

Gettysburg cinema majestically strong in streaming age

By Andrea Grabenstein
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With the perfect balance of contemporary and nostalgia, the Majestic Theater in downtown Gettysburg stands as a beacon in the community and prides itself in being “the grandest small town theater in the US.”

Since 1925 the Majestic has stood as a spectacle of entertainment. Open with programs 360 days of the year, the Majestic is constantly selling out tickets and offering Gettysburg unique experiences like no other.

Jeffrey Gabel, the Majestic’s founding executive director, pours his enthusiasm and passion into all things Majestic. Currently, set crews work tirelessly to set up for Elvis Costello, who, according to Gabel, has been sold out for months.

“People are often surprised on their first visit to the theater,” he laughed, “it looks plain on the outside.” Upon entering though, patrons are transported to a nostalgic feel of times gone past a classic Vaudeville style performing arts theater, two cinemas, an art gallery and a café.

The 1950s style concession stand pays homage to the Eisenhower era, who as all locals know, retired to Gettysburg, but also regularly attended Majestic performances.

The live performance theater complete with original Vaudeville stage, originally sat 1,200. Now, Gabel, said, the live performance theater holds 800 seats with more aisle comfort and better accommodate wheelchairs

“There’s not a bad seat in the house, no obstructed seats.” he said proudly looking out from the balcony.



“There’s no dog wanting to go out, no phone ringing, no distractions. In a nut shell, it’s more fun.”

— Jeffrey Gabel,
Majestic Theater

At 150 live shows a year, “The three most popular performance genres are Celtic, county and comedy, we program that every year.”

He has also made the decision to transfer some performances, including the Metropolitan Opera, and European dance companies, live via satellite. This lets audience experience high def, high art performances but without the tremendous costs.

Gabel said the theater has had productions came in from London and Russia that can cost anywhere from \$16,000-\$20,000 for one live performance. He said these performances were “trilling to watch, but the theater always lost money.”

He also said, “there is a limited audience for high culture verses popular culture.” Via satellite, there is a more guaranteed ticket price turn around rate.

According to Gabel, the 80s were a low point for the theater, with the rise of economic development and when the Gettysburg Hotel, “which has always been an

anchor for the town,” burned down.

The theater has been open continuous open since 1925, except, said Gabel, the 16-month period in 2004 and 2005 during a \$16.5 million restoration project renovation and expansion project, that “returned the Majestic to its 1925 opulence.”

Renovation’s and expansion also included adding a fully functional loading dock, full sized elevator and dressing rooms, everything ADA accessible. “We’ve had two dance companies feature dancers with disabilities.”

The theater re-opened on the Majestic’s 80th birthday in November of 2005.

Before the Majestic temporary closed for renovations, they were the only triplex cinema in Adams County, when they opened again, Gable said, two new cineplexes had opened.

“This gave us the opportunity to not just show commercial films and we became the first cinema in the area to show independent films.”

The 1993 film, "Gettysburg" had its world premiere at the Majestic. Gable said that day, director Ron Maxwell and star actors came. Carlisle Street was closed for re-enactors and a band.

"We all know all four and a half hours of 'Gettysburg,'" he laughed.

He said higher-ups from Washington D.C will visit the Majestic's screenings of Gettysburg and use it as talking points on leadership.

While the style of the theater is directly nostalgia, the screening technology system is completely up to date, "State of the art and old fashioned at the same time."

Gable said in 2013 when the Majestic realized it would need \$125,000 upgrade the technology, they began a campaign and were able to raise \$164,000 from over "350 generous donors."

Picking which classic movie to screen for the summer classic film series is easy for Gable, a self-described film buff with decades of film knowledge. First film showings are a bit trickier, he said, so he relies on his film booker based outside New York City to attend press screenings and use his artistic judgment to bring movies to Gettysburg that "meet the community's standards."

According to Gable, the Majestic also has a great partnership with Totem Pole Playhouse, each year collaborating for a production of "A Christmas Carol" with the Totem Pole doing the production and supplying actors and the Majestic providing the stage and volunteers.

Gable said what sets the small-town theaters apart in today's world of online

streaming is personal connection. He said watching on your computer or even big screen TV can't hold a candle to the thrill being surrounding by hundreds of others.

When watching it on the screen 30 feet wide, you're watching it how it was originally created. He also said patrons can truly immerse themselves into the experience. "There's no dog wanting to go out, no phone ringing, no distractions."

"In a nut shell," Gabel laughed, "it's more fun."

He says this is especially relevant during their summer classic movie series, which are personal because he connects with the audience before each show, coming up before the screening and give an entertaining introduction and background on the film, some facts and "set the stage for the classic film they are about to enjoy."

Theaters are relevant because "400-500 people's individual emotions are magnified by the people watching with you," he said.

He recounted when the Majestic played "Jaws" a few summers back, and the infamous midnight underwater abandoned boat scene played, the maximized reactions fed off by a room full of people was infectious.

"Everyone screams at once, and then you count 1-2-3 and you hear everyone laugh at themselves for being scared."

"People still date," he said as well, "and movies make a great date night." He said the Majestic also has loyal indie film followers.

Gable said classic movie ticket purchases are also presented with a raffle ticket with the prize of two tickets to a live show, valued at \$100.

Majestic employees are also committed to serving the best movie going experience possible with users holding doors open and assist anyone needing it.

"The show starts at the sidewalk," he said earnestly.

Gabel considers the Majestic a presence like no other, a unique corner stone of the community. He said, "small town theaters are an economic engine of prosperity." The Majestic is a paragon of this, having always been supported by the community and sending surveys out and listening to community suggestions.

The theater collects a 10 percent entertainment tax for the borough on all live show tickets sold, he said as well as money that goes into the parking garage, and restaurants that depend on movie go-ers.

"The death of film has been predicted many times," he said, including in 1928 when cinema went to talking and when televisions were introduced for the home, "it's hard to predict."

Gabel said he is always looking for something new to show, the Majestic takes pride in their diverse lineup. People keep coming back to the Majestic because its a "unique and memorable experience."

"Plus," he laughed, "we have the best popcorn in town."

For more information on Gettysburg's Majestic Theater, check out their website at <http://www.gettysburgmajestic.org/> and follow them on social media. Ticket can be purchased on line, at the door, or by phone at 717-337-8200.