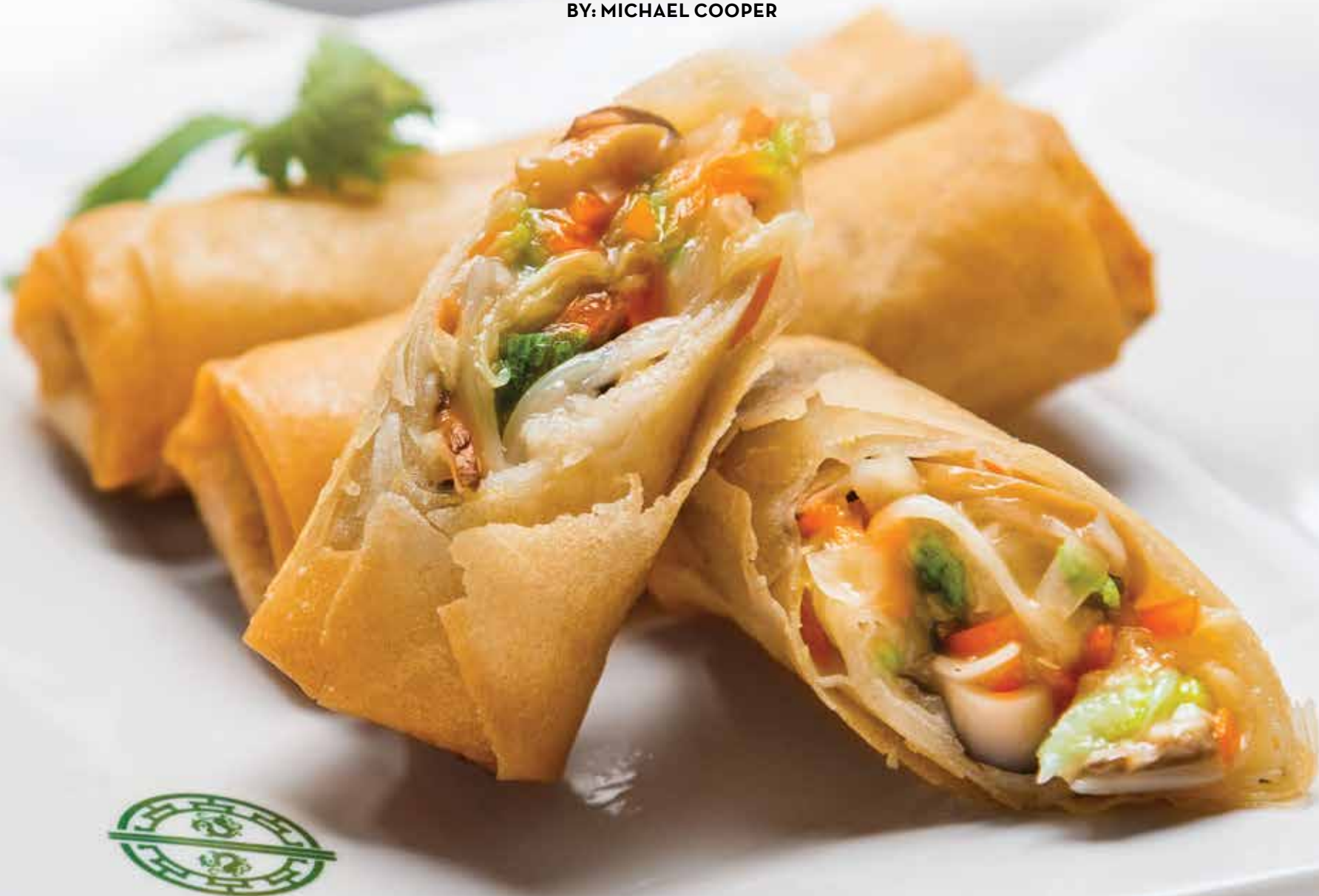


IRVINE WEEKLY

MAY 15, 2019 • NO. 15

Dim Sum Specialists: Tim Ho Wan Opening in Irvine

BY: MICHAEL COOPER



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SIU MAI

Hong Kong's Mong Kok district in 2009. "Cofounders and dim sum masters Mak Kwai Pui and Leung Fai Keung first met as head chefs in Hong Kong in the early 2000s," says Liberman. "Bonding over their love for true noodle artistry, the two left their respective positions to open a restaurant of their own. Within a year of opening, it earned one Michelin star and a cult following for being the 'world's cheapest Michelin-starred restaurant' at the time."

