The Laemmle Theaters, a beloved Arthouse Cinema chain with a Hollywood legacy, has passionately elevated the art of filmmaking as a family for 85 years – and today, they’re facing seismic change. Only in Theaters, filmed over nearly 3 years, chronicles this family-run business and their determination to survive in a swiftly changing world. It’s a tender story about the future of cinema, resilience, and family. Interviews with Ava DuVernay, Cameron Crowe, James Ivory, and more.

“Only in Theaters is 2022’s most emotional theatrical experience.” -VARIETY

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Arthouses Fight to Survive Pandemic: ‘Everyone Says It’s Dead But It Never Is’

By Robert Streus

Audiences and exhibitors may have been cheering the Spider-Man movie for months, but 2023’s most emotional theatrical experience so far is screening Greg Lamotte’s struggle with the fate of his family’s independent arthouse business in the documentary “Only in Theaters.”

Premiered at the Santa Barbara Intl. Film Festival in March: “Only In Theaters” is the story of a family struggling to survive the struggles of a family-owned theater chain—a story that viewers can relate to in their own lives. The documentary is set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a profound and lasting impact on the film industry.

“IT’S A BEAUTIFUL FILM, AND A TIMELY ONE.”
- Claudia Puig, President LA Film Critics Assoc.

“Through the wistful reminiscing and vivid memories shared, Styrge builds a dramatic and poignant film.”
- Michael Ward, IMDB film critic

“This feature-length documentary includes appearances from:

- Ava DuVernay
- Cameron Crowe
- Leonard Maltin
- Nicole Holofcener
- James Ivory
- Allison Anders
- Kenneth Turan
- Mark Ulano

OPENING IN NYC
JANUARY 2023
in select theaters

This feature-length documentary includes appearances from:
“Like a knotty, poignant family business saga you might see on one of their screens, the story here is beautiful and complicated, one in which the twin weights of legacy and calling bear down on the need to survive in changing times…” R. Abele, LA TIMES

“Only in Theaters isn’t just a celebration of the Laemmles and their love of sharing cinema but the American Dream. At a time with much uncertainty in the film business, this film couldn’t be more important.” – P. Larsen, LA Daily News

“An intimate portrait of a man burdened by legacy, navigating uncharted waters, not even sure he wants to.” – K. Walsh, TheWrap

“It’s great… a fascinating and poignant look at the Laemmle family.” – C. Puig, KPCC’s FilmWeek

“Such an American Story!” – L. Mantle, KPCC’s FilmWeek

“Essential viewing for every filmgoer.” – J. Delgado, Film Threat

SHORT SYNOPSIS

In 1938, two European immigrant brothers (who happened to be the cousins of famed movie mogul Carl Laemmle, founder of Universal Pictures) escaped fascist Germany right before World War II. They came to America and opened a movie theater. By the 1960’s, the dynamic Laemmle family owned and operated 6 theaters in the Los Angeles developing an outsized influence on cinema.

Over four generations, the Laemmle family has dedicated themselves to supporting, innovating, and elevating the art of filmmaking. Responsible for bringing foreign film to Los Angeles, popularizing independent films, documentary films, and their makers, the Laemmle Theatres’ impact on Hollywood and world cinema cannot be overstated.

Today, in a world of conglomeration and streaming, as well as a pandemic, the Laemmle circuit of beloved theaters has faced unprecedented challenges.

Filmed over two years, director Raphael Sbarge was given complete access, and editorial control, over this family’s most turbulent time in 85 years of doing business. With appearances from Cameron Crowe, Ava DuVernay, James Ivory, Nicole Holofcener, and Alison Anders, ONLY IN THEATERS is both a state-of-industry film for insiders, a love letter to cinema for a general audience, as well as an irresistible story of a multi-generational American family. The film is further enhanced with appearances from critics, writers and filmmakers Edward Goldman,
Kevin Thomas, Kenneth Turan, Bruce Joel Rubin plus Leonard Maltin, Ross Melnick, Michael Renov, and Mark Ulano.

**ONLY IN THEATERS** is an intimate film about the Laemmle Theatres, the beloved 84-year-old arthouse cinema chain in Los Angeles, as they face seismic change and downward pressure. Yet the family behind this multigenerational business – whose sole mission has been to support the art of film – is determined to see it survive.

