

AT THE DRIVE-IN (2017) 🍌🍌🍌

D: Alexander Monelli. Jeff Mattox, Virgil Cardamone, Matt McClanahan, Robert Humanick. 79 mins. (MVD Visual) 4/19

This lovingly constructed documentary looks at how special the drive-in experience is in general while specifically setting its sights on Pennsylvania's Mahoning Drive-in and the people who've gathered there. It's a David and Goliath tale as owner Jeff Mattox confronts the real threat of closing his beloved ozoner after Hollywood dictates all theaters must convert to digital projection as movies will no longer be available on 35mm film. When funds for the digital projector fail to materialize, Mattox decides to show only older films. When college students Matt McClanahan and Virgil Cardamone discover the theater, the trio forms a partnership and transforms the Mahoning into the ultimate retro drive-in. We watch these guys build the business, sleep on the snack bar floor and reach out to former employees to preserve the sanctity of the drive-in experience. Along the way we are introduced to a wonderful cast of characters, workers, and audience members, all people we recognize and relate to, their love for the theater moving some to drive six-and-a-half hours to volunteer on weekends just to be a part of it. If this were a movie solely about a retro drive-in, our heroes might be coming up with crazy shows and gimmicks to get ticket buyers away from the giant, corporate luxury theater down the street. Gross humor and pranks would fill the screen until the drive-in's exploitation orgy at season's finale with topless dancers and a band on the concession stand roof. By movie's end they would have earned the money needed to save the drive-in and put the corporate theater out of business. But life is stranger than fiction, and this family of alfresco film lovers keeps the drive-in amazingly alive and relevant. Director Monelli captures some special scenes with his subjects, particularly Mattox as he reflects on his life, remembering when his family had a birthday party at the Mahoning for him when he was a kid, then regretting not having a family of his own to introduce to the drive-in. It's a bittersweet moment that reminds us that sometimes life has different plans for us than we have for ourselves. Extras include multiple cast commentaries as well as a track by Monelli with cast member Humanick, deleted scenes, trailer and a director and cast Q&A after an Alamo Drafthouse screening. This terrific documentary reminds us that the way to preserve the past is to revisit it once in a while. As soon as it works its magic on you, you will feel like volunteering at the Mahoning, or at least putting a screen up in your backyard and showing *The Evil Dead* for as many people who can pile in next to the rusty jungle gym. 🍌

—Rob Freese

DRIVE-IN AUTEUR ALEXANDER MONELLI As Told To Rob Freese

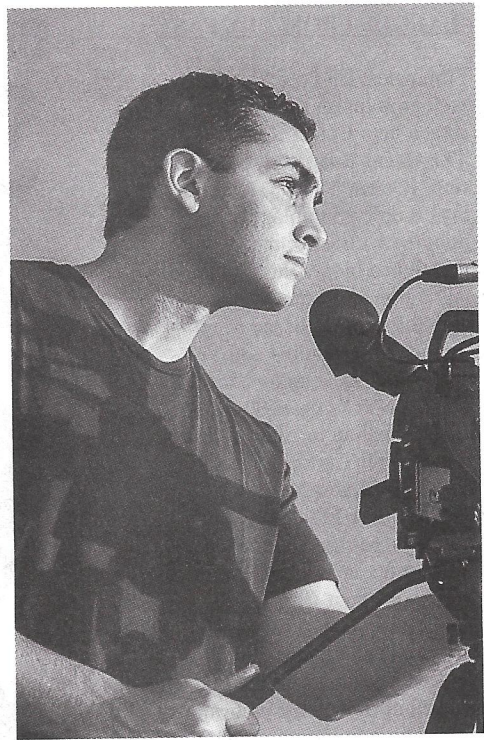
Director Alexander Monelli describes his film *At the Drive-in* as a "hang-out movie," which it most certainly is. Monelli is a cinephile who loves movies. He subscribes to the idea that cinema is more about personality than story, which contributes to his uncanny knack for catching his subjects in some very honest, sweet moments. (Scope out monellifilms.com to learn more about his work and view a number of his short documentaries.) Here, Monelli shares his insights about the magic of the movies and the Mahoning. —RF

ROB FREESE *What was your history with the Mahoning Drive-in?*

ALEXANDER MONELLI I never went there until the first day of shooting. I started shooting at a drive-in in the town where I grew up in northeast Pennsylvania. I wanted to make a documentary about a drive-in or drive-ins. I love movies, obviously, and I think drive-ins are a cool way to watch movies. I started filming at this one drive-in and it really wasn't working out too well. Everyone there was nice but they weren't open like the guys at the Mahoning. They were older, they were more proper. It was more of a business. There was nothing interesting there. I always make the joke, "They were too professional for a documentary." A kid that I went to high school with said, "If you're looking for a drive-in, I go to this one every weekend, the Mahoning Drive-in. It's about an hour away." I researched it and I called Jeff, the owner, and talked to him. He was interested and I told him I wanted to come for a day to film and see what it was like and see if this could be something. Really my friend, who's in the film, James, introduced me to it. I did not know of the place until he told me about it. I'm glad he did.

