaging. “No masters” is both a promise of freedom and an admonition against becoming an oppressor. In “Sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul,” Columbus falls off the edge of the earth, a wildcat surveys the land, a barnyard devolves into chaos, an iconic cowboy collapses in upon himself, as might America. This work surely imparts a message with resonance for the present moment, though seven might be a bit too young to join the resistance.

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