

DRIVE-IN SUMMER

With movie theaters forced to close their doors, the drive-in once again became the main attraction for summer movie audiences

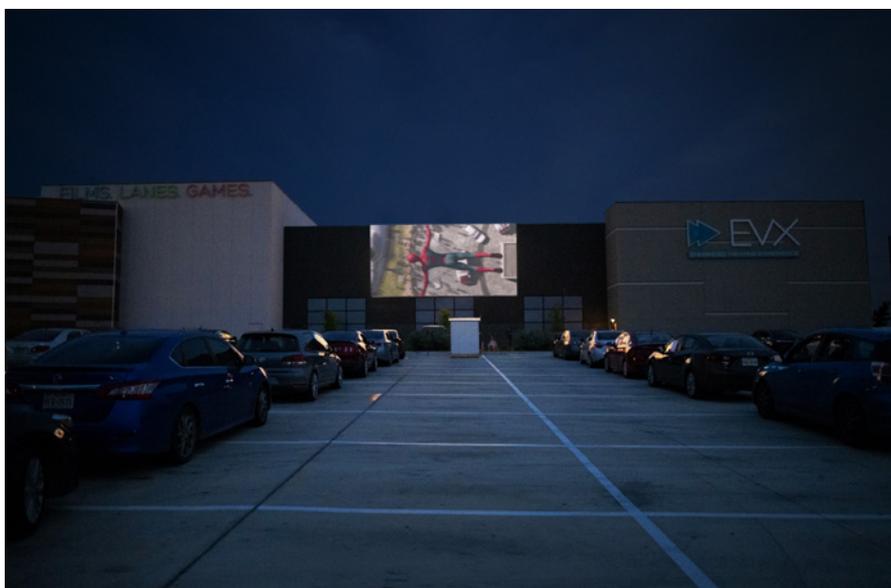
BY CHRIS EGGERTSEN





Photo courtesy JFC Films

➔ As people around the world became better acquainted with their living rooms, those who ventured outside did so by adhering to the two most important words of the pandemic: social distancing. Drive-in cinemas emerged as one of the few outdoor entertainment options where people could confidently congregate while maintaining a safe distance. With approximately 330 drive-in locations in the United States, those with existing lots opened their doors as soon as they could, while others took creative routes to welcome back audiences. In this anthology of our digital coverage, we look at how the moviegoing summer of 2020 brought about the resurgence of drive-in culture.



PARKING LOT CINEMA

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With most U.S. theaters shuttered due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, some exhibitors have devised innovative solutions to keep their businesses afloat during the shutdown. For some, like the Florida-based chain Epic Theatres, those solutions have included temporary—and often highly improvised—conversions to the once-voguish drive-in format.

“We pulled an old screen out of storage and built a frame from PVC pipe, [then] hung the screen over the side of our largest auditorium wall,” says Epic Theatres co-owner and I.T. director Weegee DeMarsh, who, along with his brother and co-owner, Joe DeMarsh,

opened a pop-up drive-in at Epic’s Deltona location on March 20. Though they were later forced to remove the screen due to forecasted summer rains, the DeMarshes didn’t let that stop them. In a decidedly makeshift but highly effective solution, they proceeded to paint the auditorium wall white. “That has worked out nicely,” says Weegee. So nicely, in fact, that Epic has since duplicated the formula at its Clermont and St. Augustine locations.

Though drive-in conversions remain exceedingly rare—indeed, many U.S. states won’t allow them during the pandemic—their implementation has become increasingly common as struggling theaters scramble for ways to generate revenue amid the unprecedented shutdown.

That said, pop-up drive-ins (as they have come to be known) aren’t a feasible solution for every theater. In addition to the often-insurmountable financial costs involved, there are logistical considerations to account for. As Entertainment Supply & Technologies’ vice president of technology sales Scott McCallum tells *BOXOFFICE PRO*, the close proximity of many theaters to shopping centers and other businesses that use bright, automatic security lights after dark can make operating these ad hoc drive-ins an all but impossible challenge.

“Light and outdoor movies are not fans of one another,” says McCallum, who is currently assisting a number of theaters with drive-in conversions. “And that becomes a challenge if you’re a theater in a shopping mall. You know, you’ve got all the ambient light around. Or if you’re next to a car dealership or whatnot. Traditional drive-ins have been in remote areas on the outskirts of town.”

