

# Revisit a golden age at historic movie houses

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Special for USA TODAY

There's something to be said for seeing blockbuster movies on massive screens with an audio system that makes your stomach churn. But America's classic theaters win for history, charm and pure aesthetic beauty. Here is a sampling of the best old-timey movie theaters that have not only survived the decades, but have preserved or restored their original designs.

## **THE BYRD THEATRE RICHMOND, VA.**

There are world-famous cathedrals that are less gorgeous than the Byrd Theatre, a State and National Historic Landmark. The 1,300-seat Byrd has operated as a movie theater almost continuously since its first movie was shown on Christmas Eve 1928. A movie back then set you back 50 cents for an evening showing (25 cents for a matinee). Today, well over 80 years later, patrons pay \$1.99, a bargain price even just to see the interior of the theater, never mind whatever is playing.

## **LANDMARK THEATRE SYRACUSE, N.Y.**

Narrowly avoiding closing and demolition twice, the Landmark is now a restored, multi-use venue on the National Register of Historic Places and still showing movies on special occasions. Originally called the Loew's State Theater, the venue opened on Feb. 18, 1928, featuring double bills of vaudeville stage acts and first-run films. Lost to years of decline are a Tiffany chandelier and 1,400-pipe Wurlitzer organ, but the Landmark's opulent red and gold décor and several massive murals have been preserved.

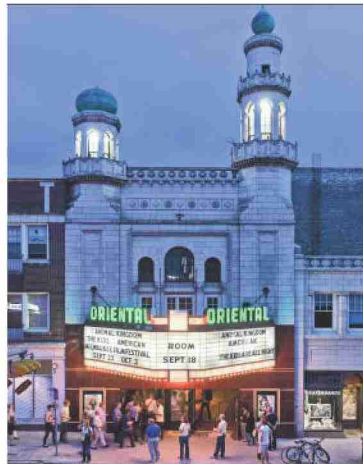
## **CASTRO THEATRE SAN FRANCISCO**

The legendary Castro Theatre became San Francisco Historic Landmark No. 100 in September

1976. Built in 1922 with a Spanish colonial baroque façade, the stand-alone box office out front, the glazed tile street foyer and the wooden doors are all original from the early 1920s. The Castro's exterior was repainted and beautified in 2008 for the filming of *Milk* and was the film's world premiere venue. The 1,400-seat theater hosts repertory movies, film festivals and special events.

## **THE LENSIC PERFORMING ARTS CENTER SANTA FE**

Built in 1931, the Spanish-style Lensic now serves as a multi-function venue hosting about 200 events a year. Thanks to a campaign by the National Trust for



ORIENTAL THEATRE

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* steals the show at the Oriental Theatre in Milwaukee.

Historic Preservation, it had a major renovation in December 2000. Events include classical ballet, chamber music, lectures, live theater, popular music, dance and live HD broadcasts from the Met. It still shows films, of course, and the annual Big Screen Classics honoring the theater's history is the most popular.

## **THE COLONIAL THEATRE PHOENIXVILLE, PA.**

The 658-seat Colonial opened in 1903, in a borough in Chester County 28 miles northwest of

Philadelphia, as a venue for live shows and vaudeville. Film aficionados will recognize the Colonial from the 1958 cult horror/science-fiction film *The Blob*, where scenes from the movie were filmed. The occasion is celebrated every July during Blobfest, a spirited weekend devoted to the film, including a live re-enactment from the movie's legendary "run-out," when participants run screaming from the building.

## **ORIENTAL THEATRE MILWAUKEE**

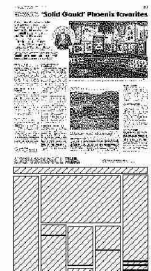
This list would not be complete without the acclaimed Oriental, which has been operating continuously since 1927. Its elaborate East Indian décor has been lovingly maintained, including gilt lions, statues of Buddha and a 1927 Kimball theater organ that is still played before select shows. The Oriental holds the world record for showing a film continuously: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which has been shown at midnight every second Saturday of the month since 1978.

## **BAGDAD THEATER & PUB PORTLAND, ORE.**

McMenamins Bagdad Theater & Pub was a then-state-of-the-art theater built by Universal Pictures in 1927. The faux-Middle-Eastern theme and décor included a fountain and grand colonnade in the foyer, and Arabian-styled uniforms worn by the "usherettes." The theater was renovated and upgraded in 2013 with a 50% larger screen, Surround Sound and rocking seats. Because this is Portland, the concessions menu features a large list of beers on tap and there are plenty of bike racks out front.

## **THE PRYTANIA THEATRE NEW ORLEANS**

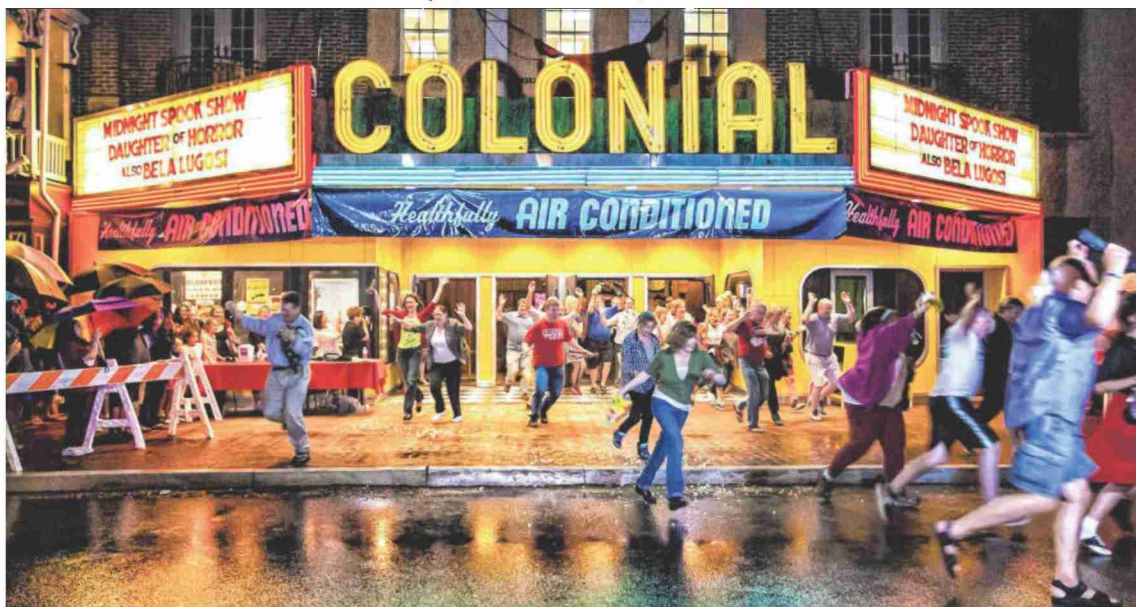
The oldest-operating movie theater in New Orleans, the single-screen Prytania celebrated its 100th anniversary in December 2014. Rene Brunet, 93, currently operates the family-owned theater with his son Robert Brunet,



and is still regularly seen taking tickets and socializing with pa-

trons. The Prytania runs screenings of classic films during the day (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Some Like*

*It Hot*) and a Late Night Series featuring cult classics.



J. FUSCO FOR GPTMC

**Run for your lives! Scenes from the 1958 cult horror classic *The Blob* were shot at the Colonial in Phoenixville, Pa., and every July for Blobfest the film's famous "run-out" scene is re-enacted.**