

In Proximity
SPECIAL EPISODE: How to Run a Movie Theater in 2024
Season 2 Episode 6
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to P-R-O-X.

You're listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, Head of Audio here, and the voice you hear at the top of every episode. Thanks for listening to our show!

If you like what we're doing, please don't forget to follow In Proximity on your favorite podcast app. Follow us on social media. We're @ProximityMedia, and we're doing a lot of cool stuff over there including sharing short video clips on Instagram and TikTok. And tell a friend, colleague, or loved one to check out the show.

If you've got a minute, leave us a rating and review on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. It would really help us a lot in terms of growing the show and helping other people find us. In Proximity is independently produced and distributed by Proximity Media. We're a small but mighty audio team, and we want to keep making this show and more cool audio projects like this so please support us and follow us if you can.

Thanks for listening. Now on to today's special episode.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[0:49 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: We talk a lot about making movies on this show. But what about watching movies? The film industry is going through significant changes right now, and that includes the many ways that people watch movies.

[1:30 - No Smoking from Blue Dot Sessions]

You can watch a movie on your phone, on your TV at home. You can also go to a movie theater, sit in the dark with friends and strangers, and enjoy the communal experience of watching a story unfold on the big screen.

I still love that experience and I know a lot of my colleagues definitely do, too. But I also know how hard it can be these days to get out to a theater, especially if you don't work in the entertainment industry and when you have so many other things grabbing hold of your attention.

On today's very special episode, we wanted to do something different and zoom in on the theatrical movie experience and, specifically, the independent movie theater experience, not the big cinema chains but the local mom-and-pop independent theaters.

What's it like to own and operate an independent movie theater today? Who goes to indie movie theaters, and why? And what does any of this mean for the future of movies and watching them in theaters?

We went out to an independent movie theater called Gardena Cinema here in Los Angeles to try and answer these questions.

[SOUNDS OF CARS PASSING]

Paola Mardo: Should we walk in?

Judy Kim: Yeah, let's go on in.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, so we're in the lobby. There's so much history in this lobby.

Judy Kim: Yeah, just in the lobby.

Paola Mardo: Of your family and the theater, but it's great.

Judy Kim: It's almost like a memorial or a museum.

Paola Mardo: It's very cool and it feels very retro with the neon.

[2:53 - No Smoking from Blue Dot Sessions]

Paola Mardo: Gardena Cinema has been around since 1946. It's one of the last family-owned independent movie theaters in LA County, located just below South LA in a very diverse neighborhood that's been home to predominantly Asian, Black, and Latino communities.

It's a single-screen theater so they can only show one movie at a time. They also do all kinds of events from comedy shows to special screenings, like a 24-hour marathon of horror exploitation movies screened in 16-millimeter film.

That's an actual event they did last summer. And if you don't know what horror exploitation is, you can look it up, but, essentially, it's a horror subgenre of exploitation films, which are usually low-budget movies that exploit current anxieties and trends in ways that can be quite gory, graphic, and then some.

So, naturally, I sent some of our In Proximity production team to check the movie marathon out. Our Associate Producer Celine Mendiola reported from the scene and produced this piece.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[CROWD MURMURING, MUFFLED CONVERSATION]

[VOICEOVER]

Celine Mendiola: It's 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday at Gardena Cinema. There's already a line of about 10 people waiting to get inside before the first showing starts at noon. They're here for a unique cinema experience, and so most of them came prepared with pillows, blankets, and snacks from the lobby like popcorn.

[POPCORN POPPING]

It's gonna be a long day, and folks want to be comfortable. Everyone here came from all over LA for this marathon.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[4:30 - Floating Whist from Blue Dot Sessions]

Bren: I came from Burbank, so like 45 minutes.

Liz: I live in the valley.

Celine Mendiola: Where in the valley? I'm also from the valley.

Liz: Oh, okay. Valley Village?

Ben (Vinyl vendor): Riverside County. It's far, yeah.

