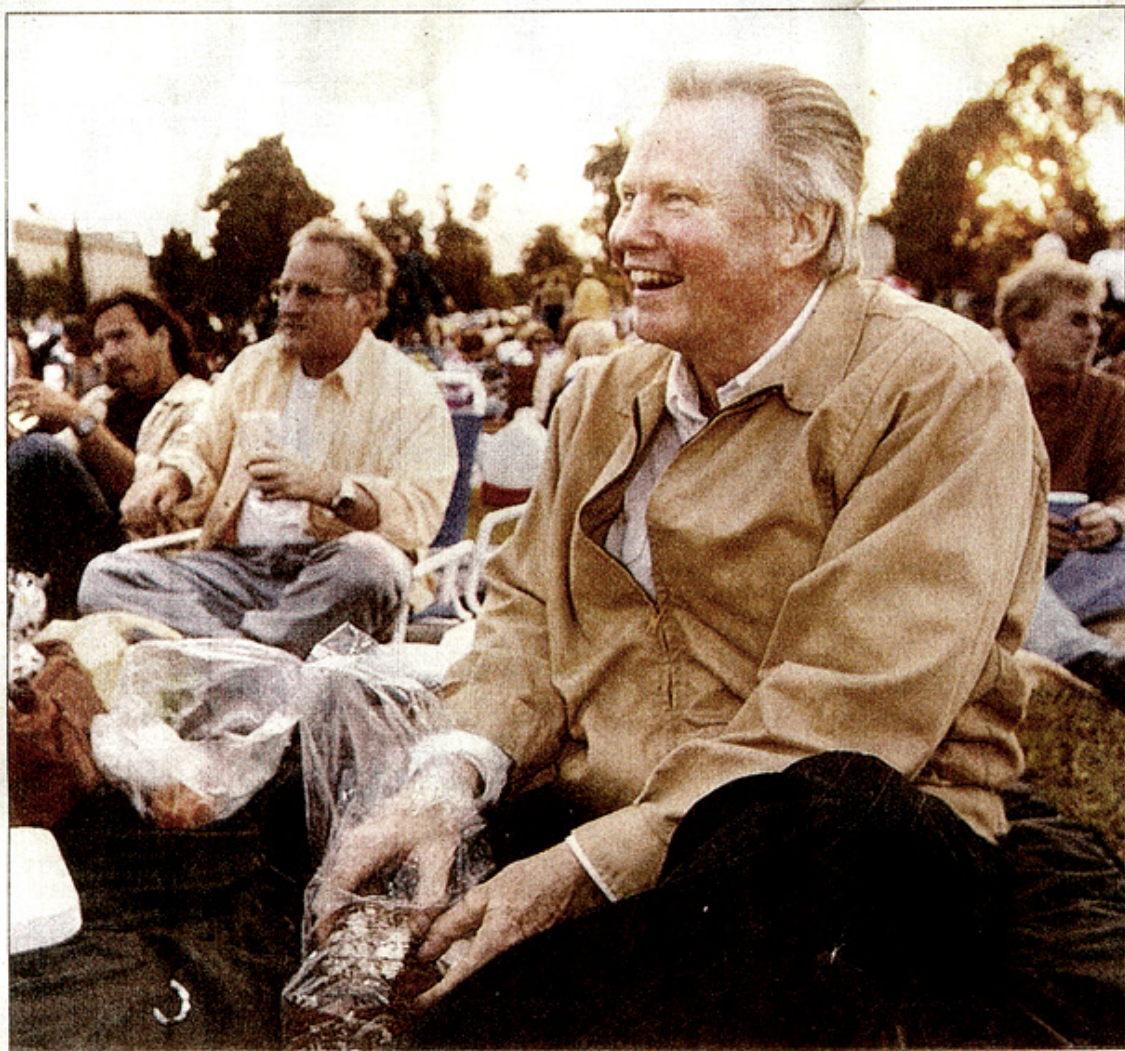


"It's a wonderful thing to see a film the way it should be seen — which is in a group. And out of doors in an informal atmosphere. . . . I like the idea of bringing your food, too."