For theaters looking to hire out companies like Entertainment Supply & Technologies for their drive-in conversions, the cost can be prohibitive. The FM broadcast equipment required to play sound through hundreds of car speakers can run between \$5,000 and \$10,000, says McCallum. Add a projector into the mix, and you’re out another \$6,000 to \$7,000. For those who request the full package—including proper screens, metal frames, servers, sanitary products, and more—the cost could run anywhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000 at the high end, according to informal estimates provided by McCallum and Alex Younger, CEO of cinema solutions company CES+.

In the event a theater decides to move forward with a conversion, time can also become an issue, says Younger, who as of last week had sent out 11 pop-up drive-in proposals to theaters in both the U.S. and Latin America.

“Some of these factories, they’re closed too, so it [becomes] a supply chain game where, what can we count on from the vendors?” says Younger. “It’s difficult to move and operate. We’ve run into those hiccups where [suppliers say], ‘Oh, I don’t have product.’”

With theaters looking at a potential delay of weeks, if not months, due to supply chain issues, cinemas—particularly those operating in colder

climates—may already be running out of time, says Younger. “In some cases,” he adds, “we [may have] to develop our own equipment to sell to them.”

Even once a conversion is completed successfully, there are other issues to contend with. During a pandemic, safety is paramount, and each drive-in is forced to follow guidelines set down by state and local officials. Eric Hansen, a consultant who has assisted with makeshift, low-cost drive-in conversions at Aspen Cinemas in Evanston, Wyoming, and Water Gardens Cinema in Pleasant Grove, Utah (both of which cost in the \$2,000–\$3,000 range), says regulations can often be strict.

“When we first announced this thing, we wanted to make sure that we had all of those things kind of ironed out,” says Hansen, who notes that each of the two theaters he works with typically dedicates “one or two” employees to parking lot supervision. “If you go to the Evanston [theater’s] website, they have a drive-in information page that’s dedicated to all of the rules. We are pretty strict with all that. You know, you have to stay in your car. You can’t get in the bed of your truck, you can’t open the hatches of your vehicle, things like that.”

These restrictions can make all-important concession sales into something of an ordeal. Hansen notes that while both the Evanston and Pleasant Grove drive-ins have set up concession systems via an online store—through which customers can place orders for snacks before texting a dedicated phone number to indicate where they’re parked—food deliveries (handed out driver-side by employees outfitted in masks and gloves) can take a long time to get to customers. That can lead to some frustration on the part of both customers and employees.

“On our busy days, it takes a little bit longer because of the logistics behind

it all,” says Hansen, who pauses before continuing dryly: “We’ll be grateful when we don’t have to do that anymore, let’s put it that way. It’s kind of a pain.”

Another significant issue to consider is how best to provide bathrooms for customers in a time of physical-distancing mandates. While both Hansen and the DeMarshes tell BOXOFFICE PRO they’re offering access to their theaters’ indoor bathrooms during screenings, only one group or individual is allowed in at a time, and six feet of space is mandated between each person or group waiting in line. That can result in longer wait times for facilities.

Parking lot sizes are also an important factor to consider for theaters mulling a conversion. Some, like all three Epic Theatres locations, can accommodate only small crowds (the Deltona and St. Augustine locations fit only 113 and 75 cars, respectively). Others, like EVO Entertainment Group’s locations in both Schertz and Kyle, Texas (both of which reopened indoor operations with a limited capacity on Monday, May 4, while continuing to operate their pop-up drive-ins), get more bang for their buck; the Schertz location alone has managed to accommodate nearly 1,600 vehicles for a single showing.

Despite the logistical hurdles, once installed, the concept has been taking hold in many communities—not only providing out-of-home entertainment for the quarantined populous, but allowing theaters to keep employees on staff. (Hansen tells us the Evanston and Pleasant Grove theaters have actually hired extra staff to deal with the extra, pandemic-compounded burdens that stem from the drive-in format.) Several of EVO’s drive-in screenings have been complete sellouts, leading the company to ponder keeping them in operation even

once the pandemic has subsided.

