

The last picture show: AMC CLASSIC Chambersburg 7 movie theater closes

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CHAMBERSBURG — On Sunday, April 16, the 7:30 p.m. showing of “The Super Mario Bros. Movie” was screened for an audience of just over 30 people at the AMC CLASSIC Chambersburg 7 in the Chambersburg Mall. The animated film featuring Nintendo’s famous pair of plumbers, and starring Chris Pratt, Charlie Day and Anya Taylor-Joy, was the final movie to ever be screened there.

If you have to choose a film to end a nearly 40-year run, “Mario” was a probably good one to go out on.

Its bright colors made full use of the screen. Its score, powered by the theater’s room-filling JBL speakers, blended symphonic drama with old-school videogame sounds. The storyline was fresh enough to help Nintendo sell the latest iteration of Mario.

But it was also steeped in enough nostalgia to remind the adults in the room that the era they grew up in would be closing that night as well.

The main feature was preceded by nearly 20 minutes of trailers for films that will never be shown here.

The theater opened with four screens in 1984. In 1989, Bill Henry was hired as the general manager, a position that he would hold until the theater closed last Sunday. Over the ensuing decades, both the film industry and the movie-watching public experienced significant stylistic and technological changes, but through it all, Bill was a fixture.

Bill Henry was there in 1997 — the year “Titanic” was released — when the movie theater expanded from four screens to seven. By this time, the theater had already been under the ownership of Carmike Cinemas for several years. Before Carmike, it had been operated by Greensburg-based Manos Amusement, Inc., which ran about 30 theaters in a region that included Pennsylvania, Maryland and New York.

And Bill Henry was there when the theater made the transition from 35 mm film to digital. “That was the big change,” he said. “Before that, the picture quality wasn’t perfect.



Photo by Aaron Dobler

The AMC CLASSIC Chambersburg 7 theater in the Chambersburg Mall showed its last movie on April 16 at 7:30 p.m. The theater ended its nearly 40-year run with "The Super Mario Bros. Movie."

With digital, it became a lot more perfect, and, actually, a lot simpler for the people that worked at the theater. You didn’t have to deal with film.”

He said, “You had to constantly worry about the film getting scratched or not being threaded right. Now it’s all digital files, and while things can go wrong, it doesn’t ruin thousands of dollars of film.”

And Bill Henry was there when AMC Entertainment Holdings, Inc. acquired Carmike Cinemas in 2016.

Some of the changes were more subtle: rather than tearing ticket stubs, guest admission could be granted using confirmation numbers on smartphones.

While the ownership became

increasingly corporate with each acquisition (despite the closure, AMC remains the largest movie theater chain in the world), Bill kept the focus on creating a space where families could come together for a shared experience.

years.”

The four movies: “Snow White,” “Fantasia,” “Jaws” and “Grease.”

The two Disney movies were tied into his hometown’s Christmas activities. He saw “Jaws” while visiting his cousin in Cleveland. For

here that she discovered the movie “Shark Tale.” “That was my favorite movie. That was one of my favorite parts of coming with my nana.”

“Coming to the mall was always an experience,” said Zimmerman who had been coming to the mall with his grandparents and his dad since he was about five or six. “Go shopping, get something to eat, always looking forward to a day out, go to the movies after. Always fun as a kid. I remember you couldn’t even find a parking spot back in the day.”

“This mall was our childhood, coming to this mall with our grandparents,” said Hess. Adding that people who never experienced the movie theater are missing out on “the experience of getting together with other people who want to see movies or going out with friends.”

Bill, the connection between film and family had solidified at an early age. It’s not just sitting in a room staring at a screen when you do it together.

Bill said, “Sometimes, for certain movies, the PG-horror-type movie, half of the excitement is when there’s a startle and the whole crowd jumps at the same time. Or when something’s really, really funny, there’s that person’s laugh that you hear more than anyone else in the theater, the weird laugh that you can hear a mile away: that’s almost as funny as the funny part of the movie.”

Beau Hess and Kyle Zimmerman happened to catch the second-to-last showing of “Mario.” Hess had seen clips of it on TikTok, and they both agreed that it lived up to the hype.

“I’ve been coming here since I was five years old,” said Hess. “My nana, she brought me here for my first-ever movie in theaters.” It was

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--Bill Henry

“My favorite part was always getting people excited about new movies,” said Bill. “Especially the kids. It’s amazing to see how excited kids can get coming to the movies. The whole experience — the popcorn, the drink, the movie.”

He compares the energy to the AMC television ad in which Nicole Kidman describes “that indescribable feeling that we all get when the lights begin to dim, and we go somewhere we’ve never been before.”

“It was spot-on for me,” he said. “It’s an experience.”

Bill grew up in a town where the downtown theater, like a lot of downtown theaters, closed in the 70s.

“I was the kid that never got to go to the movies,” he said. “My father had two jobs, and my mom was sick when I was growing up, so I didn’t get to go. I can think of four movies I saw as a kid until my teenage

Zimmerman brought up the anticipation of waiting for the lights to dim, “and the sound quality in the theater, too — it’s just different than being at home.”

“It’s something that’s going to disappear if people don’t start going soon,” said Zimmerman.

Hess agreed: “Not many people want to come out and do things in public...that’s the sad aspect about this mall and the theater. Online shopping — it took over. Nobody wanted to go out because they could get everything online.”

“They’re complaining about things disappearing because they don’t go out and support local or small businesses,” said Zimmerman.

To their credit, Hess and Zimmerman try to do as much of their shopping in physical locations as possible.

Now that the theater at the Chambersburg Mall is gone, they remain cautiously optimistic about continuing to see movies at the Regal Cinemas at the Valley Mall or the Warehouse Cinemas in Leitersburg.

When asked where he will watch movies going forward, Bill Henry said that he is a fan of the theaters in Gettysburg and that he prefers a more traditional movie theater experience.

“I especially like the old downtown theater, the Majestic,” he said. “They get more things that aren’t mainstream. They have more art films. It’s beautiful. It’s what I think of as an old-school movie theater. It’s decorated pretty — not like the super-modern theaters that they do now. You don’t have any sort of classic movie-going experience there.”

He added: “I remember when I was a small kid, and we went to our downtown theater, they still had curtains on the stage. That’s the sort of thing that I remember and look for. We still have curtains here [at the Chambersburg Mall], but they’re on the walls, not the stage.”

“It sort of brings back the old theater feel.”

Until it didn’t.

There are no post-credit surprises here.

The concession stand is already closed.

The show is over.



Photo by Aaron Dobler

The theater's staff prepare the concession counter before the theater's final feature.



Photo by Aaron Dobler

Bill Henry, center, manager of the theater, talks to fans Kyle Zimmerman, left, and Beau Hess, right.