

New movie theater to open in river wards

By Matt Godfrey
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Doug Sakmann, Zafer Ülkücü and Nick Esposito have accomplished quite a bit in the six years they've been in Philadelphia.

They just wrapped up the sixth installment of their Backseat Film Festival, which is presented by their 6-year-old freelance production company, Backseat Conceptions, and was sponsored by their liquor-filtration company, Gray Kangaroo.

But that is just scratching the surface.

This year's festival was held at a makeshift theater in a building at 941 N. Front St., just north of Poplar Street, in Northern Liberties.

That makeshift theater is now their newest business venture, aptly named the 941 Theater. The independent theater is an attempt to bring a small movie venue back where it belongs, in the neighborhood.

Still, that's not everything.

The 941 Theater will be run by — you guessed it — another new venture of the trio called Philadelphia Friends of the Projected Arts (PFPA).

PFPA, which is in the process of becoming a 501c3 non-profit organization, will be a conduit for the threesome to advocate for the presentation of movies the way they feel movies are supposed to be seen — on the big screen and not a computer screen.

They hope to do their small part to help the film industry combat some unique challenges these days, such as theatrical releases of movies that find their way to Web sites like YouTube or are circulated through file-sharing on the Internet.

"Small filmmakers face the same challenges that the (major) studios face, but at a much greater detriment," reads a news release announcing the PFPA.

The mission of the 941 Theater, which is scheduled to open on June 1, is to be an outlet for small filmmak-

ers in need of a venue.

"What we're trying to do is bring some attention to the situation around getting a movie a theatrical release," Esposito explained. "We want to make it possible for small films to have lucrative theatrical screenings."

The plan at the moment is to have the theater show an independent film each week — films that the three

"We're doing the Big Art Show on April 26," Sakmann explained. "We're also doing the Philadelphia Independent Craft Market."

Another possible outlet for the theater is that production companies can use it to watch film footage that has been shot.

The opportunity to open the theater presented itself after the building's owners saw the trio's ability to draw a crowd. They'd come upon the building in 2007 while on a last-minute search for a venue to hold the fifth installment of the Backseat Film Festival.

The building's owners were impressed with the crowd drawn to a building on a mostly under-utilized stretch of Front Street nestled almost directly under I-95. They got to talking with the Backseat guys.

This year's festival only reinforced the notion of opening a theater.

"We definitely did more screenings than we've ever done. Several of the movies were bigger than we've ever shown," Ülkücü said. "We had a lot more people."

Their turnout also was higher than ever.

The main attraction, *Raiders of the Lost Ark: The Adaptation*, "showed how much of a draw movies could be in this city.

"We had a holdover (from the scheduled 7 p.m. screening) and did a second midnight screening," Sakmann added.

After fulfilling requirements of the Northern Liberties Neighbors Association, the trio and their theater found a warm welcome from City Councilman Frank DiCicco and state Rep. Mike O'Brien.

If the trio are to open the 150-seat theater by June 1, they have to get the building ready and obtain equipment.

Now is when the real work starts. ••



(From left) Nick Esposito, Zafer Ulkucu, and Doug Sakmann outside of the 941 Theater.

MATT GODFREY / STAR PHOTO

entrepreneurs either select or have passed along to them through industry contacts.

The films would be more in line with the original idea of an "independent movie" and not the new independents that are being funded by studios making the big-budget epics.

The trio also have the flexibility to expand the use of 941 beyond movies. If they feel like hosting a band one night, they'll do just that.

Maybe a comedy show once in a while?

Why not?

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