“We see the EVO drive-in concept as becoming a regular component of our alternative programming, even after the environment shifts back to normalcy,” says EVO Entertainment Group CEO Mitchell Roberts, who says the only outside equipment the company purchased for their conversions were FM transmitters (everything else was either custom made or came from in-house). “However, our primary focus will be reopening our in-venue experiences and implementing our new operating plans with enhanced safety measures.”

As Roberts indicates, these conversions may not be the future of moviegoing in the U.S., but drive-ins (both pop-up and traditional) are in higher demand than they have been in decades—and they could stick around beyond the scope of the pandemic, particularly if fears of contagion continue to linger. As McCallum notes, drive-ins showing retro content licensed from the studios—popular titles include such films as *Back to the Future*, *Jurassic Park*, *Harry Potter*, *Jaws*, and *Grease*—can also offer a nostalgic pull for some, adding an extra layer to the experience.

“I think people will remember when they were kids going to the drive-ins,” he says. Still, in his estimation, the format’s appeal will remain limited if studios’ theatrical release slates remain empty throughout the summer season—and perhaps even beyond that.

“If there’s no blockbuster content available to draw the crowds in this summer, if it’s pushed off till the fall or to the holidays, that doesn’t help,” says McCallum. “Retro [movies are] nostalgic and fun, but they need the *Star Wars* or the *Wonder Womans*. That draws people into drive-ins just like it does into the regular theaters.”

Left, top and bottom:
Texas-based Evo Entertainment hosts a drive-in evening in the parking lot of one of its locations. Photo courtesy Evo Entertainment.

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Left: The B&B Twin Drive-In in Independence, Missouri. Photo courtesy B&B Theatres

Right: The Showcase Drive-In at Patriot Place in Foxborough, Massachusetts (top), photo courtesy Showcase Cinemas. The Malco Summer Drive-In in Memphis, Tennessee, photo courtesy Malco Theatres

MAJOR CIRCUITS EMBRACE THE DRIVE-IN AS THEY TRANSITION INTO REOPENING

Originally published on June 24, 2020

On May 30, Showcase Cinemas opened a “pop-up” drive-in theater at its Patriot Place location in Foxborough, Massachusetts, with a screening of Steven Spielberg’s 1981 classic *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The sold-out event—which doubled as a fundraiser for the local Foxboro Food Pantry—amounted to a full-circle moment for the exhibitor, which was one of the first chains to embrace the drive-in concept beginning in the late 1930s.

“It’s interesting that Showcase is starting out with a drive-in as part of our reopening, because it’s part of our DNA and our history,” says Mark Malinowski, Showcase’s vice president of global marketing. In addition to establishing one of the country’s first drive-ins—the now-defunct Sunrise Drive-In on Long Island, which opened in 1938 with a screening of the Jimmy Durante musical *Start Cheering*—several of its current hard-top locations, including Legacy Place in Dedham, Massachusetts, and the Cinema de Lux in Revere, Massachusetts, were originally launched as drive-in venues.

The current resurgence of the drive-in

format is a phenomenon that would have been inconceivable just a few months ago. But with the coronavirus continuing to circulate widely in the U.S. more than three months into the pandemic, and with the majority of hard-top theaters remaining shuttered, drive-ins remain the only moviegoing option in many areas of the country. That reality is about to change, however—and for major chains now prepping for a reopening of their indoor locations for the first time since mid-March, “pop-up” drive-ins are being viewed as a transitional step, allowing them to test out safety protocols before top-tier studio releases including *Mulan*, *Tenet*, and *Bill & Ted Face the Music* are unleashed in theaters.

Marcus Theatres has been dabbling in the “parking lot cinema” concept even more extensively than Showcase. The country’s fourth-largest exhibitor currently operates pop-up drive-ins at five locations: Elgin in Illinois, Majestic of Brookfield and South Shore in Wisconsin, Pickerington in Ohio, and Twin Creek in Nebraska. Marcus CEO and president (and current NATO vice chairman) Rolando Rodriguez says that one of the first of these to open, Twin Creek in the town of Bellevue, saw sellouts in its first 10 days of operation—a turnout he believes speaks to a “pent-up” demand from moviegoers who have been barred from entering

their local multiplexes for months. “I think people are ready to go back to some level of normalcy,” he says. “And I feel confident that we’re going to be providing that as an industry.”

