

Got Movies?

Sophisticated cineasts—among them, farmers, filmmakers, pastors, and politicians—have found a theater of their own in bucolic Montpelier, Vermont.

GEORGE WOODARD, 53, IS A THIRD-GENERATION DAIRY FARMER WITH A SAG CARD, a screen credit for 1993's *Ethan Frome*, and a year-round russet tan. During tourist season, he peppers visitors to his farm in rural Vermont with arcane facts about milking and maple sugaring. "One of the guides some of the times might say, 'Well, tell them about your movie stuff!'" says Woodard, who subscribes to both *Farm Journal* and *PREMIERE*. "They're always flabbergasted to think that I've got this little filmy career thing, too."

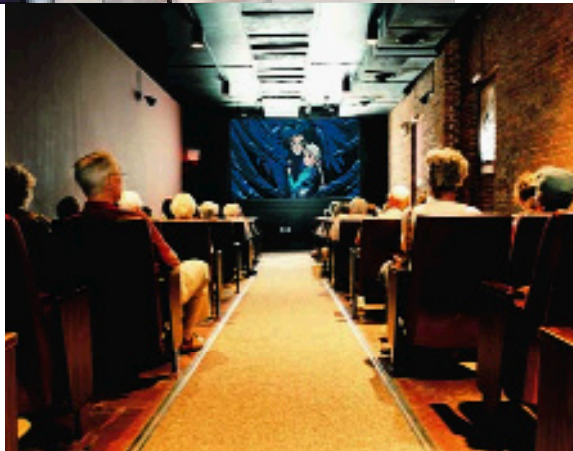
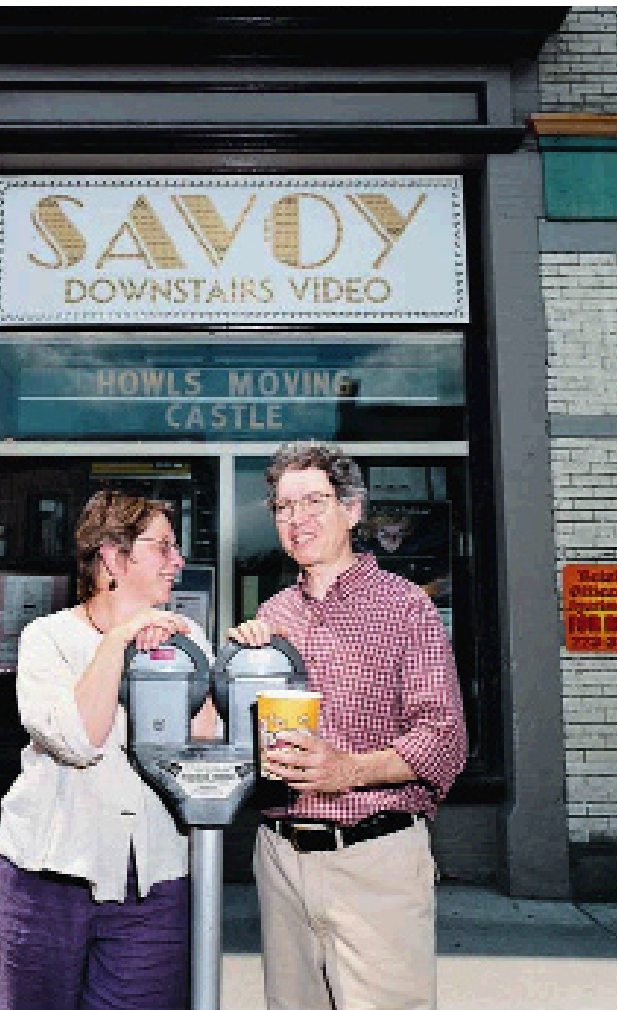
Outsiders might find the idea of a cineast-farmer quaint, but Rick Winston and Andrea Serota, who own the Savoy Theater in nearby Montpelier, know Woodard to be a serious movie buff who is as comfortable chatting about Norwegian director Bent Hamer's last film, *Kitchen Stories*, or the virtues of *Final Cut Pro* as he is talking about his barn's manure system. With a seven-day-a-week job, it isn't always easy for the single father to satisfy his cinematic cravings (during the Savoy's evening showtimes, he's usually either milking the cows or singing his 13-year-old son, Henry, to sleep), but where there's a will, there's a way. "When *Good Night, and Good Luck* came," Woodard says, "I said, 'I'm going to be there for the first goddamn show!'"

