

PROJECTING THE FUTURE

Film Studies has a stunning new building that, like the medium of film, is all about light. BY DAVID LOW '76

Photography by Bill Burkhart

After the lights go down, the MGM lion roars on the movie screen. The names Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and Debbie Reynolds appear one by one, superimposed on three open black umbrellas. Then the umbrellas turn around to reveal the three smiling stars dressed in yellow slickers. Streams of water pour down on them as they proclaim joyfully in song to the audience: "Singin' in the rain, just singin' in the rain, what a glorious feeling, we're happy again." Getting drenched never seemed more blissful.

It's the start of the first movie to be shown at the outstanding, state-of-the-art screening room of the Center for Film Studies in celebration of its opening last September. The Center is the first new academic building to be constructed at Wesleyan in more than 30 years.

"There's an old legend among elderly film exhibitors. The first movie you show in a new screening space or theater will determine the tone for your life, the quality of the shows you have, and the history and success of your theater," says Jeanine Basinger, Corwin-Fuller Professor of Film Studies, who once worked in movie theaters. "You don't want to show a horror film. You don't want to show a melodrama where everybody gets sick and dies. You don't want to show a gangster film or a raunchy comedy. You want to show something happy and bright and warm and wonderful and of course, with a happy ending."

"We chose *Singin' in the Rain* because it's a great musical, a film that has stood the test of time. It's about filmmaking and Hollywood. It's an American film, which we thought was appropriate. It's a film we teach here."

The Wesleyan audience left the screening in a buoyant mood, impressed by the pristine image on the theater's huge screen and the superior sound system. The Center has a spacious reception area, new classrooms for seminars and production, offices for faculty and administrative staff, and a small gallery. The new building meets the growing needs of the nationally recognized Film Studies Department, but it also serves the entire university. Last year more than 90 courses used film as a basic part of the syllabus.

"Film is the language of today and certainly the language of the future," says Basinger. "Wesleyan has shown great foresight by positioning itself with this center. We were the first university of our size to develop a film major and now we are the first to really set up a proper Center for Film Studies to address film as a discipline not only unto itself but as a part of the liberal arts tradition."

Film majors explore the history and theory of the medium, and the art and technique of filmmaking. The integration of discourse and practice was revolutionary in the discipline 30 years ago when Wesleyan began implementing this approach on the undergraduate level, and as a testament to the strength of this method, several other film departments across the country now emulate the Wesleyan model. The university's film studies alumni have benefited greatly from this well-rounded philosophy; today many of them hold major positions in the film and television industries and in academia.

These alumni have been inspired and encouraged by the passionate teaching of Basinger, who joined the faculty in 1969–70, and has overseen the growth of film studies from a major to a program to a department over the years. A nationally recognized expert on various aspects of American film, she is the author of 10 film books, including *American Cinema: 100 Years of Filmmaking*, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, and the upcoming *The Star Machine*, about how Hollywood created movie stars. Core faculty members Richard Slotkin, Olin Professor of American Studies; Ákos Östör, professor of anthropology; and Leo Lensing, professor of German studies, have also been key to the strength and success of film studies.

Two full-time faculty positions were added to the department in 2000–01. Scott Higgins, assistant professor of film studies, specializes in the history of film aesthetics and technology, the study of narrative, and film genres, particularly the action film, melodrama, and the horror film. He is currently working on a book about the use of Technicolor in 1930s films. Lisa Dombrowski '92, assistant professor of film studies, concentrates on film form and aesthetics, the American film industry, American independent cinema, and contemporary international art cinema. She is presently writing a book about American film director, writer, and producer Samuel Fuller. In addition, professional film editor Jacob Bricca '93, visiting professor of film studies, arrived in 2002 to teach production courses. He has edited mainly documentary films, including *Lost in La Mancha* and *Jimmy Scott: If You Only Knew*.

Currently the department has nearly 70 majors, about three times as many as in the early 1990s. In recent years, the number of students applying to Wesleyan who want to study film has increased. This undoubtedly reflects the department's national recognition. But many of these prospective students have also taken either film history or production classes in high school.