When asked to list some of the challenges of operating these pop-up locations—each of which took roughly a week to set up—Rodriguez employed the more optimistic phrase “key learnings” to discuss the inevitable logistical hurdles that came with the process. Among them: dealing with the “ingress and egress” of vehicles into and out of the parking lot; ensuring all cars are parked 15 minutes before showtime to avoid disturbances from latecomers; and effectively educating guests on how to preorder tickets and concessions online.

More importantly for Rodriguez, the pop-ups have given Marcus Theatres the opportunity to test out many of the health and safety protocols the company has been developing over the last several months. “[We want] to make sure that when we reopen our regular theaters, a lot of these plans that we’ve been working on will be not only good plans, but executable plans,” he says. Though there are certain components of the new guidelines that can only be tested indoors, a number of procedures—including the use of masks, social distancing markers, placement of sanitation stations and the concessions

preordering system—have been put into practice at the drive-ins, allowing the company to conduct a trial run before it executes a full-scale reopening.

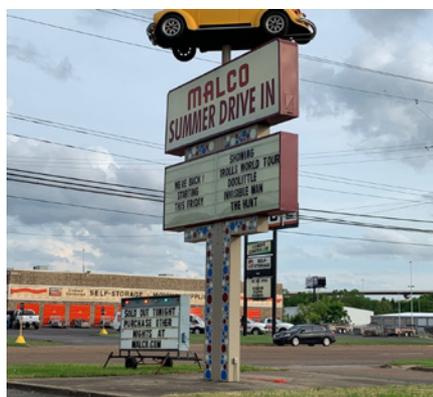
Showcase, too, used its single pop-up drive-in as a run-through for the company's "Be Showcase Safe" initiative, which includes a new ticketing and concessions preorder function on its website and app to facilitate no-contact payments. "This was our first time testing it out, kicking the tires on it," says Malinowski, "and it worked really well."

Large chains are also testing health and safety protocols at traditional drive-ins. B&B Theatres, which operates drive-in theaters in the towns of Moberly and Independence, Missouri, has put social distancing measures in place at its two outdoor locations, eliminated cash transactions, and reduced contact between guests and employees at the box office and concession areas. Malco Theatres has employed similar measures at its Summer Drive-In theater in Memphis, including limiting guest capacity to 50 percent.

Representatives for Marcus, Malco, B&B, and Showcase all claim that attendance has been strong at both their pop-up and traditional drive-ins, though just how eager moviegoers are to return to hard-top locations—even once brand-new blockbuster titles begin populating multiplexes—remains an open question. Some people we spoke to pushed back on the idea that audiences will require much of an incentive to return at all.

"I don't think it is a matter of easing movie fans back into coming to the movies," Malco Theatres' senior vice president of film and marketing Jeff Kaufman told BOXOFFICE PRO via email. "It is obvious that the high degree of pent-up demand for the theatrical experience and need to get out of the house has exploded, resulting in huge drive-in attendance. People still love movies, and we are grateful they are putting their money where their fandom is."

Those sentiments were echoed by B&B Theatres director of publicity Paul Farnsworth, who added, "While our drive-in operations did provide us the means of presenting the public with some of our revised cleaning and social distancing protocols, I'm not sure that our guests will need an 'easing back in' outside of the parameters established by local and



