CHAPTER 8

The Faemmle Business: Laemmle Theatres, Los Angeles, and the Moviegoing Experience—an Interview with Bob and Greg Laemmle

by Ross Melnick

In a December 2015 Hollywood Reporter article, film historian Thomas Doherty wrote that Carl Laemmle’s place in American film history was assured but “Less well known is Laemmle’s role as a savior of Jewish refugees from the charnel house of Nazi Germany.” Laemmle, he adds, put “his money where his heart was, not just for family and friends but for any desperate supplicant.” Indeed, during the 1930s, Laemmle spoke out against the rise of Adolf Hitler, pulled Universal out of Germany, and signed hundreds of affidavits to ferry “Hitler’s chosen victims” out of the country and into the United States, despite its restrictive immigration policies. Those family ties saved many of Laemmle’s relatives from the Nazis (Doherty). Among them were Kurt and Max Laemmle, who would build one of Los Angeles’ most important theater chains from the 1930s to the 1960s and, for the last half century, create a brand name for the exhibition of foreign, independent, and art house films in the very heart of Hollywood.

In May 1928, at the age of twenty-two, Max Laemmle sailed to the United States to begin working for “Uncle Carl” (“List or Manifest,” May 21, 1928). He was provided with “film selling schooling” and sent to Canada to hock Universal films to local exhibitors (“Daily Review” 2). By March 1929, he had been named a supervisor of Universal Pictures and, in 1930, was sent to Paris.
to manage Universal’s French offices (Universal Film Société Anonyme) (“Max Laemmle, Wyler Appointed” 8). Max’s brother Kurt had originally hoped to travel a different path in the petroleum business, but “his efforts were thwarted by barriers Jews faced in the oil industry at the time” (Levine 12). Instead, Kurt left their home in Stuttgart, Germany for the United States to work for Universal’s San Francisco branch office in August 1932 (“Behind Keys” 19). Max, meanwhile, stayed in Paris managing the company’s French sales and “introducing big French stage names” to dub Universal’s sound films for the global Francophone market (“Times Square: Chatter—Paris” 39, 44). Max resigned from Universal in December 1933 (“Nephew Max Laemmle” 15). He initially hoped to become an exhibitor in Paris but instead became an independent film distributor (“Foreign Film News” 13; Max Laemmle-Film Export 20). Kurt, meanwhile, moved to Universal’s sales office in Chicago. Like his brother, he also chafed under the company’s low wages and resigned in 1935, taking what he considered a golden opportunity to buy the Ritz Theatre in Lowell, Indiana, during the Depression (Levine 12; “Out Hollywood Way” 14). Days later, Kurt was in Los Angeles, already “looking over local theatre properties” (“. . . Los Angeles” 2).

By now, Kurt’s daily concerns were as much personal as they were professional. Max and his parents, Sigmund and Alice Laemmle, were still in Europe and the growth of fascism began to alarm him. (Max and his wife Bertha had just had their first child, Robert, on September 5, 1935, in Paris [“Births” 76].) Three months later, Kurt wrote to Max, urging him to come to the United States as the clouds over Europe rolled in. “After what the Nazis do now re the Jews, just imagine what they will do after the Olympics are over,” he wrote Max. “That’s all they are waiting for. So you being right there, carry some of the responsibility to get our parents to a decision and action. I am glad to do my share when I am over there, but all must be prepared” (Levine 13). The letter advised Max to transfer his assets out of Europe and to enter the exhibition business in the United States (Levine 13).

It would take another three years for Max to finally leave Paris. In 1937, he planned to establish a film company in the United States with his brother Kurt that would both distribute French films and remake them (“Foreign” 5; “To Handle French Pix in U. S.” 12). In April 1938, Max sailed to the United States to meet with business associates Arthur Mayer and Joseph Burstyn. He later traveled to Chicago to see Kurt and the two brothers traveled by car to California (“List or Manifest,” April 27, 1938; McCarthy 7, 27). Max subsequently bought Pacific Coast distribution rights to Jean Renoir’s _La Bête_
Humaine (1938) in May 1938 and, four months later, Kurt and Max purchased the Franklin Theatre in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park (“To Distribute ‘Human Beast’” 10; “Theatres-Exchanges,” September 28, 1938, 23). The duo bought the Glassell Theatre (later renamed the Dale) in nearby Glassell Park that December and soon added the Park Theatre in Highland Park as well (“Theatres-Exchanges,” December 28, 1938, 20; Levine 19). With his business secure, Max returned to France in 1939 and retrieved Bertha and Robert and sailed to the United States in March 1939 (“List or Manifest,” March 26, 1939). He also persuaded his parents to finally leave Stuttgart and move to Los Angeles. “We got out just in time,” he later recalled (McCarthy 7, 27).

