

“How the Clifton 5 lives with the ever-changing film landscape”

By Jacob Novak

With the recent shift to streaming services as the one-stop shop for all of your entertainment needs becoming increasingly present, local movie theaters are paying a steep price to stay in the game. If they aren't part of a larger chain like IMAX, AMC, or Atlas, then the hundreds of thousands of dollars it costs to stay up to date can put some cinemas out of business.

Luckily enough for the Clifton, the Huntingdon community has supported them well as these modern trends, especially since their switch from film projectors to digital. The continuing community engagement also gives the theater hopes to pursue even more changes to business in the future.

I'm originally from Chesterland, Ohio, a town that is actually smaller than Huntingdon, where the nearest movie theater was about a 30-minute car ride away. And this theater was part of the Atlas chain of theaters. My movie-going experience through the end of high school was defined by wide-open lobbies, tiered seating, and the soulless disconnect of a “corporate” that was putting in minimal effort.

However, coming to Juniata College gave me the opportunity to experience a true local theater. When you walk through the doors of the Clifton 5, you're immediately greeted with a real box office, as opposed to moving straight through the lobby to buy a ticket at the snacks line, surrounded by all the Coke products and latest combo deals. A novelty to be sure, but one that adds to the atmosphere of the Clifton itself. Once inside the theaters themselves, the history of the building is all around you. “The building was built around the 1900s. It was a lot of live shows and movies,” recounted the Clifton's owner, Dave Peoples. “Then, in 1930, there was a major fire that sort of killed everything until it was rebuilt in 1931. It was in that configuration until I got it, which was 36 years ago. I've been doing this ever since.”

Some screens are old stages that have been converted to show films, others are smaller, offering a more intimate viewing experience. “20 years ago, I did the multiplexing, turned into five screens. We still had 35-millimeter projectors at that time.”

But just to walk through the Clifton on your own is one thing. During business hours, the theater can give you a variety of welcome movie experiences. The smaller screens gave the audience a unique energy as we watched cinematic events like *Captain America: Civil War* or *Avengers: Endgame*, my friends and I were able to join a small group of people to take in Oscar-nominated films such as *BlacKkKlansmen*, and I finally discovered the joys of seeing movies alone, weeks after release with *Dunkirk* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp*.

Harry Biddle, a junior at Juniata College and Huntingdon local, has been a fan of the Clifton 5 for as long as he can remember. “I usually go to a movie once every other month. I’ve never had a bad experience there. I’ve always been comfortable and had my movie on time.”

Unfortunately, as the Clifton 5 enjoyed their success, the technology behind the filmmaking process continued to evolve, making their screening equipment gradually outdated. Biddle told me a little bit about how this shift affected their business. “They were on the verge of closing a few years back because they were still using film while movies had switched to digital projection, so the Clifton had to spend a lot of money to update their five rooms.”

“Seven years ago, studios decided that everyone had to go digital, so we did a quarter of a million-dollar conversion to go digital. Some theaters were not very successful with that, but we were,” exclaimed Peoples. He went on to discuss how the community of Huntingdon rallied around the Clifton to keep them in business. “We had fundraisers, a fun drive, that helped us a lot. We got over \$30,000 in contributions for that. Even with those donations I still had to borrow quarter of a million dollars to do this. The community was really great, even one graduating class

from Juniata College back then helped us out and named an auditorium. They helped us out and stayed loyal with us through all of that. We've been fully digital since that time."

Since then, the Clifton has seen a lot of growth in terms of their community engagement, especially with Juniata and the local high school, providing student discounts on certain days and allowing some clubs to hold special movie nights on the occasion. "The Juniata free nights and late-night shows for clubs and things like that have helped us out a lot and has really been good for us. It's fun to work with them," Peoples said.

Biddle also agreed, saying "I think Juniata and the Clifton have made great strides with their discount nights that have given them some good business."

Biddle also noted how the new projectors did have a noticeable change in picture and sound quality. Peoples affirmed the sentiment, but also talked about how these new shifts in technology might cost more money in the long run than sticking with their old film projectors. "Everybody seems to like the new projectors. The downside is that nobody seems to know how long they'll last. The old 35 millimeters were like a car that you could replace any moving part, so they never really wore out. Those reel-to-reel film projectors cost about \$10,000 with all the bells and whistles. Now these projectors were \$31,000, and you don't know how long they're going to last before circuit boards start going down."

Beyond the theater's response to these changing technologies, Peoples also mentioned further updates to the business that would keep the community coming back for more. "I'm talking to a guy about putting in an entertainment center and an e-gaming auditorium in. We already have the projectors, all we would need is the computer hook-ups and things like that," Peoples revealed. "We're also talking to the winery over on 4th Street to put in a satellite

location. All we have to do is put in a place for it and have our staff trained. We were thinking over in the corner where all the gaming machines out.”

Biddle also thinks that Peoples’ ability to take in community feedback has really helped their business in the long run. “I’ve seen the owner reach out to the community and get some good response from businesses and customers. I know there’s been a push by the owners of Boxer’s to get award-nominated films played at the Clifton and they’ve responded well by doing their best to accommodate that.”

The Clifton 5 is a theater unlike any other that I’ve been to, which may sound cliché or overdramatic, but it’s true. The amount of support and engagement that the business has received is emblematic of how much film is appreciated in the Huntingdon community. To see a local business such as this thrive under the circumstances of increasingly expensive and rapid changes in technology is truly remarkable.