

# A Revival House in More Ways Than One

By Joanne Kaufman

Santa Monica, Calif.

Robert Holbrook, a councilman and former mayor here, got his first kiss at the city's art deco Aero Theatre, a single-screen movie house on tony Montana Avenue. "There are a lot of sweet stories like that," says James Rosenfield, the 42-year-old owner of the Aero. "I've heard from people who had their first jobs here, took tickets, sold popcorn," he adds.

The theater was built by aviation impresario Donald Douglas in 1938—the "aero" refers to aerospace. And since its renovation and reopening this January, it has offered up classic fare ("Gone With the Wind," "On the Waterfront," "Lawrence of Arabia"), foreign movies and weekend family-matinee treats ("The Wizard of Oz," "Captain Blood"). Not all the marquee names have been onscreen, however; guest speakers have included Annette Bening and Jeremy Irons.

The tall, balding Mr. Rosenfield himself was a regular member of the Aero audience—he favored the seats on the right in the middle section—long before he was a landlord. For years he lived in an apartment building behind the theater. The proximity was a great convenience. Well, it would have been a great convenience, except that the same feature offerings tended to linger for three, four months at a time. Further, the metal seats were uncomfortable, the sound system unimpressive, the projectors unreliable, the heat and air conditioning undetectable, the microwave popcorn unpalatable.

Nonetheless, "I loved the theater," he says, pointing out the marquee repainted in muted tones of the original red, yellow and green, and the original art deco etchings on the aisle seats. "The history of L.A. isn't as long as other cities', but it's still our history," adds Mr. Rosenfield, a fourth-generation Angeleno who describes himself as a preservationist and owner of retail properties, including the two stores that occupy the same building as the Aero. "I thought, if it was humanly possible the Aero ought to be preserved as a single-screen theater. I didn't want to just preserve the building. I wanted to preserve the use. My worst nightmare was that it would become a Gap store with the marquee reading 'T-shirts: \$9.'"

Eight years ago, in a quixotic fever that has yet to cool, Mr. Rosenfield bought the Aero and began searching for a company to take charge of programming and day-to-day management. Lots of luck. With few exceptions, single-screen theaters are the white elephants—more to the point, the dinosaurs—of the exhibitor business. Chain owners speak only the language of the multiplex. This



Santa Monica Historical Society Museum

In an era when the single-screen theater is a dinosaur, can the Aero survive? Current owner James Rosenfield hopes so.

point was brought home sharply to Mr. Rosenfield when he began approaching operators like AMC, Loews, Laemmle, Landmark Cinema and Angelika.

Early on, he made his case to American Cinematheque, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization committed to showing movies in their original format on the big screen; the timing wasn't right. For one brief shining moment, he had a lease with Robert Redford's Sundance Cinemas project in partnership with General Cinema. "Redford once said he decided to become an actor while watching movies at the Aero as a child," recalls Mr. Rosenfield. "But he exercised an option and backed out."

Mr. Rosenfield's struggle is not unique.

"It's true that single-screen theaters are a difficult proposition in today's marketplace," says Ross Melnick, a film historian and co-founder of CinemaTreasuries.org, a nonprofit Web site dedicated to movie-theater history and preservation. "We do live in a megaplex world. But having said that, there are a surprisingly large number of single-screen theaters operating around the country, often as art houses or as places to see classics." Examples include the Coolidge Corner Theatre, a 72-year-old art deco movie palace in Brookline, Mass., and the Normal Theater, a 1937 art moderne movie palace in Normal, Ill. "Usually," adds Mr. Melnick, "it begins with one person who decides to purchase a theater out of love."

That would be Mr. Rosenfield. Exhausting the possibilities in the U.S., he went to Europe seeking inspiration and guidance. In a movie, this would be dealt with montage style, with trains hurtling down a track and planes skittering down the runway. "I went around the world, circled

back and starting talking to American Cinematheque again," says Mr. Rosenfield, who in a last-reel cavalry-to-the-rescue scenario made his case by generating a "We love this theater and urge you to restore it" petition signed by 25 local luminaries—among them Steven Spielberg, producer Brian Grazer, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Maria Shriver, Gwyneth Paltrow and Dustin Hoffman. "I think it was a turning point in our negotiations."

"We were Jim's last hope," says American Cinematheque's director Barbara Smith, whose organization, funded partially by the city and the film industry, also runs the Egyptian Theatre, a renovated movie palace in Hollywood. "I don't know what he would have done if we hadn't taken it over. We thought it was a cute theater, and the people in the neighborhood were enthusiastic. They really want the theater to be there."

Enthusiasm is one thing, attendance quite another. Netflix makes home delivery to people whose flat-screen TVs are equipped with Dolby surround sound. "And I just saw an ad for leather movie seats with cup-holders, so why are you going to go out?" says Ms. Smith.

"This incredible experience of our culture—moviegoing—is going away. But the more futile our job seems, the more important it becomes. And I think people will still leave their house to see something they want to see on a big screen," she adds hopefully. "They'll turn out for films they've probably seen before and know are better seen that way. We just showed 'Vertigo' at the Aero, and a lot of people were there. The other thing is that people are trying to bring the big-screen experience to their kids. The children's matinees are very successful. I see the Aero as a going concern."

American Cinematheque has a long-term lease on the theater, which derives a third of its income from ticket sales and two-thirds from fund raising, the concession counter and rental fees for special events. Frankly, the popcorn could use some work, but on a recent Sunday afternoon 1971's "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" was doing a brisk business.

Mr. Rosenfield stood outside the theater (now worth twice what he paid for it, he notes) sipping a Coke and nodding to patrons. "People tell me this is the nicest place to see a movie in Los Angeles [County]," he says proudly. "When I was first coming here, there were only six or eight people, and now to see a packed audience—that's overwhelmingly gratifying. I've often thought if we can't save the Aero, what hope is there for any old single-screen theater? This is the movie capital of the world."

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