"AT EACH TIM HO WAN RESTAURANT A 'REGIONAL SPECIALTY' DISH UNIQUE TO THAT LOCATION IS OFFERED. LIBERMAN SAYS THAT TWO MENU ITEMS EXCLUSIVE TO THE IRVINE LOCATION WILL BE REVEALED AT THE RESTAURANT'S GRAND OPENING."

Tim Ho Wan describes their philosophy as made to order dishes with the freshest ingredients. A decade after their first Hong Kong location opened, Tim Ho Wan now operates 46 different locations in 9 different countries, opening its first North American location in December 2016 in New York's East Village.

So what brings the famous chain to Irvine? "Since the 1970s, Irvine has had a vibrant, growing and diverse population," says Liberman. "This unique diversity, coupled with excellent educational opportunities, a growing tech sector and, of course, a healthy dining and retail culture make Tim Ho Wan accessible to the residents of both Irvine and the surrounding communities. We know the Irvine community will be thrilled to welcome Tim Ho Wan to its neighborhood. We believe there is a dim sum niche to fill in Irvine, as many often travel elsewhere to enjoy authentic and high-quality dim sum. We're going to change that."

Irvine customers will also be able to enjoy dishes that aren't available at any other location. At each Tim Ho Wan restaurant a "Regional Specialty" dish unique to that location is offered. Liberman says that two menu items exclusive to the Irvine location will be revealed at the restaurant's grand

TIM HO WAN IRVINE

MICHELIN-STAR WINNING DIM SUM CHAIN OPENS FIRST CALIFORNIA LOCATION.

BY: MICHAEL COOPER

PHOTOS COURTESY: TIM HO WAN

Dim Sum lovers rejoice: Tim Ho Wan, the self-described "world's most inexpensive awarded dim sum restaurant," is opening a new location right here in Irvine. The restaurant, which will be part of the Diamond Jamboree Shopping Center, has been soft opened

with limited hours since May 8, and is planning to have its grand opening on May 18. It will be the chain's first location in California.

"Dumpling folding is an art, and Tim Ho Wan is the perfect place for an introduction to this," says Tim Ho Wan Director of Operations Jeremy Liber-

man. "Our dim sum specialists create authentic Hong Kong-style dim sum that is made-to-order using fresh ingredients. Dim sum traditionally consists of lots of bite-sized and shareable plates. It's a fast-paced, lively and modern dim sum-eating experience."

Tim Ho Wan was first founded in



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BAKED BBQ PORK BUN



STEAMED SHRIMP DUMPLINGS - PHOTO BY: PETER GARRITANO

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opening. Tim Ho Wan Irvine will also be the first U.S. location to offer a takeout window.

Aside from the mystery exclusive dishes, Tim Ho Wan Irvine will of course offer customers the same delicious dishes that people love all around the world. "Tim Ho Wan is known for our world-famous BBQ Pork Buns, along with other specialties like Steamed Rice Rolls, Pan Fried Turnip Cake and Steamed Egg Cake," says Liberman. "Traditionally, BBQ Pork Buns are served in a soft fluffy dough, however, we take ours to the next level with crumbly, flaky dough that's the perfect mix of sweet and savory for a melt-in-your-mouth combination."

While Tim Ho Wan may have started in Hong Kong, flavor and delectable food is universal, which is something that Liberman has observed when comparing American customers to Asian ones. "Our experience is that our American Tim Ho Wan guests are very similar to our guests in Asian countries. No matter where in the world we introduce our authentic style of dim sum, we have found the public response to be equally enthusiastic," says Liberman. "We have actually found the American market has a great interest in our brand because it is authentically from Hong Kong with a more modern, high-paced

and urban feel than some traditional dim sum houses. Of course our signature BBQ Pork Buns lead the way with instant recognition."

