

122. The Harold & Maude Phenomenon at The Westgate Theater w/ Author John Gaspard

[00:00:00]

Daniel Dissinger: Hi everyone. Welcome to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm your host, Dan Dissinger, and today I'm here with a really special guest, really awesome guest, author of Held Over Harold and Maude at the Westgate Theater, John Gaspard John, thank you so much for being on the pod.

John Gaspard: Dan, thanks for having me.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah, I'm looking forward to this.

I know you and I have been in communication for a little bit. It started over at you, uh, reaching out to the nostalgia test and, uh, me being like, this would be a really great episode for writing remix the audience there. I think it would really enjoy this though. Let's start like, um, tell the audience a little bit about who you are, what you do, and then we'll just hop right in.

John Gaspard: Sure. Um, I, uh, boy, what do I do? I'm retired right now, but for 30 years I was the, a producer of videos and corporate events for corporate America, uh, fortune 500 companies. So I traveled around doing videos and big events for companies. I also, uh, have been since a teenager, a maker of low budget feature [00:01:00] films.

First in, uh, super eight sound, and then a couple in 16 millimeter, and then the last few in digital. Um, so I know all about feature filmmaking. Um. And now that I'm in retirement, I, uh, I got an idea that, uh, the movie Harold and Maude played for two years, uh, here in Minneapolis, in my hometown, and I was part of that.

I saw it. Multiple times at the same theater. And I thought no one's ever done a book about how Harold and Maude went from being from crashing and burning in December of 71, uh, to being resurrected in March of 72, and then playing over two years in, uh, one theater and then kind of bopping around to other theaters for the next few years doing the same thing.

Ann Arbor, Michigan, Boston, Paris, Toronto, all over the place. So I thought. I know the inside track and what happened. 'cause I was here, uh, and it'd be a fun coffee table book to do. Mixing my reminiscences, the things that popped up in the paper, and then just tons and [00:02:00] tons and tons of images from that time.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm. That's amazing. Yeah, I loved it. I was, uh. Privileged enough to look at the book and get a copy and it was beautiful. And something that is, you know what you're saying too, like in your introduction too about the movie, it being a movie that came out crashed and burned and then kind of revived in, you know, itself and has this huge cult following and maybe, you know, it'd be great to hear.

Kind of that experience being in terms of like how you experienced the film as it came out and then kind of had this revival and like what you remember and why, I guess, why is this a movie that left such a big impact on you?

John Gaspard: Well, it, it left a great impact on me and a lot of other people. Um, and the fact that it ran for two years at the Westgate.

Is why it became a cult film. But I think if it hadn't happened at The Westgate, it would've happened somewhere else. [00:03:00] Somewhere else. It would've caught on like this. 'cause the movie is just too good to disappear. The problem it had was, it's an odd little movie. Um, and Paramount did not know how to distribute it, how to market it, because it was, uh, and is a story of a 19-year-old boy who falls in love with a 79-year-old woman, and they didn't know what to do with that.

In fact, Peter Bart, who was one of the top executives at the time, even wrote, we don't know how to market this movie. However, uh, in December of 1971. Paramount did have a movie. They knew how to market, called The Godfather, and they had scheduled it in tons of theaters all over the country, and it wasn't ready.

I was not ready for its Christmas debut. So Paramount said to all the theater owners, yep, godfather will be coming. Don't worry about it. But in the meantime, why don't you run this great little movie called Harold and Maude that has no stars, no promotion, no marketing, and so in just about every [00:04:00] city, it ran for a week, maybe two, and then disappeared.

Now in Minneapolis, it got, uh, really good reviews. It didn't get great reviews everywhere around the country, but all the critics in Minneapolis were really

kind to the movie and the people who, uh, ran the theaters here in town, a company called, uh, general Cinema. Uh, they owned 20 some theaters in town.

Their, uh, their film guy, they picked all the films. Realized that this movie got great reviews and didn't get a much of a chance. And at the same time, he realized that this little theater in, uh, a suburb of Minneapolis had gotten sort of a reputation as a nursing home for oddball comedies. Uh, Mel Brooks' second film, the 12 chairs had run there for 12 weeks.

Up until that point, at that theater, no film had ever run. Longer than five or six weeks. And that one ran for 12. Uh, when that left, they brought in Where's Poppa?, which ran for 36 weeks. And [00:05:00] so they knew that, uh, the Westgate was a good place to put this film, and that gave it the time that it needed to build the word of mouth.

