

ST. LOUIS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Critic's picks

Film revisits the glory of drive-in movies

BY JOE WILLIAMS
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"Drive-In Movie Memories" (:57):

One of the perks of a movie critic's job is the chance to talk to influential people about one's peculiar obsessions. I often ask celebrities to talk about one of my favorite things, drive-in movie theaters. Invariably, these busy and often jaded people are eager to share their movie memories.

Dan Aykroyd said he still takes his family on a yearly pilgrimage to a Canadian drive-in. Kelsey Grammer recalled a trip to see "Yellow Submarine" with a girl who wanted to lose her virginity under the stars. Quentin Tarantino said a turning point in his love for exploitation cinema was when he went alone to see "Basket Case" because John Waters had written that people who go solo to the drive-in were the truest kind of movie fans.

At a press roundtable for "Miss Congeniality," I asked Sandra Bullock if she had ever been to an outdoor movie theater. "I love drive-ins!" she exclaimed. "There's a great new book about them."

The book to which she referred was "Drive-In Movie Memories," by her fellow Texans Don and Susan Sanders. The Sanderses have been cataloging drive-in history for years and promoting the institution both online and in print. To-



A classic promotional graphic shown in "Drive-In Movie Memories."

night at the Tivoli Theatre, they will screen their elegiac new documentary, "Drive-In Movie Memories," as part of the St. Louis International Film Festival.

Even for a drive-in buff like myself, who has visited dozens of ozoners in the past decade, the Sanderses' film is an eye opener. In an era of crackerbox multiplexes, it's hard for most people to imagine just how grand outdoor theaters were in the 1950s, when 4,000 drive-ins

dotted the landscape.

In retrospect, the space-age architecture and exquisite neon murals (often of Western scenes that mirrored America's cultural expansion) are both breathtaking and heartbreaking. Although drive-ins acquired a reputation as passion pits for teen-agers, they started as the ultimate family movie-going experience, and they attracted great designers as well as visionary entrepreneurs.

Drive-ins were the place

where many Americans first tasted pizza. They were also an outlet for independent movie producers to sidestep the Hollywood movie machine and take populist cinema directly to the people. By the teen-rebellion '50s and the beach party '60s, outdoor theaters were a bastion of alternative culture.

While the film includes the recollections by humorist Joe Bob Briggs, actor Barry Corbin of "Northern Exposure" and schlock producer Samuel Z. Ar-

koff, the real stars are the exquisite outdoor theaters themselves, where generations of moviegoers in chrome-encrusted jalopies came to watch, eat, dream and love under the night sky.

The penultimate chapter of the story is a sad one. Suburban development, conglomerate entertainment and even Daylight Saving Time all contributed to the decline of the drive-in, and by the '80s, most of the remaining ozoners were in disrepair.

Thankfully, the film has an upbeat ending. Across the country, about 500 drive-ins remain in business, including more than a dozen in Missouri. Each year, some dormant theaters are resurrected and a few new ones are built from the ground up. They may never again be the thriving institution that they were in the '50s, but the survivors are drawing huge crowds of nostalgia buffs and their children. Drive-ins are getting regular mention in the press, and Web sites such as drive-ins.com extol their comeback.

When the Sanderses showed their documentary at the recent Telluride Film Festival, it attracted hundreds of fans who were eager to relive the luminous thrills of cinema under the stars. Naturally, the screening was outdoors.

(A discussion of "Drive-In Movie Memories" will follow tonight's screening at the Tivoli Theater.)