Miles Villalon: You could go to West LA, you can go to Hollywood, you know, that's where, like, all the big repertory cinema is. So it's nice to come someplace local that's in our backyard because, a lot of times, it feels the South Bay is considered, like, the boonies of the Los Angeles area. I mean, if you tell someone, "Oh, I'm from Torrance," and they're like, "Where is that?"

Celine Mendiola: That's Bren, Liz, Ben, and Miles. Miles Villalon is a regular at these 16-millimeter film screenings. And part of why he likes to go is because of nostalgia.

Miles Villalon: As I get older and stuff, I'm starting to realize that when you were a kid and maybe you saw, like, something like Jurassic Park in the theater, you took for granted that you were watching it on real, like, film, film. Like, real celluloid crackling film.

Celine Mendiola: Of course, there are still some big movies released on film, but watching a movie on film in a theater isn't as common as it used to be. Nowadays, anything we watch on a screen is digital. And it's a lot of work to show movies on film.

But despite all that, there are still people who want to preserve the theatrical film experience.

[CLIP: HORROR MARATHON EVENT INTRODUCTION]

Mikey Aguirre: We are here for the 24-Hour Horror-Exploitation-Thon...

Celine Mendiola: Like Mikey Aguirre, the founder of See It on 16 Millimeter and the organizer of today's event.

Mikey Aguirre: Appreciate a round of applause for Gardena Cinema also.

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

Celine Mendiola: So what kind of movies do you show at a 24-hour horror exploitation movie marathon?

Mikey Aguirre: I wanted to stay away from franchises as much as possible. There's no Michaels. There's no Freddies. There's no Jasons or anything today. Today is a bunch of rare stuff that has played before in its day and, like, really hasn't hit the screen in a while.

There's two made-for-TV horror movies from the '70s that are gonna be playing...

Celine Mendiola: The lineup includes some known names and films like Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein and Sam Raimi's 1981 cult classic The Evil Dead. The rest

are maybe not as well-known, at least to me and the team. Their titles sound really cool, though. I'll let the rest of the team read it out loud.

[SUSPENSEFUL MUSIC AND EERIE NOISES]

Caitlin Plummer: The Farmer!

Alexandria Santana: The Prowler!

Cedric Wilson: The Incredible Melting Man!

Caitlin Plummer: Don't Be Afraid of the Dark!

Cedric Wilson: Curse of the Doll People!

Alexandria Santana: Don't Go In the House!

Cedric Wilson: And Bad Ronald!

Celine Mendiola: It's definitely an eclectic lineup, and our production team got to see that for ourselves when we popped into the first film of the day, Deadly Eyes.

[MOVIE CLIP: DEADLY EYES]

[YOUNG WOMAN WEEPS WITH SCARY MUSIC]

Released in 1982 and directed by Robert Clouse, it's about a pack of killer rats that attack the city of Toronto.

[WOMAN SCREAMS AND MUSIC CRESCENDOS]

[SCREAMING AND MUSIC FADES OUT]

[END CLIP]

There are a lot of jump-scares, a lot of awkward dialogue...

[MOVIE CLIP 2: DEADLY EYES]

TRUDY: Mr. Harris, I think I'm falling in love with you.

[AUDIENCE CHUCKLES]

[END CLIP]

...and a lot of rats, which I later learned were actually...

Mikey Aguirre: Just all wiener dogs with rat costumes on.

Celine Mendiola: The movies screened today range from cult classics to B-movies and rare prints that were never screened before. Some of them are a little absurd like *Deadly Eyes*, but overall, they're entertaining and fun. And that's pretty much what everyone is here for.

[CROWD MURMURING, MUFFLED CONVERSATION]

Miles Villalon: When you see it on real film, it's special.

Celine Mendiola: Miles from the lobby again.

Miles Villalon: There's something about seeing it with a crowd, and you hear people cheering or laughing or gasping. You know, you're listening to the sound of the reel skip. You're listening to the crackle on the screen, those two seconds where you're waiting for the reel to change.