"Because our culture in the past decade or so has become more aware of film as an industry and as a popular medium, there's also a greater awareness of the mechanisms of filmmaking, including distribution and exhibition," says Dombrowski.

"This exists to a much greater extent than when I was in college," she adds. "We had kids in the major, including myself, whose parents were actively discouraging them from studying film. We now have kids whose parents actively encourage them to study film."

Despite the increased interest in film studies over the years, the classroom, office, and storage spaces in use by the film studies faculty, staff, and students since the late 1960s were not designed specifically for film and were overcrowded and outdated technologically. The cinema at the Center for the Arts, for instance, used for large lecture classes, was not originally conceived as a movie theater. It was a shared space with other departments and became overbooked. The throw of the projector in the cinema could never be corrected for a clearly focused image on the screen, and one side of the image was often wider than the other. The projection equipment could not show silent movies at the correct speed or archival film prints. Sight lines were poor, the projection booth was drafty and prone to leaks, the sound system was average, and there was no lobby for shelter from bad weather.

Individualized rooms did not exist for the different production modes taught at Wesleyan—16 mm, digital, and virtual—and the editing equipment for all classes was crammed into 1,800 square feet of space. No spaces were available for camera, lighting, and staging demonstrations, so these often had to be performed in the hallway. In addition, faculty offices were not in one central location, and the places where they taught, met with their students, and conducted administrative duties were located in a number of buildings around the campus.

The necessity for a new facility became obvious, and by 1999–2000 plans for the Center solidified. Once the go-ahead was in place for construction, the firm of Jeter, Cook & Jepson Architects was hired to design the new building.

The design was conceived around one of the most important elements of the new structure, the 412-seat screening room, which is one of the best of its kind in the country. To plan this space and the projection

< Faculty and students chat in the new screening room, which is one of the best of its kind in the country.

booth, Jeter, Cook & Jepson selected a New York firm, the Janson Design Group led by Dennis Janson, who are specialists in theater design and determined such matters as the screen size, the seating arrangement, and the acoustics. Another New York-based company, CineMedia Systems, was responsible for the choosing and installation of audio/visual equipment.

The screening room has state-of-the-art projectors that can show films in 16 mm, 35 mm, and 70 mm formats, and these allow for variable speed for silent film screening. Additional equipment can show DVDs, laser discs, VHS tapes, Betacam tapes, and any other video format in the best possible light. From the theater's podium at the front, a professor or speaker can control sound levels for digital and video screenings and the microphone, the lighting in the theater, and the opening and closing of the screen curtains. The podium also has an integrated computer panel that can be hooked up to external equipment, such as a laptop. The screening room has perfect sight lines, and a top-notch Dolby sound system.

Last October, the architects received a prestigious American Institute of Architects (AIA) Connecticut Design Citation for their work.

"The new building is designed in such a way that it's not only going to promote an identifiable home for the Film Studies Department, but it also provides an architectural transition between the residential area of this part of the city of Middletown and the larger buildings that are adjacent to the Center on the campus," says James LaPosta, the Center's architect in charge of design.

Because the Center is located prominently on the edge of the campus, the architects had to ensure that the building complemented its surroundings. The smaller areas facing Washington Terrace are about the same size and shape of the adjacent houses, and their gabled roofs reflect the residential atmosphere. The sizeable screening room behind the production spaces speaks to the larger structures in the Center for the Arts.

Construction materials reflect the modernity of the film medium. Brick is not only cost-efficient, it also appears in many buildings on campus, as well as in several structures near the Center, such as the church across the street. The faux limestone used on the Center's back walls reflects the light-colored limestone of the Center for the Arts.

The other significant materials used inside the

building are stained poured-concrete on the floors, maple on the walls, laminated fir on the interior roof, and most important, the glass of the multitude of windows.

Basinger feels that the architects have succeeded in creating the building that she and the rest of the film studies faculty and staff envisioned: "A calm, clean, simple, and functional space that reflects the warmth and joy of the film major."

