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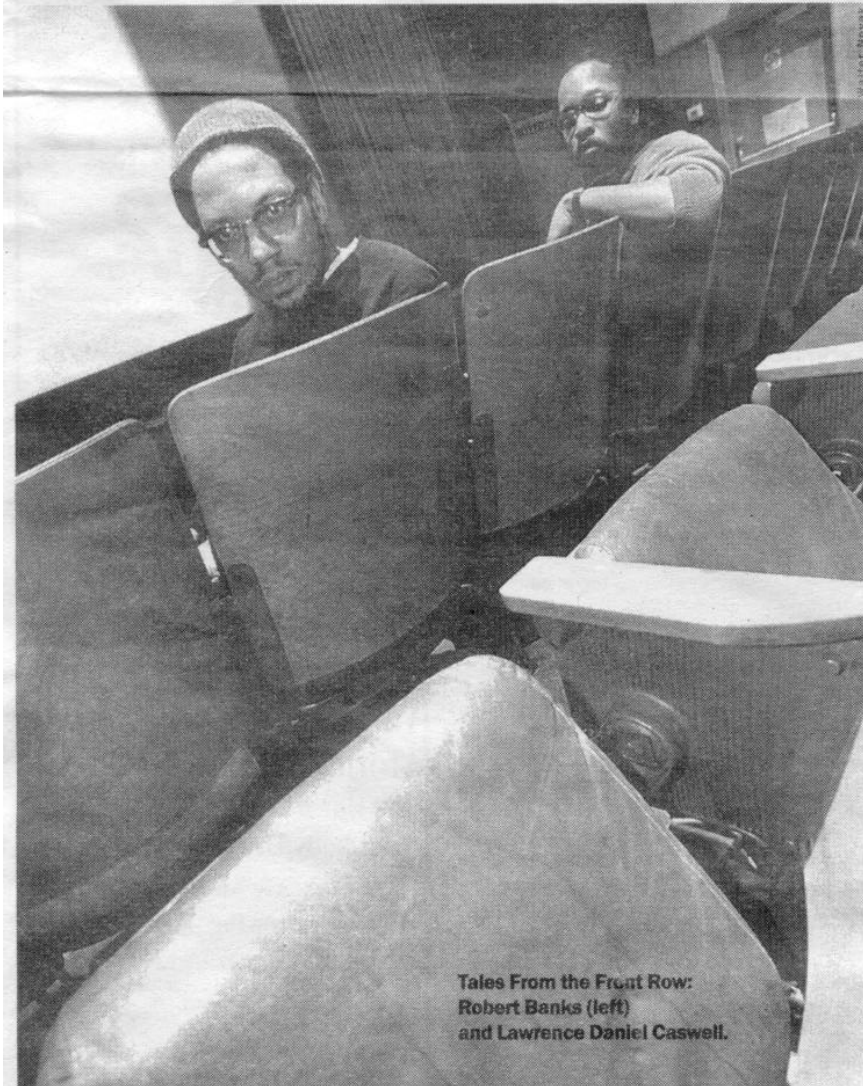
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Screening Meemies

**Cinematheque regulars
light up a room.**

They arrive faithfully to sit in the dark. Some on buses, almost always alone. No cineplex candy-asses, they can bask for hours in a hard-backed wooden seat with no attached cupholder, because they *enjoy* twisting their spines into pretzel shapes.

They're regulars at the Cinematheque, Cleveland's only movie theater where the catchphrases are "There's a dinner break between Part I and Part II" and "Next week, we've got more French films." A place



**Tales From the Front Row:
Robert Banks (left)
and Lawrence Daniel Caswell.**

where Tehran and Bangkok are the new Hollywoods, and Finland is known for its comedies, not its luge team.

"There's a handful of people who come constantly," observes Tim Harry, assistant director of the nonprofit alternative cinema. "There's this guy who waits till everybody sits down and then scopes the audience to find a seat, because he doesn't want anybody to sit in front of him." And the gent who actually got vertigo during *Vertigo*.