And then once other cities started hearing what was going on in Minneapolis, you know, the same movie, running at the same theater twice a night, three times on Sunday. For, you know, over a year, in this case, over two years, other theaters began to book it as well, and that's how the groundswell happened. It would've happened anyway.

It just happened to happen here because the circumstances were right for it.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm. I So you say it's interesting, like you're saying the circumstances are Right. And there are a lot of things in what you just said too that I find quite interesting, especially in terms of how. Movie going experiences have changed so drastically.

Mm-hmm. Obviously in, in 2026, I mean from 2020 to now, but that a movie can run. Even 12 weeks in a theater to me is wild. Do you see movies come out and it's like five [00:06:00] weeks in the theater and then it's out? Right. And most of the time, but there's something that you keep saying too, like about the circumstances were depending, the circumstances were perfect or, and is, do you feel like it was the circum.

There were cultural circumstances mm-hmm. Or, um, you know, just financial circumstances or something going on that made those circumstances, as you're saying, like kind of perfect for the, the groundswell or the popularity to grow.

John Gaspard: Right. Well, for the theater owners it was definitely financial. The only reason they kept it running for over two years was that it was continuously making money and neighbors would call up and complain.

Uh, Dan, this is the era which is long gone of the neighborhood movie theater.

Daniel Dissinger: Right

John Gaspard: where you had a theater within walking distance of your home. I happened to have three when I was growing up and whatever. Uh, one of them might have a brand new movie, but most of them had something that had already run at the downtown theaters.

And it was a month later, and now you could see it there. You could [00:07:00] walk to the theater and see a new movie every week. It was also before VHS and streaming and DVDs. So when a movie went away. Um, it might turn up on tv, but it might be really truncated or it might not turn up at all for a long time. So if you wanted to see it, you had to go back and see it again.

Now in Minneapolis, a little before that, The Sound of Music had run for like 90 weeks or something and it, it was a huge hit and people kept going again and again 'cause it was a huge hit. Um. Uh, because they knew they can't see it anywhere else. Now with Harold and Maude, the beauty of it was, it's this little black comedy that, um, actually appealed to all age groups, although kind of changed over the years.

Went from college kids to middle age to older people and back to college kids. But it was something people would bring their friends to to say, you've gotta see this. And they would sit next to them and watch them while. Things [00:08:00] happened on screen that had made them laugh and watch their friends laugh.

It's also, uh, a classic feel good movie, the soundtrack from Cat Stevens and the performances in the script and the direction you walk out of that movie. Feeling good. Um, and in the early seventies there weren't a lot of movies where you walked outta there feeling good. I mean, when the Godfather finally came out, you didn't walk outta there feeling good.

When Easy Rider was over, you didn't walk out there feeling good. There was, you know, a certain. Uh, darkness to a lot of movies in the early seventies. And this one was a pretend darkness. It apparently dealt with fake suicides, but it was really, uh, uh, light and life affirming. Mm-hmm. And people, I think, reacted to that.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. That's interesting. I've been talking about that, a lot of that with, um, on my other podcast too, like about. Movies [00:09:00] now and kind of the, the missing comedies that we're, we're having, like there's not this

release of even dark comedies like this mm-hmm. Where it's much, we are so much in like a. Horror drama, more realism moment.

And then the fantasy movies that come out are kind of like, okay, and then Marvel, right? So like you're missing big comedies, right? You're even this last year, this last holiday season, there wasn't like a large Christmas release, right? Like it wasn't right. There isn't the there. And it's interesting you say that because they, when I was also reading the book and I'm like.

Thinking about the theater itself and you're saying like this idea of the neighborhood theater, like there is at least something. They're in close proximity. That is providing a, like you said, a lightheartedness, a positive experience, a communal experience, right? Yep.

John Gaspard: Yep.

Daniel Dissinger: And um, it's, it's hard to come by now because movie going is so much more isolated in your home, right?

Yeah. You are just watching it on your own. [00:10:00]

John Gaspard: Yes. And having, when I first saw it, I was in ninth grade, so does that make me like 13 years old? I'd heard good things about it. I rode my bike over to the theater, uh, watched the probably seven 30 show on a Saturday night and, and, uh, sold out house absolutely full.