That being said, there are still slight taste preferences that are more common in the U.S. "There are subtle differences in what our [American] guests order. For example, we sell more braised chicken feet in some parts of Asia than we do in the U.S., but Americans are very adventurous. We're learning if it tastes good, the market will support it, and the American market has lots of good taste. We can't wait to get started in Irvine!"

With the only Tim Ho Wan in the entire state of California, Irvine is certainly lucky to welcome the dim sum chain to its city. Dim sum lovers have been known to travel far and wide to taste Tim Ho Wan's dishes, but for Irvine ones, they now have this affordable Michelin-starred restaurant in their backyard. As Liberman explains, "Dim sum literally translates to 'to touch your heart.' That's exactly what our food does - it touches your heart with each bite you take."

Tim Ho Wan
Diamond Jamboree Shopping Center
2700 Alton Parkway, Suite 127-131
Irvine, California 92606
www.timhowanusa.com



JERRY MANDEL, IRVINE BARCLAY THEATRE HOLIDAY PARTY

AN IMPRESARIO FOR ALL SEASONS

JERRY MANDEL OF THE IRVINE BARCLAY THEATRE STRIVES TO LEAVE A LASTING LEGACY.

BY: LIZ GOLDNER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: JERRY MANDEL

You might have seen Jerry Mandel playing his saxophone around town – perhaps at the annual Orange County Arts Awards Ceremony after party at Costa Mesa’s Samueli Theater. While the self-possessed gentleman is a long-time jazz musician, his expertise on his horn is the tip of the iceberg of a decades-long arts and entertainment career.

The president of the Irvine Barclay Theatre, former San Diego State University dean of the arts, and former president of the Orange County Performing Art Center, not only looks

back at an illustrious career. Today, at age 79, with the energy, passion and enthusiasm of a much younger person, he looks forward to advancing the Barclay’s programming and upgrading its facility, both to be accomplished over the next several years, and especially to, “having a chance for a legacy here,” he explains.

In Mandel’s words: “I grew up in Culver City, right next to the MGM studios. My grandfather was a violinist who played in all of the major movie musicals, and my father was a drummer who was quite a performer and played a lot of gigs. I graduated

from Culver City High School, where I played reed instruments as well as sports. And the parents of my classmates worked in the movie industry. That’s how Culver City was in the old days.”

The still handsome musician and arts administrator continues: “I attended Long Beach State University where I studied the liberal arts. I played saxophone in the college marching band, and supported myself through college by playing in music combos on the weekends. I attended more weddings and bar mitzvahs than anyone I knew because I performed in

them.”

Not eschewing his military duty in the 1970s, Mandel says: “During the Vietnam War, I joined the United States Coast Guard, and played in the coast guard band. Then I returned to graduate school at Purdue University where I earned a Ph.D. in communication and organizational leadership. Working in academia, I advanced through all of the professorial ranks as assistant, associate and full professor. I was dean of the arts at San Diego State University and then became executive vice president at the University of Las

MUSIC

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MEXICO VIBRA, 2018. PHOTO BY: TERRA DEAL



MOHENA MAJOO CONCERT - PHOTO BY: EBRAHIM SAFI

Vegas, vice president at Long Beach State University, and vice chancellor of advancement at the University of California at Irvine from 1995 to 1997.”

Forever in love with his music, he explains, “Here’s where the story gets interesting. All of these years that I was involved in academic administration, music was the thing that meant the most to me. So during my tenure at

UC Irvine, I served on the board of the Orange County Performing Arts Center, now Segerstrom Center for the Arts. Then I was asked to become the president of the Performing Arts Center in 1997. Working in that position truly changed my life. Being at the helm of the third largest performing arts center in the country, I experienced and curated several art forms, including

the symphony, opera, ballet and Broadway, to name a few.”

Mandel also conceived of the creation of a small multi-faceted theater on the Orange County Performing Arts Center campus. That idea resulted in the Samueli Theater, opened in 2006, with its stadium and club/cabaret seating for recitals, jazz performances, banquets, meetings, seminars and other special events.

