

Edifice Complex: Boulevard Theater

Written by Erik Bojnansky Photographs by Silvia Ros
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The Academy Award-winning film, starring George C. Scott, was released in 1970. A general-release movie hasn't screened there since.

Nearly four decades later, with the neighboring barber shop and china store long gone, Griffith still owns the old Boulevard Theater, despite continuing efforts by neighbors, activists, and the city to shut him down. Since 1970 the venue has played host to a variety of live burlesque acts, pornographic movies, and strippers. "That place has morphed more times than a chameleon on acid," says Bob Flanders, vice president of Upper Eastside Miami Council. "It's been many things and always the same thing: a slightly sleazy sex thing."

Back then, Griffith gave his newly acquired theater a new name, the Pussycat, and converted it into a kind of three-ring sexual circus consisting of two movie theaters and a main stage, where female entertainers performed. Each space had a name: the Pussycat II, the Kitty Cat, and the Tom Cat. "The Kitty Cat was where the regular [heterosexual porn] movies were shown," Griffith recalls. "The Pussycat was burlesque, and the Tom Cat was for male movies. It operated that way for years."

More recent incarnations have included Madonna II, a sequel to Griffith's nude female entertainment venue Club Madonna located in South Beach; Black Gold, featuring predominately African-American female strippers; At the Boulevard, which screened porno movies; and Boulevard Nightclub, a gay-very-friendly establishment that featured DJs, food service, adult movies, and male dancers in thongs.

The venue is scheduled to reopen this month in its most recent incarnation, a gay nightclub to be known (once again) as At the Boulevard. For the past month, the site has undergone a frenzy of work, according to Julio Melendez, Griffith's general manager: a new roof, upgraded plumbing and lighting, completely redecorated interiors. The sole remaining movie theater will be converted into the Gayety Theater, where scantily clad male dancers will perform. "The area is changing, and we can change with it," Griffith says. "There is a lot of gay clientele in the area."

But Griffith's idea of change doesn't appeal to many residents living in or near the evolving Upper Eastside area, who say they'd like to see the "sleazy sex thing" disappear entirely from the block, which happens to be the northern gateway to the MiMo/Biscayne Boulevard Historic District. "I would hope they'd get rid of those kinds of places," says Arva Moore Parks, the respected local historian who grew up in nearby Miami Shores. "It doesn't go with what they're trying to do with the MiMo District."

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Belle Meade resident Frank Rollason, a former Miami assistant city manager (and current BT columnist), agrees. "I'd like to see it gone," he says. "I don't think it adds anything to the community. It's a trouble spot."

While some Upper Eastsiders may dream that an independent movie house, a live theater of a more respectable nature, or a Banana Republic will take over operations at 7770 Biscayne, few expect change to occur any time soon. "We've never been in favor of a strip club, but it's there," concedes Margaret Tynan, president of the Belle Meade Homeowners Association. "It's like having a pimple at the end of your nose," Flanders says. "You get used to it."

Part of the reason for the uneasy acceptance is that Griffith, much like Patton, is no pushover. The 76-year-old entrepreneur, a longtime resident of the Upper Eastside's exclusive and private Bay Point neighborhood, is a fighter, and he's willing to take on any municipality that tries to shut him down. One of his more recent and well-known conflicts is his quest for a liquor license at Club Madonna, which he has owned across the bay since the 1960s and which is the only nude entertainment venue now allowed on South Beach. A 1990 Miami Beach law bans alcohol in clubs with nude entertainment, but Griffith was on the verge of getting a variance in 2004 when Jane Gross, wife of Miami Beach Commissioner Saul Gross, launched a well-publicized campaign against the proposed permit, arguing that the venue encouraged crime and prostitution.

In the wake of unleashed citizen outrage, the Beach commission denied Griffith's petition for the liquor license, and he in turn sued Jane Gross for libel and slander. In 2006 the commission offered to take up the liquor license request again if he would first drop the libel suit. Instead, the club owner filed a complaint with the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics, which ruled in June 2007 that the city commission had acted improperly. Griffith says he has since filed a complaint with the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office as well.

The City of Miami has also tried to shutter Griffith's adult operations at 7770 Biscayne, but to no avail. "The community has been trying to get that changed over the years," says Miami Police Ofcr. Darrell Nichols, longtime resource officer for the Upper Eastside. "But Mr. Griffith, he's a hard-nose, and he's not about to give it up."

