

The 14th Anniversary of Ciné Brings Reflection and New Endeavors to the Athens Film Community

Hayley Croke

Why It's Newsworthy : After a year of closure Ciné is finally gearing up to reopen its doors to the public. The recent 14th anniversary of Ciné marks a turning point in the tumultuous year for the film industry on a local level.

In a normal year for Ciné, April is jam-packed with special events for their anniversary celebration. In a normal year, the theater would be hosting conversations about film and filmmaking. In a normal year, Richard Neupert, the board president of Ciné, might even be showing a free cartoon for kids from his collection of 16-millimeter cartoons. But this past year has been anything but normal for the Athens arthouse theater.

On March 19, Ciné closed its doors to the general public for what many believed would be a month or two.

“I think everybody was shocked after like two to three months when we weren't open again. By mid-summer it was really clear that things were dire,” Neupert said.

With the theater closed to the public in March of 2020, the celebration of last year's 13th anniversary in April was diluted down to virtually nothing.

“We send out emails saying we'll get open as soon as we can. And frankly, I thought we would just push things down the road, and, our summer classic series would just be slightly different. You know 'it's our anniversary summer' or something. There really wasn't much celebration, that's for sure, just reaching out to remind them [Ciné Members] that we will be back and we're here and we appreciate them,” Neupert said.

The Struggles of the Entertainment Industry Amid the Pandemic

Ciné is one of many theaters forced to adapt their business model to stay afloat during the pandemic. Kate Fortmueller, assistant professor in the department of entertainment and media studies at the University of Georgia, joined the board of directors at Ciné in January 2020. Fortmueller's forthcoming book, “Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID,” dives into the effect COVID has had on all stages of the entertainment industry.

“It's been very hard on theaters because there wasn't much new material to show so all they can do is show older movies and studios made those older movies available. But that's tricky because we can watch those at home,” Fortmueller said.

Fortmueller explained that since the entertainment industry has had less content to push out to theaters in the past year, the dynamic between studios and theaters has changed drastically.

“This has really shifted the balance of power between studios and theaters. There is a lot of renegotiation of theatrical release windows. So, when things reopen more widely, a lot of movies won't necessarily be in the theaters as long. That is something that a lot of owners are kind of looking down the pipeline and are nervous about,” Fortmueller said.

Ten days after closing the theater to the public, executive director Pamela Kohn created a transition to virtual screenings. At the beginning of October, Ciné transitioned to in-person screenings for private parties of 10.

While the 14th anniversary of Ciné might not be as elaborate as past celebrations, it brings an air of clarity to a complicated year.

“This year we’re slowly opening up. We’re gradually going to be opening more and we’re going to do more of a classic series like we used to in the summer too. That, sort of, anniversary feelings is going to continue off into the summer, remind people why they liked coming to Ciné in the past, encourage new people who have never been in there to come once the doors are open, and check us out,” Neupert said.

In addition to the gradual opening of the theater itself, Ciné has taken on a new endeavor starting this summer: a drive-in movie theater.

Fortmueller says the board of Ciné is looking forward to putting on an event for the people who have been patiently awaiting a return to watching films on a big screen.

“It's been really fun to kind of ramp-up to it because we're excited to have something going on. It's fun over the summer after last summer being so fraught for everyone. My hope is that people will fill up their cars, get food truck food, set up their lawn chairs in front of your car and enjoy some fun summer movie fair that will feel really different from if you're watching something like Jaws in your living room,” Fortmueller said.

The drive-in theater will be located in the parking lot of the old Westclox Factory, directly across from the Terrapin Beer Co. Brewery. Lines have already been drawn to mark off where cars will be allotted space at the drive-in which will be open for screenings one night a week this summer.

While this year has challenged the Athens film community, it has also shown the true colors of its members.

Fortmueller believes that the support the community has shown Ciné over the past year is evidence of its vital role in supporting film culture within Athens.