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### LONG SYNOPSIS

In 1884, Carl Laemmle came to America from Laupheim, Germany. After seeing the success of nickelodeons in Chicago, he opened his own theaters. Carl soon decided he wanted to make his own movies but was blocked by Thomas Edison - Edison owned most of the major U.S. patents related to motion picture cameras and was preventing filmmakers from making independent films. Laemmle sued Edison and took the case all the way to the Supreme Court—and won! This landmark case opened the door for independent filmmaking and ushered in the most dynamic art form of the 20th Century.

Had Carl Laemmle not sued the Edison Trust as a monopoly, filmmaking as we know (and love) it, might not exist today.

Carl Laemmle went on to form Universal Pictures, making more than 400 movies, including *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, as well as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. He discovered great talents such as Rudolph Valentino, Myrna Loy and Walt Disney.

Laemmle retained a passion for his home country, and with the rise of the Nazi regime, he sponsored more than 350 people, saving them from the Holocaust. Among those he brought to America were his cousins Max and Kurt Laemmle, who went on to open The Laemmle Theatres, which would become the preeminent art house cinema in Hollywood, dedicated to independent foreign and documentary films and the artists who make them.

For the past 84 years, this family business has thrived, and the Laemmles’ passion for cinema has manifested in many ways - attributed with introducing foreign film to Los Angeles (winning the French Legion of Honour) and provided a platform to highlight independent and documentary films and their filmmakers in the city that is known as the epicenter of the film industry. With a sense of mission, translating their European ideals of art, music and philosophy into their business, they have weathered many storms—including the introduction of television in the ’50s, which decimated the neighborhood theater. In the early ’60s, when other art houses discovered
the profits of exhibiting pornography, the Laemmles stayed focused on their family’s mission and became the top art theater chain in Los Angeles and around the country.

At the core of this multigenerational family business is a passion for cinema with countless filmmakers’ careers tying back to Laemmle Theatres for almost a century. The Laemmles have expanded their mission to include supporting filmmakers qualify for the Oscars, live music events, art shows, cycling events, and a Jewish-Christmas Eve tradition of sold-out screenings of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Over 84 years, the Laemmles opened new locations as part of cities’ plans to provide entertainment hub. No doubt, the Laemmle Theaters are a cultural institution.

However, in 2018, Max Laemmle’s grandson, Greg Laemmle (now president of the chain) faced a new challenge. Dealing with pressure from lower ticket sales, streaming services and a changing audience, Greg made the tough decision to put the theatre chain up for sale. To Laemmle patrons who remain passionate, this news elicited a painful response. To the filmmakers and distributors, the news was devastating—potentially upsetting the delicate ecosystem of how films get made and find audiences. To theatergoers, the news was dreadful.

After careful consideration, Greg decided in December 2019 not to sell the family business and to continue to provide what was seen as a giant community asset.

Then, in March 2020, the world suddenly changed with the pandemic. Theaters shuttered, leaving an industry questioning its very existence. Greg, his wife Tish, and their three sons, faced life-changing decisions about how to stay afloat, where to live, and how to survive the unimaginable.

*Anyone who loves the art of film and the history of Hollywood will be taken by this story. However, this film is not an homage to Hollywood—rather, it’s an intimate portrait of a family dealing with seismic change in a complex world, during unprecedented events.*  

-Raphael Sbarge, director
DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT
By Raphael Sbarge

My father was from a Jewish immigrant family that escaped the Russian Revolution, came through Ellis Island to New York City, and started a family business in the Garment District. My father became a filmmaker, my mother, a Broadway costume designer. I grew up in New York City, which at the time felt like a city filled with artists and colorful, intellectual, people. When I met the Laemmle family, they felt very familiar to me—their caring for one another, their openness and curiosity, their shared passion for art, music and culture, and their recognition that those things make life richer.

It was always the Leammle family that drew me to this story.

When I approached Greg about a documentary, he told me his father, Bob, was 85 and still coming to work every day, and his great-aunt Alyse was 103. Slack-jawed, I said, “Greg—we have to interview them as soon as possible.” You see, my father had been diagnosed with leukemia a few months earlier and died soon after, so I felt a personal sense of urgency. Within weeks, we set up several days of interviews with Bob and Alyse, Greg and his wife Tish, and many others. That was April 2019.