In Los Angeles, Max had still not given up on the distribution business, but he was grateful to be in the United States and in the picture business (“Max Laemmle on Coast” 22). “These [cinemas] afforded us a livelihood for several years” (McCarthy 7, 27). In the early 1940s, Kurt swapped one Ritz for another, selling his faraway Ritz Theatre in Lowell, Indiana in 1942 and buying another Ritz Theatre in Inglewood, California (“About People of the Theatre” 32; Levine 13). During the war, the Laemmles’ theaters—not yet called Laemmle Theatres—were key centers for a home front audience. Frank Whitaker recalled the Park Theatre years later as a place “where housewives escaped a few hours from dull chores, where young girls waited for the war to end and loved ones to come home, where teenagers worshipped their movie idols and children were dropped off Saturday while Mom went shopping” (Whitaker 74).

When the war came to an end and Hitler’s destruction became well known, the Laemmles, like many Jews in the motion picture industry, worked hard to repatriate refugees in displaced persons camps and other victims of the Holocaust. In 1948, Max Laemmle became a vice president of the Southern Regional chapter of ORT—the Organization for Rehabilitation Through Training—while Kurt’s wife, Alyse Laemmle, became the Regional Extension chair of a women’s chapter of the Jewish benevolent organization (“ORT Plans Luncheon, Program” C2; “ORT Screen Unit Forming” A5). Kurt and Max were key members of the Theatres and Exchanges Division of the Motion Picture division of the United Jewish Welfare fund alongside local exhibitors such as Sid Grauman and Sherrill Corwin (“UJW Theatres Division Pledges Up” 38). Alyse later became vice-president of the Women’s Organization for Rehabilitation Through Training, touring Europe and working to help refugees repatriate to the United States, Canada, and Israel. Back in the States, she also started selling insurance in 1951 and quickly became one of the top selling insurance saleswomen in Southern California (Vierhus C3).
Kurt and Max, meanwhile, began to move the circuit west in the 1940s, responding to demographic shifts within the city. They bought the Los Feliz Theatre in 1947 and it became the flagship of the circuit for decades. But by the mid-to-late 1950s the Laemmles’ theater business was struggling as audiences dwindled due to television and other postwar changes. Kurt stayed on as a financial partner in the theater business but joined his wife in selling insurance. By then, the only theater left for Max to manage was the Los Feliz Theatre on Vermont Avenue. Drawing on his European background and sensibilities, Max re-crafted the Los Feliz from neighborhood house to art house. Increasingly, he recalled later, “I’d take a fling at something foreign. I was knowledgeable about foreign films, and they did better than a poor American film, so I drifted into showing them more often, then permanently” (Diamond G1). It was the birth of what is today Laemmle Theatres, a distinctive brand of theaters and programming that has catered to a more eclectic palate and moviegoer ever since. Max brought in the waves of the moment: Italian neorealism, French New Wave, Japanese art cinema, American avant-garde, and independent film, and buttressed these selections with documentaries, retrospectives and film series, and the more sophisticated films from the Hollywood studios.

In 1961, while Max and Bertha were away, their son Robert (Bob) took a break from his job at a bank to manage the Los Feliz Theatre—the last stand of the family business. When Max returned, Bob was brought on board to spearhead a new expansion effort in Pasadena and other locations. During the 1960s, Max and Bob Laemmle opened the Esquire in Pasadena (1964) and the Regent (1966) and Plaza (1967) theaters in Westwood (Levine 20, 29). The move to art house programming in the 1960s cemented Max’s reputation as a local tastemaker and cultural figure and he was honored by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1963 with a commendation for his “continuing contribution to the culture of Los Angeles through the screening of outstanding art cinema, for his interest in student and professional artistic endeavors and his furtherance of intercultural appreciation” (“Max Laemmle Honored by Supervisors” D9). By 1965, Los Angeles Times critic Kevin Thomas wrote, “Today, there are more places to see art films in Los Angeles than ever before, but only the Cinema, the Europa, and Laemmle’s Los Feliz would be considered ‘first-rate’” (“L.A. Lags” M17). Thomas added, a half-century later, “There was a tremendous amount of detail work put into each film and as far as I know, no other theater ever in fifty years did this kind of personalized, focused marketing. And all of this intense, imaginative and creative effort is the foundation of the whole Laemmle chain” (Levine 69). In the era before home video and
saturation booking, all of this attention to detail could pay off handsomely as a hit film could play for months or even years at a single theater. Claude Lelouch's *A Man and a Woman* (1966), for instance, played at the Regent Theatre for more than two years (“Three-Year Run at Regent” NC1). (The Regent Theatre made another long-term run when, in an ironic twist, the theater was subleased by Uncle Carl's old studio, Universal, for two years after the Lelouch film played out [“Universal to Sign Lease” W1].)

