

Star Community Cinema - The New Enterprise

By Elsie L'Huillier

The Star Cinema first operated in the Eaglehawk Town Hall in the middle of last century. Back then it was called 'going to the pictures' rather than the movies and usually occurred on Friday and Saturday nights. History tells us that the Lyric Cinema operating in Bendigo and the Star in Eaglehawk used to swap movies at interval using the tram that ran past the Lyric in View Street all the way out to the end of the line - the Star Cinema in Eaglehawk. The tram conductor would meet the projectionists out the front and exchange reels.

The original Star Cinema stopped operation by the 1960's probably unable to compete with the introduction of television, which had everyone staying at home content to watch ghost like figures in grey and white on tiny screens because it was the new, in thing to do. Many cinemas closed in the second half of the century but the industry has stayed alive thanks to the appreciation many people have for big screen viewing with the lights down and the outside world temporarily suspended.

In 1999 a pioneering woman called Joan Rodger brought big screen cinema back to Eaglehawk with the opening of the 'new' Star Cinema. In her Star Cinema, couches replaced the hard old cinema seats, patrons were offered a glass of wine and at times even a meal as part of the 'gold class' package. Joan was passionate about cinema and the art of film making. She was committed to bringing the best of world movies to the big screen in Eaglehawk as well as ensuring good Australian movies got lots of exposure. She was committed to giving people a choice alongside the dominant 'made in the USA' movies showing in commercially minded cinemas. Joan also introduced and encouraged community use of the cinema for fund raising purposes resulting in over a 100 different groups using it at different times during the year.

In early 2004 Joan decided to retire from the world of cinema and sought interest from the community about keeping the Star afloat. A passionate group of people soon rallied to her call and after a series of public meetings and much discussion with local Council and other bodies the Star Community Cinema Association was formed and took over the Cinema in April 2005. Funding to purchase the business was obtained from state and federal sources, business planning and legal advice were provided free by loyal, local supporters and a new enterprise was born.

The Cinema is unique in Australia. Housed in an historical building it operates seven days a week and relies heavily on volunteers as the backbone of its operations. It encompasses huge community engagement through its fund raising capacity and

shares the space with traditional users like the Dahlia and Arts Society and the local footy club who have been using the building for generations. The Bendigo Amateur Movie Makers group now calls the Star home and is keen to start using the facility to show locally made films.

The Star has four paid staff - two part time managers, one full time and one casual projectionist. The staff, like the volunteers who form the Committee of Management and run much of the Star's day to day activity, are totally dedicated to the organization and the art of film. Staff contribute many volunteer hours to keep the cinema going and their sense of team helps make the Star a friendly place to visit.

The Star has its business challenges. Running a community enterprise is just as stressful as running any business. At the end of the day if the business can't break even it won't survive. Being a community enterprise the Star is committed to values that are not primarily about profit. The Star values and promotes cultural diversity, community arts and community participation. To stay true to these values they have to be strategic about capturing public interest and support. Foreign language films often don't attract big audiences and having to close the cinema for other community users to use the building eats into takings. To offset this the Cinema has positioned itself well with sponsors who are proud to advertise their support of the Star and governments that are willing to invest in the community capacity-building the Star brings to Eaglehawk.

Individuals are encouraged to become members of the Star for \$30 and enjoy over \$100 worth of discounts and other benefits. Membership also gives individuals an opportunity to have a say in how the enterprise develops.

The business community has the opportunity to support the Star through the newly formed 200 club - \$200 to be a corporate member and enjoy all the benefits of individual membership plus recognition as an official supporter.

Anecdotes abound about people and businesses that name the Star as one of the reasons they moved to Bendigo. Two new restaurants have sprung up since the Star started operating in Eaglehawk. The old Town Hall that was hardly used for much of the 90's is now bubbling with activity every night. The Star is adding a unique ingredient to the arts and tourism attractions of Bendigo but more importantly it is providing a place for the Bendigo community to relax in, enjoy and be proud of. The Star celebrates community life from all over the world but loves its home in Eaglehawk.

Enquiries can be made to Jacinta Morton at the Star on 54 46 2025 or jacinta@starcinema.org.au or visit the website at www.starcinema.org.au