

# Rotunda cinema reopening gets raves from customers

Refurbished theater has low-key opening

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A romantic comedy and a tale of a young wizard are ushering in the much-anticipated and long-delayed reopening of a closed North Baltimore movie house, to the delight of cinemagoers from 6 to 60.

The refurbished two-screen Rotunda Cinematheque, an affiliate of the historic Senator Theatre, opened before Christmas with *Two Weeks Notice* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

The theater, in the Rotunda shopping mall on the edge of Hampden and Roland Park, replaces the old Loews Twin Cinemas, which closed in March 2001.

"I'm excited about it," Sandra Heubeck said of the theater's reopening. She went Monday with her 11-year-old daughter, Alicia Brown, to a late-afternoon showing of *Harry Potter*.

"I think it's the best thing they could have done for us," added Heubeck, 39, a factory worker who lives a few blocks away. "I don't drive, so it's easy to get to. It's perfect for a weeknight to come to the movies."

The theater has been advertising its showings and offering discounted \$5 tickets Monday through Thursday but has not otherwise promoted its opening.

"It was a stealth opening," said Thomas A. Kiefaber, owner of the Senator and Cinematheque. "What we're trying to do is get these places running before we do a lot of, 'Hey, look at us.'"

Although the initial offerings are mainstream Hollywood films, Kiefaber said he plans to offer first-run, art and classic movies.

"What I'm really ecstatic about is that the Rotunda is a neighborhood movie house," he said. "Those that are coming in are part of the surrounding community."

The cost of renovations was \$400,000, about \$50,000 more than originally estimated, said Kiefaber, who had hoped to reopen the theater a year ago.

Improvements include plush seats and a new sound system within the theaters, and new carpeting and a revamped concession stand in the small lobby.

City and mall officials are as enthusiastic as patrons about the opening of Rotunda Cinematheque, a key part of a broader plan to bring financial stability to the Senator.

Andrew B. Frank, executive vice president of Baltimore Development Corp., had a one-word reaction to news of the theater's opening: "Great."

The city's economic development agency is guaranteeing half of a \$1.2 million loan to help refinance the Senator's debt and renovate the Rotunda theaters, Frank said. The guarantee is backed by liens on the Senator and Kiefaber's home, Frank said.

BDC got involved in part because of the city's \$2.9 million investment in Belvedere Square, across York Road from the Senator in North Baltimore, Frank said. The new theaters also will enhance the stable neighborhoods around the Rotunda, he said.

"There's an intangible quality-of-life benefit in bringing a new theater within walking distance," he said.

"It'll give us a boost in repositioning the mall," said Craig Scheiner, vice president of Manekin LLC, manager of the retail and office complex, which has been troubled by several vacancies.

Merchants in the 30-year-old mall with high ceilings and grand pillars are hopeful the theaters will draw more customers.

"Little by little, I expect business to increase," said Roslyn DuPree, owner of Coffee with Rozz, a sandwich shop around the corner from the theaters.

"It looks to be like it's going to be very helpful," said Shabir Malik, owner of Casa Mia's carryout across from the theaters.

In the 1980s, Loews ran such first-run fare as Rain Man and Who Framed Roger Rabbit. In the 1990s, it turned to more arty movies, such as The Piano and Shine. Their closings occurred as part of a North American corporate cutback that included more than 100 movie screens.

For moviegoers, Rotunda Cinematheque is filling a definite void.

"There's been no place nearby for kids to go to the movies," said Betty Crooks, 60, of Medfield, who was accompanying her daughter-in-law Nicole Aaron, 36, and granddaughter Autumn, 6, to a showing of Harry Potter.

Lois David pronounced the theaters as "lovely" after seeing Two Weeks Notice.

"I used to come here all the time. I was very disappointed when it closed down," said David, 63, an artist who lives a few blocks away. "When I saw the sign that it was opened, I was thrilled."