By the 1970s, the chain was once again expanding west. Having marched from Northeast Los Angeles to Los Feliz to Westwood, the Laemmles' next cinema was a new twin theater—then a novel concept—the Monica Twin, in Santa Monica. The art house's opening ads promoted the chain's legacy as a family business exclaiming that the Monica Twin was “Max & Robert Laemmle's New Concept in Deluxe Twin-Theatres—Where Comfort, Beauty & Service Match the Quality of Their Film Presentations” (Monica Twin Advertisement D14). Despite a challenging industrial climate, Bob Laemmle told *Boxoffice*, “There's nothing wrong with this business that showmanship can't correct” (“Los Angeles” W6). The following year, the Laemmles took over the Royal Theatre in West Los Angeles, where the company's offices still remain. They also grabbed the Westland Twin in West Los Angeles and the Music Hall in Beverly Hills in 1974, and, branching out to the suburbs five years later, the Town Center 5 in Encino in 1979 (Levine 20, 21).

Throughout the 1970s, Laemmle Theatres' eclectic programming brought global cinema to Los Angeles audiences increasingly starved of art house films as Hollywood began ramping up its production of blockbusters and family films in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “The Hollywood film wants to know how the bank was robbed,” Bob explained in 1977. “The foreign [film] wants to know who robbed the bank.” He added, “We screen an average of five films a week, and we're not just seeing them but developing ideas for promotion. We see our part in a film as creative, not just a business proposition. We want people to see it and we want to have everybody involved come out making money, or there won't be more films” (Diamond, G1). Max Laemmle was honored again in 1973 with the Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters from France's Minister of Cultural Affairs for the circuit's dedication to French cinema and French film series and festivals (“Max Laemmle” 30). By then Laemmle Theatres had become well known for their international programming and as the home of the Israeli Film Festival (“Israeli Film Festival Is Set” W1).

Laemmle Theatres added the Continental in West Hollywood in 1980, the Grande 4-plex in downtown (1984), the Fine Arts in Beverly Hills (1985),
and the Colorado in Pasadena in 1986 (“Max Laemmle” 30). From a death spiral in the late 1950s to a golden moment for art cinema in the 1980s, *Boxoffice* declared “The Neighborhood Art House” as “a very hot property” by 1982: “Once a questionable investment in the minds of many exhibitors and tainted by tales of unpredictable grosses and low concession sales, the art house has survived quite nicely due to increasingly strong product, growing audiences and intelligent booking practices” (Lincoln 18). Laemmle Theatres aided and benefited from this resurgence in art house filmmaking and distribution and Max was honored in 1983, this time by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. At the award luncheon, held at a restaurant in Universal City, Laemmle told the crowd, “I had occasion to call Universal Pictures the other day, and they asked me how to spell Laemmle.” Uncle Carl may have been long forgotten by many, but Laemmle Theatres had remained a vital if still intimate part of Los Angeles’s film culture (Thomas, “Laemmle Honored” 7). For Bob, their small number of cinemas was always intentional. “[A]s a family run business we go very slowly,” he commented in 1983. “We believe in personal handling of our product. You have to remain small and intimate to have the time to do that” (“Laemmle: Art Exhibs” 6, 18).

