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# IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: BEHIND THE SCENES WITH BOSTON'S FILM PROGRAMMERS

WRITTEN BY KRISTOFER JENSON

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*Images by Scott Murry unless otherwise noted*

One hour before a midnight screening, Mark Anastasio, program manager at Brookline's Coolidge Corner [Theatre](#), is firming up his pre-show introduction. Tonight's [film](#) is John Carpenter's classic *They Live*, the satirical tale of a man who discovers that many of the planet's wealthy elite are really aliens in disguise whose true forms can be seen exclusively through the sunglasses our hero finds. Such lead-ins before midnight shows are half of the experience, and tonight's—involving a Coolidge colleague hiding in the audience wearing the film's iconic “fuckin’ ugly” mask—will not disappoint, so long as Anastasio's crew can avoid detection.

Indeed, some people would consider this the coolest job on Earth.

It's well known that [Boston's](#) repertory and [art](#) house film scene is significant for such a small city. But how this scene remains embedded in the culture—and how it maintains itself with no bad blood between supposed competitors—is less remarked upon. Though most Hub cinephiles have taken in at least one

take for granted the loose apparatus that guides local entertainment. As it turns out, there's an art and a business behind film curation—selecting what plays when, acquiring prints in a preferred format, publicizing screenings, and attracting the right audiences for unique movie nights you won't find at suburban cinemas.

Though his is a niche gig, Anastasio is not the only show in town. On the strong hunch that film programmers do more than just watch movies and select their favorite ones, we sat with Boston's leading movie maestros to examine one of the least visible and even less understood dream jobs in Boston or anywhere else.

## CITY LIGHTS

Carter Long holds the title of Katharine Stone White Curator of Film and Video at the Museum of Fine Arts, a position named for the recently passed advocate for film as *an art form*. Among moviegoers, the MFA is best known for its commitment to world— particularly French—cinema, festivals with an international or avant-garde bent. It's a reputation earned; long before *A Separation* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the museum's annual Boston Festival of Films from Iran was one of the few places to encounter the Middle Eastern country's vibrant and underrepresented film community.

"I'm always amazed when I get a shipment of screeners, DVDs, and it's from Tehran," Long says. "That just blows my mind. And sometimes it's really subversive material. It's funny, because it's much easier to get things out of Iran than it is to get things in."

As the head of programming for theatrical presentations at the MFA, Long's role is as rooted in education as it is in entertainment. As such, he's a master of balancing the sometimes competing, sometimes

presenting material multiple times.

“The nature of Boston as a city,” says Long, is that “the population is refreshed every year ... It gives everybody who’s coming into Boston and didn’t get to come in for those programs, they have their chance to see it ... It’s good for everybody. You get to see these great films again if you’re interested in them, and you get to see them for the first time if you haven’t yet.”

The Harvard Film Archive in Cambridge is similarly linked to a larger academic institution, yet the venues rarely find themselves competing for prints or moviegoers. Sometimes their slates mirror each other; for example, both recently featured “complete” retrospectives of directors like François Truffaut, Lars Von Trier (MFA), Fritz Lang, and Andrei Tarkovsky (HFA). But where some may see competition, HFA programmer David Pendleton sees the strength of networking.

“I think our contribution [to the Boston film scene] is that we have the least pressure,” Pendleton says of the place the HFA occupies. “We’re the most free not to worry about money ... We have the space and the freedom to do things like show every single Fritz Lang film that exists, whereas I feel like other institutions don’t ... [The MFA has] concerns about fitting into the museum’s mission as a whole. I feel like we’re actually relatively autonomous within Harvard. They pretty much let us do whatever we want. What I try to do then is to pay that forward.”

## PATHS OF GLORY

With the HFA and MFA on the academic end of things, on the other side of the cinematic spectrum are the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge and the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, both known for their repertory programming. Bolstered by membership programs and nonprofit status, the two venues match

"We're always in competition for audiences," says Ned Hinkle, creative director of the Brattle, in that "there is a limited number of people who are going to go and see a movie on any given night in Boston. But we're rarely in competition for product."

"I fucking love the Brattle," says Anastasio from the Coolidge. "Ned's programming is still stuff that I geek out over as a film fan ... It's not competitors. It's just making sure that it doesn't ever become that."

Part of this camaraderie appears to be due to a clarity of purpose among theaters, as well as an awareness—even a support structure—that serves the common good. Says Anastasio: "The Coolidge is a first-run house, primarily, and we're fortunate enough that we're able to take the time to show two to three repertory titles per week ... Versatility is what we have. I check other calendars to make sure I'm not playing something so close to something else, because this town, I want all of us to keep fucking running film, and being successful at it."