While we were prepping our first shooting days, someone mentioned that for Alyse’s 103rd birthday, a chamber orchestra was coming to her house as a surprise. This really struck me, and I asked if we could possibly have cameras there. “Why?” they asked. I didn’t know exactly but again, something about the idea of this moment touched me deeply and felt like a window into what this family valued most.

When we began making this film, we were aware of the threat about to be posed to the movie theater model. Our plan was to highlight the Laemmle family’s unbelievable legacy and impact on the motion picture industry and set it against the slowly changing landscape. What we didn’t realize was the extent to which we were poised to witness history unfold. Not long after we started, we realized the story was much bigger than we had imagined.

We ended up following the family for over two-and-a-half years, during which the Laemmle story became a microcosm of the macrocosm. The question was, where was it all headed? Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Laemmle family members’ determination to survive, their willingness to make the right decision—not the financial decision—moved me deeply. Multiple generations of a family had built a business on the core principle of celebrating artists. There was something so innate, so essential about the Laemmle family mission, which was ever more remarkable in a world that often undervalues artists, even though artists help us see the world, interpret it and give it meaning. In a world fraught with corporate values and shareholders, this
was a family business that wasn’t driven only by money, by people who understood the importance of planting a tree for the next generation.

Why tell this story? Absolutely everything that the Laemmles stand for is important to me: Art, culture, community and elevating the next generation of artists. For the Laemmles, this is not a posture or a tagline but a palpable mission, and why they and their theaters are so beloved in Hollywood, amongst patrons and filmmakers. The Laemmles have been a lighthouse, a safe harbor, and this is ever more remarkable in a city where film and the artists who make them are monetized and packaged as a matter of course. When I thought about it, the fact that the Laemmles and their mission existed at all seemed utterly remarkable and astounding.

We feel quite privileged to have been there, during what was the most tumultuous 24-month period in the theater’s history. We found ourselves quite suddenly in the “hot part of the flame,” witnessing the Laemmles’ challenges, which were echoed over and over by theaters around the country.

Ultimately, while bigger issues are discussed—the future of film, the importance of exhibition to both audiences and filmmakers, the questions about what’s at stake if we were to lose theaters—this is singularly a story about a family, one immigrant family, a remarkable mission across several generations and a determination to continue doing it.

**ONLY IN THEATERS**

**ARTISTIC APPROACH**

Using movie clips, home movies, old family photos, 16mm and digital film cameras, we have visually created the rich interior world of this theater chain, counterpointed with the history and day-to-day complexity of running a family business. The weight of legacy brings added pressure and difficult decisions. We followed Greg Laemmle, interviewed four generations of Laemmle family members and witnessed the hard choices they made. Cameras were invited in for intimate portraits of the family, for the day when the Laemmles received their first offer to buy the theater chain, throughout the pandemic closure, and as they prepared to reopen—weakened, but determined to return.

The following is a list of people interviewed, in addition to four generations of Laemmles:

- Ava DuVernay (filmmaker/director, Oscar nominee)
- James Ivory (director/producer/screenwriter, Oscar winner)
- Cameron Crowe (writer/director, Oscar winner)
- Bruce Joel Rubin (writer/Oscar winner)
- Leonard Maltin (film historian)
- Nicole Holofcener (director/writer)
- Mark Ulano (sound mixer, Oscar winner)
- Kenneth Turan (film critic)
- Allison Anders (director, *Gas Food Lodging*)
- Ross Melnick (film historian)
- Edward Goldman (art critic)
TOPIC SUMMARY

Like the family farm or the last bookstore, *Only In Theaters* is an American story about a multigenerational family business determined to survive.

Even before the pandemic and global shutdown, the movie industry was questioning its own future. Theaters were suffering losses, technological upgrades (at-home screening rooms, surround sound, etc.) where changing how often people went out to see movies, and increased competition for people’s attention was thinning box office numbers.

Kenneth Turan, renowned author and former *Los Angeles Times* film critic said, “The culture is poorer when people can’t see these kinds of movies—there’s no two ways about it. And independent theaters are having a very tough time of it. This is an existential moment for theater chains like the Laemmle’s across the country. We have to hope that they will survive.”

