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By Erin Randolph
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Moviegoers line up outside the Varsity in 2004 to see "Fahrenheit 9/11." (Credit: Register File Photo)

Bev Mahon still keeps a grainy photocopy of a newspaper advertisement that was published in early 1939. The Varsity Theatre had just opened, and the advertorial boasted that it was "not just another theater, but in a setting as picturesque as the locality it represents undefined a charming place to spend your entertainment hours, leisurely, unobtrusively."

And when one considers that description, the Varsity hasn't changed all that much over the years. On Christmas Day, the single-screen theater across the street from historic Drake University reached a milestone of its own: its 70th anniversary.

Though the Varsity got its start as a third-run movie theater, it started to carve out its niche by playing arthouse films when Mahon took over the ownership of the theater in 1954. Now 86, Mahon has spent the last 54 years of his life contributing to the success of the Varsity. Though his hair has turned white, his wit remains sharp; when he loses his train of thought, he attributes it to a "senior moment," and when asked what he likes most about being in the film

industry, he just laughs.

"I've been at it so long," he said. "I'm thinking I've lost track."

Under Mahon's direction, the Varsity shows mainly foreign films, documentaries and independent films, and Mahon likes it that way.

"We don't play pictures where they blow up buildings or cars smash into each other," Mahon said. "We try to play pictures with some substance that you can learn something from without them being boring or dull."

While the multiplexes have focused, for the most part, on big-budget films and increasing ticket and concession prices, the Varsity has doggedly embraced independent films, even though the surer financial bet would be in first- or even second-run movies. And Mahon spends a great deal of his time reading scripts and trade publications to find the films he feels are a good fit for his theater and audience.

And the bar has been set high. One summer in the 1980s, for instance, when Mahon's only options were films he thought weren't worth seeing, he stubbornly continued to play the same film for 23 consecutive weeks, refusing to lower his standards. And he's never been afraid to shy away from controversial films, either, having played both "Fahrenheit 9/11," which Mahon believes holds the box office record, and "Passion of the Christ."

Though most of the other theaters in town are multiplexes cashing in on the newest Brad Pitt film, The Varsity's formula for success has been replicated by the Fleur Cinema and Caf and the now-defunct Sierra 3. Larger multiplexes have also turned to independent films to keep their screens occupied. And that competition hasn't gone unnoticed.

That competition is also what helps keep Mahon focused on what makes his theater so different from the others: the lowest concession prices in town. Popcorn starts at \$1.35 and pop at \$1.30. But the Varsity is locally owned, and its owner knows its regulars by name and provides a personal experience the others can't replicate. It's those regulars Mahon will thank on Christmas Day when his livelihood starts a new year of business.

"You've heard of people who are uncouth; well, our audience is pretty couth," Mahon said. "We have a lot of regulars who come here. They're the reason we're open."

"The whole schematic and attitude is that it's just a quiet, good place to see a movie." Different, but also the same as it was in 1939.

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