RF *How long did it take you to earn the trust of your subjects to get the more intimate interviews featured in the film?*

AM Well, it was definitely a slow process. I went into it not really knowing what it was going to be. I was like, I'll just follow them around for a season and see what happens. Right off the bat they kind of opened up a little bit with me, but I could tell there was still some guard up. Anyone who goes there on a weekend to see a movie, I guarantee you, the experience you have when you meet them in person is just like when you meet them in the film, because they talk to everybody. They're super-friendly. They are generally just nice guys and girls. I made the teaser trailer and sent it to them and I was like, "I just want you guys to get an idea of what I'm doing, the tone, the feel, the look, everything." I feel like



Drive-in Ambition: Director Alexander Monelli focuses on the still-thriving Mahoning Drive-in.

when they saw that, and I'm not saying this egotistically, but it kind of blew them away. I don't think they expected that. I think they were thinking more like, "Oh, this will be something on YouTube, a blog or something maybe." I don't think they realized I was trying to make a movie. When they saw the teaser trailer they definitely bought it more and started opening up. All the sit-down interviews, not the ones where I'm sort of catching them running around, but the main sit-down interviews you see were all done after filming. I did that because I thought that, by that point, everything would be good. They'd open up and it worked. I feel that if I shot those interviews early on, Jeff may not have told that story about wishing he had a wife and a family, Virgil talking and getting choked up about his childhood and all that stuff. It definitely took three or four months. Matt was the hardest one to crack because he was approaching everything from a business point of view, and the fact that they slept in the concession stand was something he was very apprehensive talking about. He felt like it might draw some kind of red flag or someone might come and try to say this was illegal or whatever. I was like, "Dude, you're just sleeping in there, it's fine. People sleep at the drive-in, they camp out." But it took him a little while to open up to that. There were a lot of little things along the way that he tried to protect. But eventually we were able to pull the curtains off of them a little bit. It was a pretty long process.

RF *The music played throughout the entire film has a whimsical, dream-like quality. Was that a conscious choice to use music that gave the film that dream-like ambience?*

"You're just sort of stuck in this fantasy land and we only allude to the outside world."

Alexander Monelli
At the Drive-in

AM Yeah, definitely. Music is super important to me and I kind of approach it like Quentin Tarantino does, not to compare myself or my work to him, he's the master and everything, but he doesn't like a composer coming in and sort of altering, perhaps, what he saw through editing. Even Stanley Kubrick was similar. He would like to use finished, existing pieces of music. I went to my favorite music licensing site and it took a while. There were definitely different versions of every scene and every song. I didn't want the music to heighten the comedy. I wanted the music to accentuate, like you said, the sort of mystical, magical quality of the place. I wanted the humor to be sort of dry and you either kind of laugh at it or it's not funny. I didn't want a laugh track. I like where the music is sort of not what would normally go with what you're watching. With this film there were a lot of instances where I could have put in something more fast-paced or more modern. I wanted to play the music that way, where the content was much different in terms of the guys cursing a little bit and those scenes where you see zombie parts, so I thought it was a nice juxtaposition.

RF Did the focus of the film ever change at any point during production?

AM Well, there's a moment in the middle where Robert the movie guy, he talks to me behind the camera saying, "I heard you wanted to make a movie about drive-ins and then you decided to make a movie about *this* drive-in." And that was a very early-on decision. That wasn't something that happened midway through. I feel there have been other drive-in documentaries—*Going Attractions* is one. That one chronicles all these different drive-ins. Actually, what really made me focus on the Mahoning were two things. One, a French-Canadian documentary filmmaker put together a 60-minute piece and he interviewed some of the guys at the Mahoning. But he interviewed a bunch of different people at a bunch of different drive-ins. It was good. I really enjoyed it. But it interviewed so many different drive-ins in America and *Going Attractions* was there, I felt like, "What am I doing then?" I kind of figured the only thing I could do is tell this super-specific story about this drive-in and try to make it a microcosm for drive-ins in general, although it's really not, but also, using the drive-in, tell a singular, smaller story.