Came back the next afternoon to see it again because the reaction from the audience was so effusive that I felt like I'd missed about half the movie 'cause the audience was so into it. Uh, and you obviously, we don't get that very much anymore. Uh, people just aren't going to theaters the way they did. Uh, and so a movie like Harold and Maude that.

Explodes in front of an audience, it, uh, it's hard to get that audience in there anymore. And also it's a really weird movie and they're not willing to take risks on really weird movies.

Daniel Dissinger: Well, yeah, it is. And and that's the thing too. And I think, uh, being this love story between this 19-year-old and this 79-year-old [00:11:00] woman, I think is, there's a comedy to it.

And I think, you know who Bud Court who just recently passed away, you know, when. When you look at his, when you look at him as a character too, he

definitely also interestingly, plays younger. Like he looks, it's funny, when I saw it, I was like, oh, that's an interesting coupling here, right? Like it's, this is an interesting pair.

But Ruth Gordon too, like you're, you said like, they're not stars. They're not huge people. They're, they're these, you know. They, they just look like everyday people, right? Mm-hmm. You know? Yep. And so it, you're, you're right in terms of it being a hard sell, I think it's interesting though that audiences connected to such a, to such a story as well.

But uh, you know, does, do you feel like it also has to do with the theater itself? 'cause your book talks about the Westgate and the history of the Westgate Yeah. And everything like. Does the theater play a role in, in this as [00:12:00] well?

John Gaspard: I, I think it does, uh, because it had, like I said, gotten a reputation as being, if a movie was playing at the Westgate.

Uh, you knew it was gonna be funny and different, uh, and obviously Harold and Maude was that, but so was, where is Papa? So was the 12 chairs. So audiences already knew that going in. It also had a great lead in, uh, there was a short that played every night before. Both screenings of the movie called De Döva

Mm-hmm. And De Döva is about a 15 minute black and white short. That is a takeoff on Ingmar Bergman films. Uh, uh, about, uh, a woman who ends up playing badminton with death to. For her soul. Uh, and it is in a fake Swedish that you realize after a few minutes is actually English with a Swedish accent. It is a very funny little movie and really set the table quite nicely for Harold and Maude because it, it is dark and weird and funny.

Uh, and one of the reasons I [00:13:00] think that Harold and Maude took off the way it did was, uh, this is back in the day when a, uh, a newspaper film critic. Could have an impact on whether or not people saw movies. And there was a, a writer for the Minneapolis Tribune named Will Jones and Will Jones had been around forever, but he had great taste and he was a very good writer.

And when he said, go see something, people went and saw it. In this instance, he wrote on, uh. The Monday before Harold Mot opened at the Westgate Theater, he wrote a long column about dva, which he had seen a year earlier and had been begging the theater owners to bring it back 'cause it was so funny. And he said in his column, uh, I hear Harold MA's very good, but you've got to see De Döva run and see it before, uh, it disappears again.

And they had virtually a sold out house that Wednesday night because so many people listened to him and came running to see it.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm. I love that idea that [00:14:00] you have a setup movie. You know, obviously the movie going experience from that time period has ch, you know, has changed to now. Now you, they actually tell you you're gonna have like 25 to 30 minutes of trailers or, you know, some sort of commercial.

Yep. Where there, it's just like you have an, there is an a movie or a news reel or cartoon. There's something before it. That setup is so interesting because I, for one, never have never experienced that, you know? Yeah. You know, I was born in 1982, so the movie going experience for me is like trailer movie, right?

Mm-hmm. Like, so some of us love the trailers, now we're getting too many of them, but

John Gaspard: yes,

Daniel Dissinger: do the, the idea that a movie, but the movie before it set them up for success is really, really beautiful and interesting to me. I, I love that idea.

John Gaspard: It's, you know, one of these quirky things that just happened.

Everything fell into place for that to happen and [00:15:00] it didn't hurt that, uh, although it's across town. But the University of Minnesota is a very big university and has a very young, large audience. Um, and they had one art theater, well actually two at that time over there. But they also knew to come over to the Westgate to see stuff.

Uh, and so we had sort of a built in young audience for it. And then. Once it caught on, then the middle aged people were coming to see what was going on.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm. Yeah. And there's also photos that are great in your book. The, the book, the, that you have, um, and someone who is the person that helped design the, the book.

