



behind the screens

Darren Cook is carrying on a cherished family tradition of offering arthouse movies to an appreciative Christchurch audience.

Words **Kim Newth** Photos **Doug Richardson**

Learning how to roll icecreams comes with the territory if you grow up in a family business associated with movies. Darren Cook, son of Rodney Cook, who was a well-known Christchurch cinema owner, also remembers sleeping in projector rooms as a child before graduating to operating the projectors at an early age.

"We had two cinemas at home, where he'd screen 35mm films for his mates," Darren says of his father. "The movie business became second nature to all of us. It was more than a hobby – it was built into our lives."

Rodney was devoted to bringing arthouse cinema back to the city after losing the Metro Gold cinema near Cathedral Square in the February 2011 earthquake and being evicted from the Academy and Cloisters cinemas at the quake-damaged Arts Centre.

The 64-year-old died of cancer in January, but lived long enough to oversee the design and décor of the family's new Academy Gold Cinema at The Colombo in Sydenham.

"During the whole process we were showing him photos of the building and he was so excited to see it progress. You could see how much it meant to him," Darren says.

Rodney worked on the building's layout in conjunction with Fulton Ross Team Architects and, with his wife, Annette, chose colours, patterns and designs for the interior.

It was a long and difficult process to get up and running after the quakes, Darren says. The first hurdle was finding the right place. "When this came up, we knew it was a great opportunity, because the location is just so good ... but we had to build from scratch. It was tough, at times, with the council, but a few people there really helped us with the consent process."

He knows his father would have loved the end result.

"Dad was captivated by the glamour of Hollywood and the grandeur of the old picture palaces, with their marble staircases and plaster-moulded ceilings. He wanted to recreate that feeling that going to a movie was a real event. He would have been the proudest man in the world to sit here now," Darren says.

Rodney, a former shoe designer, first discovered the joys of celluloid during the 1950s in the picture palaces of Bristol and later translated that into cinema ownership in Christchurch. He was a fan of old westerns and big-screen classics from the '30s

to '50s. His favourite movie, shared with Annette and many Christchurch followers, was undoubtedly *Gloomy Sunday*, a cult German film directed by Rolf Schübel.

His taste for classic and arthouse cinema is reflected in the 1930s-'40s style of Academy Gold, which houses three theatres: the Odeon (25 seats), the Academy (65 seats) and the Metro (48 seats). Each is self-contained, featuring richly patterned carpet, retro-style lighting and comfortable seating, made to Rodney's specifications. Many of the materials were imported.

"My favourite is the Metro," Darren says. "I just love the colours: orange drapes down the side, blue seats and blue patterned Axminster carpet. Mum had a big input into the style, too. When you're in here watching a movie, it all just works so well."

Pitched to discerning grown-ups, the tasteful lobby has a kiosk offering tea, coffee, craft beer and wine, without a whiff of popcorn or fizzy drinks. While the look is retro, considerable care has gone into ensuring heating, sound and comfort is top-of-the-line. Some foyer seats have been recycled from the Arts Centre, as have the poster boards.

After the site was acquired in October, Darren's main role was to oversee the cinema's projectors and technology, while his sister, Rebecca, lent a hand with jobs such as cleaning, and his brother, Glenn, was heavily involved in painting and

general labour to get the 450sqm building ready. Brother-in-law Charlie Loughnan worked as site manager for the project.

It has been an emotional journey for the whole family, says Darren, who relates how one older couple had come to the new cinema and started "crying in memory of Dad". Many people had spoken of Rodney's legacy.

The Academy Gold Cinema opened in April with the movie *Song for Marion*.

The family have been humbled by the positive response to Academy Gold, where everyone gets to walk on red carpet and savour a taste of old-movie magic.