For the farmer-actor-screenwriter-director who once tried to make a name for himself in Hollywood before finally heeding the call of the land, the Savoy is an invaluable resource. It's where he educated himself about digital video, which he recently used to direct his first feature, *The Summer of Walter Hacks*, set during the McCarthy era. It's where he took Henry to see subtitled films when he was learning how to read. But mostly, it's where George Woodard goes when he wants to escape, and be among friends in the dark—an experience that's becoming increasingly hard to reclaim.

"Rick Winston, entrepreneur cineast, had, for a while, his film series in the basement of the Pavilion Hotel. And I remember showing up one night in the early '70s to find a goat tethered to the rail outside. Picturesque, but true." —David Mamet in *South of the Northeast Kingdom*

WITH A POPULATION OF LESS THAN 9,000 in a state boasting more than 140,000 dairy cows, the nation's smallest capital might not seem like the obvious place for an indie film haven like the Savoy. But Montpelier's bucolic charm belies its tough-minded demographic. "There are a lot of interesting folks living in Vermont," says William H. Macy, who, like David Mamet, attended Goddard College in the nearby town of Plainfield, and returns to the area regularly. "It's made up of dairy farmers and expatriates and a lot of intellectual types who have opted not to live in the big city—poets and screenwriters and all kinds of artists—and when you go to the Savoy, that's where you get to see them."





CINEMA PARADISO: "Some people couldn't give a hoot if you wanted to talk about a film," says dairy farmer-turned-director George Woodard, left, who drives approximately 15 miles to get to his movie haven, the Savoy Theater (above). Top, the Savoy's mom-and-pop owners, Andrea Serota and Rick Winston.

Like many leftist baby boomers, the owners of the Savoy were part of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s. In places like Vermont, Maine, and northern California, urban refugees were creating new establish-

ments, co-ops, and communes. It didn't take long for Winston to start his Lightning Ridge Film Society, a collective of like-minded transplants who loved life in the country but sorely missed metropolitan movie houses such as the Thalia Theater in Manhattan and the Brattle in Cambridge. Buoyed by the success of the weekly series (where he met Serota), Winston and his then partner, Gary Ireland, decided to build a theater in a space formerly occupied by a flower shop. "It was just a huge sigh of relief," says Lee Duberman, a local chef. "Having lived in the Upper West Side with at least three different art theaters in walking distance, when I found the Savoy, I was fine. I could live here."

Winston and Serota, both 58, have drawn certain conclusions about their patrons based on recent successes and washouts. Like the rest of the country, the Savoy audience flocked to see *March of the Penguins* this summer. But more often than not, they are inoculated against hype. Buzzworthy films such as *The Aristocrats* and *Napoleon Dynamite* have died on arrival, whereas foreign travelogues (Bhutan's *Travelers and Magicians*, Mongolia's *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, Afghanistan's *Kandahar*) and political exposés like *Control Room*, about the internal affairs of Al Jazeera, are almost always guaranteed to be hits. For the most part, Montpelier tends to avoid "anything too New York, too L.A., too hip, too violent," Winston says.

"I think we were the only theater in the country that lost money with *Pulp Fiction*."

If anything, such examples serve as a reminder that while Hollywood is expected to think globally, the best exhibitors act locally. "Vermont is about as blue a state as they come, and our core audience has many veterans of the political upheavals of the '60s and '70s," Winston says. "You're coming to the movies not just to be entertained but to be aware." "And," adds Serota, "to be provoked."

