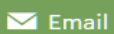




Philanthropy & Nonprofits - Arts Front

Cincinnati World Cinema has been reeling in art house movie fans for 2 decades



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From left, Tim Swallow and his wife, Margaret, founders of Cincinnati World Cinema, Anne Golden of the Japan American Society of Greater Cincinnati, and filmmakers Toko Shiiki and Erik Santos. Photo: Craig Ellison

By David Holthaus

Sep 10, 2021

As a 10-year-old back in the '50s, Tim Swallow lived the childhood dream of having the run of a beautiful old movie theater. In those days, his mother would get dressed up to shop and lunch with friends at downtown department stores and tea rooms and would drop off her son at the Albee Theater, where the family had a close connection with the general manager.

"I would fall under the care and watchful eye of a maintenance man," Swallow said.

He not only got to watch movies all afternoon in the palatial expanse of the long ago-demolished Albee – on East Fifth Street where the Westin Hotel stands today – but got behind the scenes in the projector booth to see how the magic of cinema happened.

Those experiences kindled a love for movies that was consummated almost 20 years ago when he and his wife, Margaret, started Cincinnati World Cinema, devoted to bringing independent, international and under-the-radar movies to town.

Since 2002, they have been showing the kind of movies that are usually only available at art houses in much larger cities. Where else could one see "Nina Wu," a psychological thriller from Taiwan about the exploitation of women in the film industry? Or "About Endlessness," a collection of 30 loosely connected vignettes by a Swedish director who calls it "a collection of short poems about existence"?



Image: Corrie Schaffel/CBC

For 20 years, Tim and Margaret Swallow have been showing the kind of movies that are usually only available at art houses in much larger cities. Photo: Corrie Schaffel/CBC

"We felt Cincinnati was not well served when it came to international film," Tim Swallow said.

The Esquire Theatre in Clifton and its East Side sister, the Mariemont Theatre, are the only movie houses in Greater Cincinnati that regularly show independent and international films. But even they might not touch "Gunda," a black-and-white 2020 Norwegian documentary of a mother pig and her piglets, filmed without dialogue, music, or people. The movie, produced by Hollywood heavyweight Joaquin Phoenix, was on the CWC's menu in August.

For two decades, the Swallows have been presenting thoughtful, sometimes provocative movies as an alternative to the blockbusters, rom-coms and action flicks churned out by Hollywood and shown in multiplexes everywhere. "What you see at the art houses is intended to appeal to people with intellectual curiosity," Swallow said. "The multiplexes provide films for 16-year-old boys of all ages."

Cincinnati World Cinema's debut in 2002 set the bar high. Its first presentation was "Kandahar," a 2001 Iranian film set in Afghanistan during the rule of the Taliban. The movie made *Time* magazine's 2010 list of the 100 greatest movies of all time.

For most of its life, Cincinnati World Cinema was nomadic, renting out Memorial Hall in Over-the-Rhine, the Cincinnati Art Museum auditorium, the Carnegie Theater in Covington and other venues for periodic showings.

In 2018, it moved into a more permanent home, the Garfield Theater downtown on Race Street. The theater was built in the 1970s as a single-screen art house and had previously been home to the Movies Repertory and other attempts at cinematic independence. The Cincinnati Shakespeare Company moved in during the late '90s.



The Garfield Theatre is located at 719 Race St., downtown.

When it became available, the Swallows turned it back into a movie theater, now the only one downtown. It showed its first film there in 2018 and things seemed to be hitting stride in 2019. Then 2020 happened, closing all sorts of theaters. They also became among the last venues to reopen.

"There should be some kind of award for impeccably horrible timing," Swallow said.

Now, the organization not only had to counter the marketing prowess of Hollywood, the big theater companies and the growing trend of streaming movies at home, it faced the public's aversion to gathering in enclosed spaces. Like so many other arts organizations, CWC went virtual, offering its eclectic mix of movies for a \$10 online rental fee that was generally good for 30 days.

It helped keep the lights on, but as Swallow said, "it was trading analog dollars for digital dimes."

Pre-Covid, a date night at the Garfield would cost \$20 for a couple, plus any refreshments. (The cost of popcorn has been kept to \$2.) Now, that same couple could watch the movie at home for \$10 and make their own popcorn.

In April, Cincinnati World Cinema reopened the doors of the theater, at 25% capacity, with proof of vaccination required to get in. It moved to 50% over the summer and is planning to expand to 75% this month. It experimented with requesting vaccinations and using the honor system earlier in the summer but returned to requiring proof of full vaccination in August. Its audience tends to be older, educated people, and they preferred to attend the screenings in an environment they are confident is safe, Swallow said. "People have learned to trust us."

Two marquee events each year help to fund other screenings throughout the year:

- For 20 years, it has annually presented a series of short films – documentaries, animated shorts and live-action films – that were nominated for Academy awards. That was presented in April and available digitally.
- Since 2015, it has also presented a series of short films that won awards at the Sundance Film Festival. Those were shown at the theater for several days in July and again for two days in mid-August.

But Cincinnati World Cinema is a labor of love, not profit, for the Swallows, who have both been retired from corporate life for several years. They rely on volunteers to help on movie nights, and they've built an audience of dedicated film buffs over the years.

COMING UP

Cincinnati World Cinema usually features discussions after or before its presentations. Two events this month will be opportunities to hear from filmmakers in person:

- **Sept. 14-15:** Adam Stovall, a Northern Kentucky native, will introduce his film "A Ghost Waits," billed as a "comedy-romance-horror," and conduct a Q/A afterward. \$10.
- **Sept. 19, 26:** Lunafest, a traveling film festival of movies by and about women. Filmmakers from Cincinnati Women in Film will lead a post-movie discussion. \$15, with proceeds to benefit Cincinnati Women in Film.
- **Where:** Garfield Theatre, 719 Race St., downtown. For information, [click here](#). You can also sign up there for email announcements.