After more than half a century in Los Angeles, Max Laemmle passed away in 1989. “I would have left daily film-reviewing sooner than I did,” *Los Angeles Times* film critic Charles Champlin wrote at the time, “except that the dwindling, often-derivative flow of Hollywood product was interrupted by the films Max imported for his longtime base, the Los Feliz on Vermont, and later for his flagship, the Royal, and a lengthening chain of other Laemmle theaters. He was a shrewd businessman with a knack for reaching and holding the art-film audience” (Champlin E1). *Boxoffice*’s obituary may have been the most sublime, merging Max Laemmle’s love for the family, the business, and the family business: “Max,” the trade journal wrote, “leaves behind his brother, his wife, two children, four grandchildren, and the sixteen Laemmle screens” (“Obituaries,” April 1, 1989, 18–20). His wife, Bertha, who had traveled from Paris all those years earlier, died a few months later. She, like many of the Laemmle clan, had played her own role in the company’s development, overseeing the interior decorations of many of the cinemas in the chain (“Obituaries,” August 16, 1989, 96, 98; “Obituaries,” October 1, 1989, 95). As a final tribute, AFI Fest created an award in Max’s name that “honor[s] the contribution made by exhibitors and cinemas who have established an outstanding record in the previous year of recognizing, encouraging and promoting film as an art form” (Meisel 40).
Despite the family’s (and the business’) loss, the Laemmle chain kept on through the 1990s. “Just as Bob once joined forces with his father Max,” Peter Henne wrote in *Boxoffice* in 1997, “now Greg Laemmle is becoming a full half of the Laemmle team” (Henne 22, 153). Bob and Greg picked up their own award in 1999 from the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival—the Indie Supporter Award—“presented to individuals who have been instrumental in helping independent filmmakers realize their vision” (“Laemmles to Receive” 122). Since then, Laemmle Theatres has lost some of their key venues and added new ones. The company had to relinquish the old Los Feliz Theatre in 1987 and, more recently, the Sunset 5 and Fallbrook 7, but it has added many new screens as well, refurbished venerable locations like the Royal, and re-fashioned the old Monica Twin into the Monica Film Center in 2016. Bob and Greg Laemmle are now looking north to new markets and refusing to be just a lessee in favor of being a stakeholder, developer, and investor in all of their new cinemas. “The closure of the Sunset and Fallbrook locations has reinforced our feeling that as a family business we really need to be our own landlords,” Greg Laemmle told *Boxoffice* in 2013. “Mall owners are looking for national-credit tenants and they do not necessarily appreciate, although they should, what we bring to the table” (“Building Community”).

Today, at the Royal, the Music Hall, and other Laemmle theaters, time feels still. It’s still the same business, the same family, and in many ways, the same family business. Sitting down with Bob and Greg Laemmle is to be in conversation with caretakers of a very unique family name and a very unique exhibition company and history. And one can’t help wondering if, without Kurt Laemmle’s urging all those years ago, Max, Bertha, and Bob might not have made it out of Paris in time. It is hard to imagine what Los Angeles’s art house scene might have been without the Laemmles and their theaters. With those thoughts, and the current state of film exhibition and the world in mind, I sat down with Bob and Greg Laemmle to ask them about how their family and industry history and how their cultural identity interacts with their business, their philanthropy, and their programmatic decisions.

**Ross:** The founding of Laemmle Theatres in 1938 was directly affected by the difficult contours of European Jewish history.

**Greg:** My grandfather was in Paris where my father was born and likely would have stayed in Europe—almost certainly would have stayed in Europe—if not for the rise of Nazism.
Ross: I’m curious, of course, about your own reflections on this period. How much does your family’s background play into your dedication to showing Jewish-themed films and films like *Son of Saul* that reflect upon the Holocaust and those who were unable to leave in time?

Greg: In addition to being Jewish my grandfather was European and the best parts of European culture informed his personality and so I think he was always interested in the idea of bringing world culture to the United States. And we’ve been an art house in some way, shape, or form almost since the beginning, and now that we’re known as being an art house it’s what we do. Do we make a special effort to include films that reflect the Jewish experience? Sure.

Ross: Did Max talk often about Germany and the world he and Kurt left behind? Did it have an impact on the kinds of films he booked?

Bob: There’s a very interesting letter downstairs on the wall [of the Royal Theatre] from my uncle Kurt to my dad in 1935... all about the awareness of what politically is going on. They were encouraging my parents to consider [leaving].