What do we lose once neighborhood cinemas are gone? How does losing theaters affect the delicate ecosystem of how films are made? What does it mean for filmmakers, and what does it ultimately mean for audiences? Businesses must remain relevant in a changing world, but does convenience and speed come with a heavy cost?

There are vast parts of the country where theaters have closed due to the shutdown, never to open again and paving the way to what is being referred to as “theater deserts.” Ross Melnick, associate professor of film and media studies, UC Santa Barbara said, “There are huge swaths of the country where there are no movie theatres anymore—30, 40 miles, no movie theaters. So, your trip to see a movie becomes more difficult and you have to question if that’s really worth it.”
Movie theaters are gathering points in a world that has become more isolated and remote. In a theater, we are reminded that we are a part of a collective body. Technology has provided an opportunity to retreat from contact with others, and of course the pandemic has accelerated that isolation.

Beyond the large screen, the immersive experience of an audience, and the social connectivity of going to the movies, how do independent film makers survive? How does their artform thrive if there’s no place to view films?

As the entertainment world has become more ‘corporate’, what does it then mean to filmmakers to have direct access to a family who care so deeply about filmmakers and the community for which they program? What does it mean to filmmakers, to be able to pick up a phone and speak directly to the CEO of the theaters - someone who will work with them to support their film? It means everything.

Over four generations, the Laemmle family has been devoted to the art of film as a whole; the moment the lights dim and we sit in a dark theatre, waiting for this shared experience on a big screen, is both intimate and powerful. Only In Theaters is about the Leammle family as they navigate their business, with the pressure of legacy from above, and a shifting viewership from below. What has persevered is the Laemmle’s passion and commitment to this art form, and a belief that what they are doing provides an enduring benefit to the community.

FILMMAKERS

Raphael Sbarge (Actor/ Director): Raphael has explored life on the other side of the camera as a working actor for more than five decades. And now, since 2011, he’s added Director to his resume.

Growing up in New York City, he began working at age 4 on Sesame Street. Son of Broadway costume designer, Jeannie Button, he grew up backstage, appearing in his first play at Tanglewood at the age of 7. Raphael’s mother was also a professor at Yale Drama School, and he continued doing plays at the Yale Rep starting at 10. His father was an artist, photographer, and documentary filmmaker—so he grew up in and around two creative and visually dynamic people. He did his first Broadway play at 16, opposite Faye Dunaway and has done five total, including the revival of Ah, Wilderness opposite Jason Robards, and Coleen Dewhurst. Raphael was cast in his first studio film at 18, Risky Business, followed by My Science Project, Vision Quest, and many others. He has gone on to do many films, including Independence Day, Pearl Harbor, and the cult classic Carnasuar for Roger Corman. Raphael has appeared in over 100 television guest and recurring roles and 4 series regular roles on network television shows, including the running ABC hit Once Upon a Time, Steven Bochco’s Murder in the First, and The Guardian for CBS.

In 2020, Raphael earned his first Emmy nomination for LA Foodways, a one-hour feature documentary and a six-part series that he directed and produced. It debuted on KCET-PBS, which his production company, Wishing Well Entertainment, co-produced with the network. He has directed and produced several other films for KCET that have aired. His current feature, called Only in Theatres, had its theatrical premier at 7 theatres in Los Angeles in Nov. 2022. The film follows a fourth generation family business, a beloved art house cinema chain with ties to the origins of Hollywood called The Laemmle Theaters. Receiving rave reviews in the LA Times, Daily News, Film Treat, and Film Week, it was called “Essential viewing or every filmgoer,” Beautiful and complicated,” Beautiful and timely,” “An American story,” and “This film could not be any more important.” Only in Theaters is opening in New York at the IFC, and New Plaza Cinema’s on Jan 18th and 20th. The film is being distributed by The Film
Collaborative around the US for theatrical bookings Kino Lorber will continue booking it later in 2023, add it to their catalogue to distribute the DVD.

Raphael has also just completed a 4-part docuseries for KCET, called 10 Days in Watts, set in Watts, Ca. It will air on Feb. 12th and 19th 2023 on KCET and streaming on PBS. This series follows another legacy story of a 3rd generation family working to “improve the lives of the citizens of Watts” for over 57 years. We meet many of the long resident of Watts, as we prepare for the opening of a 2 ½ acre Farm right at the foot of one of the most notorious housing projects, Jordan Downs.