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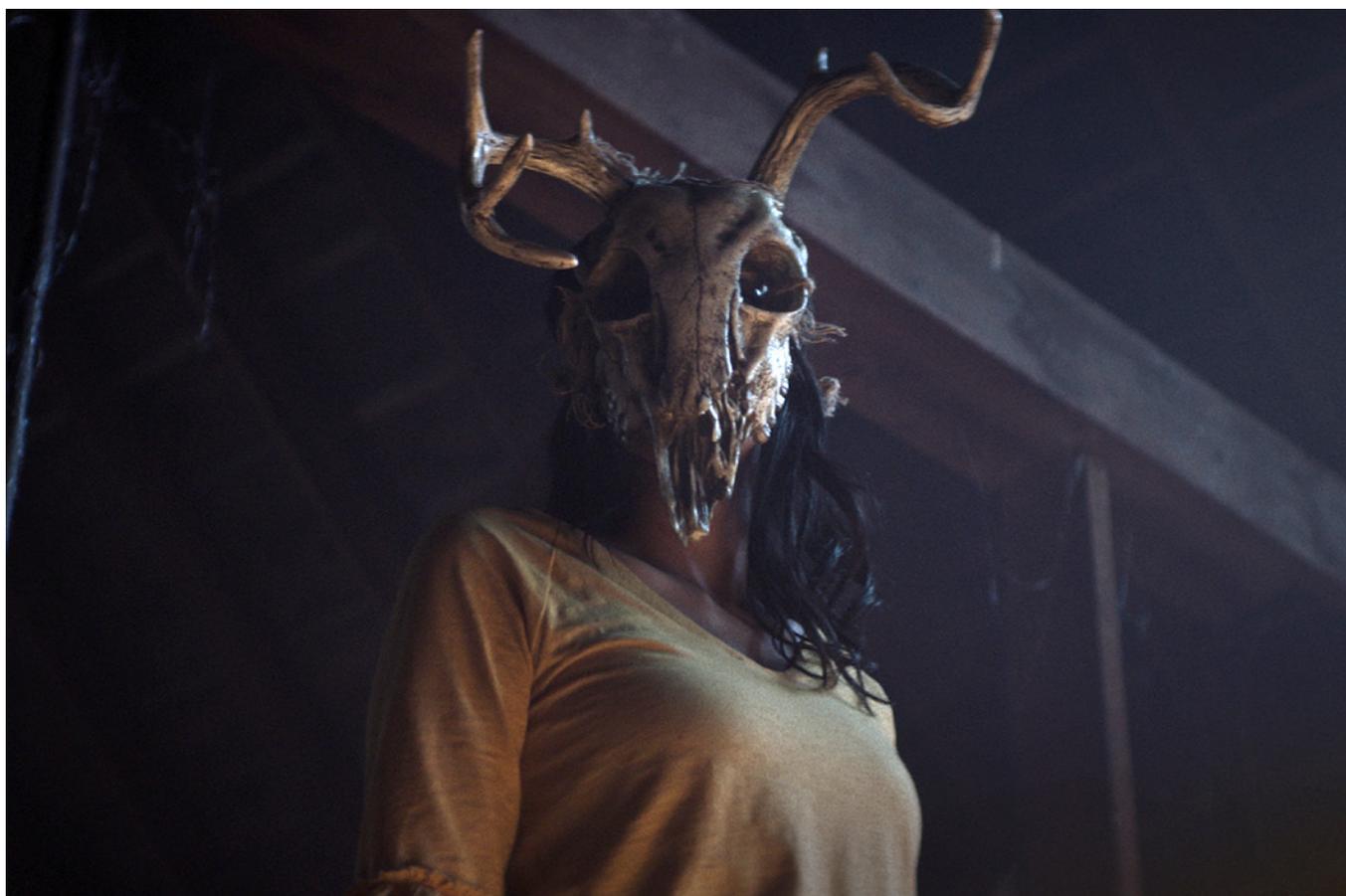
regional health authorities. In other words, we feel and hope that our guests will come back to cinemas once cinemas are reopened and won't require much in the way of re-acclimation."

Rodriguez was more measured when asked whether drive-ins are a way of mitigating anxieties for guests who may be nervous about returning to indoor locations—not to mention a reminder of the value of moviegoing for those who have been relegated to watching films at home for the past several months.

"Think about this—our industry has been pretty much shut down now for almost three months," he says. "So for us, it was an important aspect to keep connected with our guests and the importance and the fun of moviegoing and entertainment value associated with it." To accommodate guests who aren't yet comfortable watching movies in an indoor theater, he adds, the company is considering keeping its pop-up drive-ins operational even once its hard-top locations open for business.