There's this thing about analog that can't be replicated, and we don't get that anymore in a cinema experience, and, you know, that's what I love about this community.

Celine Mendiola: Out of the 50 people who showed up to the marathon, only about 15 actually stayed for the entire 24 hours. So it was a small turnout in the end, but, like Miles and Mikey, they were all passionate about watching movies on film in a theater and finding ways to preserve that experience. Here's Mikey again.

[PROJECTOR WHIRRING AND FILM CRACKLING]

Mikey Aguirre: This theater I believe needs more representation and it needs more people coming and attending because if people don't come to places like this, these places vanish. I enjoy the theater experience. I enjoy the communal experience. And, like, places like Gardena, Judy is fighting to keep open to be able to preserve all that, which is truly special. If you love movies, you go to the theater to go watch them with other people.

[9:20 - Stately Shadows from Blue Dot Sessions]

Celine Mendiola: To be honest, I thought being this passionate about movies was exclusive to quote-unquote "cinephiles." But the way everyone talked to me about films made me realize the community was much more inclusive than I thought. They want to watch movies with other people.

[CLIP: HORROR MOVIE EVENT INTRODUCTION 2]

[APPLAUSE]

Mikey Aguirre: ...the little lady running around, Judy, is one of the hardest workers I have ever met, and she is keeping us all together and this dream alive to share with all you guys. So thank you, Judy, for having us, we appreciate it.

[CHEERING AND APPLAUSE]

[10:02 - Stately Shadows from Blue Dot Sessions]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: That segment was produced by Celine Mendiola.

The turnout for that event may have been small, but just a few nights before, Gardena Cinema had its first sold-out show since 2004's *The Passion of the Christ*. It was a comedy show with the comedian Bill Burr.

I met owner Judy Kim at the theater earlier that day, and we sat inside the beautiful 800-seat auditorium to talk about how she is navigating the challenges of running an independent movie theater today.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Judy Kim: My parents are Korean immigrants. They immigrated in 1971. My parents are from an area of South Korea that historically has had a lot of discrimination.

Paola Mardo: Mm-hmm.

Judy Kim: They're from the Jeolla-do Province, which is, you know, South South Korea. So it's a big farming community and kind of the countryside. So, my dad, he has a very thick accent. He's got kind of that Southern Korean accent. So when he talks, you immediately recognize where he's from. He worked for the Korean Electric Power company. He felt like he was hitting a glass ceiling in his career. So he ended up deciding to immigrate to the United States, and he had big dreams. He had the American Dream, which was to own your own business and to make it big. He came here with my mom, and they finally came to Los Angeles, and—

Paola Mardo: What part of LA?

Judy Kim: Koreatown, I think. Somewhere around there. And then he got a job pumping gas. And then he just kept finding new jobs. He always hustled and gave my mom, you know, money to save and gave her a budget on, like, living expenses. And eventually, they were able to save enough money to buy their own business. And the first business that they bought was a carniceria. That is a very ironic thing because my dad is vegetarian. He can't stand the smell of meat. He told my mom, "We have to sell this business, and we have to find something else." And that's when they found this theater.

Paola Mardo: Hmm.

Judy Kim: They would come out here, and they would park across the street, and they'd count how many customers were walking in and how many customers were

walking out. And they'd watch the owners, you know, doing the management of the theater operations. And my mom fell in love with the theater, and it's love at first sight. So they put in an offer in 1975.

[13:02 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You grew up here, basically.

Judy Kim: Basically, yeah. This is home.

Paola Mardo: We're in the theater right now, actually. So do you have memories in this space?

Judy Kim: Oh, of course. I remember everything.

Paola Mardo: Can you share a couple?

Judy Kim: Sure. So when my parents took over, they played movies every week, different movies. They noticed that the Rhodium down the street, which is a drive-in cinema, they would show Spanish language movies every Wednesday, and it would be packed.

