

# ALAMO

GNOMEO & JULIET

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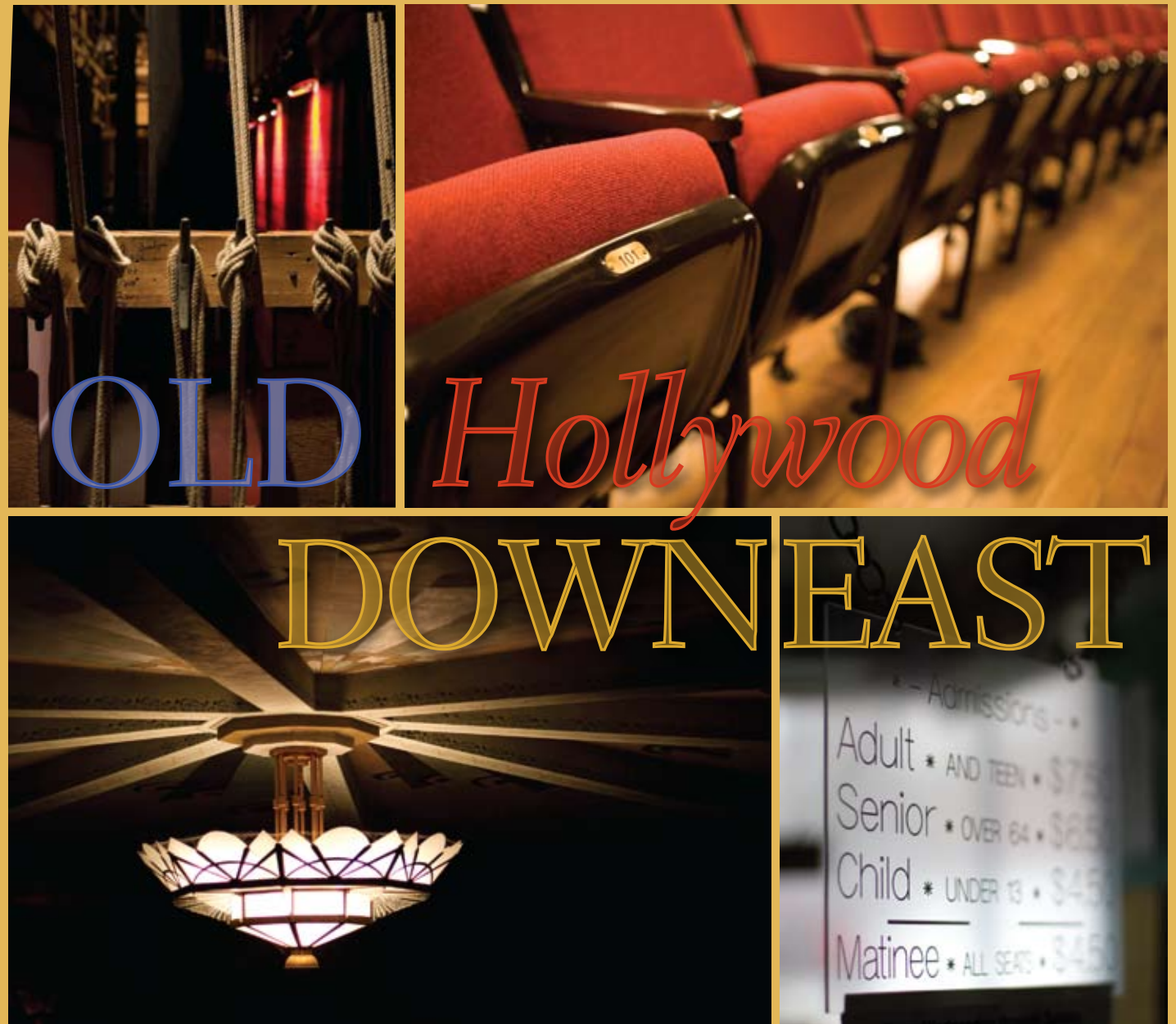
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OLD

Hollywood

DOWNEAST

The Midcoast and Downeast regions of Maine are home to some of the most spectacular **vintage movie theaters** in the state. From art deco marquees to glamorous chandeliers, these theaters serve as a testament to the way movies were once enjoyed—in style.