Greg: The reality is that most of the family made it out of Europe. Carl, famously, [was] known for providing affidavits for family members and even non-family members from the community. Both brothers were able to get to the United States [and] their parents came to the United States. They were able to bring many members of their spouses’ families. My maternal grandmother’s family lost a few family members—

Bob: Almost all... My grandfather had I don’t know how many brothers that were lost. My mother’s parents were Russian and that’s the side of the family where I have my height from. If you know Carl, he was probably 5’5” or something. I’m the total freak in the family who got to 6’5”. So I understand that my grandfather, that his brothers, were all above six foot. But I don’t know how many [he had]—I never really had that conversation with my mother as to how many there were. But they were all lost.

Greg: So I guess there was an impact. ... I don’t remember necessarily growing up with a sense of survivor guilt per se but I know that my grandparents, the Laemmle grandparents, worked very hard in the late ’40s and throughout the rest of their life on issues related to Palestine. ... Rather than focusing on business, it felt like they were working more for ORT and other
organizations. . . . Whether that was a reflection of some sort of sense of guilt or just . . . an opportunity to do something since they had to survive for a purpose.

**Bob:** [Regarding Laemmle Theatres and changes in the exhibition industry] When you say Laemmle Theatres, it was not really branded. . . . It was obviously operated by the Laemmle brothers but there was no branding identifying them as Laemmle theaters. That didn't happen until the '60s. Basically, I did that. What prompted it really was that Walter Reade came to Los Angeles, built a theater called the Granada and also acquired the Music Hall and Beverly Canon. So here's Walter Reade, a newcomer in LA with three theaters, and they take out ads describing it as Walter Reade Theatres and I'm looking at that and we had five theaters at the time and we hadn't yet branded. We discussed it with my dad and we decided that instead of being in the Independent Theater Guide [in the newspapers] where there's no identification of ownership at all—just the theater name—that we would take out a very special guide for Laemmle Theatres. And that was really the first time that we started branding.

**Greg:** For quite a few years it was one theater. Neighborhood chain with six theaters and TV comes along [and the chain dwindled to just] the Los Feliz Theatre.

**Bob:** My uncle Kurt went into the insurance business because the one theater really wasn't enough to support two families so the decision was that my dad as the older brother would stay with the theater and my uncle went into the insurance business where he was phenomenally successful by the way. And his wife [Alyse] also went into the insurance business where she is still functioning at the age of ninety-nine. She still works and services her customers. . . . Whenever a question comes up and I ask my son he calls [her]. At ninety-nine, she's pretty remarkable.

**Greg:** My grandfather was very good at building relationships with the film critics and he was very good at building relationships with his patrons from that one single screen. I think possibly into the '60s when it was just the Los Feliz, or just starting to expand, that people knew—the cognoscenti—if you wanted to know what was going on in world cinema you talked to Max Laemmle. Max Laemmle was the local guy that had that so maybe it was reasonable to say, “There is enough awareness around this name that this is the appropriate thing to brand it to” . . . It wasn't so crazy to name the business after yourself [like] Bergdorf’s.

**Ross:** The exhibition business has certainly changed since then.
Greg: I would argue that the business has basically stayed the same. Little aspects of it have changed: multiplexing, digital projection, how you communicate, [and] distribution, I mean. In the ’60s you would send a letter to New York because it was too expensive to call long distance and you’d wait for the reply so the pace has picked up but, at the end of the day, we’re still showing movies to an audience that comes to buy tickets.

Bob: There is one thing that precipitated the change. There was a film called *The Immoral Mr. Teas* [1959]. It was the first of what you call the pornographic films. It became a big, big success. It played at a theater called the Monica. It was on Santa Monica Blvd. near Fairfax—just west of Fairfax. With the success of that film many—in fact almost all of the theaters that were showing foreign films—converted and started showing porn. The Los Feliz was the only one that remained true to the calling because to us it wasn’t just providing money, it was an interest. . . . The Los Feliz showed the real esoteric foreign films, the foreign films that nobody else wanted to play because they weren’t by Truffaut, Bergman, Fellini, Kurosawa, those films we didn’t get. Those played these other theaters that ended up converting to porn theaters. Now, after that conversion happened, and here we were with the Los Feliz Theatre and I got into the business, we started the expansion. . . .

Greg: Our business changed. The business didn’t change.

Bob: There was a vacuum for us to step into, to show the bigger foreign films.

Greg: We recognized, or my Dad recognized, that the city was moving west and made a conscious effort to move with it. And the audience was expanding for these films. That was also an opportunity there.

Ross: American Jews have long been involved in motion picture exhibition, often as an outgrowth of their desire to provide entertainment and culture. How much do you see Laemmle Theatres as a community center for culture and does that draw upon a familial and ethnic desire?

