

John Tutt

For more than twenty years, John Tutt has staked his career on the belief that the people of Waterloo want to see good movies. When he opened the Princess Cinema in 1985 he believed many people prefer the intimate setting of a locally-run downtown cinema to the neon, suburban multiplexes.



It was a gamble, but he was right.

In fact it was so successful that Tutt opened up a second Uptown cinema on King Street North - The Princess Twin Cinemas - in 2004. “I think this is the first time that any small, art house cinema has expanded,” Tutt said at the time.

Tutt began his foray into the world of film while studying business at Wilfrid Laurier University. He took as many film electives as possible and in his third year completed a mock business start-up for establishing a theatre in Waterloo. Tutt also screened films and wrote press releases for an experimental film series organized by Richard Kerr, a filmmaker who suggested Tutt try to start a repertory cinema locally.

Upon graduating, and after working a few jobs, Tutt returned to Waterloo with the dream of turning an old brewery on Princess Street into a place for viewing classic movies, first-run art films, and specialty films from around the world.

The old brewery behind the Huether Hotel had for years been a “blue movie” house called The Majestic. With a \$5,000 government loan and \$1,800 of his own money, Tutt embarked on a gamble that would change the face of downtown Waterloo. “It wasn’t equipped for professional film projection . . . we put in a new screen, painted it and built a snack bar. We did some things to bring it up to standards,” he said.

The Princess opened on September 18, 1985, showing the classic feature *Casablanca* on a 16 mm projector.

These days the Original Princess Cinema sticks to a monthly program of foreign-language films, international award-winners, documentaries and Canadian films. Some of the early changes included a switch to 35 mm projection, surround sound, and high-backed chairs. It has become a first-run movie theatre, playing many new, independent art films.

In the early years, the original cinema showed mainly old classics and silent movies. The popularity of video meant a shift in planning and marketing for the fledgling business. Ten years into it, Tutt said: “People can go to a video store and get a beautiful print of a Fellini or a Bergman film. They won’t come to a theatre to see a blurred-out red print with bad splices.”

The newer Princess Twin Cinemas, which John runs with his wife Wendy, cater to more mainstream tastes, showing high-quality films that have played at other venues, as well as film openings. The two new cinemas have larger screens, high-backed chairs and stadium seating.

“It’s a kick. I haven’t lost the joy I get out of it,” he said.

Tutt’s sense of community also propels him forward. “If we weren’t here, there would be hundreds of films every year the Kitchener-Waterloo audience wouldn’t even see. Nobody in local theatres wants to show movies with subtitles.”

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