BY EDDIE ADELMAN

The last half-century has brought great change in the way movies are presented to the public. Drive-ins, once a staple of the American landscape, have all but disappeared. Swanky downtown movie theaters have given way to 14-screen cineplexes with giant parking lots in the suburbs.

Some might call that progress. Others might disagree. Right here in Midcoast and Downeast Maine, a handful of vintage movie theaters are doing their part to remind folks that newer isn't always better. Raging against the current tide of theater conformity, local downtown icons have courageously stood their ground.

These theaters remind us all of a much different time in American history. A time when popcorn didn't cost \$6, video games didn't scream at you from the lobbies, and theaters with names like The Bijou, The Majestic, and The Palace held an air of sophistication. In short, theaters with a personality.

**Art Deco design reigns supreme at these Maine movie theaters.**





# The Grand | Ellsworth



The Grand is a staple of the arts scene in downtown Ellsworth.

**WALKING DOWN MAIN STREET** in Ellsworth, you can't miss the 40-foot glass tower that rises up from the marquee of The Grand Auditorium. Its creation was directly linked to a catastrophic fire that burned 130 buildings to the ground and virtually destroyed most of downtown Ellsworth.

The year was 1933. With so much devastation, the city faced the overwhelming task of rebuilding its downtown. But, to their credit, the city fathers turned

this crisis into a golden opportunity. Instead of simply replacing what had been destroyed, the city decided to begin construction of a new and improved Ellsworth.

Over the course of four years, the city reinvented itself. A delightful riverside park was created and major streets were rerouted, along with a whole new design for the downtown shopping area. The city council also made a major investment in a downtown movie theater. They wasted no time in its construction. Four months later, the Grand opened for business.

Opening night was a gala event. Speeches were made, and the Ellsworth High School Band performed. All of this was followed by the showing of the Grand's first feature film, *Holiday*, starring Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn.

During the 1930s and 1940s, moviegoers flocked to the Grand, watching newsreels and classic films like

*Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The 1950s, however, were a different story. Unable to compete with the growing popularity of television, the theater expanded its offerings to include live boxing matches, stage plays, and rock 'n' roll shows. Despite its efforts, the theater was finally shut down in the early 1960s.

"The Grand has really had to overcome some major obstacles," says Zoe Scott, executive director. "But the people of Ellsworth have always understood its value to the community. Nineteen seventy-five was a watershed year for us."

That year, a nonprofit group, Hancock County Auditorium Associates, was formed. The group bought the theater and renovated the building, which had fallen into disrepair. On August 8, 1975, Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul, and Mary fame opened the newly restored theater with a benefit concert.

Today, the Grand offers a wide variety of programming. Monthly film festivals, children's events, live music and theater, as well as broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera and the London National Theater are all on the schedule.

Scott is particularly gratified by the large turnouts for the Grand's film retrospectives.

"Our monthly film festivals have been a big hit," Scott says. "Foreign films, independent films, and retrospectives of directors like Blake Edwards and Kurosawa have really attracted large crowds. We're even more excited about this year's upcoming selection of films."

**ENTERING THE ALAMO THEATRE** in Bucksport is like being transported back in time. There's an antique art deco candy counter from the 1930s, a 1950s popcorn machine, and a stunning display of old postcards, picturing almost every movie theater that ever existed in Maine. Then there's the pièce de résistance: the stunning collection of antique movie projectors and cameras.

Once you've taken all that in, you pass by a large picture window that allows you to see inside the projection booth. It's only then that you step into the cozy and intimate 140-seat auditorium.

The Alamo Theatre is also the home of Northeast Historic Film, a "moving image archive" that preserves and records vital and often irreplaceable films and videos of northern New England. It also provides public access to these film treasures.

The collection, begun in 1986, contains more than 10 million feet of film and over 8,000 hours of video, chronicling a century of the lifestyles and folklore of this region. Consequently, it's become the go-to source for many historians studying our recent and not so recent past.

"We see the moviegoing experience as an extension of our mission with Northeast Historic Film," says Jane Donnell, the theater's manager. "We're not only preserving historic films, we're also safe-

guarding a cherished moviegoing tradition, while keeping it as intimate as possible."

