

THE LAST (DRIVE-IN) PICTURE SHOW



New Jersey's only remaining drive-in theater offers up first-run films, a foodie-worthy menu, and a few lessons in retro movie going.

BY DANIELLE L. BURROWS/ Photography by Douglas Bovitt

Pictured: Another Saturday night at the Delsea Drive-In.

MY VISIT TO Vineland's Delsea Drive-In Theatre starts as anachronistically as a scene from *Back to the Future*.

"One adult," I tell the teenager in the ticket booth, from my driver's side window.

"Just one?" he asks, with a look of confusion that throws me.

This isn't the Ritz, I remind myself, suddenly aware of the unusualness of solo movie-going at drive-in theaters. Twentysomethings don't generally go to drive-ins alone. He's probably wondering whether a boyfriend or kids are hiding in my trunk.

"I'm writing an article," I stammer. "For *South Jersey Magazine*. Ya' know, about the drive-in. Not smuggling anyone in, I promise."

Eight dollars and a few shreds of dignity later, my Honda and I round a corner on the drive-in's dirt entranceway off Delsea Drive. We're greeted by the view of a vast gravel lot, on which sits a sea of darkened cars and a massive, glowing screen. Nim's Island, the first of the evening's two features, has already been playing for an hour.

I bring my car to a near-stop to take in the charming and iconic scene—only to realize my headlights are blinding at least half the viewing audience.

Fumbling my way around my lighting controls, I eventually find my parking lights and wonder whether an angry chorus of horns might protest my mid-movie arrival. After my confusion and missteps settle, I suddenly regret my failure to bring along a Baby Boomer for guidance on drive-in etiquette.

One week later, Dr. John DeLeonardis, the long-haired pediatrician who revived the Delsea Drive-In in 2004, assures me I'm not the only patron unsure of modern-day drive-in practices. "One guy had a boom box plugged into the receptacle in one of the speaker poles, and swore to me he'd gotten audio through it," DeLeonardis remembers amusedly, referring to the speaker poles that today remain as vintage parking markers, but that once provided each vehicle with audio in the years before sound was transmitted via FM radio frequency. DeLeonardis suspects the man was merely overhearing audio from other cars. "There's no way he was getting sound through those speaker poles. I had all the old wiring removed from those things in 2004."

DeLeonardis' much-documented revival of the Delsea Drive-In in 2004 is the stuff of which local lore is made. Like so many drive-ins nationwide, the Delsea, which debuted in 1949, had fallen prey to changes in viewing trends, and by 1987 closed its doors following a showing of *La Bamba*,



The crucial concession stand at the Delsea.

presumably for good. The closure of Monmouth County's Route 35 Drive-In four years later, in 1991, left the Garden State completely devoid of drive-ins; an ironic fact considering New Jersey was the birthplace of the world's first drive-in in 1933.

That all changed in 2004. DeLeonardis, a local pediatrician with practices in Bridgeton and Mullica Hill, bought the vacant site of the Delsea Drive-In with visions of developing a skate park and an accompanying restaurant. It was his wife, Judith, who suggested, after noticing the screen still intact, that they restore it to its original use. It was Dr. DeLeonardis who'd grown up less than a mile from the Roosevelt Drive-In in Jersey City, which ignited his lifelong love of film. He was easily swayed.

One can't help but wonder whether *Wife Beware*, the title of the premiere film shown at that first drive-in theater in Camden in 1933, foreshadowed Judith's future. In the four years since the Delsea Drive-In's grand re-opening, she and her husband are still intricately involved in every detail of operating the venue every Friday and Saturday

evening throughout the spring and summer months.

"It's like putting on a show every night; that's what it's like," Judith says. "And you can't have that,"—she gestures toward the movie screen—"without this." By this, she's referring to the bustling concession stand in which she'll spend the evening overseeing the young staff and churning out menu options from popcorn to pulled pork sandwiches to shrimp.

It was Judith's idea to show a short montage between features that explicitly explains to patrons the modern-day necessity of concession sales to theater survival. Most patrons are unaware, she came to realize, of the economic reality of keeping a theater's doors open for business. The small profit margin on ticket sales force indoor and drive-in theaters nationwide to rely almost entirely on food and beverage profits. It's the reason the DeLeonardis' have no choice but to require a \$7 permit charge to any vehicle opting to bring in its own food or beverage to the Delsea.

With hopes of enticing a dinner crowd to



the drive-in, the DeLeonardis' implemented a concession menu that includes a variety of healthy options and less-than-traditional drive-in fare. Small popcorns are priced at \$2 and stir-fry asparagus at just \$3.75. The intentionally low prices allow families a night of dinner and a double feature that's easier on the wallet than an evening of traditional dining and movie-going, the DeLeonardis' point out. And, as the parents of 13-year-old triplets and a 17-year-old son, they're undoubtedly speaking from experience.

Even amidst all this talk of finance, the DeLeonardis' are surrounded in their concession stand by charming reminders of a near-extinct national pastime: Popcorn is popped in a vintage popper purchased from a Pittsburgh-area drive-in. Pajama-clad toddlers carry baseball gloves and stuffed animals. Dr. DeLeonardis (or "Doc," as his staff of teenagers affectionately calls him) hurriedly answers ringing phones, opens doors to allow for cross-breezes, and reminds his employees to be careful while cooking.

Even the staff seems yanked from a more endearing era: Eighteen-year old Maranda, a Millville resident, is in her fourth season at the drive-in. "It's like a family here," she says, eyes shining, and recounts stories of patrons coming to the Delsea from as far as Rhode Island and New York. Maranda loves hearing older people recall drive-in stories of their youth—even if she does hear similar anecdotes time and time again.

Jessie, a 19-year old concession manager from Pittsgrove, is also in her fourth season of employment. She attributes her love of drive-ins to her father, who regularly drove his family as far as two hours to drive-ins in Delaware.

The young women debate whether this is the second or third weekend showing Nim's Island, evidence that their jobs, much like the economic realities of the drive-in itself, have much more to do with food service than with actually taking in flicks. The remainder of their night will be spent cleaning up the concession stand and potentially providing a few unlucky patrons with jumper cables (dead car batteries are a regular occurrence at the Delsea).

The greatest lesson I take from the Delsea Drive-In has nothing to do, thankfully, with the pitfalls of leaving a vehicle in accessory setting for two hours, and everything to do with an understanding of why a mere 400 drive-in theaters exist today in the United States. Especially in the northeast, drive-ins are seasonal operations fully reliant on fickle factors including weather, viewing trends, and real estate value and costs. With these odds stacked against them, drive-ins are ideal undertakings not for venture capitalists, per se, but for that rare individual willing to wear dozens of hats for the sake of nostalgia, a love of film, and only the possibility of sustenance and profit.

Dr. DeLeonardis, who spent the first half of his day examining young patients, points out a large van parked in the front row, close to the screen, that's blocking other cars' views. When he's finished cooking, Doc will lead the van's driver to a better parking spot. And then he'll check in on the projection booth before returning to clean up and shut down the kitchen. And then he will get up to do it all over again the next day.

Cumberland County has found the right man for the job.

The Delsea Drive-In

Phone: 856.696.0011

www.delseadrive-in.com

Adults: \$8 (ages 12 and up)

Children: \$3 (ages 3 to 11)

Children 2 years and under: Free

Outside food and beverage permit: \$7 per vehicle at box office, \$14 per vehicle inside gate