— Jon Voight



Photos by Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

**Famous faces:** Actor Jon Voight, right, and director Michael Mann, center, set up a picnic in Hollywood Forever Cemetery, where people gather twice a month to watch classic films "beneath and above the stars."

# A movie experience as big as all outdoors

## Open-air theaters are the new drive-ins

By Claudia Puig  
USA TODAY

Summertime, the living is easy, the nights are warm and outdoors in a cemetery is the place to be. Unless you prefer bobbing on an inner tube or picnicking in the foothills of the Rockies.

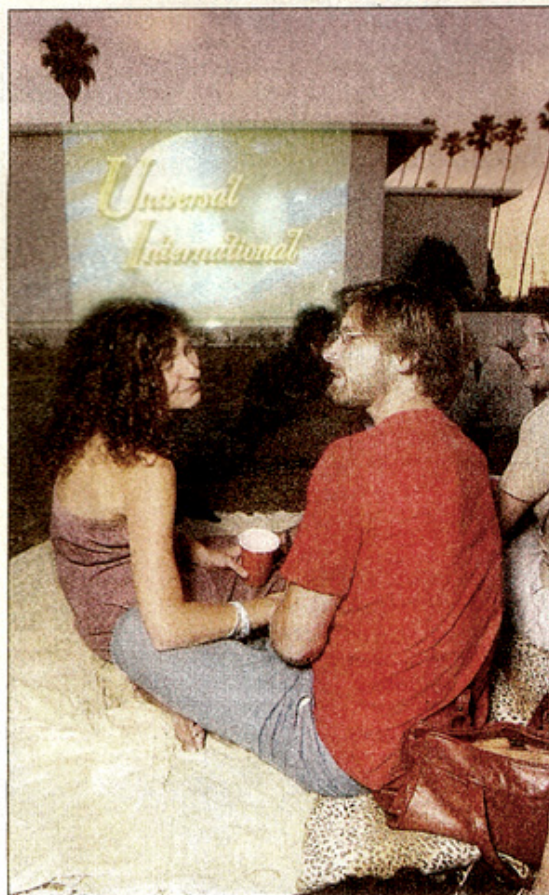
Of course, one must be willing to brave the elements — if not the insects — that can add unexpected excitement to the al fresco moviegoing experience.

Outdoor theaters are an increasingly hot (and cheap) summertime ticket in most states around the country. Prices range from free to \$10 a person.

"America has always had a love affair with the movies and with outdoor entertainment. Now the two have come together in the contemporary version of the drive-in," says Bob Deutsch, who organizes outdoor film festivals in Maryland and Virginia.

Some movie fans set up beanbag chairs in a parking lot in Olympia, Wash. Others share a well-manicured lawn with ghosts of silent movie stars in a Hollywood cemetery. Some float on inner tubes on a lake in San Antonio, and others blow up beds in a park at the foothills of the Rockies or spread blankets on the sand while roasting marshmallows in Newport Beach, Calif. There are more than 100 major open-air theaters around the USA, Deutsch says.

"People bring whole dinners — chandeliers, cande-



**Date night:** Jessica Hundley and Sebastian Kaufmann wait for 1957's *Written on the Wind* to begin.

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# Nostalgic parents bring the children

Continued from 1D

labras, wine, hibachis, everything," says Brian Cobb, executive director of Way Out West Productions in Olympia, which has been showing movies outdoors for three years. "It becomes a tailgate party/flea market and a movie experience."

At the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, about 1,500 people gather twice a month on Saturday nights to watch classic films "beneath and above the stars," says organizer John Wyatt. Movies are projected on a marble mausoleum wall, near the graves of Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and Sr., Rudolph Valentino and Cecil B. De Mille.

## Cover story

Alexis Scott celebrated her birthday there, sharing blankets, pillows and an Asian-flavored picnic dinner with three friends.

"It's always really beautiful here watching the palm trees and seeing the movies," Scott says. "It's a great communal feeling."

Watching a story unfold by moonlight has special appeal. Call it *Cinema Paradiso*, American style.