The theater itself has a long and diversified past. The building was built as a cinema in 1916. It showed motion pictures and presented live performances by touring companies. It also hosted local dances and graduations. Many of the summer tourists who attended the movies back then actually arrived by boat.

It remained a working theater until 1956. After that, the building was transformed into an A&P grocery store, a health clinic, a bar, a restaurant, and a video rental store before being boarded up in the late 1980s.

It stayed that way until 1992. At that time, Northeast Historic Film bought the vacant building at a foreclosure auction. The building had fallen into disrepair and needed years of renovation. Thanks to a lot of potluck suppers and volunteer work, the theater was restored by the local community. Finally, in May of 1999, the new 35mm projector showed its first movie, *October Sky*.

Today, the Alamo presents everything from contemporary Hollywood movies to the work of local filmmakers. It also presents film retrospectives, symposiums, and public workshops on the preservation of regional culture. In addition, the theater serves the local schools with a variety of performing arts, film, and video activities.



## The Alamo Bucksport

Top: Jane Donnell, manager of the Alamo.  
Below: Thanks to Northeast Historic Film, the Alamo is once again a working theater.







## The Colonial | *Belfast*



**This eclectic-looking building can't be missed in downtown Belfast.**

**HOW MANY MOVIE** theaters can boast a life-size grey elephant on top of their marquee? The only one we know of is in Belfast.

Mike Hurley, along with his wife, Therese Bagnardi, have owned The Colonial Theatre in Belfast since 1995. Hurley understands the value of a first impression. "We purchased 'Hawthorne' [the elephant] from Perry's Nut House in 1997," Hurley says. "Walking down the street, you can't miss him. With old theaters, it's true what they say, 'The show starts on the sidewalk.'"

Twenty-twelve will be a historic year for the Colonial. It marks the 100th anniversary of the theater. In fact, the Colonial opened on the same day that the *Titanic* set sail, April 10, 1912. That year, the first humans reached the South Pole, Howard Taft was president, and Fenway Park first opened its gates.

For the next 11 years, the Colonial not only showed silent films, but also had live entertainment before the film's presentation. Then, in 1923, a fire leveled the original building. But, just as quickly, a new building was erected in 1924.

Since then, the doors of the Colonial have remained open, spanning close to a century of enter-

tainment in downtown Belfast. In its early years, the Colonial offered a mixture of "moving pictures" and vaudeville acts. But as the 20th century passed, the theater evolved into an all-film format.

In 1947, there was a major renovation, with the most striking aspect being the addition of the current art deco, stucco façade. It was around that time that John Grant arrived at the Colonial. Although he never owned the theater, Grant was instrumental in keeping it going. He ended up working there for 50 years. Ultimately, Grant became the theater's manager.

"The town of Belfast owes a great debt to John Grant," Hurley says. "John kept the flame alive for over half a century."

In the early 1980s, the auditorium was divided into twin theaters. This allowed for more creative programming with more choices for the audience. In 1996, the owners redeveloped the original 1924 stage area that had been sealed off for years. The result was a luxurious third theater with both downstairs seating and a handsome balcony with great sightlines. It was appropriately named "Dreamland" in honor of a former movie house in Belfast.

Getting to Dreamland is an adventure in itself. You find yourself winding downstairs and then upstairs again, as you pass by wall after wall of art deco paintings and old movie posters. There's even a smaller elephant, called Baby Hawthorne, on display. You can easily get lost in the show before the show.



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## The Strand | *Rockland*



**WHEN YOU GO TO** The Strand Theatre in Rockland, you get a lot more than just a movie.

At recent showings of *The King's Speech*, the audience heard the original BBC recording of King George VI's speech before the movie began. For silent films, the Strand will often book live music to accompany the show. It's also quite common for Liz Mclean, the house manager, head projectionist, and movie historian, to give talks before starting the film. They even open and close the curtains before and after the movie.

At the concession stand, you can purchase everything from gourmet

popcorn to organic chocolates to a glass of champagne.

"We try to give the audience an experience that they can't get anywhere else," says Donna Daly, the Strand's executive director. "Our audience really appreciates the extra effort we put into it."