Prior to these, he directed a series with Ed Begley Jr on the building of his LEED home, with Jeff Goldblum and Sharon Lawrence. His narrative film about an immigrant Korean family, The Bird Who Could Fly, won Best Director, Best Ensemble, and Audience Awards at several Asian festivals around the US. He filmed Broadway actor Marty Moran in his Obie Award winning play called The Tricky Part, which deals with the complicated issue of male sexual abuse. It played many festivals around the US, winning Best Director at the Awareness Festival.

The focus of many of Raphael's films has been about social justice, environmental justice, and underserved voices.

**Rick Pratt (Editor/Producer)** is a Los Angeles-based producer and editor. His diverse portfolio includes numerous corporate videos, music videos, TV series, independent films and documentaries. In his early career, Pratt worked under the direction of many top directors including Darren Doane, Geri Cusenza and Robert Lobetta. His work on LA Foodways for KCET garnered an Emmy nomination. Other films for KCET include Is There Hope For Planet Earth?, A Concrete River and Lewis MacAdams: A Celebration of Life.

**Thomas Cassetta (Sound Design/Producer)** enjoys bridging the gap between the invisible art of technical craft and creative expression. After a quarter century in theater, film and television, Cassetta brings an understanding of the technical processes from development to distribution for clients including Viacom, KCET, HBO, Disney+, Amazon Studios and Netflix.

**Matthew Kubas (Director of Photography)** is a Los Angeles-based director of photography and lighting designer. His diverse portfolio includes numerous short films, music videos, TV series, feature films, documentaries and TV specials. Kubas has extensive experience in lighting and artistic camerawork. In his early career, Kubas worked under the direction of many of the top cinematographers, including Jo Willems and Matthew Libatique.

**Freida Orange (Producer)** started her film career at Miramax/Dimension, where she supported publicity campaigns for award-winning narrative films and documentaries including Kill Bill Vol. II, Bad Santa, Cold Mountain, The Aviator and Fahrenheit 911. At Sikelia Productions, she was executive assistant to Martin Scorsese on projects including Academy-Award winning The Departed, Shutter Island. She currently works in Film Publicity at Netflix.

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS**

**Gary Rubin** has more than 25 years of experience distributing, acquiring and managing independent films/companies. He has held senior-level positions at Artisan Entertainment, First Independent Pictures, Cohen Media Group and Menemsha Films.

**Mark Myers**, owner of Citizen Skull Productions, is currently working on projects that include a five-part unannounced series for Showtime and Street Gang, on HBO Max. His recent projects include Vice Versa: Chyna, and Collision for Netflix.
Heather Kenyon, started her career at Hanna-Barbera and Cartoon Network. At Starz Animation Toronto, she helped produce such films as 9 and Elton John’s Gnomeo & Juliet. Kenyon is currently a producing partner at Citizen Skull Productions.

Neil Friedman, founder and president of Menemsha Films, a U.S.-based distribution and international sales company.

Other Executive Producers: Carole Schandler, Michael M. Thomas, Jenna DeAngeles, Raphael Sbarge and Suzanne Jacobson

HUMANITIES ADVISERS/FILM HISTORIANS

Leonard Maltin is an American film critic and film historian, as well as an author of several books on cinema, focusing on nostalgic, celebratory narratives. Maltin is president of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association and is on the Advisory Board of the Hollywood Entertainment Museum. For nearly a decade, Maltin was also on the faculty of The New School for Social Research in New York. Maltin teaches Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California.

Michael Renov is a film expert specializing in contemporary documentary filmmaking. He is the vice dean of academic affairs at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts and professor of Critical Studies. He has served as a jury member at documentary festivals including Sundance, Silverdocs, the Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival, Brazil's International Environmental Festival of Film and Video, and DocLisboa in Portugal, among others. Renov's teaching and research interests include documentary theory, autobiography in film and video, video art and activism, and representations of the Holocaust.

Ross Melnick is an associate professor of film and media studies at UC Santa Barbara. He has been named a 2017 Academy Film Scholar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The honor, one of two for scholars bestowed by the academy, will support Melnick as he writes a book on the history of Hollywood’s foreign ownership and operation of hundreds of theaters around the world.

See The Trailer: www.OnlyInTheatersMovie.com

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