

# The Fox Theatre Institute

## Case Study #2: The Plaza Theatre

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### **LAST ONE STANDING**

When the Plaza Theatre opened on December 23, 1939, about 120 other neighborhood theatres dotted Atlanta’s landscape, featuring movies, live performances, or both.

Today, the Plaza stands alone – a singular avatar of the Atlanta indie cinema experience, as well as being the city’s oldest continually operating movie theater.

Like the films it features, the story of the Plaza’s survival for 83 years encompasses a wide range of emotions – triumph, angst, and artistic wonder. From a June 1940 screening of “Gone With The Wind” to current, weekly showings of “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” as well as a wide range of fringe, classic, and currently popular films, that neon marquee atop the entrance has seen it all. (Including a short time in the 1970s when the theatre resorted to X-rated adult fare.)

But even the iconic marquee – ravishing as it’s been for decades on Ponce de Leon Avenue – needed help in recent years. In 2014, the Plaza’s then-owners applied for and won a \$5,610 Preservation Grant for repainting and neon repair from the Fox Theatre Institute (FTI). This began a relationship between two of Atlanta’s most beloved cultural survivors that has helped propel the Plaza into what may be its most storied phase yet.

### **THE MARQUEE AS A BEACON**

The refurbished marquee is emblematic of the theatre’s past, present, and future. Its art deco style is a living symbol of history in a city known for forging ahead relentlessly,

especially in terms of real estate. It's also perpetually in the moment, featuring a daily reminder to passersby how they can escape the world via a current screening. And it's a guidepost to the future, in the eyes of Chris Escobar, who purchased the theatre in 2017 and is busy implementing his ambitious plan for restoration and upgrades to the entire theatre.

"Our plan is to take what people love about the marquee and make that consistent throughout the whole building," says Escobar.

With a director's eye for both granular visual details and the larger plot, in 2022 Escobar ambitiously committed to a rare 25-year payment plan to purchase the theatre from Asana Partners, a Charlotte, NC-based real estate investment firm that owns the shopping center. Escobar's plan involves multiple tiers of needed renovations and creative innovations to the Plaza, some of which have happened already.

"Five years from now, my plan is for the entire Plaza interior to be physically consistent, floor to ceiling, with the marquee," he enthusiastically explains. "We want that art deco feel to resonate architecturally with the history of the theatre."

## **ELEVATING THE EXPERIENCE**

Like sequels to a beloved classic, Escobar has begun thoughtfully and ambitiously unfolding new ways to experience the Plaza in the coming years, from the artisanal experience of seeing a movie in two new 50-seat mini-screens to a planned rooftop deck and bar (to be named The EscoBar!).

He knows what he's up against in the modern entertainment-everywhere era. But going to the Plaza, Escobar points out, isn't just about seeing a movie – you go to experience a film. The big screen, a superb sound system, renovated seats, the style and design, all help create an event not accessible at home – or on a phone screen. Under Escobar's watch in particular, every inch of the Plaza feels special: it's a place for making memories.

## **PLAZA OWNERSHIP THROUGH THE YEARS**

Prior to Escobar, the theatre's history is long, having been owned originally by the Georgia Theater Company, with ties to the Candler family. By the 1970s it was run by Atlanta businessman Robert Griffith, who sold it to movie theatre entrepreneur George LeFont in 1983. LeFont's main legacies include converting the balcony area into a second auditorium and situating the Plaza as a home for independent, foreign, and art-house films.

Jonathan and Gayle Rej bought it from LeFont in 2006, understanding the Plaza's unique value to Atlanta, as well as the allure of movie-going in a cinema. The Rejs' touch remains visible in the theatre's long central hallway featuring a collage mural of 81 hand-assembled posters assembled by the owners and friends.

In 2013 the Rejs sold the Plaza to businessmen Michael Furlinger and John Brieger, who infused capital to fund interior upgrades including new seats, curtains, carpeting, furniture, lighting, screens, and sound technology. They also completed the costly conversion from 35 mm film to digital, positioning the Plaza to thrive in the modern system of digital film distribution.

In 2017, Furlinger and Brieger sold the facility to Escobar, who considers himself a grateful receiver of each prior owner's wisdom and hard work. In fact, he plans to install signage to name the screening rooms after the three most recent sets of owners.

## **MAPPING THE FUTURE**

Despite being only 35, Escobar's knowledge of film – and the Plaza's place in presenting it – is deep. But as a newly minted facility owner in 2017 at age 30, he knew he could benefit from strategic partnerships, including the existing one with the FTI.

With a vision for the future but no formal road map for his goals, Escobar applied for and won a \$32,580 Historic Structures Studies & Planning grant from the FTI in 2020. The grant allowed him to hire an architectural firm to complete an overall preservation plan to address issues related to the theatre's age and sustainability.

Winning that grant was crucial, he says, allowing him to create a tactical plan to match his vision for future renovations and creative upgrades. But just as importantly, the plan created the opportunity for an unusual, long-term lease with the owner.

"The 25-year lease I got from Asana is much longer than their typical one," Escobar explains. "The reason they approved it was because I approached them with the preservation plan I had gotten done via the FTI grant. The grant allowed me to complete the feasibility study and then present a formal plan for the theatre's restoration and revitalization."

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Even as the lone surviving indie movie theatre in metro Atlanta, the future is bright for the Plaza, largely because of a combination of Escobar's vision, partnerships he's built, and the way the theatre is woven into the community.

Along with his Plaza ownership, he has also served as the Atlanta Film Society's (AFS) executive director since 2011, and the two are intertwined – the theatre serves as the AFS's home base for screenings annually. Specific renovations like the two smaller screening rooms Escobar created have also allowed him to bring in event programming and small screenings that are a welcome amenity to Atlanta's film community.

The theatre serves the community in many other ways, from housing local female-owned businesses like the lobby photo booth (which prints old-school photos rather than just digital output) to a fact in which Escobar takes special pride: even during the pandemic, as movie theatres were among the first businesses to be shut down, he never laid off any employees. Showing films in small screenings in an adjacent parking lot for months produced some revenue, and Escobar prioritized the retention of employees because he knew that their knowledge, spirit, and work ethic would be key to the Plaza's success as pandemic restrictions eased.

Escobar points out the Plaza has long reflected the colorful tapestry of Ponce de Leon and the Atlanta community. "It's also no accident that RuPaul was working here in the

eighties when LeFont owned it,” he says. “RuPaul’s day job was working here, while building the drag act at night,” he says. The programming of local, foreign, and indie films has been significant too – “showing people who were underrepresented,” Escobar points out.

The Atlanta community has responded in kind. Recent months have seen the highest revenues in years for the Plaza. He’s grateful for that support, and praises the Fox Theatre Institute for its part in the success story.

“The FTI legitimized [my plans] – made them practical,” Escobar says. “Not only was it the money, it was the endorsement and vote of confidence. The FTI is a private, non-profit organization with no obligation to anyone else; yet they provide these grants because they saw how the Atlanta community came together to help save them in 1975. You can't really put a price tag on that type of engagement. For some theatres, it's the difference between giving up – or doubling down and succeeding.”

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