Greg: Well, I absolutely see ourselves as a cultural center, as a meeting place. One of the distributors we work with, Jeff Lipsky, I want to credit him with using the concept, that the movie theater is now the modern agora. It’s the place where you gather and you get information and you hear about what’s going on in the world. So I do sense that. We’re uncomfortable specifically branding it as a Jewish environment because it’s not. We do the annual *Fiddler on the Roof*
on Christmas Eve and at some venues more than half the audience isn’t Jewish. It’s still just fun to come out and experience that so, personally, I definitely identify as a Jew but I don’t want the business to reflect that because we want the business to reflect being part of Los Angeles and Los Angeles is an incredibly multicultural city. Always has been. Even if the motion picture business has always had a particular association with the Jewish community it was also always a multiethnic environment.

**Ross:** There are very few other places where strangers gather together in a room, who don’t know each other, for a group experience. People don’t go to the same church, the same mosque, the same synagogue. Because you actually care about curating a community experience, I’m curious what your own thoughts are about what you’re trying to constitute, your own sense of your audience. Because people who don’t book one thousand screens, who book twenty, have a sense of who their audience is.

**Greg:** It varies by theater. Are we consciously trying to create something? No, there’s no specific political or religious agenda at play there. We are probably trying to provide an opportunity for our patrons to become informed and aware—attuned—to what is going on in the world. So that’s an opportunity to create that cultural space. If you’re just playing Hollywood films ultimately you’re kind of numbing your audience a little bit so by combining some of the more interesting films from Hollywood and the American independent films and documentaries, foreign language films—even the cultural events, the opera and the ballet—there’s an opportunity for someone to say I’m really able to acquire a lot of information about what’s going on in the world, elevated through the arts, entertained, and be mentally alert because of that. And share that experience with others, both people I don’t know, which is one of the great things about cinema, but also people you know. How often do you see neighbors seeing each other at the movie theater . . . It’s those kinds of structured and unstructured interactions that really define the space.

**Ross:** You’ve hosted the Jewish Film Festival, the Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, and the Israel Film Festival. Are those festivals you’ve actively reached out to or do they just know Laemmle Theatres and contact you directly?

**Greg:** We also host the Hungarian Film Festival, the Polish Film Festival. I think we’ve hosted everything but the American Nazi Party film festival. That might be a stretch. [Thinking] Well, if they paid enough. [Group laughter] We
don't reach out specifically to them but we do host a number of film festivals and there's a natural affinity obviously especially when it comes to the Jewish and Israeli film festival because we're also just year round showing a number of films with Jewish themes and Israeli films. . . . It's a natural fit.

**Ross:** Laemmle Theatres, like the Royal, actively books *Omar* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2013) and other Palestinian films, Jordanian films, and you're showing all kinds of films from around the world—particularly the Middle East. So I'm curious about how important it is to you to have Middle Eastern films and a global menu of films that aren't going to play AMC or other theaters.

**Greg:** It's almost exclusively about our relationship with distributors or a producer's desire to have a film play in Laemmle Theatres. . . . I can't tell you how many times people call and say “I can't believe you're showing that movie. You're an anti-Semite and I'm never coming to see another movie at your theater.” And it's like, okay, you're now not going to see all of the Israeli and Jewish-themed films if you really follow through [on that]. Look, there's a world of ideas out there and there is a level where it is our responsibility to present this. You don't want to buy a ticket, don't buy a ticket, but if you want to say that something shouldn't exist . . . But we don't bring our personal, philosophical beliefs to our programming and say “I don't agree with this film so I'm not going to play it.” We did not play *The Last Temptation of Christ* [1988] partially because I didn't need to. There were plenty of other people who were playing the film. You didn't need Laemmle Theatres to play that film. Now if we didn't play [Abu-Assad's] *Paradise Now* [2005] that film might not have been seen in Los Angeles. . . . Is it an insightful film? You can't have that conversation until you've seen the film. It is our responsibility to provide an opportunity for that film to be seen. In our programming, yes, I do feel it is important to provide space for uncomfortable ideas and experiences to be available because that's the only way we're really going to learn.

