

CINCINNATI WORLD CINEMA PRESERVES A RARE, CURATED FILMGOING EXPERIENCE

For more than 20 years, CWC at the Garfield Theatre has maintained the value of independent film in Cincinnati.

By **Ben Momeni** - September 25, 2025



PHOTOGRAPH BY PIERCE RYAN COURTESY CINCINNATI WORLD CINEMA

It's no secret that in recent years, Cincinnati has attracted national attention for its mark in the film world. Major productions like *Superman* and *Bones and All* were filmed at notable city landmarks like Union Terminal and the University of Cincinnati, respectively, in addition to previous Hollywood blockbusters like *The Bikeriders* and *The Old Man and the Gun*. Cincinnati was also a [finalist as a potential host city for the Sundance Film Festival](#), the largest and most influential independent film festival in the U.S. known for launching careers of acclaimed directors like Quentin Tarantino, Ryan Coogler, and Chloe Zhao.

Against that backdrop, [Cincinnati World Cinema](#) (CWC) at the Garfield Theatre offers a fascinating counterpoint, promoting a carefully curated and community-driven filmgoing experience. CWC is more than just a venue, it is a volunteer-run film presenter and curator that operates out of the Garfield Theater. Its unique, flexible model allows CWC to focus on international cinema, documentaries, shorts, independent features, and even locally made films that would otherwise bypass the Cincinnati market entirely.

For much of its history, CWC was nomadic, renting venues such as Memorial Hall in Over-the-Rhine, the Cincinnati Art Museum auditorium, and the Carnegie Theater in Covington for periodic showings.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY CINCINNATI WORLD CINEMA

In 2018, the organization moved into its permanent home, the historic Garfield Theater on Race Street. Built in 1970 as a single-screen art house, the Garfield had previously hosted Movies Repertory, other attempts at cinematic independence, and even the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company in the late '90s. When it became available, Tim and Margaret Swallow—the current owners and directors of CWC—restored it to a movie theater. In fact, it is currently the only movie theater in downtown Cincinnati's Business District. With just 163 seats, the Garfield is intentionally small, showing only a handful of films monthly.

At its core, CWC's mission is to engage the community to explore the human condition and celebrate cultural diversity through cinema that informs, educates, and entertains. Unlike the commercial multiplexes that dominate the local landscape, or the algorithm-driven streaming platforms, CWC's approach is rooted in something slower, more deliberate, and ultimately more sustainable. "We strive to educate on the filmgoing experience," says Tim Swallow. "People shouldn't just have to settle for what they're given."

A Longstanding Sundance Connection

Cincinnati's selection as a Sundance finalist didn't happen by chance. [Film Cincinnati](#), city leaders, and a creative team quickly assembled to pitch the Queen City as a worthy successor to Park City, Utah, Sundance's longtime home. With support from Mayor Aftab Pureval and local production teams, the group produced a polished promotional video highlighting the city's arts, culture, architecture, and recent film productions. Their efforts impressed Sundance officials, earning Cincinnati a place in the final six new site locations, a remarkable achievement for a city whose involvement in the national independent film conversation was only recently emerging.

Despite not securing the top seat, Cincinnati maintains a connection with the national film festival, and has for more than a decade.

One of CWC's most significant national relationships is with Sundance, a connection that didn't happen overnight. Swallow has been a long-time member of the Sundance Institute and began attending the annual [Art House Convergence](#) Conference in 2010, which takes place alongside the Sundance Film Festival. There, he built relationships with festival managers, programmers, distributors, and other theater operators. Over time, those connections opened doors to opportunities that would put Cincinnati on the map for independent film enthusiasts.

The result? For the past 11 years, CWC has been the exclusive local presenter of Sundance Shorts, a touring program showcasing some of the best short films selected by the festival. That exclusivity is no small feat: CWC's unique business model allowed it to give the Shorts a dedicated multi-day engagement—showing no other films during the run—and to commit to NPR radio advertising, something few, if any, presenters do in the region. That level of commitment was rewarded with a relationship that audiences have come to rely on. "We were devoted to Sundance, and they reciprocated," Swallow says.

CWC's connection to Sundance isn't limited to shorts. Earlier this year, it brought the award-winning feature *Prime Minister*—winner of the [World Cinema Documentary Award](#) at this year's Sundance Film Festival—to Cincinnati for three nights in July, with encore screenings in August and a second encore tentatively planned for October 17 and 18. There's more on the horizon: three additional Sundance features are already being considered for the October to December slate.



