

Cable Car Cinema: A Toast to the Soul of South Main

The Cable Car Cinema, most recently owned by Daniel Kamil and Emily Steffian, is closing its doors after a 42-year run, and here, members of the area creative community share some tributes.

Richard Manning, former co-director for the French Film Festival and retired film archivist for modern culture and media at Brown University, reminds us not to forget Eric and Al Bilodeau who originated the Cable Car in addition to Daniel and Emily “with their eyes for art, design and film well spiced with adventurous tastes that crowned the Cable Car.” He referenced Gerry DeLuca, who hosted an Italian film series, and the late Shoggy Waryn as French Film Festival co-director, who left his mark directly.

Previous Cable Car owner Eric Bilodeau, currently programming director for Providence Children’s Film Festival, started working at the cinema weekends in high school before managing it for 18 years. He explains that there are two central components making the Cable Car the soul of South Main:

“The first was that the Cable Car Cinema provided a dependable meeting place for decades. I used to joke that the only place open more than we were was the police station. When you are open so much, you really get to know many aspects of a community. People from all over were constantly coming in to ask for directions because we were the only place that looked open right off the highway.

“The second, and most important, part of the Cable Car’s soul was the vast array of films shown over the 40-plus years. In the truest sense they were/are art films. Getting people to share great art in any form is what advances humanity. The programming has ALWAYS been, at the very least, thought provoking. I was delighted to see that Daniel and Emily ran further with it than I would have. The stories that were told on this small screen resonated far beyond the cinema’s four walls.”

Comparing the Cable Car to the late College Hill Bookstore on Thayer, he added, “That was the soul of Thayer Street ... warm and inviting, and the people who worked there were passionate about books. I haven’t felt another business on Thayer take its soulful place since. I hope South Main finds its soul in another iteration.”

The go-to man on Providence area goings-on, Matthew Lawrence, mentions why the Cable Car is important, as he likes watching movies in public in a way that TV or even Netflix can’t compare. “It’s where I went on my first date (*Velvet Goldmine*). It’s where I once heard an audience of French people boo at the end of a movie (*The Last Mistress*). It’s where I saw *Detropia*, *Snowpiercer*, and most recently, François Ozon’s batty *Double Lover*. I remember it for other reasons, too, like that man who used to sing ‘The Teddy Bear’s Picnic’ before every movie.”

Joshua Gravel, former projectionist and occasional programmer at the cinema, was lucky enough not only to see many a classic and future classic at the Cable Car, but also to present screenings of many of his favorite films to enthusiastic audiences while spending a few years in the projection booth.

Sara Archambault, program director at LEF Foundation, reflected on the Cable Car Cinema as a sort of home away from home for her since attending church events there at age 11. She has hosted events there for the RI Council for the Humanities, Day One, the LEF Foundation and local filmmakers and

artists.

She explains, “For such a public space, I’ve always marveled just how at ease I felt in there and how much it felt like home. I’ve cried in that theater, drank wine with friends, brought my newborns to sneak into a matinee and showed my son his very first movie.”

After 36 years of going to the Cable Car, she was proud to recently screen a film there that she had produced. “I started that journey at a church event so long ago now, and strangely the Cable Car became like a church for me — a place to which I would continually return to find comfort, inspiration, a safe place to cry, share in joy, be by myself or gather in the company of good friends. I will be forever grateful to the Cable Car’s many caretakers over the years. Thank you for some of my most precious and powerful memories. They will live on in my heart as they will with each person who sat on those couches.”

In compiling these reflections, I’ll add my own appreciation for having hosted several editions of my film festivals and seen so many independent films, the creators of which I have been privileged to interview. Echoing Sara’s closing words, “You made a difference, Cable Car. You will not be forgotten.”