The Upper Eastside segment of Biscayne Boulevard opened for traffic in the late 1920s, and

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businesses along the drive generally weathered the Great Depression and prospered into the Fifties. Historian Parks remembers the Boulevard Theater, which was built in 1941. “It was a very popular movie theater,” she says. “I went there frequently.”

The postwar boom brought large-scale tourism to Miami, and motels and businesses sprang up along the Boulevard. As the thoroughfare prospered, so did the surrounding area. “That neighborhood was white, working-class,” says Paul George, a Miami-Dade College professor specializing in local history. Popular restaurants, clubs, and diners – Junior’s, Bea Morley’s Mousetrap, Shalimar Steakhouse, Prince Hamlet – opened up and down the street. In 1963, Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Club, where beautiful women served food and drinks, went up near the Boulevard Theater. “It was a good area at that time,” Griffith remembers.

Prior to coming to Miami in 1961, Leroy Griffith already had experience turning movie theaters into adult cinemas and burlesque shows in Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, Indianapolis, and throughout Ohio. In fact he grew up in the business; his father had been a theater owner in Missouri. In the mid-1960s, he took over three former clubs and movie houses in Miami Beach – the Paris, the Roxy, and the Gayety Theater – where he screened X-rated films and showcased burlesque acts that included comedians, strippers, and other performers. The actresses he booked would forever be etched in Miami history – Blaze Starr, Tempest Storm, and Zareta the Snake Charmer. (Historian Parks, who attended school with Zareta’s daughter, says, “I remember feeling sorry for her because she was Zareta’s daughter.”)

By 1970, when Griffith brought porn and burlesque acts to the old Boulevard Theater, the thoroughfare itself was sliding into economic decline. The families and tourists who once strolled the area were replaced by drug users in search of a fix and johns looking for hookers. The city, for its part, reacted quickly and aggressively against the new adult venue. Miami police raided the place in 1971, after a cop alleged that four women were “performing a striptease.” Two years later the city temporarily closed down the theater after it screened the iconic, made-in-Miami porn movie *Deep Throat*.

In fact, Griffith would be raided more than a dozen times in the 1970s and 1980s, but each time he beat the rap. When Miami officially declared war on porn movie theaters and strip joints in 1982, Griffith fought back again, and Judge Joe Eaton ruled that the city’s anti-pornography ordinance, which targeted the *Pussycat*, was unconstitutional. At one point the State Attorney’s Office tried to bring racketeering charges against Griffith, but these cases were ultimately dismissed as well. “Those do-gooders,” he quips. “If you ask them what they do for entertainment when they go out at night, they probably go to an adult movie theater.”

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Local activists like the late Grace Rockafellar (who, ironically, was a fan of the Playboy Club) blamed Griffith's establishment for contributing to the area's downturn. "It's a cancer on our whole community here," she told the Herald in 1987. "It attracts all kinds of dregs who go in there." But that view doesn't sit well with Seth Bramson, a local historian who managed the Playboy Club. "Oh my God," he says today, "I loved Grace Rockafellar, she was a very nice woman, but she was wrong. He was running a business there, that's all."

Even so, poverty, crime, and prostitution took their toll on many of the Boulevard's establishments. Most closed down by the end of the 1970s. The Playboy Club moved away in 1978. The restaurants, bars, and clubs of the 1960s all disappeared. But in spite of efforts from neighbors, the city, and prosecutors, Griffith's Pussycat continued to thrive. "Evidently some people like the theater, or it wouldn't be there," Griffith says pointedly.

By the 1990s, in fact, Griffith was feeling so bullish about his property that he invested \$1 million in upgrades. In 1997 he reopened it as Madonna II, the live nude female entertainment venue. "The only place for Miami to spread is north," he told the Herald that year. "There is no more room on Brickell Avenue. If a major franchise like Outback or Friday's would open up in the area, it would cause a chain reaction. Any type of entertainment establishment would give people a reason to come here."

