

ARTS & FEATURES

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New theater opens for lovers of indie film

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In a city with nearly a dozen movie theaters, a new theater needs something to stand out.

Steve White, owner of Grail Moviehouse, grew up near Winston-Salem and moved to Chapel Hill for college, only to drop out after his freshman year because of the love affair he developed with movie theaters.

His first job was at The Carolina Theater on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill. From there he moved to Greensboro to work in another theater where he eventually became manager.

"It's the kind of job that gets in your system even when you leave it for 20 years," White said. "You always want to go back to it."

White moved around North Carolina working in the industry before making his way back to Greensboro to finish college. Although he still worked in independent movie houses, he found a way to balance school and work the second time around.

White opened Grail Moviehouse in May, named for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a new theater that has something to make it stand out.

The movie house, located on South French Broad Avenue, features a long hallway at the end of is the box office and the theater itself. The walls lined with art from classic films and the concession stand displays memorabilia from the manager's personal collection.

It is a film lover's paradise.

White left the movie theater business for 20 years, a time during which he worked as corporate media producer and made his own film in Chapel Hill in the 90s. Although he always wanted to open a theater of his own, the opportunity never presented itself to him.

That is, until he and his partner, Davida Horwitz, heard a building was for sale, the building just happened to be large enough for a theater.

Although White liked his job, it was not his true passion. Horwitz taught for 20 years. They were both ready for a



Photo by Karrigan Monk

Owner Steve White works the concession stand at Grail Moviehouse.

change.

"We just saw the opportunity," White said, "and knew that something like this was something Asheville would appreciate and respond to."

The building, originally a relief map factory, once hosted The Downtown Market, which is now closing its doors for good. Now everything from a grocery store, start-up tech companies, the Asheville School of Film and Grail Moviehouse can be found there.

The purchase of the building was just the first step of White's dream. They had a space, but now they needed to make it a functioning theater.

The partners first traveled to Brooklyn to buy a projector and sound system from an art house in the process of losing their lease because the building was going to be torn down. When purchasing the technology, they asked if any seats were available, something they still didn't have for their budding theater. The art house came through with cushy purple seats. The partners fell in love and sent the seats back to Asheville with the projector and sound system.

They still needed to find more seats to fill the theater. In lieu of the traditional movie theater seats they already purchased, White and Horwitz decided on a more unorthodox route.

Through word of mouth they found out about ZABS Place, a thrift store in Matthews, NC, that raises money for disabled kids. ZABS deals with the hotel chain Marriott, which allows the store

to sell the hotel furniture that has been replaced. The owners of Grail loved the mission of the store and the idea of non-traditional seating and filled the rest of the theater with couches and chairs from ZABS.

In addition to the furniture, the owners recycled and upcycled many other items in the theater.

According to White, refurbishing old cigarette machines to sell art is becoming a popular feature in many businesses. He wanted one for Grail, but found they were too expensive. Instead, he improvised by upcycling an old Lance snack machine to serve the same purpose.

The machine now sits in the concession area of the movie house and displays local art available for sale for \$5. In addition to the art, the manager sells a small magazine called *MovieJohn* that he started while working in Philadelphia at another theater.

"It's kind of weird ramblings, cartoons, critiques," Horwitz said, "things like that. It's a little weird, but it's still cool."

The completed theater consists of three rooms for screening.

The first room seats 122 and displays the biggest screen. The chairs from Brooklyn fill this room where the few big studio films are shown.

The second room seats 80 and hosts a variety of seats from couches to comfy chairs to traditional theater seats. A film reel sits in the corner of this room used to host Skype interviews with directors.

The final room only seats 40, but White describes it as their lucky charm. Couches and chairs from ZABS fill the room.

Once the theater was set up the only thing left was to find films to screen.

To do this, White signed contracts with studios, big and small. Grail works with a booker to get the films they show, sometimes as an exclusive.

White said Grail Moviehouse was the only theater in 100 miles to show *Absolutely Fabulous*, which fans flocked to see.

When choosing films to show, White and Horwitz said they like to pick those not only of good quality, but films that also tell an interesting story. They particularly look for films for smaller niche audiences from indie companies.

"A lot of the films we book because we think we would like it and we think other people who like good movies would like to come and see it," White said. "Otherwise there wouldn't be enough screens in town to play it."

The theater tries to run a classic film each week in addition to the other titles they show, usually running anywhere from one to three weeks.

Documentaries are a favorite for the owners and can be as varied from the absurd *Tickled* to the more serious *Witness*.

One such documentary, *Holy Hell*, tells the story of a cult in California. A former member of the cult, who was in it for 24 years, now lives in Asheville and brought the film to Grail as an exclusive. After each showing, he engaged in a question-and-answer session with the audience. This was a huge success for the theater.

Despite their status as a relatively new business, Grail Moviehouse relies very little on advertisements in favor of word of mouth and social media. White said it excites him to hear people coming out of a film talking about it, and knowing it means they will probably tell their friends about it later.

The theater offers the typical movie fare as well as local beer and local snacks, like Poppy popcorn.

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