The regulars are reasonably tolerant, as long as you don't throw Milk Duds at old people. Or time your laughing fit around the sobering climax of the Italian avant-garde film *Il Mistero di Oberwald*. A woman in the second row did that once, and boy, did people glare at her. She couldn't see the glares, because the lights weren't on, but she *felt* them.

Silence is everything here. They tried to sell popcorn once, but decided the collective rustling of the bags was too loud. People can bring their own snacks, though, as long as they don't make a ruckus.

For film purists Lawrence Daniel Caswell and Robert Banks, the Cinematheque's front row holds a certain allure. Set back generously from the extra-wide screen, it's a far cry from those whiplash-inducing front rows in shopping-mall cinemas, pushed up against puny silver squares. They're at the movies, they reason, so what they should be seeing is screen, not people, seats, or ceiling.

The two self-described "geeky, pseudo-hip black guys" recently presented a primer on Cinematheque front-row etiquette on *The Fourth Wall*, Caswell's film talk show on WCSB-FM. The show is usually free-form, though a special themed episode once tackled the topic of "What type of job should a main character have to guarantee a good movie?" (Answer: gladiator or barbarian.)

Good hygiene is part of front-row protocol. "Don't come if you've been digging in a ditch all day long and sit right next to somebody," Banks advises, his nerd eyeglasses slightly askew. And you can stretch your legs, but don't put your feet, coat, or drink on the stage. They make shadows on the screen.

Though Personal Seat Licenses are a running joke here, front-row seats are technically first-come, first-served. Caswell, who prefers front and center, still trembles at the memory of the bloodless yet traumatic Seat Coup: He arrived at the theater a half-hour early, only to find that someone had usurped his usual throne.

Irked that he had to settle for the second row, Caswell stewed through the whole film, shooting lots of "bad vibes" at the back of the guy's head.

"It wasn't just that he'd be in my seat," laments Caswell, whose archrival one-upped him nightly last spring. "It was that I'd get there early, and he'd already be there, see me come in, and run in there to get my

seat. But I wasn't mad. Yeah, I was mad. I've sat in this same seat since '94."

Projectionist Les Vince occasionally gets so engrossed in what's onscreen, he forgets to change the reel. Although he sees only about four-fifths of each film — the other fifth spent splicing celluloid and adjusting apertures — his attendance record is impeccable. He's been with the Cinematheque since its dawning in 1984, when then-librarian John Ewing scraped his own money together for a screening of *Vortex*, starring rocker/performance artist Lydia Lunch.

To their surprise, 300 people showed up, paving the way for Ewing to bring a full slate of foreign and experimental films to the austere, 600-seat lecture hall in the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Cinematheque's current home.

"I hope I'm enabling them," Ewing says of the diehards, including the woman who wolfs down a three-course meal in the theater and the perpetual latecomer who's peeved when the show starts without him. "When I die, I've gotta answer for my life, and I hope I've done something good."

He's kept lab technician Dan Romano occupied. "If I were to depend on friends, I would miss most of these films," says Romano, who usually comes alone. His only Cinematheque friend prefers solitude, surrounding himself in an ocean of empty seats. They might mingle afterward, though.


Bonita Tiffany, a retiree from the federal government, sometimes gets so relaxed in the balcony, she'll work on her knitting during the film. She abhors movies with the F-word and cigarettes, which rules out many French films.

For Banks, an underlying message is crucial to a good movie, even if it's cloaked in escapism. "You guys have to remember that, in the history of this country, nobody walked a straight path. Somebody slept at some point or another with people of a different color or different religion or different class. I like films that address these issues in subtle ways."

A filmmaker whose retrospective screened at last year's BBC British Short Film Festival, Banks started soaking up movies early. His dad, who worked in a thrift store and sold porn flicks on the side, used to bring home 8mm *Deputy Dawg* and *Woody Woodpecker* cartoons and condensed versions of B-movies.

"Back then, even that stuff had something to say," says Banks. "After *Star Wars* came out, films suddenly got fluffier."

Banks likes to talk after the films so much, "the security guards know him, and when they see him getting his space, getting ready to sit and talk for a while, they kick him out," says Caswell. That's usually around midnight. So does the last one out turn the lights on?

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