She stresses that the light that pours through the many windows into the interior during the day was an essential element she told the architects to emphasize in the Center's design.

"Civilians, which is what we call people who aren't film nuts, talk about film by talking about darkness," she says. "Film people always talk about light. Film is not about darkness, it's about light. There's light on the screen, and the way light moulds things, shines on things, and reflects things, is the beauty and power of film."

"Yes, we do go into dark spaces before the light comes on the screen. So when we come out of those rooms, leaving the light we have enjoyed on the screen, we want to find more light," she adds. "The architects listened very carefully to that. The building is beautiful, and it is full of light. It has wonderful windows that look like strips of film."

The Center has large and separate spaces for 16 mm, digital, and virtual film production, with enough leeway for additional equipment. Another bright, commodious room serves as a seminar space, where students can have roundtable discussions and easily project film clips in 16 mm and other formats. The expansive lobby (dubbed the "Winter Garden" by the architects) can hold 450 guests and can be used for receptions.

The Center also includes a small gallery space that will regularly showcase materials and artifacts from Wesleyan's prestigious Cinema Archives. The archives contain materials that are relevant not only to film studies but also to a broad range of liberal arts disciplines. The gallery's current exhibition is devoted to Elia Kazan's film, *America America*, and documents the creative filmmaking process through letters, scripts, notebooks, correspondence, posters, and photographs. The exhibit was curated by archivist Joan Miller and by Leith Johnson, co-curator of the Cinema Archives.

"The show is a good case study of the kinds of things we have in the archives," Johnson says. "Our

gallery allows us to show a broad audience that the archives is a serious research center and has much more than movie memorabilia."

The opening of the Center has already had positive effects on the Film Studies Department and students.

"The Center has helped create a sense of identity for the students and the department insofar as it has provided us with a home both professionally and personally," Lisa Dombrowski says. "It's the first time that all the faculty and the administrative assistant have been in the same space—and also in a space where the classrooms are."

"Students appreciate how collaborative we are among ourselves as faculty and with the archives staff," Basinger says. "They can see us working as a group and that sets a good role model for them. The building facilitates that, which is a good thing."

Film students now feel they have a home and that their department has a more solid presence on campus. The warm atmosphere of the new space makes it easier for majors to find each other, schedule meetings, communicate, and share ideas.

"The new facilities give all of the majors a sense of belonging," says senior film major Lana Wilson. "It's like a sports team getting a new stadium, but even better."

"The building asks you to take film studies seriously," Jacob Bricca observes. "You feel you are a part of something important."

Senior film major Max Goldblatt cites the positive side of the use of glass around the faculty offices, which he refers to as "transparency."

"The fact that the outside of Jeanine's office is all windows, there's something really comforting in that," says Goldblatt.

The addition of the new screening room greatly expands the opportunities for what can be shown to students and the entire Wesleyan community. Many older films that the faculty would like to show in their classes are only available as rare, archival prints, and for the first time, the university has the projectors that can properly show these valuable films.

"Before, we could never borrow prints from other archives or from collectors," says Scott Higgins. "That was a problem with my *Color in the Cinema* class, which demands Technicolor prints from the 1930s and 1940s, many of which are available but

none of which anyone would allow us to show on our old equipment. Now we can show original works of art like a 70 mm print of *Lawrence of Arabia* and a 35 mm restored color print of *Becky Sharp*. We want to offer students an aesthetic experience that is as close as possible to seeing the original art form the way it was shown in public."

"It's important for people to realize that just because you can show a DVD, it doesn't mean you can do a film major," Basinger says. "First, film is film, and you should be showing film to students, not a copy of it in another format. Secondly, a great many of the films that are used in a scholarly program are not—and never will be—available in DVD, which is designed for popular entertainment. For instance, if you have a course in early cinema, which we do, lots of luck finding one of the European masterworks by silent film director Victor Sjöström on DVD."

"The theater represents a real commitment to technology, and to preserving old technology and looking forward to the technology of the future," Goldblatt says.

