

The Last Picture Show: How The 101-Year-Old Somerville Theater Continues to Shape the Culture of Davis Square

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12/9/15 FINAL draft

1190 words (*bridge is italicized*)



Despite the chilly temperatures and spitting rain, the line outside the Somerville Theater steadily fills up. Passing by movie posters splashed with faces of movie stars ranging from Matt Damon to Rudolph Valentino, the line snakes around the corner and into the darkness behind the fort-like Davis Square MBTA entrance next door.

As the showtime nears, anticipation begins to build. Hipster college students chat with silver-haired 50-year-olds decked out in leather jackets that only make it out of the closet once or twice a year. YouTube videos are traded with rhythmic and percussive hand motions as the crowd tries to guess what they will see in the hours to come.

It's almost showtime at this 101-year-old movie theater. However, while a small portion of the

crowd may be waiting to see a screening of *Spectre*, the majority of this line is made up of Jonathan Richman fans who are waiting excitedly to get seats for his 8pm concert on the main stage here this evening. Such is life for the Somerville Theater, a small independent movie theater that's been in open since 1914, in 2015.

And while the concert may rattle the theater's walls – which can vary in color from sea green to red and sometimes are adorned with posters that are worn around the edges – and each theater's seats won't recline like the ones at newer multiplexes that are nearby, the quirks of the Somerville Theater are a reflection of the community that surrounds it, and that community wouldn't have it any other way.

Originally opened as a single screen movie and vaudeville house, The Somerville Theater's survival as a privately-owned theater for so long can largely be attributed to its ability to adapt to the changing needs of the community surrounding it.

“I think that one of the reasons we've been able to survive is because the programming has been able to reflect the community, said Ian Judge, the theater's director of operations. “We aren't geniuses, we just know how to cater to the community.”

Firmly in his 40s, and hailing from the Boston area, Judge is keenly aware of how the Davis Square community has evolved over the years. He's also aware of how the theater, and other arts programs in the area, have had to adapt with it.

He recalls that Davis Square in the 1950s was quite homogenous and had a population who generally only wanted to see one particular film at a time. That eventually changed as the college population grew and tastes became more diverse, so the theater began adapting its offering as well.

It's a lesson that many other theaters did not learn in time. Changing tastes and the rise of television and multiplex theaters led to the closing of at least 12 other local movie theaters that used to checker Somerville by the mid-1980s.

"Every neighborhood had one," added Judge.

A similar shift in cultural tastes, Judge notes, can be seen in Davis Square's restaurants, resulting in a similar charge for them to either adapt or die.

"Everything used to basically be cafeterias," he said. "Now it's all catered to different tastes"

The theater's attempts to adapt and cater to expanding tastes took the form of increasing the number of its movie screens, diversifying its offerings to include midnight cult film screenings, putting on film festivals, and replacing vaudeville shows with live concerts. On Halloween, the theater put on a 12-hour movie marathon that featured 35mm prints of classic horror films. In December, the main stage will be used for "The Slutcracker," a burlesque show that has become something of a holiday tradition among younger residents in the area.

By adding popular features such as these, the theater has been able to not only survive, but become a dominant force in the shaping of Davis Square's unique culture that exists today.

"The theater reflects the audience and the audience, the theater, said Stephen Mackay, President and CEO of the Somerville Chamber of Commerce. "[It] is an original economic engine. It is a major artistic, cultural, [and] economic force in Davis Square and the larger community."

Even on days when there is not a live concert on the horizon, the artistic community in Davis Square that the theater has helped shape is regularly out in full force. A small group of scruffy film buffs wait outside the theater for its first shows at 4pm on a Thursday. Across the street men and women ranging from ages 20 to 80 as they take a moment to listen to a college-aged street performer grooving out with his acoustic guitar. Not far from him, children play on the statue of a human that has been built into the center of the square while a sign promoting the 2015 Boston Comedy Festival billows nearby.

"It's a community that really cherishes the arts, no matter how eccentric or unique it may be," said William, a passerby who stopped for a moment to listen to the street performer. "The Somerville Theater doesn't feel like one of those big box theaters, and that's why I like it, and think people around here like it too."

Part of this culture in Davis Square, which Judge says encompasses the idea to "don't take yourself so seriously," has also manifested itself in some more recent additions to the theater like the Museum of Bad Art (MOBA). Describing itself as "the world's only museum dedicated to

the collection, preservation, exhibition and celebration of bad art in all its forms,” MOBA was a natural fit for extra space in the theater’s lower level, especially given the playfully contentious relationship that he says Somerville has always had with its ivy-laden neighbor.

“The thing about Somerville is we like to thumb our nose at the ‘arts’ a little bit, said Judge. “We aren’t Cambridge.”

While the close bond between the Somerville Theater and Davis Square would, in a perfect world, forever guarantee that it won’t suffer the same fate as the other local theaters, it’s simply not the case. There will always be competitive forces out there that Mackey acknowledged the theater must continue to adapt to so it can remain relevant.

“But, if any business demonstrates resiliency, the Somerville Theater does,” he added.

Judge noted that it’s impossible to ignore some recent changes to Davis Square as it continues to expand, and become more expensive to run a business in. But, he remains optimistic, and said that the theater has been doing well recently.

“We are an affordable place, and we are in an area that is [becoming] increasingly unaffordable,” he said. “We’ve rolled with the punches for 100 years. I think we’ll keep finding a way.”

As the theater prepares to enter its 102nd year in 2016, it can't be ignored that its survival has already launched it into rare air when it comes to the preeminent cultural touchstones of not only Davis Square and Somerville, but the entire Boston area.

“Through all those years, wars, depression, recessions, generations, and technological changes? [It's] Incredible,” Mackey said. “The Boston Garden lasted 70 years. The Somerville Theater [has lasted] 101 years, and counting.”