

The Berkshire Eagle

Our Opinion: It's time to root for the Beacon Theater

Posted Monday, December 18, 2017 4:48 pm

Ever since the declining cost of technological advances such as Surround Sound, high definition, large format flat-screen TVs, DVDs and digital streaming made home theaters affordable for the average American householder, old-fashioned brick-and-mortar movie theaters' biggest competition has come not from one another, but from inertia. More specifically, today's moviegoer would rather microwave his own popcorn, crack open his own beer, settle into his recliner and stream a show in the comfort of his own home than go through the hassle of piling into a car for a relatively expensive outing at a theater — especially when the high cost of noshes and beverages is factored in.

It seems like a no-brainer — investing in renovating or improving a movie theater, especially an old one, is analogous to sinking money into slide rules or eight-track tape players; they once served a purpose, but have long ago been rendered obsolete and nobody wants them.

So there must be something else that Pittsfield's Beacon Cinema — located not in a suburban mall but in the middle of a mature downtown shopping district — has to offer for the price of a ticket; something that gives lenders the confidence to sink over half a million dollars into the latest updates; something that "puts fannies in the seats," as the old show-business expression goes.

That "something" is the total movie-going experience — that special event we all used to enjoy when going out to see a movie was our only choice besides watching a scheduled film on TV that seemed to have more ads shoehorned into the time slot than the actual movie. And that camaraderie of being in the company of others is particularly missed now that so many of our entertainment options involve simply staying at home. There is an excitement to sharing the emotions, the great acting, the clever lines of a movie with a roomful of people; we laugh in unison at a comedy; our sense of fear is heightened during a scary thriller when those around us are also scrunching down into their seats, squinting their eyes shut and putting their fingers in their ears. It's contagious, and it's thrilling. The audience becomes part of the show.

Beacon Cinema has successfully tapped into this basic need, and in so doing has managed to make itself one of the sparkling ornaments of Pittsfield's North Street

The Berkshire Eagle

business district. The people at Berkshire Bank clearly share the faith; the financial institution lent the Beacon the money to upgrade to fancy double reclining seats, new carpeting and lighting to compete with other venues that have made the same move in recent years.

A couple of other factors work in the Beacon's favor: It shows first-run movies, unlike some other renovated art houses that feature foreign or classic films that only aficionados will want to see. Also, it has severely undercut standard ticket prices, which, when one takes into account the availability of beer and wine for customers to enjoy while they watch, steers patrons downtown where they can spend the money saved on adjacent businesses for meals and drinks before and after the show.

The Beacon Cinema says that as a result of its renovation, it's now selling more tickets even though it has a smaller seating capacity. Let us hope this is a harbinger of the theater's sustained economic prosperity. Meanwhile, congratulations to all involved in the project and to Berkshireites who can enjoy a viable and unique entertainment alternative.