

### MTC and downtown need each other to survive



recall these lines from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts...." What's often forgotten is the remainder of the monologue, which chronicles the seven stages of life, from birth to death.

I'm reminded of this because the prominent Miami Theater Center (MTC) on NE 2nd Avenue -- arguably the cultural epicenter of Miami Shores and an anchor institution key to the revitalization of downtown -- has undergone almost all seven of those life stages, multiple times.

Built in 1946 and serving primarily as the Village cinema destination for the ensuing three decades, MTC had a series of near-death experiences in the 1980s. In his excellent *Boulevard of Dreams: A Pictorial History of Biscayne Park, Miami Shores, and North Miami*, Shores author Seth Bramson recounts how MTC, then called the Shores Theater, was led by "a local well-meaning but misguided group of pseudo-theater enthusiasts whose tinkering nearly ruined it."

The group lacked business knowledge of theater operations, replaced movies with entertainment dilettantes resulting in a slow, long slide in popularity, and was on verge of being converted into retail space throughout the 1990s.

MTC's rebirth came about under the guidance of Stephanie Ansin, who took on the role of artistic director of the decaying facility in 2006. Ansin was described as the "artistic visionary,

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imaginative playwright, emotional sparkplug, and effective fundraiser at the heart of the operation” by Bill Hirschman of the blog *Florida Theater Onstage*. She renovated the facility and brought in her traveling PlayGround Theater production of family entertainment and stage plays. For the next six years, PlayGround provided lush productions aimed primarily at youngsters.

Ansin is also notable for making the facility’s productions accessible to all, irrespective of disability. The theater became wheelchair-accessible, provided audio and sign language services, and offered sensory-friendly performances for those on the autism spectrum.

Former Biscayne Park resident Karla Gottlieb enrolled her son Xavier in PlayGround’s summer camp program and raves about not only the artistic quality of the program, but the confidence boost it provided him. Over the summers Xavier was enrolled, he took part in writing a play, designing the costumes, and overcoming the dread of acting, dancing, and singing in the culminating summer performance. And let’s face it, playing the central role of Sheriff Crab from Planet Cheese takes a very high level of poise, courage, and bravery.

The theater also struck up partnerships with the art-film distributor O Cinema and the experimental Sandbox productions, and provided a home for the independent Mad Cat Theatre Company. In 2012, in part to expand the marketing breadth of the theater beyond young people, the company was rebranded as the Miami Theater Center.

Early last year Ansin stepped down as leader of MTC to spend more time with her family. The leadership mantel was passed to board member Giselle Kovac, who assumed role of executive director. Whereas Ansin had MTC become a production house of different programs, Kovac has focused more on identifying and bringing external talent into the theater.

MTC continues a three-pronged approach to programming: youth programming, adult-targeted productions, and films. Central to MTC is family and youth education and performances through camps and a standing Saturday theater club. Offering the opportunity for youth to actively engage in acting and theater production becomes more relevant because schools are offering less by way of art education. Last year more than 10,000 public-school youth visited MTC to see productions, often exposing some to live theater for the first time.

Beyond youth-centric programming, MTC offers more adult-targeted productions. MTC’s

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resident Mad Cat actively courts a more edgy target audience, stating that its mission is to “promote debate by creating work that illuminates the darker regions of our mental and emotional landscapes.”

Witness a recent recreation of Black Sabbath’s *Vol. 4* album, replete with horror-movie imagery and gory rituals for shock effect. SandBox productions, in MTC’s Black Box theater, provides a venue for aspiring and established artists to create, rehearse, and perform new work.

Finally, MTC continues regular film screenings, albeit no longer in cooperation with O Cinema. O Cinema reportedly sought a commitment to show art films nightly at MTC, which could have impinged on the theater’s efforts to promote live theater performances. Instead, MTC independently provides film screenings of selected movies every Wednesday night.

The movies are selected to provoke thought and discussion. A recent screening of *I Am Not Your Negro* , in partnership with the South Florida People of Color group, resulted in hours of audience dialogue and discussion after the screening. This month the series will highlight vintage films of yesteryear.

With all the quality programming and highlights, the attention now turns to you, dear reader. MTC is one of those undervalued gems hidden in plain sight. Quality programming receives less local attention and attendance than it rightfully deserves.

The challenge of MTC is the challenge of every theater nationally. According to a 2012 national survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts, fewer adults attend live visual or performance arts activities, and those who do attend are more elderly. Technology has enabled more people to consume entertainment within the confines of their own home, precluding the need to even venture out the front door.

Kovac highlights the essence of the theater experience as being more deeply social, interactive, and personal. Bonds are nurtured through the shared experience, and a kind of social capital is built. With visitors in the tens of thousands, MTC’s success and downtown’s vitality are inherently linked. Alas, after performances, dining and drink destinations for patrons along NE 2nd Avenue remain sparse.

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More broadly, MTC needs to continue increasing awareness of all it does. Beyond its website ([www.mtcmiami.org](http://www.mtcmiami.org)) and social media, information can be hard to come by. Strolling directly in front of the theater, chances are you'll have little idea what's occurring inside. Quick, what movie is playing this Wednesday at MTC?

A tastefully designed, digitized, LED marquee that highlights showings, activities, and performances on an ongoing basis would go a long way to combating our collective ignorance. Past Village councils and planning and zoning boards have unfortunately spiked efforts for a digital marquees, citing concerns with aesthetics, size, precedents, blah-blah-blah.

Either we support the progress of MCI as an institution, and more broadly arts and culture in the Miami Shores, or we don't.

Play your part, village art boosters. After all, as Shakespeare noted, we the public are players on the village stage as well.

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