If that isn't enough, the audience has the added pleasure of sitting in a vintage movie theater that's listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In June of 1922, a massive fire in downtown Rockland destroyed four entire business blocks. Out of those ashes, the Strand Theater was the first building to be erected. Distinguished by its interior





terra-cotta tile walls, an ornamental brick exterior, and a stunning, vertical electric sign that spells Strand, the theater soon became a symbol of rebirth and pride for the town of Rockland.

Throughout the 1930s, the Strand thrived despite the recession. In the early 1940s, the theater introduced midnight movies to accommodate the round-the-clock production shifts necessitated by WWII.

Nearly 40 years later, the theater was split into two cinemas and remained that way for 25 years. But after new ownership and extensive renovations in 2004 and 2005, it was restored to its original art



At the Strand, visitors can buy high-end treats (including champagne) at the theater's concession stand.

deco look and feel. It reopened on July 3, 2005, with a screening of Buster Keaton's classic silent film *The General*.

Nowadays, the programming has expanded to include live music, lectures in conjunction with the Farnsworth Art Museum and the Camden Conference, first-run films, and movie retrospectives. It also hosts the Camden International Film Festival and offers simulcasts of the Metropolitan Opera and the National Theater of London.

Daly helped engineer the theater's latest renovation, and has been essential in developing the eclectic range of programming that's available. She gets especially energized when talking about the Metropolitan Opera programming. "Our turnout for the Met is just amazing," she says. "Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Met, heard about our turnouts and actually came up to Rockland from New York City to see it for himself. We'll never forget that day. It's a real testament to how far the Strand has come in serving our community."

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## The Criterion Bar Harbor



The Criterion retains almost all of its original features, placing it on the National Register of Historic Places.

**WHEN YOU FIRST SEE** The Criterion Theatre in Bar Harbor, you can't help but be taken back to a more gilded era. The art deco, neon-lit marquee with the year 1932 at the top hits you right between the eyes.

"This theater just takes you back to another time," says Tom Burton, the manager of the Criterion. "A time of style, class, and sophistication."

The Criterion was created, in part, to meet the needs of the wealthy summer residents who frequented Bar Harbor in the 1930s. Even though the Depression had gripped the country, you couldn't tell by walking down Cottage Street at the height of the summer season in Bar Harbor.

An enterprising local businessman,

George McKay, was struck by the idea of creating a local movie palace that would capture the imagination of the well-heeled residents who were constantly searching for new ways to entertain themselves.

McKay financed the venture by forming a corporation that sold shares to prominent citizens in Bar Harbor, although there were whispers that bootlegging money had made its way into the mix. It wouldn't be surprising, given the bootlegging activity up and down the Maine coast at that time.

When the theater opened, the *Bangor Daily News* displayed a full-page spread, with a banner headline that read, "Criterion Theatre, Bar Harbor Showplace, Opens Monday." On opening night, Cadillacs and Lincolns lined Cottage Street.

It could have easily been a scene right out of *The Great Gatsby*—with its velvet seats equipped with phonograph jacks for the hard of hearing, one-of-a-kind art deco walls with soft pink and aqua interior lights, a magnificent chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and a "floating balcony" with no pillars for support—an architectural wonder for its time.

The Criterion has gone through a series of ownership changes over the last 79 years, but has remained a movie house all that time. In 2008, Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins hosted a benefit screening of their movie *Bull Durham*.

On the National Register of Historic Places, the Criterion retains almost all of its original features and charm, both inside and out. It features a mix of live music, theater, opera, and classic film retrospectives, such as Chaplin, Hitchcock, and Kurosawa.

Burton's passion for this theater is boundless. "We need to keep jewels like this alive," he says. "We offer the audience an experience they can't get at modern movie houses—classic films in a classic movie theater."

**THESE VINTAGE THEATERS** don't have recliner-sized seats with cup holders, stadium seating, or a screen that is so big you have to turn your head from side to side to see the whole thing. The surround sound isn't going to blast you out of your seat, either. But the experience will be intimate and cozy, like community theaters used to be. Take a chance this year and visit one or two. It will be an event you won't soon forget. □



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