“I concluded my career at the Performing Arts Center in 2006 during the completion of the Renee and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall,” he says.

As retirement in his mid-sixties did not suit the irrepressible Mandel, he again pursued his dream “of getting back into playing jazz music. I performed locally, went on tours, did a few workshops, and performed and recorded in New York City.”

In 2015, Mandel’s sterling reputation as an arts executive beckoned him to the Irvine Barclay Theatre (which opened its doors in 1990). “In September of 2015, I was asked by Stephen Barker, UC Irvine’s dean of the arts, to step in here on a three-month interim basis [as the Barclay’s founding president, Doug Rankin, had left the venue]. But I’m still here almost four years later. As CEO, I’m responsible for the overall functioning of the organization, including all of the management, programming, fundraising and budgets.”

At the Barclay Theatre, Mandel delights in greeting and welcoming musicians to the most musician friendly theater in the world, as he explains, adding, “We have the best sound and lighting people.” He also brings to the theater a variety of world class performers and speakers, including jazz musicians Wynton

Marsalis, Joey Alexander and George Benson, Broadway musical comedy star Sutton Foster, and even Adam Schiff, U.S. Representative for California’s 28th District (Burbank) as a speaker. “While most people my age don’t work,” Mandel says, “I’m having so much fun here. And I also love being on the stage and watching the audience come in.”

Before he retires, Mandel’s goals for the Barclay include raising significant funds, installing new lights and seating, upgrading the lobby and building a smaller second black box theater with 250 seats. He also wants to continue to host major performers from around the country and beyond, to have the venue be open 300 nights a year, and to, he explains, “make the Irvine Barclay Theatre into one of the best performing arts venues in the country.”

Upcoming events at the Irvine Barclay Theatre include:

- Backhausdance, May 22, a company fusing classical with contemporary dance
- The Wooden Floor, “Of Knowing Where” dance recital, May 30 through June 1
- UCI Symphony Orchestra, June 7
- Dance recitals for kids and families:
 - Southland Ballet Academy, “Grand Defile,” June 8 and 9
 - Focus Dance Center, “Sweet 16,” June 12 through 15
 - “DanceLova, The Recital,” June 16
 - Pacific Dance, June 19-22
 - Rhythmic Arts Academy of Dance, “The First Annual June Showcase,” June 28
- Ivan Amodei’s Secrets and Illusions, June 30

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CRACKING THE CODE

DOJO-INSPIRED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TEACHES STUDENTS THE INTRICACIES OF COMPUTER CODING.

BY: NICK WALKER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: CODE NINJAS



If video games seem to be the only thing that can grab and hold your child's attention, we may have found something for you. Parents looking for a new way to stimulate their children's brains outside of school and prepare them for the technology-based workforce of the future should look no further than Code Ninjas, the new after-school program that opened a location in Irvine this past March. Code Ninjas brings a fresh approach to teaching children of all ages the intricacies of computer coding, with a curriculum tooled and refined by the franchise's three years of experience in after-school education in over 100 locations across the United States.

The Irvine Code Ninjas location marks

the franchise's entrance into Orange County. It is owned and operated by local residents and siblings Jonathan and Josephine Cheung, along with Josephine's husband, Arlington So.

Mr. Cheung moved to the United States from Guam in 2005, and proceeded to graduate from the University of California, Berkeley, with a degree in business and consulting experience in technology. After co-founding two tech start-up companies, Cheung looked to continue his passion for tech by opening this Code Ninjas branch. Besides his personal connection to Irvine as his home, Cheung felt Irvine was a perfect place for the franchise.

"We thought Irvine was great to build the kind of high-caliber team we were looking for," says Cheung. "Irvine is

where you find people with that kind of caliber [in tech] who are also looking to give back." Cheung sites UCI as a huge advantage to their program, as most of their instructors, or "senseis," as they are referred to in Code Ninjas fashion, are UCI students looking to give back to the Irvine community.