CWC volunteers at the screening for Oscar-Nominated short films.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY CINCINNATI WORLD CINEMA

Every February and March, CWC also hosts its long-running screenings of Oscar-Nominated Shorts—animated, documentary, and live-action. The program has been a CWC exclusive for 24 years, and unlike most short film exhibitions, it ensures that the filmmakers receive a portion of the proceeds. “Shorts are almost always passion projects,” Swallow explains. “Filmmakers rarely get paid for them, so making sure they see some benefit from their work is really important to us.”

An Alternative to Chains and Streamers

Cincinnati World Cinema's mission has always been to show audiences what they wouldn't see otherwise. While commercial theaters often rotate the same 16 to 18 mainstream titles that show for one or two weeks, CWC builds its lineup around international films, documentaries, and independent work that rarely get shown locally. Further, the organization is built on the belief that cinema should be a collective experience, best shared on a large screen with a community of fellow filmgoers. That's why post-film discussions—often led by local film professors and organizations, CWC staff, or filmmakers themselves—are a standard part of the experience. These conversations create space for audiences to process what they've seen, explore cultural and societal issues reflected on screen, and connect with one another in meaningful dialogue.

This deliberate, discussion-centered programming is something Swallow says has been part of the theater's mission since the beginning. This kind of intentional programming feels especially critical today, when polarization and algorithm-driven media consumption can leave people siloed in their own viewpoints. Garfield Theater becomes a third space where people can encounter new perspectives collectively in a safe environment.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY CINCINNATI WORLD CINEMA

Streaming platforms present their own challenges. Major streamers are increasingly focused on building subscription revenue and promoting their own in-house content—often at the expense of variety and longevity. “You might dig like crazy to find something you want, only to see it retired from the service a month later,” Swallow notes. For filmmakers, the equation is even more discouraging: compensation is miniscule, fewer films are being picked up, and even fewer are being financed. In that environment, CWC’s role as a curator and advocate for underseen work becomes even more significant.

Preserving a Filmgoing Tradition

For Swallow, the larger point is that filmgoing itself is something worth preserving. Cincinnati once had 28 movie theaters downtown, but by 2018, every one had closed. That year, CWC renovated and reopened the last remaining theater, naming it the Garfield Theater. More than just a screening room, the Garfield has been designed as a hub for film culture, housing Cincinnati’s only filmmaker residency program, complete with production offices, an editing suite, and access to the big screen for dailies and test screenings.

CWC’s commitment to the film community has not gone unnoticed. In 2019, the organization received the “Favorite Film Presenter or Series” award by Movers & Makers Magazine, a

publication spotlighting the citizens shaping the future of Cincinnati arts and culture, reflecting years of dedication to providing the community with outstanding motion pictures and fostering a space for meaningful dialogue and cultural engagement.

Historically, CWC has hosted [Lunafest](#), a traveling film festival of movies by and about women, featuring post-film discussions led by [Women in Film Cincinnati](#), with proceeds benefiting the organization. From its inception, CWC has championed women filmmakers, presenting approximately 200 films by women. Since 2016, Swallow has served as a founding board member of Women in Film Cincinnati, providing both space and funding to support WIF activities.

On September 24, CWC will present [Swamp Dogg Gets His Pool Painted](#), a documentary about singer, songwriter, and record producer Jerry Williams, aka Swamp Dogg. The film explores his collaborations across jazz, soul, country, and hip-hop, featuring many of the musicians themselves, and is presented in partnership with [The Voice of Black Cincinnati](#), connecting local audiences with important cultural conversations. Through combining art, advocacy, and education, CWC keeps the Garfield firmly rooted in the cultural life of the city.

Looking Ahead

Their messaging is clear: Cincinnati World Cinema at the Garfield Theatre is keeping alive a kind of film culture that feels harder to find each year. As Swallow puts it: “We want to preserve the integrity of the experience. It’s not just about what’s on screen, but how you engage with it.”

At a time when streaming services dominate and many theaters play it safe with blockbusters, CWC continues to carve out a space for something different: films that challenge, conversations that linger, and an audience experience that feels intentional. In that way, CWC makes the city not just a place where movies are made, but a place where movies—and their messages—matter most.