The Brattle, according to creative director Hinkle, "has always been sort of at the hub of Boston's film exhibition scene. There's the MFA, which has always been a stalwart of new international cinema. There's the HFA, which has always been a stalwart of hardcore classic cinema, or avant garde films, more academic stuff. The Coolidge is new art house fare, as well as the various midnights and stuff like that ... People might have never been to the HFA before, but they come and see a bunch of stuff at the Brattle, and they discover that there's this other great film resource right down the street."

Ian Judge, director of operations at Somerville Theatre—the only for-profit theater in town with active repertory programs—agrees: "[We're in] different neighborhoods. And there are a lot of similarities between these neighborhoods, but I think a theater should reflect its neighborhood ... That's one of the

## IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT

Prior to becoming director of programming in the visual media and arts department at Emerson, Anna Feder began her career curating both major and budding film happenings including the Boston LGBT Film Festival, the Newport Film Festival, and the Boston Underground Film Festival. All together, her experience dealing with filmmakers, distributors, publicists, venues, and competing schedules has helped in her orchestration of Emerson's Bright Lights series, named for Emerson alum Kevin Bright, producer of *Friends*. That said, there's no straightforward path to this career.

"There's not really a program for curators," Feder says. "Most everyone I know has a [film] studies background, or a production background, or both. I designed a major at UMass as an undergrad that was a little bit of production ... And then I have an MFA in production, which is not essential to being a curator, but it's always helpful in dealing with filmmakers to know what they're talking about on the production end of things."

HFA's Pendleton stresses that an appreciation of the film experience is, first and foremost, the key to effective programming. He says: "I don't necessarily mean *watches a lot of films at home*, because I also think that having a certain investment, to be invested in the idea of filmgoing as a social practice. So it's fine if you're one of these people who has pirated the latest Marvel Comics movie the weekend it opens and is watching on your screen at home, but I really think that to be a programmer, you really should care about going to a theater, and what that's like."

Hinkle's mother was a librarian, which he credits with planting the seed of curation and assembling collections he feels people ought to be passionate about. There was also organizational inspiration; after

when he helped bring a Painkiller show at which only a handful of heads came to see John Zorn's grindcore experiment.

Anastasio came into curation after a childhood full of VHS collecting and watching "Up All Night" on USA. The Coolidge quickly became his favorite theater after moving to Boston, and was where he submitted his first job application and started in the ticket booth. Upon learning that the theater used to host a horror marathon that no longer existed, it became his mission to reanimate the tradition.

### *The Monster Squad*

"It got me really excited, and I was like, 'Well, I'll fuckin' program the thing.'" Former Coolidge programmer George Bragdon, currently at the legendary Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, Texas, gave Anastasio the program list, and said to "pick six of them, point out two that you think should lead, and we'll go from there." Then-rookie Anastasio says he "just grabbed the biggest fuckin' titles and strung along six of them ... *Halloween*, *The Monster Squad*, *Evil Dead 2*, *The Fly*, and *An American Werewolf in London*." Between the challenges of acquiring prints, contacting collectors, and learning that the art of marathon curation is much like that of making mixtapes—respect the flow, don't overload on high profile hits—the lineup shifted, but it successfully relaunched the marathon series which continues to this day.

"And so that was my first programming ever," says Anastasio, "a double feature of *Halloween* and *The Monster Squad* for *Halloween 2007*."

Long similarly came to the MFA with a strong interest and appreciation for film, but without any specific programming chops. With an academic background in English literature and critical theory, he focused roughly a third of his master's thesis on Danish icon Thomas Vinterberg's Dogme film, *Festen*.

"I'm passionate about everything we play," Long says. "But there's a balance. You always have to consider what's going to get an audience, because we're selling tickets, and we want to see people in here." He says he values films with the critical approach expected of museums, but attempts "to provide something that people in Boston want to participate in."

On the personal tip, one of Hinkle's defining experiences came from seeing *Taxi Driver* at the now-closed Harvard Square Theatre. "It was just too much for me," he says. "I was probably 12 or 13." For Anastasio: "Storytelling is my thing," he says. "I have a bachelor's in English, and I'm a huge fan of literature and short stories, and a giant comic book fan. So I like showing solid stories ... I'm willing to overlook [technical bumps] because the backbone's there."

Anastasio continues: "The first thing I ever bought on DVD was Lucio Fulci's *Zombi*." His friends would see a movie cover and say, "This looks fucked up. Let's bring it home." He explains, "And that's how we would do it. We would each buy five DVDs in a clip, bring them back to somebody's house, and just watch them ... My house was the house where everyone would hang out, and I would always pop on something strange. So I guess that's when I started playing a little bit of a curatorial role amongst my buddies, just like, this is something to watch while we party."

## HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE DCP

It's hardly disputed that film-watching is markedly improved by going to the theater. That belief, at least in part, is what motivated most programmers to pursue their careers. Whether it's the matter of a shared experience, improved visuals and audio, or getting the added perspective of experts, a movie simply ain't the same at home.



*Thousand Clowns*, one of his favorite films, both on 35mm.

“Of course,” he says, “you get a huge crowd to see *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It’s one of those movies that everybody loves.” But Judge also asked, “Please, if you have the time, stay for the second movie. You never have heard of it, it never plays, it’s a great opportunity to see it.” Not everybody took the advice, but those who did appreciated the assist. “It’s just a good rep policy to balance [popular titles and rarities] that way.”

As any programmer will tell you, all audiences are different. Though the Bright Family Screening Room is not exclusively for Emerson students, Feder says she finds new attitudes toward media consumption to be somewhat of an obstacle for younger crowds. “Cinema as something that happens at a particular place, particular time, is sort of foreign concept,” she says. “Particularly the film students, they understand intellectually that it looks better on the big screen, it sounds better, but this idea that there is something to be gained from the communal experience of film, that is an idea that they don’t get. For them it’s about convenience. It’s not convenient for them to give up a Thursday evening to go and see this movie when I feel like I can download it at some point.”

Netflix, pirated torrents, and streaming sites aside, the moviegoing experience is also shaped by the increasing dominance of digital cinema. When you go to your local multiplex, odds are there’s no human in the projection booth. The movie plays off a server, not film, and the camera runs on a schedule set from a remote location. This is the preferred distribution method of big studios, which often press hard for theaters to install expensive DCP (Digital Cinema Package) setups. Their pitch: A DCP may be pricey up front, but it will ultimately save money, even if it alienates viewers who dislike the artificial quality of digital projections.

Judge is not convinced of the benefits. “It saves them money,” he says, “but even today I got an email from our film buyer saying Paramount still wants to know who still has 35mm for *Interstellar*. Because

here on 35, because he is one of the only directors who seeks out bookings in 35. And so I'm happy to say, 'Yes, we have it! And please give us a print.'"

Judge notes further: "I understand why they're not reprinting these movies, because there's no money in it for them. But they have prints of almost all these titles, and they won't let them out sometimes. Half the studios just say, 'Play the Blu-ray,' which is a total slap in the face."

In most cases, accepting DCP as the new normal is a matter of strategy and resources. "I prefer film, of course," says Feder, who finds digital to be a technological pain sometimes. "Not just for the look of it, but also it's just so much less headache ... The thing is, I'm not showing too many older films. I'm mostly showing current work right now. [The students] are watching classics now in the classroom. And they have access to it in the library, and so I think the niche that I fill is introducing them to newer work."

From Long's perspective, digital versus film isn't quite so black and white. "Digital has changed a lot," he says. "It's made things easier in a lot of ways. I'd be surprised if anyone said anything different, because availability is always an issue ... the Digital Cinema Initiative allows it to get a digital print that needs to be somewhere the next day." In many of Long's programs—particularly international films, festivals, and complete retrospectives in which the only option for a particular film is digital—he will choose inclusion over omission.

"If we're playing Stanley Kubrick's films and *2001* is only available on a DCP but I've got everything else on 35, I'll do the DCP, because it's been produced as exhibition material," Long says. "I wouldn't want to limit the possibilities of what an audience can see because of my feelings about a particular file type or delivery medium or method."

Anastasio, the purist, feels somewhat differently: “As far as I’m concerned, we all have a fucking duty—these houses that have 35 left in their booths—we should be using them things as much as humanly possible.”

## THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES

Despite the uncertainties of shifting methods of projection and distribution, film culture is strong. Especially in Greater Boston, where attendance at festivals and midnight screenings is better than ever, even for films that are available on streaming services. In a recent example, the word of mouth success driving an interesting new film like [Snowpiercer](#)—which showed nationwide at independent cinemas including our own Brattle, Somerville, and Coolidge—proved that studios can’t bury a good movie out of fear it won’t find an audience.

To understand why this region has prevailed, and why our cities are a model of participation on the part of ostensible competitors, it’s best to see the characters in action. Watching Anastasio prepare to introduce *They Live* at the Coolidge, masked audience plant and all, demonstrates the most consistent strand connecting all the programmers behind film magic in Boston: Their job isn’t a dream only because they get to watch movies all day.

“It’s really about the audience,” says Long, “and making sure that they get what they expect from us.”

## FURTHER READING