And then they realized, hey, there's a market out here for Spanish language movies. So my mom told my dad, we should just go Spanish language seven days a week. My mom was the shot caller. Basically, whatever she said goes. So she wanted to go seven days a week Spanish, that's what we did. And because of that, we started to build a Spanish clientele.

And at the time, we were called Teatro Variedades, which is Variety Theater. We got approached by a promoter, a Spanish-language promoter who did live shows. And he would go to Mexico City, bring all the talent from Mexico City up to Los Angeles, and they would perform here.

[14:23 - La India Maria by Jurame]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: The lobby of Gardena Cinema is full of memorabilia and photos from the past. There's a shrine dedicated to Judy's late mother and photos on the walls and in albums that show the theater's rich history.

There's one photo in particular of one of those variety shows. The auditorium is packed with happy faces watching singing performers onstage. It's a lively and crowded audience, so different from most nights at the theater today. And there, at the edge of the stage, is little Judy Kim, maybe about 7 or 8 or so. Her elbows are on the stage as she gazes up at the performers, almost bored and acting like she owns the place. Well, at least her parents did.

Judy didn't plan on staying in the family business. She went to the East Coast for college and had dreams of becoming a Broadway producer in New York City.

But when her parents called her in the '90s to come back and help, she did. She's been there ever since, now running the place herself with some volunteers and her dad helping here and there with repairs.

Over the years, she's seen the theater through many ups and downs. The pandemic was tough, but when the studios rebounded and rolled out big event films again, Judy was able to program them in her theater, and they did well.

In 2023, she screened Barbie, Super Mario Brothers, and Blue Beetle.

But when the SAG and WGA strikes hit later that year, movie studios pushed back release dates for some of their biggest films. There was no product to put on Gardena Cinema's single screen. This was a make-or-break moment for the theater. And Judy was forced to rethink her business model or risk losing everything.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Judy Kim: So that double strike kind of put a pause on any new releases.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Judy Kim: So we were planning on showing Dune in November when it was gonna come out, and it ended up getting pushed out to March of the following year.

And by that time, we were like, what do we do? I was talking to my volunteers and they told me, you should just book old movies, do the classics, and keep running those. So I did. And because the terms were more flexible, I was able to close Monday to Thursday so that I could take care of my 84-year-old dad and catch up on some bookkeeping and do work at home. And then I would open Friday, Saturday, Sunday with classic movies, repertory titles, and old, old titles. So by doing that, I found that I tapped into a totally different market than my first-run movies.

And it's a different crowd. And they love movies, and they have a deep appreciation for old stuff, including old theaters. So when people come here, they're like, "Oh, this is great." And I'm like, "Wow, you like it?" Because when I show my first-run movies, there are people that will come here and be like, "Oh, um, can I have my money back?"

And I'm like, "Is everything okay?" And they're like, "Oh, you know, it smells funny in there." It's an old theater. I'm sorry, we smell old!

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: It's got new carpets, though.

Judy Kim: Yes.

Paola Mardo: Or at least updated.

Judy Kim: Updated carpets. But it's funny because people want the latest and greatest new thing, the shiny bling-bling place. And that's not us. We're old and vintage. And so all of a sudden when I'm showing these repertory titles, I'm getting people that come in, and they're loving the vintage feel. They love the fact that our seats are original from 1946. And my market seems to grow bigger.

In the beginning, I only concentrated on a five-mile radius because, with first-run movies, you go to the closest theater near you, right? But with repertory, you have to go far away because it may not show again for a very long time, even at another theater.

Paola Mardo: When you say repertory, can you define that? How do you define repertory?

Judy Kim: Repertory is basically a movie that's pretty much a year outside of its release date. It's no longer considered a new release.

Paola Mardo: Got it.

Judy Kim: So when it's out of new release status, it now goes into the repertory status. And repertory is basically a library of titles that a studio owns, and they can license out the titles to theaters for theatrical licensing for a fee.