**Bob:** We are open to talking to people. So if there is a festival, they may try to call, in the past, AMC or Mann Theatres or whatever, and they get no response. They know that if they talk to us—they know they will reach somebody who is sympathetic who will try to work with them to make something happen. . . . We probably qualify [for the Oscars], I'm guessing, eighty percent of the shorts, documentaries, independent features, because we are willing to talk to people and try to work with them to make things happen. Now that started from the
very beginning, back in the ’60s, where there were people who would come to us and ask the Los Feliz Theatre, “Would you please qualify this short?”

**Ross:** With so much attention on television these days does cinema still have the primacy and importance to reach audiences and bring them together?

**Greg:** It is harder now. I think it is harder now. Even the independent scene is dominated by a very marketing-driven culture. There are very few critics that can really champion a smaller film and break it through to a larger audience because at some point they’re not being given the space. They don’t have the power. If you can’t cut together a thirty second TV spot, and not only cut it together but afford to sell it, you’re not going to hit critical mass to have a film enter the cultural conversation. And yet there are still opportunities. . . . A film like *Ida* [2013] just hits a groove and starts finding an audience . . . but these are films that are hitting a million people in the US and that’s throughout all platforms.

**Ross:** Films don’t have the same chance to play for months at a time anymore with so much foreign and art house product available.

**Greg:** It puts pressure on the audience. There’s enough capacity that if an audience wants to make a film run long—that long tail—it’s possible but it’s about getting enough momentum going with the audience to make that happen and that’s a little more difficult. Because the audience is consumed with what’s new—“I heard that’s great but this new one is coming and I saw the ads on TV.”

**Ross:** So those kinds of windows put pressure on the ability to have a film play for a long time and find an audience.

**Greg:** Before the film has opened they’ve already set the date for the DVD so you only have a little window. The theatrical run has been curtailed in an unnatural fashion based on some of these preset issues. *Spotlight* [2015] should be going out really super wide right now through May but, at the end of the day, it’s also out on this and it’s out on that. What could have been a long theatrical tail for something is not going to appear for a variety of reasons. But it’s ultimately about the fact that the DVD date got set.

**Ross:** What was the impetus for the Laemmle Charitable Foundation which donates much needed funds to charities including Bet Tzedek, the Westside Food Bank, etc.? Is this the family’s interest in the notion of *Tikkun Olam*
(“Healing the World”)? How much does this charitable initiative reinforce the local presence of Laemmle Theatres in the community versus the national focus of your larger competitors?

**Greg:** The foundation was set up to provide a lasting vehicle for the family’s interest in investing in the community. If you are going to make the statement that it’s a multigenerational business then you have to find ways to encourage and support the younger generation as it moves into a position of leadership. Generally speaking, people make less in terms of salary in a family business than they do out in the real world . . . how do you augment that earlier generation’s ability to integrate into the larger culture? So having that vehicle that provides entrée for people was something I was thinking about when I encouraged my father to start the foundation in 2000. . . . It’s very focused on Los Angeles as you can see from the organizations we support. Even if they’re national organizations we’re very focused on what they’re doing here in Los Angeles. . . . We have almost exclusively stayed away from funding Jewish organizations with the exception that we do support Jewish organizations that are providing a Jewish response to a general community issue. [The Food Bank] is a Jewish response to a general problem that’s something we can get behind. . . . Personally, I’ve really started to see or try to see my own family’s history as immigrants coming to Los Angeles and finding Los Angeles to be a welcoming community for that immigrant experience and so I like to . . . remember that you were a stranger in a strange land. We can take it from the tribal experience or take it from our own personal experience and say we came here fleeing persecution. Yes, maybe we arrived with a little more on our backs than some of the immigrants coming today but the experience is ultimately the same so how do we create here in Los Angeles a more welcoming environment, an environment that provides for the same developing opportunities to integrate into the city that we had? Because I do believe that that will actually be for the benefit of Los Angeles, and not to the detriment of Los Angeles, both economically, culturally—in all kinds of ways. I think Los Angeles has benefited incredibly from, just speaking personally about the Jewish immigration to the city, and when you look at the history of the city culturally and from a business standpoint in so many ways, all of these Jewish families who were able to settle here and make homes here, enrich the city. So I’d like to see that happen for the next generation of immigrants.
Ross: You’ve stated in the past that Laemmle Theatres no longer wants to be simply a lessee but a builder and operator of all of its future cinemas. With your upcoming Newhall project, how are you taking control of this process from beginning to end? Would it surprise some that you’re going to Newhall?