Built for children between the ages of 7 and 14, the curriculum of Code Ninjas is based in dojo culture, with "ninja" and "sensei" used in place of "student" and "teacher." As ninjas progress through their coding education, they receive colored wristbands that serve symbolically as belts in the martial arts world. What separates Code Ninjas from most after-school activities, however, is that their curriculum is not run in a class-based system, which

is an attractive feature for most busy parents out there. Families don't need to rush to get their kids to Code Ninjas promptly at a specific time, because learning in Code Ninjas is done on a totally individual basis. Young ninjas can arrive whenever they are able, seven days a week, so long as they have 1-2 hours to be able to fulfill their education for the day.

This individuality also prevents children from getting frustrated or bored from lessons that are moving too fast or too slow, as they are in total control of the speed of their learning. Each level ninjas reach is made up of mini-quizzes and checkpoints throughout, to ensure that students are maintaining the information they are learning, and lessons always



come with the option of “brain breaks” for students, to keep them from getting overwhelmed. But while the curriculum is self-paced, it is not self-taught, as the program’s senseis are always around to provide instruction and encouragement.

Most importantly, however, the ninjas of Code Ninjas get to learning coding in probably the most exciting way possible: they get to literally MAKE video games. Within their programs, young ninjas create phone apps that

they have done. The curriculum even expands further outside the realm of straightforward computer coding, as along their path students also learn lessons in robotics, drone technology and other STEM activities. “I wish I had Code Ninjas growing up because it provides children vital skills to pursue their dreams and unlock their unlimited capacity to learn,” says Mr. Cheung. “For younger students in Irvine, Code Ninjas will open the door to opportunities and ensure they are

“PARENTS WANT THEIR CHILDREN TO LEARN THE CRITICAL SKILLS THAT THEY’LL NEED IN THE FUTURE, BUT IT ALSO HAS TO BE FUN FOR KIDS. CODE NINJAS HAS FOUND THAT SWEET SPOT WHERE KIDS HAVE FUN AND PARENTS SEE RESULTS.”

- CODE NINJAS CEO DAVID GRAHAM

they can actually publish (and even sell). “Parents want their children to learn the critical skills that they’ll need in the future, but it also has to be fun for kids. Code Ninjas has found that sweet spot where kids have fun and parents see results, and we’re truly excited to bring our unique concept to Irvine and surrounding communities,” says Code Ninjas CEO David Graham.

When an app is complete, parents can access them from their own phones, so that every day spent in class a child can proudly showcase the work that

not intimidated by the words ‘STEM’ and ‘coding.’”

Code Ninjas will be hosting an Open House on Saturday, May 18, from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m., where they will demo some of the game building and robotics covered in their courses. They will also be providing both half-day and full-day weekly summer camps. For more information about Code Ninjas, check out their website at www.codeninjas.com/locations/ca-irvine or call 949-679-2633.

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SCREENX HAS LANDED AT IRVINE SPECTRUM

NEW TECHNOLOGY OFFERS HIGHLY IMMERSIVE MOVIE-GOING EXPERIENCE.

BY: SCOTT FEINBLATT

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: CJ 4DPLEX

When you're going to the movies, your choices begin long before you reach the cinema:

Do you want to reserve your seat in advance? Which online service do you use to make your reservation? Which row would you like to sit in? Would you like extra carry-on luggage? Oh wait! Wrong industry. You get the idea, though.

From combination snack choices at the concession area to theatrical membership services, there is no shortage of options to custom-tailor one's movie-going experience. As far as the actual theater is concerned, exhibitors have

been toying with techniques to make movies into more of an immersive experience for nearly a hundred years, since the first 3D film *The Power of Love* was released, worldwide, in 1922.

Starting in the late 1950s, actor/writer/producer/director William Castle introduced a bevy of gimmicks into theaters in order to promote his horror films, and, in 1960, Hans Laube's *Smell-O-Vision*, which filled theaters with various odors intended to complement the film, was a disaster that was used only once. While the 3D fad has come and gone a few times, large screens (predominantly IMAX and XD), enhanced audio, stadium seating and comfy chairs are

currently the basic go-to luxury options of the cinematic experience (though 4DX – which includes motion-enabled chairs and theaters equipped to simulate lightning, rain, fog and scents – is on the rise).