Paola Mardo: Mm-hmm. And it's different terms than a first-run new release.

Judy Kim: Exactly. So when we were operating as a first-run movie theater, I knew the basic terms of most movie studios. A lot of people don't understand that first-run movies have very onerous terms. Number one, they have to show clean meaning that you're not allowed to share the screen with any other product.

So if I have a brand new movie, and I want to, like, maybe show a 2:00 kiddie movie, I'm not allowed to do that. I must show that brand new movie all day, every day for a minimum of three weeks.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Judy Kim: Yeah. So that was typical. But I mean, now, like, sometimes as a single screen, I could probably get away with doing a two-week run, but for the most part, I knew that if I did a first-run movie, I had to hold it for three weeks. What does that mean for me as a single-screen movie theater? It means I only see my patrons once a month, if that! Because that's only assuming that they'll come back for the next movie I show.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Judy Kim: If they don't like the next movie I show, I may not see them for months. And then if they're out of the habit of coming to our theater, they may end up going into another theater and going to that because that becomes more familiar, more comfortable, it becomes part of their habit. So then we start to lose patrons because we are not able to show the variety of movies that the multiplexes are able to do.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah, so that's why it sounds like the repertory screenings are helpful because you get to show a variety of films, and you bring in this new audience of movie lovers who want this experience to see these kinds of films, older films in this setting.

Judy Kim: That's correct.

Paola Mardo: So how do you reach your audience?

Judy Kim: Now what we do is we plan everything a month in advance, and then we print a month-long calendar on a half sheet, and then we give that calendar out as— so people can plan.

Paola Mardo: I have that here. So is it this, it's sort of a little half sheet with your whole month program.

Judy Kim: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Oh, incredible. This is amazing! I mean, I'm just looking at this right now. There's so much going on at your theater now that you're able to screen all these old movies

Judy Kim: Yeah, I really— it's kind of strange to me because I feel almost liberated now because when we were showing first-run movies, I felt like I had handcuffs on, and I had all these terms. And I knew that if I booked a movie, I'd have it for three weeks, and it would have to show all day every day—

Paola Mardo: And it'd have to do well.

Judy Kim: And it'd have to do well. And it was very devastating when we'd have one bomb, but it was even more devastating if you had successive bombs. So...

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Judy Kim: Yeah, it was just very, very hard.

Paola Mardo: So is business as good as it was, like, booming as it was in the '70s or what?

Judy Kim: No, nowhere near.

Paola Mardo: How would you compare it?

Judy Kim: It's different. I'd say, like, some weekends—depends on the show, too. I can never tell what movies are going to do well and what movies aren't going to do well. But for the ones that do well, like Nightmare on Elm Street 4 and 5, that did very well. But we had talent here also.

That's another thing is, when I have talent support, it makes a really big difference because people, they want something special. And that's what I've learned about doing these events is that you have to event-ize things to bring in a crowd.

I remember we had a Killer Klowns from Outer Space event here, and it was fantastic. I have to give a special thanks to John Massari, who is the composer of the score for that movie, and he helped me get the talent. We had the Dickies play before the movie started, and they played the theme song to the movie. And I had a local punk band play beforehand.

We had a costume contest. So people came in dressed like clowns, like the Killer Klowns, and John Massari did his music beforehand, and he did giveaways, and he handled the costume contest. It was fantastic. It was such a fun event.

And when you have that kind of energy and people who love a particular movie, they find their own people. It really enhances the sense of community for people who love that movie. So when that happens, it's an incredible experience, and it's electrifying for me. So if I can do more of those, that would be great. It's really hard though, because there's just so many. I'm only one person, and I'm trying to do everything.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I was going to say, what is your day-to-day like? If you can just quickly list some of the things.