Hollywood Forever Cemetery is an oasis in the middle of an urban Hollywood neighborhood. Close to studios such as Paramount and Warner Bros., the venue attracts industry insiders like actor Jon Voight and director Michael Mann, who were there on a recent Saturday.

Mann has been to the movie series four or five times, drawn by classic films like *Sullivan's Travels* and *Sweet Smell of Success* in the open-air setting.

Voight, who munched on tomatoes and mozzarella, says, "It's a wonderful thing to see a film the way it should be seen, which is in a group. And out of doors in an informal atmosphere and near the Fairbankses and all these people who have contributed to our industry in another era just adds to the atmosphere."

Mann's assistant, Julie Herrin, wasn't quite as enthusiastic about the ghosts of movie stars past. "Being in a cemetery is a little freaky. I hope we don't walk on anybody."

But Polish-born Alexander Gruszynski says he finds it nostalgic, "like a piece of Americana that got lost. The concept of drive-in theaters ceased to exist."

Something about being outdoors relaxes people.

"People bring their own chairs and can hoot and holler at the screen where they cannot in a movie theater," Cobb says. "It's more interactive."



By Dan MacMedan, USA TODAY

**Picnic place:** Alexis Scott, left, celebrates her 40th birthday with friends Sandelle Kincaid, Susanna Puisto and Alexandra Welker.

And some movies benefit from that atmosphere.

"You get more from the experience when you're laughing with 500 other people sitting right next to you," says Dave Riepe, who programs an outdoor film series in Boulder, Colo.

At Hollywood Forever Cemetery, DJ David Hollander spins "tunes for a morbid night" at the cemetery that dates to the late 1800s.

"I went there to see one of my favorite movies, *Sweet Smell of Success*, and it dawned on me that it was entirely possible that some of the actors who appear in the film were buried in sight of where I was sitting," says journalist and outdoor film buff Chris Willman. "If one were to believe in ghosts, it'd be fun to imagine some of the actors interred there coming out to watch themselves on screen."

All outdoor venues don't have quite that kind of cinematic synergy, but they draw die-hard fans.

In Brooklyn's Prospect Park last month, a record 6,000 people showed up to watch *Creature From the Black Lagoon* in 3-D to kick off a Brooklyn arts festival.

Most outdoor theaters show movies appropriate for the whole family. Ikea, the furniture store, sponsors weekly outdoor screenings in Burbank, Calif., of such family films as *Shrek* and *Jurassic Park*. L.A.'s Chinatown is hosting a Jackie Chan film festival this month.

"The ones that are great to watch outdoors on a big screen are adventure movies like *Lord of the Rings*, *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Lawrence of Arabia*," Riepe says. "The parents love it because they remember going to see movies outdoors at drive-ins as kids. Now they want to take their kids to

something similar."

Cobb in Olympia targets another key demographic: "Our rule is 'Is it a good date movie?' We generally stick with some new releases and sure-fire classics. There is also the trend toward *Mystery Science Theater* nights, where the actors come out and pan a B movie."

And people from the USA to Canada are looking to start their own outdoor cinemas. "We've had calls from virtually every state," Deutsch says.

Little wonder, since most states have natural settings that lend themselves well to star-lit films.

"If you love the movies and you love the outdoors, al fresco cinema really is kind of the best of both worlds," Willman says. "Movie theaters have traditionally been designed to take you away from the real world. But there's something interesting about seeing a movie screen integrated into an outdoor landscape. It's incongruous and fun, seeing these oversized images plopped down amid real life, as if the gods were paying an unexpected visit."

But the gods also can wreak their own atmospheric havoc.

"We still show a movie in light rain, though it definitely does have a slimming effect on audience size," Riepe says.

Scott and her friend Sandelle Kincaid were at Hollywood Forever a few weeks ago when an invasion of June bugs threatened to steal the thunder from the 1941 classic *Ball of Fire*.

"All these bugs hatched and got all over people's blankets," Kincaid says. "People were jumping and screaming and running away."

Adds Scott: "It was like *The Birds*."