The latest to join this trend in Irvine is ScreenX. This reporter was recently invited to attend a presentation of the film *The Curse of La Llorona* at Edward's Irvine Spectrum 21's ScreenX-equipped theater. In addition to attending the screening, Irvine Weekly also had the opportunity to ask Paul Kim, VP of Studio Relations and ScreenX Production, a bit about the ScreenX technology and its increasing popularity among

theaters throughout the world.

While attending the screening of *The Curse of La Llorona*, the first evidence of the ScreenX technology occurred after the previews. Two additional projectors, which were mounted on the ceiling, projected onto two additional screens. That is, the walls on either side of the screen became additional screens; the images were synchronized so that the effect for viewers was basically one of being surrounded by a singular, expansive, wrap-around image. The content that was projected was the ScreenX company logo sequence – an animated bit of fun that made terrific use of the technology, which is reminis-

ENTERTAINMENT

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cent of the enveloping experience of VR technology. I was sold. Then the movie began, and I experienced the disconnect between the potential of ScreenX and the current state of it as demonstrated by *La Llorona*.

The essential problem was that the film was not shot in a manner befitting (no pun intended) the wraparound screen. The secondary screens were used in a variety of ways throughout the film, but, for most of the film, they were not used at all. The alternating appearance and disappearance of peripheral imagery removed me from the experience of the film's narrative and kept me aware that a gimmick was at play. In this instance, the film itself was a mediocre exercise in horror entertainment; therefore, being removed from the story so that I could study / experience the ScreenX properties was not that big a deal. However, when the effect was active, it was not used in a uniform manner. Specifically, the peripheral sides were used in different ways at different times.

Sometimes they were used to flash incidental or jarring images that were not part of the image composition on

the main screen – as in the momentary appearance of a screaming face or an atmospheric field of smoke. More frequently, they were used to expand the central image for a tracking shot, like when the camera moved in on a lone character in the center of a field (or something to that effect). The principal problem with that was it did not seem as though the peripheral aspects had been shot in tandem with the central image. Sometimes, the movement on the various screens did not synchronize properly, and sometimes, for example, it seemed as though the forest trees on one screen were not the same as the forest trees on another. This made me wonder if the peripheral imagery had even been shot when the rest of the movie was shot or if they were manufactured after-the-fact for the ScreenX presentation.

Screen X's Paul Kim confirmed my observation and pointed out that although no Hollywood features have yet been shot for ScreenX (all ScreenX effects are shot / generated in post-production), projects are already being shot that way abroad.

He said, "For our other films from Korea [and] China, we HAVE shot in the ScreenX format as we have specific cameras and rigs available for ScreenX production." He provided examples: "We shot the BTS World Tour: Love Yourself in Seoul performance at Olympic Stadium live and [were] able to put together an incredible viewing experience for those who weren't able to attend or for those who wanted to relive the experience. We also got in [during] the pre-production stage with the South Korean horror hit *Gonjiam* last year. It is a terrifying film that we were able to make even scarier. Imagine long corridors that stretch onto the walls of the theater, putting you smack dab in the middle of the action, or things flickering in your peripherals while dread and suspense fill the main screen."

In regard to theaters that have been or will be selected for ScreenX presentations, Kim pointed out that the modifications required for exhibition include adding ScreenX servers for communication between the projectors, retrofitting the theater walls with special fabric panels for optimal visibility,

and, of course, adding the additional projectors. The theaters selected for the modifications must also meet certain requirements, such as location / marketability, theater length, central screen size (must be wall to wall with no gaps between screen and room corners), and there must be no columns, sconces or other obstructions.

Given these parameters, Kim pointed out that last year ScreenX has expanded from 142 screens to 208, around the world. The Cineworld Group (which owns Regal Cinemas, including Regal, Edwards, and United Artists Theatres, as well as several other subsidiaries around the globe) has been ScreenX's biggest champion – bringing ScreenX to 100 theaters across the U.S. and U.K. With additional new exhibitor contracts in Nigeria, India, Mexico and Belarus, Kim has shown that ScreenX continues to expand operations rapidly. I, for one, look forward to witnessing the growth of this new facet of theatrical immersion, both in terms of its use by more filmmakers and in terms of its proliferation throughout the ever-evolving cinema industry.