Judy Kim: So day-to-day, I'm constantly just—I'm inundated with mail and with accounting and bookkeeping, so I'm constantly having to do box office reports. And I used to only have to worry about doing box office reports for one movie a month, but now I'm doing like three a week. For the most part, a typical repertory title doesn't make that much money. I'm barely able to break even with the show. But—

Paola Mardo: Oh wow. Can you say numbers? Or if you don't feel comfortable, that's fine.

Judy Kim: I mean, I can say numbers. Typically, like, you're talking somewhere between \$200 to 500 for a licensing fee for a one-day licensing fee, or a, you know, weekend licensing fee, or whatever.

Paola Mardo: You pay that.

Judy Kim: Of course, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Then how much do you bring in?

Judy Kim: So I charge \$12 for a general admission, and \$15 if it's a 3D movie, or if it's a special Q&A, actor, whatever event. And if it's truly a special event, like if I'm co-hosting it with another organization, I might charge \$20 for the event. So Bill Burr tonight is a \$20 event.

Paola Mardo: So the fee is about \$500 at most to license. There are days where you don't bring that cash back in—like you don't make that money back.

Judy Kim: Right. No, I don't make that money back. So typically I calculate about a hundred dollars a day for utilities. That's about \$3,000 a month. and then I calculate for property taxes, and I also calculate for insurance, and so, you know, all of that kind of adds up. And so I have a set number that I have to make in order to break even so that I can pay my bills.

Paola Mardo: Every month.

Judy Kim: Yeah, and that doesn't even include my own living expenses.

Paola Mardo: I was going to say, and then at some point, you have to pay yourself.

Judy Kim: I have to pay myself, and I have to pay my bills, right? So that's part of the whole process of running a movie theater. And, you know, I have my nose above water constantly. Sometimes I go down, sometimes I go up and take a breath, and it's just up and down.

Paola Mardo: What keeps you going and invested in this?

Judy Kim: I think it's the patrons and the volunteers who tell me how important it is for the theater to stay open. And so I feel a sense of a duty and responsibility to keep it open. I also feel a loyalty towards my mom to keep her dream alive.

I didn't know this at the time, but before she passed away, I asked her, "Why did you want this theater so much?" And so she said, "I think it's because when I was in middle school, I had a girlfriend whose father owned a movie theater, and I just thought it was the coolest thing when she would invite all of her girlfriends to come watch a free movie. And I remember going to the theater and thinking, one of these days when I grow up, I'm going to own my own movie theater." And so she achieved her dreams as an 11-year-old, 12-year-old girl.

[27:05 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Thank you for sharing all of this with us. It's pretty incredible what you and your family have built and maintained, and you being the steward of all this too.

Judy Kim: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: Definitely gonna check some of these films out, and we can't wait to share, you know, with our audience on In Proximity. So thanks for talking with me, Judy.

Judy Kim: Yeah. Thank you for sharing this with your audience.

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: That was Judy Kim, owner and operator of Gardena Cinema. You can support Gardena Cinema by watching a movie at the theater, and you can donate to their fundraiser.

For more information, head to their Instagram page [@gardenacinema](#). Check out some of their posts, and click on the links in their bio. You can find them on our Instagram page, too.

[27:43 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media. If you like the show, help us spread the word. Send a link to your friends, colleagues, and loved ones. Follow, rate, and review In Proximity on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app, and follow us on social media. We're [@ProximityMedia](#) on Instagram, TikTok, Threads, and Twitter. To learn more about us and read episode transcripts, head to [proximitymedia.com](#).

In Proximity executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and Paola Mardo. That's me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson.

This episode was produced by Celine Mendiola, and edited by Celine Mendiola, Judybelle Camangyan, and me. Caitlin Plummer is our Producer. Celine Mendiola is our

Associate Producer. Our editors are Cedric Wilson and Judybelle Camangyan. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. He also provided additional music. Isabella Miller is our Production Assistant. Alexandria Santana is our Social Media Coordinator.

Special thanks to all the other folks who help make this show possible, the whole Proximity Media team, and to you for listening to In Proximity.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]