One of the goals of the Center for Film Studies is to be able to work with any professor and any department or program on campus that has an interest in incorporating film into their classes so they can show film in the proper manner.

"Film culture is a big part of the Wesleyan campus," Higgins says. "This should be a meeting place for everybody interested in film."

The film studies faculty decided that the opening of the Center was the perfect opportunity to get the rest of the campus involved in the new building. Over three to four semesters, the Center is sponsoring a series of 18 events, under the title "Celebrating the Liberal Arts Tradition Through Film," in collaboration with 19 departments and programs across three divisions, with funding from the Edward W. Snowdon Fund and the participating departments and programs. The events range from one to three evenings, involve the moving image in some fashion, and showcase academics from various disciplines or creative artists working in film and television.

In fall 2004, for instance, events included a philosophical investigation of the film *The Matrix*, an evening with Israeli writer and filmmaker Etgar Keret, a tribute to HBO Sunday programming, a presentation by documentary filmmaker Mark Moskowitz, a talk by Gordon Crawford (a vice president of the

money-management firm Capital Research and Management), and two evenings devoted to experimental filmmakers Paul Kaiser '78 and Scott Snibbe.

"We've been thrilled by student turnout," Dombrowski says. "We've been impressed by the high quality of questions that the students have had for the speakers—and the interaction of students and speakers at the reception afterwards. At one recent event, we had kids talking to the speaker until 11 o'clock at night."

As a result of planning these events, film studies has begun an ongoing collaboration with professors in the sciences. In the fall of 2005, events at the Center will be presented with the mathematics and

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—JEANINE BASINGER

molecular biology and biochemistry departments. Film studies is also in the process of developing future courses that will be team-taught and will integrate the moving image and the sciences (primarily MB&B, chemistry, and biology). These include a class on Science and Science Fiction on Film and another on The Scientific Documentary.

In addition to showing *Singin' in the Rain*, the Center celebrated the opening of the screening room with a tribute to Martin Scorsese, whom film studies students requested as their choice for the greatest living director; there was no second choice. Six of Scorsese's films were shown over four days in the new space, and Scorsese came to campus to speak to the Wesleyan community after a screening of Elia Kazan's


America America, the film he selected to talk about. Scorsese and Kazan were close friends near the end of Kazan's life. The film was a fitting choice, too, because when the old CFA cinema opened on campus in the '70s, a tribute was paid to Kazan, and he, too, came to speak on campus. Scorsese's papers are secured in the Cinema Archives. The director is also a Wesleyan parent: his daughter, Domenica Cameron-Scorsese '98 was a film major.

The Center for Film Studies was built at a cost of \$5.6 million dollars thanks to the generosity of Wesleyan alumni, parents, and friends.

"This building is a gift from past students at Wesleyan and their families to current and future students; it's an investment in the quality of the program; it's a recognition of its past accomplishments, and an investment in what it can become and how it can grow," Dombrowski comments. "Our current students realize this; they recognize the generosity of the people who have come before them. They know that this is a community that leaves Wesleyan very tight-knit, that leaves with a lot of contacts and close associations because they've worked so closely while they're here. Once they leave Wesleyan they look forward to the day when they can give back."

The next step for the Center is Phase Two, which involves raising money to build two additional smaller screening rooms and additional archival storage.

Basinger has high hopes for the Center's future.

"I see the Center as continuing the quality of the film major, which attracts the best and brightest of Wesleyan students, and continuing to serve the liberal arts tradition of film studies, which is a wedding of theory and practice," she says. "The Center will continue to represent Wesleyan, to serve Wesleyan in the larger context, to be the kind of facility we always envisioned it would be—a place where students and teachers could work side by side, in the happy ways that we've seen the last 35 years. Upward and onward, bigger and better, but always respecting the institution and maintaining its standards." 

Note: David Low '76 majored in English and film studies as an undergraduate. He remains a film fanatic, after all these years.

Do you have an opinion about this topic? Please write us at letters@wesleyan.edu.