

BAMcinématek Celebrates 10



Don't Let Me Drown, courtesy of Cruz Angeles

...And BAMcinemaFEST is Born

By Troy Dandro

At its cultural zenith, New York was littered with dozens of movie revival houses, purveyors of cinematic history that inspired generations of filmmakers and cinephiles with films by international giants alongside the independent and avant-garde work blossoming in its own backyard. These theaters such as the Thalia, the Regency, the 8th Street Playhouse, and the Bleecker Street Cinema are some of the most vibrant reminders of a city that no longer exists—gritty, bohemian, and full of potent eccentricities. Sadly, many revival cinemas were shuttered in the late 80s and early 90s—victims of escalating real estate costs, the popularity of VHS, and the onset of the multiplex. As New York cleaned up its act, these grungy, worn theaters were swept away and the city's colorful film-going scene began to fade. However, there were hopeful glimmers—Anthology Film Archives and Film Forum moved to new homes in the late '80s (where they remain today), and Film Society of Lincoln Center opened the Walter Reade Theater in 1991.

Brooklyn was in a similar situation—where once there had been diverse theaters throughout the borough, smaller theaters were demolished in favor of multiplexes. However, as the population swelled and more Manhattanites migrated to Brooklyn, a demand grew for a new dedicated arthouse. BAM, Brooklyn's largest cultural organization, moved to fill this void and inaugurated a new era of greater cultural accessibility for Brooklyn residents by attracting young, diverse audiences.

In November 1998 BAM Rose Cinemas opened in what was formerly the Carey Playhouse. BAM's four-screen arthouse brought independent and foreign films to Brooklyn, opening with Danish domestic drama *Festen*; the James Whale biopic *Gods and Monsters*; the adaptation of the Irish play *Dancing at Lughnasa*; and *Slam*, the gritty hip-hop drama starring Saul Williams. In July of 1999, BAMcinématek was born—Brooklyn's first daily repertory cinema screening classics, silent films, special retrospectives, and festivals of new work from around the world. Fittingly, BAMcinématek's first program, *Summer of Spike*, celebrated Brooklyn's own hometown filmmaking hero, Spike Lee.

With programmers Florence Almozini, a founder of the Ocularis screening series; Adrienne Mancia, the original consultant and current curator-at-large for BAMcinématek and former head of MoMA's film program; and later Jake Perlin, over the next decade BAMcinématek would bring Brooklyn audiences retrospectives of major directors like Luchino Visconti, Robert Altman, Fritz Lang, and Akira Kurosawa, while also presenting the first US retrospectives of new international talents like Arnaud

BAMcinématek Celebrates 10

Desplechin, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, and Hong Sang-soo. As Brooklyn became fertile ground for creativity among a new generation of artists and filmmakers, BAMcinématek filled the role once played by those classic NYC revival houses—a place where audiences took their film seriously and where there was always something new to discover. Author Jonathan Lethem noted that BAMcinématek “has from the very first evoked for me the genial, unstuffy, languorous-mid-afternoon cinephile’s dream that I knew growing up in the city in the ‘70s... like the old New Yorker or the Bleecker Street Cinema or the Thalia, a place to wander over and catch, say, a rare Fritz Lang or some promising-sounding new French director, not feeling the pressure of any cultural agenda, just satisfying the appetites aroused by living in the middle of an ongoing feast.”



The Leopard, courtesy of Criterion Pictures

As BAMcinématek earned a reputation for innovative film programming, it also became a highly regarded destination for some of the most respected actors and directors who began coming to BAM for Q&As. Bill Murray, Jim Jarmusch, Gena Rowlands, D.A. Pennebaker, Elliott Gould, Milos Forman, Robert Altman, and Danny Glover, among many others, have made appearances here over the years. In addition to attracting notable artists, esteemed critics like Phillip Lopate, Andrew Sarris, Armond White, J. Hoberman, and Amy Taubin have often taken note of BAM’s programming and have led and participated in discussions with audiences. Phillip Lopate states “I have been roped into speaking before or after many film events at BAM, and am always happy to do so. I live in Brooklyn so BAMcinématek feels more like a neighborhood institution that I want to support. Finally, the programming is a daring mixture of new-cutting edge and historically informed, and you always get the impression that Florence and Jake are personally enthusiastic about what they’re showing.”

As a vibrant community of filmmakers developed in Brooklyn, BAMcinématek became a major touchstone in their film education. Gus van Sant attended BAMcinématek’s screening of Béla Tarr’s *Satantango* in June of 2000; this masterpiece had a major influence on his subsequent work. Steve Buscemi credits BAMcinématek with helping him shape his work as well: “As I was preparing to direct the film *Lonesome Jim*, I mentioned to screenwriter James Strouse that the tone of his script reminded me of the films of Aki Kaurismäki. James had never seen a Kaurismäki film, but as luck would have it, BAMcinématek was featuring a series of the Finnish director’s work, and James and I attended the first screening.”

Recognizing this critical place it held within the local filmmaking community, BAM formed a three-year partnership with Sundance Institute to showcase Sundance Film Festival artists, many of whom call Brooklyn home. Sundance Institute at BAM was a huge success and reaffirmed the need for a platform to present more local work in the community.

Now, in celebration of its tenth birthday, BAMcinématek is thrilled to inaugurate a new film festival here in Brooklyn. A culmination of ten years of nurturing Brooklyn’s energetic film community, BAMcinemafEST (June 17—July 2) is an opportunity for many talented local artists to show their new work in their neighborhood theater, while also presenting local cinephiles with the best recent work from film festivals all over the world.

Long after the Dark Ages the city endured with the downsizing of the city’s film culture, BAMcinématek is now a major part of a new Golden Age in New York City cinephilia. 🍷

Troy Dandro is BAMcinématek’s Marketing Manager.