Asomewhat bashful man with the indoor voice and pale complexion of someone who's spent a lot of time in darkened theaters, Winston doesn't love the term "activist." But the Savoy has become a center of action nevertheless. It's not unusual to find flyers for various antiwar rallies wallpapering the theater's window. The exhibitor himself has been known to canvass the sidewalk, col-

lecting signatures for petitions to print in one of the town newspapers. (This year, he called further attention to the Bush-Blair Downing Street Memo, which some believe prove the White House deliberately falsified intelligence to justify going to war in Iraq.) "Like many, I am disgusted and scared by the rightward turn our country has taken," he says, "and we have an ideal platform at the theater, whether it's posting articles or showing films like *Control Room*, *The Corporation*, and *Why We Fight*, Eugene Jarecki's latest."

"It's what I think of as 'great reckonings in little rooms,'" says Jarecki, a Vermont resident who has been known to stop by the Savoy for impromptu Q&A sessions. (When the documentarian spoke about his film *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* following a screening, Senator Patrick Leahy showed up.) "You know, somebody's choking to death in the front row: The bigger the room, the more everybody's going to think, 'Oh, someone else will help.' The smaller the room, the more intimate it is, the greater the likelihood each individual will become involved."

As multiplexes continue to super-size the country and TiVo and HDTV become more popular, the notion of a movie theater as a place that can make a difference in the lives of its patrons seems unlikely if not obsolete. But over the years, Winston and Serota have improved the quality of life for their neighbors by controlling the quality of the films they get to see. Before the Savoy opened in 1981, "Montpelier was really a cultural wasteland," says Andrew Kline, one of their veteran projectionists. "There was one theater, and for, like, twenty-three weeks they showed *Star Wars*. It was the only movie you could go to in either direction."

The community's dependence on their art house was tested when, at the peak of the home-video craze in 1986, Winston and Serota were forced to shut down for a month. "People were shocked, devastated: 'How can we live in Montpelier without the theater?'" Serota recalls. Through membership fees, they raised \$36,000 to pull the Savoy out of debt. Six years later, when an ice jam on the Winooski River flooded many downtown businesses, including the Savoy's video store (which the couple opened in 1989 to roll with the times), the town turned out again. This time, instead of checks, they brought mops and miner's lamps. "There was loss, but there was a huge outpouring of people who worked shifts gutting the old space," Kline says. "There was a feeling of, 'We're all in this together.'"

AMERICA GOES TO THE MOVIES



IT TAKES A VILLAGE: “People trust us to provide what they want, and what they don’t yet know they want,” co-owner Andrea Serota says of the Savoy’s eclectic programming. “It’s a charge that we have, and we take it seriously.” From left, Pastor David Connor often recommends films from the pulpit; video store clerk Thomas Murphey; the Savoy projection room; and film-buff baristas Zoe Christiansen and Matthew Bryan.



ON A WINTER NIGHT, Montpelier looks like a scene caught in a snow globe: White powder swirls around the lamp-post in front of the ‘50s-style diner Coffee Corner, and icicles hang from the eaves of stores. In warmer months, families gather on the lawn in front of the glinting golden dome of the capitol building for ice cream socials and Earth Day celebrations, full of hemp and glitter.



Two and a half decades since the seeds were sown, the local film community is in full harvest. Winston and Serota strive to complement the Savoy’s programming with special events and speakers (most recently, Edward R. Murrow’s son, Casey, came in to talk about *Good Night, and Good Luck*), but its spirit is equally manifest outside the theater, where the discussion of film is an integral part of daily life.

“I many times will recommend from the pulpit films that I think are important: *Bowling for Columbine*, *Born Into Brothels*,” says one local pastor, David Connor, a white-haired dynamo who organizes weekly anti-war vigils in front of the town post office. “That’s where the Savoy supplements the work that I do: The films cover everything from peace and justice to cultural divides and freedom—a lot of the things that I consider to be part of the church’s social ministry.”

The belief that film is a medium that should be used, as opposed to just watched, is a firmly held one in Montpelier, evidenced by the efforts of local activists who have begun

circulating, among themselves, little-seen documentaries such as *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* and *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*. While it’s no surprise that what could be considered progressive propaganda is embraced in a town where the coffee shop is called Howard Bean and the local bar advertises trips to Tibet, Winston and Serota, both former teachers, seem to get a kick out of challenging what it means to be liberal-minded.