CELEBRATING LOCAL CREATIVITY

DISCOVER DIVERSE ARTWORK AT THE 25TH ANNUAL IRVINE STUDIO ARTS FESTIVAL.

BY: RYAN NAJJAR

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: IRVINE SCENE

There are plenty of museums in Los Angeles, and quite a few around Orange County, but art exists everywhere. We don't have to seek out the exhibits of prominent figures to be blown away by the creativity humans are capable of.

In fact, if you're in Irvine this summer, you won't even have to leave town to immerse yourself in the arts. Why is

it going to be so easy, you ask? It's all thanks to our city's Fine Arts Center, which is proudly hosting the 25th annual Irvine Studio Arts Festival.

This event will be taking place at Heritage Community Park on June 1, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and the festivities are free and open to the public.

When you stop by, you'll have the chance to discover the works of a

diverse array of artists. Included amongst them are ceramists, painters, jewelry designers, sculptors, photographers, printmakers and more.

If you really like what you see, you'll be able to purchase their work and bring it home with you. The chance to look at amazing art, decorate your home and support local creative minds? That's a good day all around, in our opinion!

While a wide host of artists present their work at the festival, it wasn't always that way. Susie Munger, who's been overseeing this event for the past five years, was kind enough to regale the celebration's history and give us all sorts of exciting info about this year.

When the Irvine Fine Arts Center first began putting on these showcases, they originally started within certain

ARTS

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departments. The ceramics department was the first to put on the event, which they held in their courtyard patio and framed as more of a sale than an exhibit.

Their active and popular jewelry department, which saw the success the ceramics department enjoyed, decided they wanted to get in on the sale as well. From there, more and more people across disciplines and departments at the center contributed their work.

They began including painters, printmakers and the like, and eventually started to bring in glass blowers, woodworkers and other types of artists that functioned outside of the

center's facilities.

The common factor that's continued throughout the history of the festival, however, has remained. That, of course, is the fact that all the work being shown is created by artists from the area, rather than major figures from other far-off towns.

What's more, the festival might be your only chance to see work from some of the most accomplished artists in the area. As Susie tells us, various metal workers, ceramists, jewelers and painters, along with others, only offer their wares for display and sale at the annual event.

While the chance to view and

purchase some high-quality art and jewelry should be incentive enough to drop by, they don't stop the good times there.

For starters, there'll be live music throughout the day while visitors peruse the art. This year, the jams will be provided by Southern California country and blues duo Alpha Mule, who'll be back playing their second year of the festival.

"We had them last year and they were so popular that we asked them back again this year," Susie told us. "We'll also have Knowlwood [Restaurant] here, and they'll be cooking on site. They'll provide some nice barbecue, burgers

and salads for guests so they can eat a nice lunch."

Susie also let us know that those who want dessert can get a delicious treat in more ways than one. Not only will ice cream be sold, but they'll be offering it in handmade bowls crafted by the ceramists at the Fine Arts Center. These will also be available for purchase.

If you find yourself walking around the displays and wanting to learn how you can create some beautiful art yourself, you're in luck! Along with the displays, the center will be hosting demonstrations in their studios.

Their photography demo, for those able to attend, will allow guests the opportunity to experience one of the few black and white development studios left in Southern California.

There will also be a printmaking demonstration, and even a youth program so the kids can get creative too.

On the food-centered side of things, they'll be offering some instruction on the fine art of fruit carving, along with some mini-classes on how to get things cooking in the kitchen.

Even if you can't make it for the festival, you'll still have a chance to enjoy the bubbling fine arts scene of our city whenever you step into the Irvine Fine Arts Center.

They have exhibitions running on a regular basis, and they offer a wide variety of youth, teen and adult classes for those that want to try their hand at making their own masterpieces.