Of course, reopening plans for exhibitors across the country are highly dependent upon major studios providing new content—and with only a few high-profile films slated for release over the next several months, all eyes are on Disney (*Mulan*), Warner Bros. (*Tenet*), and others to follow through on those plans. All exhibitor representatives interviewed for this story expressed confidence that the studios will keep their remaining summer releases on the calendar, but if coronavirus cases begin to spike in a substantial way—a phenomenon already being observed in states like Arizona, Texas, and Florida—reopening plans could be further delayed in some areas.

"Let's hope to God that that does not happen—not just for the sake of our industry but the sake of our country," says Rodriguez, who didn't rule out the possibility of opening more pop-up drive-in locations if indoor reopening plans get pushed back in some communities. And if they do? "Obviously, there are different ways to provide that entertainment experience during difficult times," Rodriguez adds. "What you've seen is we can be creative and certainly adapt to whatever those situations might become."



PROGRAMMING: HOW IFC FILMS' *THE WRETCHED* BECAME A SLEEPER HIT ON THE DRIVE-IN CIRCUIT

Originally published on June 18, 2020

In an unprecedented spring season that saw the shuttering of hard-top theaters, a release slate emptied of major studio films, and the improbable resurgence of drive-ins, an unlikely hit emerged: IFC Films' *The Wretched*, a low-budget horror film about a young boy who is terrorized by a thousand-year-old witch. Through the end of its seventh weekend, the creature feature had brought in a cool \$1.37 million, mainly from outdoor theaters, making it arguably the first drive-in hit of the modern era.

"Horror films in general have such a long history of being at the drive-in," Jasper Basch, director of sales and distribution at IFC Films, tells BOXOFFICE PRO. "This is just a continuation of a tried-and-true tradition."

A lack of competition didn't hurt. When the major studios cleared their theatrical slates during the spring months due to

"Cinemas are there for every type of film, every type of genre, but I think drive-ins specifically imply the popcorn movie that everybody can go see together and have a good time."

Covid-19, it created a fertile landscape for an indie title like *The Wretched* to break through. The film's largely positive critical reception (74% on Rotten Tomatoes) and strong word of mouth also played a role in its popularity. "I think a lot of [the success] has to do with the film itself," Basch adds. "A good movie is always going to find its audience—I'm a true believer about that."

Needless to say, *The Wretched* directors Drew and Brett Pierce couldn't have predicted that their film would be released in the middle of a pandemic—nor that it would lend itself so well to a format they never expected to screen it in.

"We didn't realize that we were making the perfect drive-in movie," says Drew, who co-directed one previous feature with Brett—the 2011 zombie film *Deadheads*. By the brothers' own admission, *The Wretched* isn't "art house" horror. Rather, it's a fun, old-fashioned creature feature that falls squarely within the tradition of drive-in hits of yore.

"I think drive-ins are associated with escapism and a good time," says Brett. "Cinemas are there for every type of film, every type of genre, but I think drive-ins specifically imply the popcorn movie that



everybody can go see together and have a good time.”

The Pierces do admit to one drawback of the drive-in format: The audio, mixed in 7.1 by sound designer Eliot Connors, gets lost when it’s played over a standard car stereo. But that’s just one downside among many advantages, including the ability of the directors—who have watched the film multiple times at Los Angeles-area drive-ins—to hear the audience’s feedback in real time, just by rolling down their windows.

“We love hearing random people react to the movie,” says Drew, who adds that in pre-Covid times, “usually we [would] go hide out in the bathroom, because that’s where people say what they really think of [the movie].”

For IFC, *The Wretched* has allowed the independent distributor to forge relationships with drive-in owners that Basch hopes will pay further dividends down the line. “All the [drive-ins] we’re in are new customers to IFC, and we had to build those relationships,” he says, noting that drive-ins typically don’t program new, independent releases.

If nothing else, *The Wretched*’s sleeper success proves that even in the bleakest of times, audiences remain hungry for the theatrical experience. “When the virus started becoming more of an actuality, I think there were a lot of questions as to what the future would look like,” Basch says. “The thought of grossing a million dollars theatrically, that’s nothing I would have ever been able to predict.” ■

Far left: *The Wretched*, an IFC Films release. Photo courtesy IFC Films

Left: The Galaxy Drive-In Theater in Ennis, Texas (top). Additional stills from *The Wretched*, an IFC Films release. Photos courtesy IFC Films