



INDEPENDENTS REIGN AT IND/EX 2024

Today's moviegoers require variety, not just in what they see, but in the cinemas they choose to patronize. In partnership with Spotlight Cinema Networks, BOXOFFICE PRO is proud to present Indie Focus, in which we explore the wealth of experiences that cinemas—from the high-end luxury theater to the beloved community art house—offer their audiences.

BY REBECCA PAHLE

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➔ The last five years have brought seismic changes to the cinema industry. March 2020 saw theaters go dark in response to a global pandemic that, as was thought by many at the time, would bring the cinema industry to a halt for weeks or even months. That prediction, alas, proved optimistic, and the industry would rise to its feet in fits and starts over a period of several years, along the way adapting to myriad changes brought about, in one way or another, by the pandemic. Debates over theatrical exclusivity windows, changing consumer habits, and the role of cinemas in communities were worked out over emails and Zoom calls, then—as trade shows began to return, starting with a smaller-than-usual edition of CinemaCon in 2021—in person.

One event absent from the show calendar until this summer was Art House Convergence (AHC), which, like the coalition of exhibitors from which it got its name, centered on the wider ecosystem of independent exhibition, including brick-and-mortar cinemas, film festivals, museums, virtual platforms, and more. First held in 2008 with 27 attendees, the show grew over the years, and by January 2020—when the 13th annual AHC conference took place in Midway, Utah—was a gathering of some 700-plus representatives of independent exhibition outfits, plus studios and vendors.

That community returned in full force to the first edition of the Independent Film Exhibition Conference, or IND/EX, held from June 25-28 in Chicago, Illinois. A joint endeavor of Art House Convergence and the Film Festival Alliance—renamed to better reflect the show's more inclusive scope—IND/EX hosted discussions, workshops, mixers, screenings, and more



CEO Jerry Rakfeldt
at IND/EX's closing night
party, sponsored by
Spotlight Cinema Networks.

"We were thrilled to partner, once again, with Art House Convergence and Film Festival Alliance on the new IND/EX. It was wonderful to be a sponsor and participant in the conference. The energy was electrifying, and everyone was supercharged. IND/EX was an incredible opportunity for all participants to share with and learn from one another, and we were delighted to be a part of this collaborative experience."

Jerry Rakfeldt, CEO, Spotlight Cinema Networks

across a four-day period, with a wide range of programming reflecting the needs of independent exhibitors, from fundraising strategies and social media marketing to the changing face of film criticism and strategies for nurturing attendance among younger generations.

"First and foremost, our community hadn't gathered in person since January 2020, so the most pressing need for all of us was simply to be in the same place at the same time," says Lela Meadow-Conner, a curator and producer who sits on the board of Art House Convergence. "Though we'd had virtual touchpoints over the last four years, it was so important that we share that space (700+ of us) to hug old friends, see new faces, and beyond that, have the time for community building and the sharing of knowledge and ideas." That community-building was accom-



*Clockwise from top left: IND/EX attendees, director Ang Lee, and panelists gather at Chicago's historic Music Box Theatre, one of IND/EX's venues and host to a special screening of Lee's *Lust, Caution*.*



Page 20: AHC's Kate Markham and FFA's Barbara Twist address the IND/EX crowd; attendees gather at the Music Box Theatre; representatives of the Ann Arbor Film Festival celebrate their Trailer Wars win.

plished through such programming blocks as Trailer Wars, inviting cinemas and festivals to put their preshow trailers up against their colleagues in a bracket-style tournament, and Art House Tales, where attendees gathered in Chicago's historic Music Box Theatre to hear and be inspired by the stories of fellow exhibitors.

Inspiration wasn't difficult to find at IND/EX. Though the first half of 2024 was rough for the domestic exhibition market as a whole, the prevailing mood among the indies was one of optimism, and the release of Disney/Pixar's *Inside Out 2* the weekend before IND/EX injected some much-needed energy into cinemas following months of a sparse slate. At "Repertory Revival," panelists discussed the surge of young audiences to repertory screenings, with Brian Belovarac, director of theatrical sales at Janus Films, noting that the art house demographic is getting younger overall—quashing the narrative that young adults who grew up in the age of streaming would shy away from cinemas. At Balcony Booking, which handles programming and

booking for independent cinemas, repertory programming more than tripled between 2019 and 2024, noted panelist Meghan Bowman, who handles their classic and repertory film buying.

"It was so rewarding to simply remind ourselves, and the industry at large, of the passion, dedication, and energy that comes from the independent exhibition sector—and that it's thriving," says Meadow-Conner of the conference. Coming out of the pandemic, as new audience behaviors and habits began to crystallize, independent theaters have been well-positioned to take advantage of a growing preference among consumers for experiences over material goods. As reflected in IND/EX programming across the four days of the show, independent cinemas and festivals are no strangers to giving audiences that little extra something, in terms of both programming (adding a Q&A or a musical performance, for example) and of using design, food and beverages, and other elements to craft the sort of unique, intimate atmosphere that sets the independent theater apart from

the multiplex.

All is not sunshine and rainbows in the world of independent cinema, of course: There continues to be a strong need for "transparent conversations" between distributors and exhibitors "about theatrical-platforming, windowing, marketing—what's working, what's not, and how we can better support each other," says Meadow-Conner. "One of the conversations I had over and over [during IND/EX], with cinema and festival folks, distributors, and industry partners, was the need to change the narrative that the theatrical experience is dead, that cinemas are faring poorly, that audiences aren't going to the movies anymore." In the presentation "Audience Insights: Reports from the Field," findings shared from Art House Convergence's recent national audience survey painted the opposite picture. Data from more than 32,000 respondents representing 46 cinemas across the country shows that films outside the mainstream, interesting programs and events, and a sense of community remain among the top reasons audiences go to art house cinemas. The main takeaway from the survey, said Kate Markham, Art House Convergence managing director, "is what we already knew to be true: art house moviegoing audiences are still attending their local cinemas, new and younger patrons are discovering these independent exhibitors, and the creativity and variety of programming is what keeps them coming back."

That feeling of community so valued by art house patrons was found in abundance over the four days of IND/EX, among regulars at the prepandemic Art House Convergence conference and newbies alike. "While moving the event from a literal hilltop resort in the heart of winter took away some of the intimacy of the event," admits Meadow-Conner, "moving it to the summertime (we'd never seen each other in shorts!), and the middle of the country made it more accessible for many people to attend, and I think we saw greater diversity across the board because of it." Plans for the next IND/EX are TBD as of the time of publication, but if its inaugural run is any indication, IND/EX 2—wherever and whenever it ends up being—will be an incredibly valuable resource for the exhibitor, distributor, and vendor professionals who love the independent side of the industry. ▀