For adults, along with their famous ceramics and sculpture courses, they offer lessons on photography, cooking, painting, printmaking, jewelry and what they call the "Traditional Arts."

They also offer teen and youth classes in many of these disciplines, along with offering after-school programs and full/half day camps for youth attendees.

The camps are also offered during the summer, along with spring.

For those with even younger children, there are a myriad of family programs offered as well.

Already experienced in your discipline and just need a place to practice?

If you're a printmaker, ceramist, photographer or jewelry maker, you can drop by during one of their open studio sessions to keep your skills sharp.

Further information on their programs and offerings can be found here: www.cityofirvine.org/irvine-fine-arts-center



REVIEW: 'EXTREMELY WICKED, SHOCKINGLY EVIL AND VILE'

NETFLIX DEBUTS ORIGINAL FILM CHRONICLING THE NOTORIOUS SERIAL KILLER TED BUNDY.

BY: NICK WALKER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF: NETFLIX

For whatever upsetting, deep psychological reason, there's no questioning that American audiences are currently fascinated with the serial killer. Films and documentaries have been cropping up across every platform for the last year featuring the worst and most unforgiving true crimes of our nation's history. It's no wonder, then, that Netflix would embrace the cultural trend (that they may have very well restarted in the first place) with not one, but two recent original films on Ted Bundy, one of the most fascinating serial killers ever known. Still, with their most recent adaptation of the Ted Bundy story, "Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile," anyone with any shred of decency in their body can't help but wonder if, maybe, this time, they went a little too far.

The film's biggest draw, of course, was casting heartthrob Zac Efron in the lead role of Bundy. A long way from his "High School Musical" days, this is Efron's most challenging and unprecedented role to date, and within it he holds nothing back. His portrayal of the charming mass murderer is impressive, and he

nails the minute facial tics and gestures that made watching Bundy so entrancing. He is frighteningly smooth, and at times, as you watch him sweep through

rooting for him, until you remember he is portraying one of the vilest men in modern history.

Still, in many ways, this rendition of

women surrounding the case. Much of the story is told from the perspective of Bundy's longtime girlfriend, Liz Kendall, portrayed by Lily Collins ("The Mortal Instruments," "Talkien"). For most of the film, Collins' performance appears to arrive somewhat heavy handed, but as she is given more to work with in a script that doesn't do well to service her character, she slowly but surely alights, especially with the film's late reveal of what is actually tugging at her soul. She comes around just in time for a haunting rendition of her character's final visitation with Efron's Bundy, in a scene that may prevent you from ever looking at Zac Efron the same again. Kaya Scodelario's ("The Maze Runner") performance as Bundy's greatest supporter and eventual wife plays as a wonderful juxtaposition to Collins' brooding depression and gives a whole different angle for the film to be seen from.

It is these female viewpoints into Bundy's life that both set the film apart while also causing it its greatest problem. The most troublesome part of the film is that while it worked hard to showcase Bundy's manipulative charm, it also seemed to accidentally idolize him. Skipping over many of the facts and details of the case was a daring move on the filmmaker's end, as it allows the audience to step more into the shoes of those who supported him regardless of what was said in court. But at what cost? From a moral standpoint, you can't help but wonder if that idolization is really a good thing for current audiences. In our violent, turbulent society, do we really need media that is putting serial killers up on pedestals?

Moral questions aside, the film is showcased by beautiful cinematography that, if able, viewers should watch on something larger than their laptop screen. The storyline is somewhat jumpy and mangled, and at times can be hard to follow, but it comes back enough toward the end for the film's finale to work nicely. Jim Parsons ("The Big Bang Theory") as Florida Prosecutor Larry Simpson and John Malkovich ("Being John Malkovich," "Dangerous Liaisons") as Judge Edward D. Cowart make the film's court scenes pop. Other problems aside, those scenes are probably what make the film worth watching, just as the clown court of the original trial made the case so enticing in the first place.

"Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile" is streaming now everywhere you can access Netflix.



the courtroom acting as his own defense, you very nearly find yourself

the Bundy case isn't just about Bundy, but the relationships he had with the

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