

Brattle boattle cry: Cash

Harvard Square Theatre still on hunt for \$500,000

Six months ago, the Brattle Theatre, the landmark, single-screen art house movie theater in Harvard Square, announced that unless it raised \$500,000 in 2006, it would have to close its doors. The good news is that about halfway to its deadline, the theater has raised about half the money (\$270,000). The bad news is that the Brattle's financial challenges aren't likely to go away, even if they hit their target.

The financial problems were caused by declining attendance, back rent and an old renovation debt that the theater hadn't paid off.

In facing the challenge, Ivy Moylan and Ned Hinkle, the wife-and-husband team that runs the theater, have made impressive inroads with donors.

"We had a 300 percent increase in the number of donors," says Moylan, describing one success of the theater's Preserve the Brattle Legacy Campaign. "Going in to this we had 250 donors, and we have over 900 now."

However, more than 700 of the 900 donors gave \$100 or less. Still, Moylan feels confident they'll hit the mark.

"Most of the energy that Ned and I and our board and our volunteers are working on is making sure that goal is a reality," she says. "We're turning to major donor prospects. If a person who makes an average living is willing to give \$100 or \$250, that's a significant gift, to them. Now we're turning to people who are more traditional donors and asking them to make an equally significant gift for the same goal."

There are other reasons to be encouraged. Audience

numbers increased for the first time since 2002, the Brattle received its first three-year grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Council last fall, and the theater's marketing budget has been increased — the Brattle has done some underwriting on WBUR.

Moylan is also working on grant applications for various community programs, including bringing back "Rattle at the Brattle," the film series for parents and babies; an expansion of the Brattle's "Film Notes" program of written movie descriptions which she hopes will accompany every film in every series there; and working with youth organizations in media literacy.

But the Brattle continues to face tough competition that's not likely to go away. The Kendall Square Cinema regularly secures many of the high-profile, first-run art films such as "An Inconvenient Truth" and "Cache." And the growing DVD market is changing the way Hollywood does business. And now Netflix may be the new thorn in the side of the Brattle.

"Netflix is starting to be a really significant competition for us," says Moylan. "Netflix appeals to the trend of people staying home, of wanting things as easy and as quick as they can."

"Even I have a Netflix account," she adds. Moylan is a movie buff — she appreciates films as an art form. The Brattle used to be packed with these viewers. But that's not the case these days.

"There were a lot of indicators that something was wrong," says Moylan. "But the thing that alarmed us the most was tickets sales taking a big drop in 2004. In 2004 we had a 30 percent drop in ticket sales."

Moylan blames part of it on the weather and part of it on Michael Moore. Traditionally, the Brattle's best business has been in the first quarter, with the most tickets sold in January.

"But that January was very cold, and a lot of people stayed in," she recalls. "Then in July, 'Fahrenheit 9/11' came out, and if you weren't playing '9/11,' you didn't exist that month."

The Brattle was featuring the French film "The Time of the Wolf" amid their repertory, screenings, but very few viewers came. And audience numbers never came back.

The loss at the box office led to problems paying off an old renovation debt as well as back rent, which in turn led to Moylan and Hinkle and the Brattle board announcing Phase One of this year's Preserve the Brattle Legacy Campaign.

Without going into detail, Moylan reports that as far as debt for renovation and back rent, "we've relatively caught up with everyone and have payment plans in place. The tenuousness of day-to-day is now over, and we're focusing on ensuring that it doesn't show up again. Right now we're trying to fully transition the organization from a struggling for-profit to a sustainable non-profit."

"Non-profit models are primarily dependent on philanthropy for their sustainability," she adds. "We have to get out of the position of ebbing and flowing our comfort level with the comfort level of how many people are buying tickets. We know that tickets sales will never sustain us."

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