“The Savoy and a couple other theaters in rural areas are really aggressive about playing interesting independent films and not just whatever comes down the pipeline from the mini-majors,” says John Vanco, vice-president and general manager of Manhattan’s IFC Center. “It means that there are these little places that actually have greater film literacy than some big cities. I have a lot of admiration for people like them. They’re really the lone voice in the wilderness.”

Despite their awareness that the commu-



nity likes an overtly political “feel-virtuous” movie, the Savoy owners make it a point to show a diverse range of films, sometimes at the cost of attendance. They attribute the low turnout for David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* to its title alone. As for the lack of enthusiasm for *Capote*, Serota says some people “hear the words ‘In Cold Blood’ and they don’t want to know any more: ‘There are going to be killers, this guy is a weird New York homosexual: Am I really interested?’”

Culling their intelligence from a variety of sources—including their booker, Jeffrey Jacobs; other exhibitor friends; festival buzz; and publications ranging from *Variety* to *The Village Voice*—Winston and Serota



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have found other ways to showcase edgy releases. In the late '90s, they helped found the Green Mountain Film Festival. Last year, they invited a high school sophomore, Thomas Murphey, to be on the board. An employee of the Savoy's video store, Murphey, who favors flannel shirts and Nick Drake albums, first attracted Serota's attention when he rented Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows*. “That was ninth grade, but it feels like *ages* ago,” says Murphey, who now goes by Tómas.

Savoy patrons who hated *Cowards Bend the Knee*, which Canadian auteur Guy Maddin adapted from a ten-part peephole instal-

lation, can hold Murphey responsible for recommending it to the festival committee. “I don't know if there's a polite term for it: It had fisting in it,” he says. “It's not for everybody, but I was angry because I was like, ‘This is a good movie—people shouldn't be walking out of it!’” After taking a moment to ask a customer in the video store if she enjoyed *Duck Soup*, he continues: “I also realized that you can't try to impose what kind of movies you like on other people. It's sort of pointless and usually disastrous. Everybody has a different reason why they go to see movies. And everybody has a different understanding of what a movie should be.”

AFTER YEARS OF CONDUCTING THE Savoy's market research person-by-person and day-by-day, Rick Winston has become a walking lockbox of the town's cine-confessions and filmgoing tics. He knows who fainted during the finger-chopping climax of *The Piano* and who arrives extra early to get the seat with a special shelf for her popcorn (topped with brewer's yeast); who named their son Simon after Alan Arkin's titular role in the Marshall Brickman film, and who developed a hopeless crush on French actress Emmanuelle Béart in the winter of his life.

It's one thing to know your audience; it's another thing to be a part of their lives. Over the years, Winston and Serota have hosted a traditional Jewish wedding at the theater (an accordion player in Vermont's only klezmer band, Winston waltzed the bride down the aisle) and almost ushered in a new life when a woman's water broke during a screening of *Casablanca*. “I remember saying, ‘You've got to name it Rick or Ilsa,’” Winston says, at home in the couple's cabin, moments before pointing out a red fox that's skulking by the window.

In an age when moviegoing seems less about *going* to the movies than it is about sitting on the couch, the Savoy is one gathering place where films are still felt to be intensely, sometimes painfully, personal. For Serota, they have even been a saving grace: Several years ago, her daughter from another marriage (whom Winston adopted, along with her brother) died unexpectedly. “In much the same way that children have books they like to have read to them over and over again, I have what I call my comfort movies that I see every few years. And I know I saw a lot of those films in the months after our daughter's death,” she says quietly. “It's a bit like eating mashed potatoes in that sense. For me, *Some Like It Hot* would surely be one. *Roman Holiday*, *Best Years of Our Lives*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *Fallen Idol*. They're not necessarily happy movies.” She looks out at the pond, now spiked with rain. “And maybe in some way, this goes toward a question that I'm always trying to answer, which is, what makes a classic? Most of these are films that we've seen many times. Yet each time I see them, I am struck repeatedly by the force of them and how engrossed I become.”

Winston listens. It's one of the things he does best. And when she's finished, he adds, “It's like the Rock of Gibraltar or something. It's always going to be there.”

Hopefully, so will the Savoy. ●