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Art House Cinema Exhibitors band together during closures to create a national cohort of theaters showing films via a new virtual cinema technology solution

This week, Salt Lake Film Society announced that eleven art house cinemas have formed an initial cohort for @homeArts, a nonprofit project that might just save some beloved movie houses around the nation. The @homeArts technology creates a defined and clear theatrical VOD or “THVOD” lane for film exhibitors and distributors.

This virtual screen program reinforces cinema-going behaviors, supports donations to cinemas, and puts the virtual space of cinema into the hands of actual bricks-and-mortar theaters. The project’s objectives are to: increase distributor box-office yield; increase exhibitor cashflow during Covid-19; and provide a way for the public to support their theater through donations. The technology mimics traditional exhibition business practices from box-office reporting to patron gateways, essentially creating and defining the THVOD lane for a bricks-and-mortar theater. It includes: DRM security for distributor confidence; an administrative back-office to serve the configuration and management needs of each art-house; box-office and numbers live-reporting; curated programming that opens titles on Fridays and drops/holds titles weekly; a showtimes reinforcement; geo mapping capability for the distributor; bolt-on URL website integration for a direct box-office entry point at each specific theater (as opposed to sending all theater patrons to various and disparate “off-site” locations); customer service integration; coding systems to handle varying prices for members, seniors, and other discounted groups; a YouTube file-link capability for local, unpaid films; and Apple/Roku apps in development for launch in winter.

Participating theaters span the country and currently include; Amherst Cinema in Amherst, MA; Austin Film Society in Austin, TX; The Avalon in Washington D.C.; The Chelsea Theater in Chapel Hill, NC; The Coolidge Corner Cinema in Brookline, MA; The Film Forum in New York City; Film Streams in Omaha, NE; The Grail Moviehouse in Asheville, NC; The Loft Cinema in Tucson, AZ; The Roxie Theater in San Francisco, CA; and the founder of the project, Salt Lake Film Society, operating Broadway and Tower cinemas in Salt Lake City, UT.

A virtual dilemma has been facing cinemas since the March closures: how to successfully pivot to virtual offerings while also manage a new climate of virtual wild-wild-west business models and innovations that threaten to upend the health of cinema in the future. “The entire industry went topsy-turvy,” said Tori A. Baker, CEO/President of Salt Lake Film Society and a founder of @homeArts, “it literally did a 180 on the roles exhibitors and distributors played. By flipping roles, it slowed down bricks-and-mortar cinema cashflow in a critical survival time and created new competition, since anyone from a bookstore to a non-theatrical arts organization could release these otherwise theater-only titles.”

@homeArts functionally behaves no differently than a cinema itself, with one exception, it provides online viewing of films. This allows for business continuity in a way that supports a healthy recovery for the industry on both the distribution and exhibition side.

If art house cinemas do not reemerge from closure to play a distributor’s title in the future, the smaller distributors’ films might get swallowed up by the larger PVID, TVOD, and VOD business and lose per-title financial viability. “Theaters have always been the gold standard for connecting movies with enthusiastic, appreciative audiences,” said Connie White, owner of Balcony Booking, who negotiates for the films on @homeArts as part of the all-inclusive package. “Typically, films that are initially released only in theaters are more profitable when they are later offered on VOD platforms. In this new streaming world with a multitude of films being offered, art-house cinemas’ programming skills are as important as ever. Movie-goers trust their theaters to be curators, and distributors trust these theaters to be active PR and marketing partners. During this time when theaters are closed, @homeArts provides a path for both

distributors and art-house exhibitors to define this lane of THVOD, generating best revenues for both sides.”

@homeArts will expand to more American cinemas as needed. “The value of the virtual screen is evolving, but the program we’ve built works to increase a theater’s viability during the closure period, and then scale to augment the bricks-and-mortar after theaters reopen—especially while they work towards full capacity,” said Miles Romney, another founder of @homeArts and the tech architect behind the service. “This technology team has built and deployed comparable systems for ESPN, DirecTV, Blizzard Entertainment, and others over the years, and is now doing it on a non-profit basis for indie art houses. The platform has been tested with Salt Lake Film Society and Coolidge Corner since April 3rd. Along the way we’ve identified more of the specific needs of exhibitors and distributors, and we have built a system that addressed them. With hundreds of theaters struggling under current market conditions, we hope to be a major source of support to art house cinemas everywhere.”

Grantors and philanthropists invested in a future where cinemas remain a vibrant part of their community can support this project by contacting Tori A. Baker or Miles Romney at 801-321-0310. Theaters that would like to be part of this project should visit athomearts.org.

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