A few months later, however, Madonna II closed. The venue then went through a series of changes, at various times as an adult movie theater called At the Boulevard and a strip club that was often leased to independent ventures. "Every time I operated or leased out the club," Griffith asserts, "I made money." In 2004, he recalls, he was about to rent it to the adult-club chain Crazy Horse. When that deal fell apart, Griffith decided to run it himself as a gay club, the Boulevard Nightclub. The local gay community was thrilled, and on the first day 3000 men stood in line to get in, says general manager Julio Melendez. "The line went around the immigration building [at 79th Street]. Every time we let one person out, one person was let in."

But like Madonna II, the Boulevard Nightclub closed down after a few months. "We had a fabulous opening, and the following week people just didn't want to go back," promoter Lazaro Leon told the Herald at the time. He blamed poor marketing and Griffith's insistence on running adult movies during the day. "That alienates a lot of people."

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Griffith reopened the theater on his own, and as always, anyone using his parking lot had to pay the \$7 theater admission charge. During the day, he got a lot of business from people who had appointments at the Immigration and Naturalization Service building. City of Miami officials determined that this amounted to the operation of a private parking lot and demanded that he obtain a license and pay a parking surcharge. Until he did, code enforcement would move to yank Griffith's licenses to operate. "They wanted 20 percent off the top," Griffith says, complaining that Miami officials presented him with a bill of \$2 million. Insisting that he wasn't running a private parking lot, Griffith litigated against Miami for months. Last year he settled and wrote a check to the city for \$300,000. "I still think I was robbed," he grumbles.

About a year and a half ago, the theater was leased to Lenny Moore and Bernard Jenkins, who reopened as Black Gold, featuring African-American female strippers. Griffith the landlord invested \$600,000 in the enterprise, installing a new Infinity sound system that Melendez says is among the most advanced in the entire state. "Leroy never does anything half-assed," he maintains.

Black Gold began as a huge success, attracting local sports and music celebrities. There were even nights when aspiring local artists were invited to play for the audience and dancers. "When it first opened, [Black Gold] had classy girls," Melendez says. "But as business declined, the quality of the girls declined." So did the payroll. "I went three months without getting paid," he says of his stint working for Moore and Jenkins. They eventually made good on back pay, but Griffith finally pulled the plug after disputes over rent payments.

Meanwhile the Upper Eastside revitalization that Griffith predicted years ago is finally taking shape as a new generation of restaurants, bars, and coffee houses opens up along the Boulevard. And while prostitutes still occasionally walk the thoroughfare, many of Griffith's neighbors hope for the day when this too will become a thing of the past.

Frank Rollason says an establishment like Black Gold would be better off within Park West's 24-hour entertainment district on NE 11th Street, where the strip club Gold Rush is located. A place that often advertises nude women isn't appropriate in a family neighborhood, he argues. The fact that it will soon be operating once again as a gay club, with male dancers, doesn't make some neighbors feel any easier. "I don't think we need a strip club in the middle of a dense urban neighborhood," Bob Flanders says. "It doesn't quite fit."

Griffith doubts that his property will ever make a comeback as a general-release, single-screen

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movie theater. Survival would be too precarious in this age of megaplexes. But he does think a drama playhouse might do well there. And he's willing to sell, he says. "If somebody wants to pay the price," he offers, "it's available. The area is changing. It might be a high-rise – or a lot of things could be going there." He declines to suggest a price, but according to the Miami-Dade Property Assessor's Office, the 23,086-square-foot lot and 11,400-square-foot building were worth at least \$1.8 million in 2007.

Until then, Griffith is pushing ahead with At the Boulevard. Melendez says they've been made wiser by earlier mistakes and intend to hire more than one promoter. "We learned all the tricks," he says.

Kris Wessel, acclaimed chef and owner of the Red Light restaurant at the Motel Blu, just across the Little River, has mixed feelings about the adult nature of the old Boulevard Theater. As a Shorecrest homeowner, he feels a strip joint won't help the area. At the same time, being located near an adult club, within site of its neon glow, has actually been an enhancement for his restaurant. "I think it is exciting for people who go somewhere and feel like they're on the edge, and still get good service and good food."

Bob Flanders admits he can't help but admire Griffith's longevity on the Boulevard. "There's been a huge change [in the Upper Eastside], yet Leroy Griffith and his very marginal and unsavory club manage to survive, and I just find it amazing," he says. "It's the same kind of admiration for a cockroach who survives after a nuclear holocaust – so will Leroy Griffith."

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com