Greg: I already talked to the Rabbi! That really does go back to the idea that Los Angeles is changing . . . and areas where you would previously say no one is interested in art film or [has] enough population and you turn around and there’s three to four hundred thousand people living in the Santa Clarita Valley and they’re educated. You talk about some of these neighborhoods where these art houses were and now people are coming back to them but in the ’60s people were fleeing these neighborhoods. Maybe part of it was because the local neighborhood theater started showing porn films because the operator wasn’t really invested in what was going on around them, they just [said], “How can I make the most money today?” There are so many parts of town where Laemmle Theatres had theaters and left and now it’s time to come back. The corporate mentality is how do I make money quickly and the family business mentality is how do I plant the tree for the next generation?

Greg: How do you recruit talented individuals who are located in that area? Will they think twice about moving, taking a job in that area if living in that community means they’re going to have to give up on the cafes and the restaurants and, yes, the art house movie theater that they really find important to the richness of their life. So to be able to say, “You don’t have to give up on it. Look, we have it here as well.” I don’t think Old Town Newhall is going to be Silver Lake but if it can have some of the elements of Silver Lake that makes it a more interesting community and a richer community.

Ross: For the art house business to expand, distributors rely on circuits like yours to open new theaters and find new audiences.

Greg: Distributors do need us to expand otherwise they’re going to be focused on the ancillary release . . . But if exhibition can increase then exhibition continues to become a viable and important business for distributors, for producers. But it does speak to the role of art in place making. When people say they’re going to create an arts and entertainment district, what are you really trying to create? You better stop and think because just dropping a twenty-plex downtown isn’t necessarily going to change anything. . . . It’s the conversation we have with every community, with every developer.
Ross: Do you think movies can still bring disparate people and cultures together through cinema and the cinemagoing experience? How valuable is that in a world as unpredictable and fractious as the one we’re faced with today? How does seeing movies from foreign cultures provide your audience with an opportunity for empathy and understanding?

Greg: I hope they can see that the conversations going on in some of these countries that we read about in the headlines, that the people who live in some of those countries, the individuals, are people and that the actions of the government don’t necessarily reflect the concerns and desires of the people who live there. I can say that in regard to a film like Gett [2014]—which could be argued shows people living under a theocratic regime within Israel or apply it to the young girls in Mustang [2015] who just want to be young and free and yet their environment crushes their dreams but maybe can’t ever destroy them completely—that’s where the artists in these communities can provide voice to something that shows that what their rulers are saying in the headlines isn’t always appropriate. And if we can have that conversation on an artistic level maybe we can have it on a personal level and then maybe we can begin to develop a little more trust. I would like to think that the films coming out of Iran show that beyond just the results of the recent election that the films that we see show that there’s a lot more thoughtfulness than whatever Ahmadinejad wants to scream in the headlines.

Bob: You see what’s going on with the film in Pakistan about honor killings [Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy’s documentary A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness (2015)]. All of a sudden the country is reevaluating. The judicial process is changing as a result of this film. When I read that I thought, wow, this is really amazing.

Greg: So I think film can have that conversation on a current level, the way Ida is being interpreted both within Europe and within Poland. . . . I’m not happy at all about some of the attacks on the film but even in the attacks there’s an interesting conversation to be had. Maybe we do need to acknowledge that, yes, while the Polish people were guilty of certain things there was also a lot of harm done to Poland and the Poles. We should acknowledge that. That’s not necessarily the role of this one film or another film but film as a conversation can begin to provide some context for events in our recent past. . . . [Regarding the film Les Innocentes (2016) about Soviet soldiers’ sexual assaults of Polish nuns during World War II] If you only see one or the other you’re not getting
a full picture of what the world is. If you have the opportunity to see both, understand both, sort of try to put them together, you may get a picture of why things are currently the way they are. And acknowledge people’s pain and help everyone get past it.

**Ross:** What is the future of Laemmle Theatres and art house exhibition?

**Greg:** Ever since TV came in people have been predicting the death of exhibition. Those cries are only getting louder and louder. Certainly trying to be a small business, a family owned business, in an environment where all we see is increasing corporatization, flies in the face of any sort of reasonable business practice. But there you have it. We do believe in the future for exhibition and we believe that, I guess, that as a family business we’re going to be able to survive as well—as much as the world is telling you, “Sell, sell, sell.” . . . It probably becomes harder and harder for each generation to consider selling because now you bear the weight of generations. That’s going to be a decision for the next group.
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