

# Film Forum

Against all odds, this is the little art house cinema that can—showing everything from crazy cool Korean kitsch to neorealist masterpieces.

**B**uried in an unnamed neighborhood, just south of the Village and west of SoHo, on the block where Houston Street narrows into a conduit for the West Side Highway, Film Forum is a city treasure.

A three-screen neo-Deco establishment, as well as an autonomous nonprofit with a multimillion-dollar budget, Film Forum had little more than a projector and 50 folding chairs when it was founded by Peter Feinstein and Sandy Miller in 1970 in an Upper West Side loft. Two years later Karen Cooper, then what she calls “an all-around slave” at a short-lived film publication, dropped by and was handed the business. (Those were the days...) She moved operations downtown, first to an exceedingly snug off-off-off-Broadway theater, and then to a relatively capacious former garage near the entrance to the Holland Tunnel.

Cooper established the theater as the New York home for documentaries, American independents, and innovative Europeans, premiering and reviving work by such then near-unknowns as Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders, and Chantal Akerman. Along with Mike Maggiore, Cooper still selects Film Forum’s new work, while Bruce Goldstein—who has run retrospectives and restorations since those early days—brings in some pop showmanship and film history. (For 1988’s Gimmick-o-Rama, he wired every third seat with a motorized buzzer to provide “Percepto!”: the full sensory experience required for William Castle’s 1959 Vincent Price thriller *The Tingler*.)

No other New York theater has Film Forum’s range—a mix of arcane and popular, avant-garde and retro. The venue has opened everything from Matthew Barney’s fantasies and the 2007 Iraq War documentary *No End in Sight* to the original Japanese-language version of *Godzilla*. And no other theater has the power of Film Forum’s imprimatur. Miramax acquired Jennie Livingston’s 1991 *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary of Manhattan’s drag balls, after it packed the place for six months. For the cognoscenti a Film Forum booking simply gives street cred. Last fall the theatrical premiere of Todd Haynes’s Bob Dylan biopic *I’m Not There* set a house record.

As a venue, Film Forum exerts an influence far beyond Manhattan. Not only does a screening there ensure national attention but

the theater’s inventive programming has been imitated by media centers across the nation. Goldstein’s festivals have created new varieties of film noir and more or less invented pre-Code Hollywood cinema as a genre. And thanks to his 3-D series, Film Forum is the only theater in New York capable of fifties-style 3-D projection. When Martin Scorsese purchased a number of vintage 3-D prints a few years back, he had to come down to Houston Street to screen them.

Things haven’t always been peachy. There was an eviction in 1989, after which Cooper resettled the theater at its current industrial-

chic digs in a former printing plant, the fancifully ascetic interior of which has been deftly carved into three tunnels of about 150 seats each. (The sight lines are good, the recently reupholstered seats are...cozy.) Cooper asked her architect for Brancusi meets Pee-wee’s playhouse, and that’s what she got. In the lobby there’s a kidney-shaped counter and a 19th-century hand-cranked Mutoscope showing flip-book movies.

Fans include Ethan Hawke, Parker Posey, Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, Nicole Kidman, the Coen brothers, and late greats Susan Sontag and Fay Wray.

Wallace Shawn has been spotted

here, too. Even the seats are Boldfaced Names. Patrons have dedicated them to movies (*Roger & Me*, *High Anxiety*) and to such screen icons as Louise Brooks and Betty Boop. Diane Keaton dedicated one to her cat, Buster—there’s one named for Buster Keaton, too.

And the snacks! *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott said Film Forum has “the best movie-house popcorn in Manhattan,” and the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida told *Time* magazine “I love this banana bread,” referring to one of the concession stand’s confections.

I’ve discovered—or rediscovered—more great things at Film Forum than I could ever possibly list. I never much cared for Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*, for example, until I saw it there last summer. As I left the theater, it all came together for me: wise-guy one-liners, Astaire-Rogers music, neurotic obsessions, and gorgeous black and white. New York’s sooty glamour and a passionate love of movies. Diane Keaton’s seat and Wally Shawn in the audience: Film Forum. At 209 W. Houston St.; 212-727-8110; [filmforum.org](http://filmforum.org).

—J. HOBERMAN recently celebrated his 30th year as a movie critic at The Village Voice. His ten books include *The Magic Hour: Film at Fin de Siecle*.