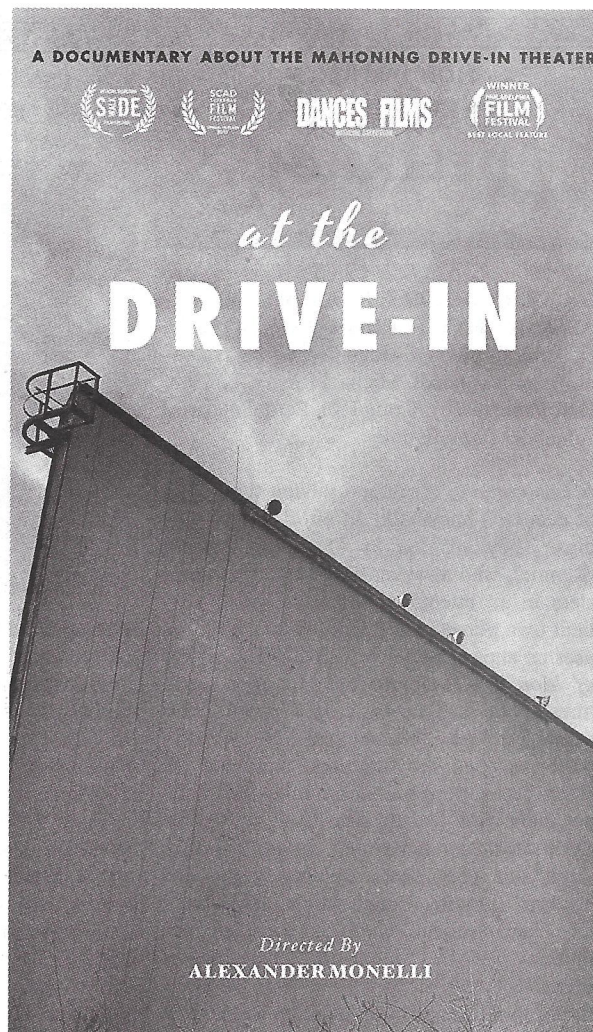
Then, as I was filming, I started talking to everyone more, especially on the last weekend. Chef Corey, he says, "My life is all over the place." They all mention how the drive-in is kind of an escape. Not just in jest. It really feels like they are going there to fulfill something that is sort of missing in the real world. It really became apparent as I kept watching interviews. That's definitely why I wanted to keep everything at the drive-in. It's like the *Wizard of Oz* if the *Wizard of Oz*, the entire thing, took place in Oz. You're just sort of stuck in this fantasy land and we only kind of allude to the outside world. That interested me. They all had full-time jobs on top of this. I felt that going there and showing them at the full-time jobs, I'd seen that before. It's like you watch a documentary about a struggling wrestler or struggling artist, it always shows them at their boring day job like they're kind of in *The Matrix* or something. So I felt, "Let's stay in *The Matrix*." And that's what led me to focusing on them and that's really how it kind of morphed throughout production.

RF Are you happy with how the film turned out?

AM Yeah. I'm happy with it. Obviously, I've seen it so many times now at screenings and whatnot, I understand George Lucas now. I wouldn't go back and do what he did to the original *Star Wars* trilogy, but I understand that urge. I understand seeing something and knowing, "That could have been better" or "If only I added this moment or this shot." All that stuff constantly runs through your head, so I understand George Lucas better after making this. I'm definitely proud of it. I didn't know what the reaction would be. I didn't know if Millennials would like it more or Baby Boomers. You have Jeff representing the Baby Boomers and Matt and Virgil are the Millennials. So I didn't know if it was going to play to one group or both. Honestly, I get as many comments from men and women in their sixties as I do in their twenties. That's pretty interesting, I thought. I'm proud of it, but there are definitely things I'm like, "I wish I could do that better or do that over."

RF What do you consider a perfect night at the drive-in?

AM Well, I recently went to the Mahoning with my wife, my sister and her kids. It was awesome. I just wanted to go see *The Wizard of Oz*. It's one of my favorite movies and that's why it's in the documentary. Again, I think it's a nice parallel with the film itself. Like I said before, the



whole film is kind of like in Oz, in a way, that sort of fantasy place. The movie-going experience is sort of a holy experience for me, if you couldn't tell. Whenever one of my favorite directors puts out a movie, I make sure I see it at the theater. If it's someone like Tarantino, I try to see it if he put it out in 70mm. Same with Christopher Nolan. I'll try to see it the way they want us to see it if I can. But at the drive-in, I want it to be vintage. I want it to feel like you're stepping back in time. So the Mahoning is obviously perfect for that. You know, going there, getting a spot usually up front. I always get a big bag of popcorn and a can of soda. Just sort of sitting outside and, you know, hearing nature. I don't mind hearing the cars in the distance. Where the Mahoning is, you'll sometimes hear animals in the distance. It's all part of it. My favorite thing is, I never bring a radio to the drive-in. You can listen in your car, but I like to sit outside, and this was awesome at the Mahoning when I saw *The Wizard of Oz*, so many people have their radios that you can hear the collective sound of everyone's radio. You can hear the movie that way. It really is immersive because you feel it and you hear it coming from all around you. I just love that. And I love just being out in the fresh air watching a movie. It's not something you normally do. And I have to have plenty of buttery popcorn. ☘