

VIC SKOLNICK and CHARLOTTE SKY

Life At The Movies

by Robert Lerose

IF THERE'S MORE to Long Island movie-going than a trip to the megaplex, Vic Skolnick and Charlotte Sky can take a big part of the credit. As founders of the Huntington-based Cinema Arts Centre, the husband-and-wife team has made a 20-year career of bringing offbeat, provocative, sometimes-controversial films to Long Island audiences.

The sleek CAC of today, with its eclectic offering of foreign films, independent films and the occasional revival, is a far cry from the pair's early days. In the beginning, their screenings took place in a borrowed dance studio, with filmgoers cheerfully supplying their own tea and cookies. As for the screen, it was made from king-size bedsheets stitched together.

Then known as the New Community Cinema, the operation moved to the abandoned recreation room of a former firehouse, and then finally to its present location at the Village Green School. Now, thanks to the outside grants generated by the cinema's increasing prestige, it boasts two fully equipped theaters, an airy conference area and a well-stocked refreshment bar in the lobby.

Neither of the two had originally aspired to operate a movie theater. Sky grew up in Bensonhurst, and spent several years studying acting and dance at the Martha Graham and Juilliard schools, before acute back problems ended her performing career. Skolnick was also involved in the arts, preparing for a career as a pianist before switching his interest to history.

However, both discovered movies at an early age. In fact, they spent their first date at the movies, watching a double feature of George Bernard Shaw films.

It was Sky who first suggested that they start a club or a gathering of film buffs, after they had married and moved from New York City to Long Island. Settled in Centerport, Skolnick was teaching American social history at C.W. Post, while his wife took film courses at SUNY/Old Westbury. "When I moved out to the Island," she recalls, "I really intended being here for [only] a short while, precisely because there were so few avenues for the kind of things I was interested in, specifically films. The theaters were playing the same things that were playing all over the country. Everything that was in the city that was real special stuff wasn't out here."

Furthermore, Skolnick adds, the whole act of going to the movies had become "largely impersonal. We went to the local theater—it was miserable out, it was raining, it was late—and we waited outside. When we got in, the film was on. They had turned the film on! I was wet and I was late, I paid my money...I think that just triggered the feeling about how movie patrons are treated."

Although he enjoyed teaching, Skolnick didn't like schools or dealing with administrators. Soon after the movie operation began, he left his teaching position to work full-time with his wife and a small, dedicated staff. To make ends meet, both worked part-time jobs, including driving delivery trucks for A&S.

Growing up, Sky recalls, she had prized the feeling of community of the city's neighborhoods: "Kids knew each other. The families were a little more interacting." She found it hard to adjust to Long Island, where the closest thing to a community's heart is a local shopping mall, and the need to travel enclosed in a car only reinforces the perceived sense of isolation and distance between

people. Their cinema, she feels, offers a healthy alternative to the depersonalization of Long Island.

The theater has touched the lives of many people. Skolnick recalls getting a letter from the young, award-winning filmmaker Hal Hartley, a Lindenhurst native who credits his career choice to his years of being a regular attendee of the New Community Cinema. "It is a lot like teaching," Skolnick says. "You meet somebody and you make a difference. That happens. It's the same thing with film."

Perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the family enterprise has been their son Dylan. Since he was a teenager, he has been programming films, and his proud parents say that his encyclopedic knowledge of movies rivals even theirs.

In a larger sense, though, the two think of their entire audience as an extended family, learning and growing together. "I hope that people don't keep bringing up 'Oh, it should have been...' or 'Why didn't it have this or that,'" Sky concludes. "I wish people could come without the preconceived ideas about what they want to see—and really open up to whatever the experience is going to be, to really be willing to see something new and fresh." □

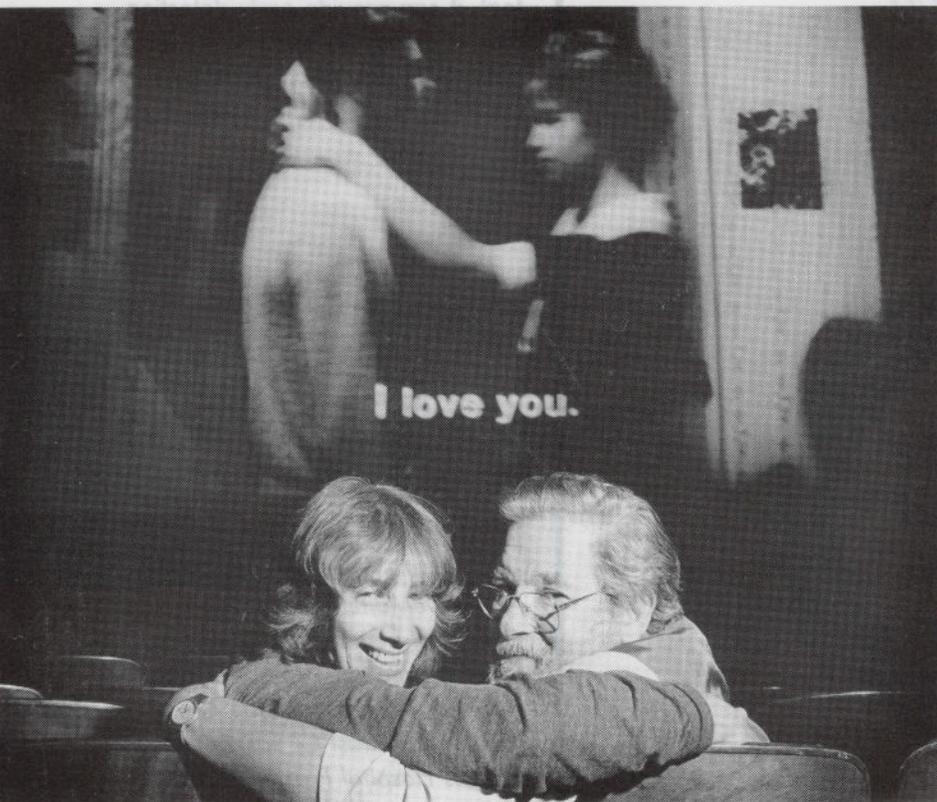


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