John Gaspard: It's a company, uh, out of, uh, the uk, uh, called Design for Writers and as a husband and wife team, Andrew and Rebecca Andrew did the cover and came up with that look. And then his wife, Rebecca, uh, did every single page. Um, and it wasn't like a cookie cutter thing. Ev as you notice when you page through every page has different size photos and different layout.

And, um, she did a great job of getting everything in there.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah, it was [00:16:00] beautiful. It was like walking, it was like taking a, a museum exhibit and putting it in the pages. I felt like I was actually just walking through its history. It was like very, very well put together. I, I was so fascinated by it and, and I think also the pictures of the theater from the outside to the inside, especially the inside lobby really.

Also gives me that sense. It's like the, the experience of going to that theater, right. Or to a theater house. Mm-hmm. Right. Instead of like, now look, if you ever get to a movie theater, you're going, it's very sim, it's very cookie cutter. You know the kind of carpet you're gonna go in. You know what it's what it's gonna feel like when you walk in.

It's all very similar. Where these movie houses had. Very different, distinct looks like theaters in New York when I was living there. You go to Broadway and every theater has like a different lobby. The

John Gaspard: right,

Daniel Dissinger: the um, you know, the Pantages in Los Angeles is very gorgeous on the inside and there's a little movie house in Encinitas called La [00:17:00] Paloma, which is one screen and it's the one of the oldest theaters I've ever been in.

And it's just gorgeous, like the inside. It's like you could feel the history in it. When you worked there, like did you. Did the look of the theater, like how has, has it changed or, well, not, has it changed? Like,

John Gaspard: well

Daniel Dissinger: was that something that interested you? How it kind of like, oh, well it did change actually.

Yeah.

John Gaspard: Well, when I worked there, which was after Harold and Maude had had its run, which ended in spring of 74, and I worked there I think 19 75, 19 76, uh, on and off. And at that point, even during the Herald and MA years, it was a tired little theater. Um, it had not had. Much in the way of refurbishing. Um, when it had first been built in 1935, the guy who built it was sort of a mad genius and he created this beautiful show place that had a stage that was big

enough for his orchestra to be on if he wanted the orchestra to be there that night or do live [00:18:00] performances.

It had a, a whole wing that was just a party room that you could rent. So if you wanted to have a dinner party or. They had a catering kitchen there. If you wanna have your bridge club there and then go in and see a movie, it had a candy store attached to it that you could get to from the lobby. So it was a big deal thing.

And then, you know, a year into it's running, he tragically died and there was no more visionary and a, and a competitor bought it up and it just sort of trudged along. So by the time I was there in 75, 76, um. The, uh, the staging kind of been reconfigured, so it really was just the screen. The carpet was exactly the same as original carpet.

The candy store was gone. They just put a candy counter in the lobby. The, uh, party room next door had been turned into a beauty salon, uh, and it was tired. So when I was lucky enough to find the granddaughter of the guy who founded it, and she said, I have some pictures. Do you wanna look at it? So my wife and I went to her house and she flips open this photo album and it's these [00:19:00] beautiful photos that have not been seen in 70, 80, I don't know, a million years of what it was back then.

Um, and it was just fascinating to see 'cause I recognized the carpet, and the carpet looked nice, didn't look so nice in 75, but it looked pretty good in 35. And you could see what his vision had been and the. Fact that it had just sort of run down was because, you know, he died so nobody had a vision for it anymore.

And then it was just the neighborhood theater. And then they were trying to find ways to get people out of their houses when TV came around. It was just a struggle from that point on until they realized, oh, this Mel Brooks movie is running. Oh, this Carl Reiner movie has continued to run. Oh, we have Harold and Maude.

Then the problem they had was after Harold and Maude left, how do we repeat that? And they were never able to do that. They did a little bit with King of Hearts for a while. Uh, tall Blonde Man, a French film ran for a bit, but nothing ever came to that same level of success as Harold and Maud. And then in 77, they just [00:20:00] closed it 'cause it just wasn't.

If it wasn't working.

Daniel Dissinger: Wow. You know, uh, I was, as I was reading the book too, um, it made me think about. The small theaters that were near me when I was a kid, like I had one, it was like, not exactly like this, but it was the smallest theater that we, I've ever seen it. It was called the Herricks Movie Theater.

It played four films. It was the smallest movie theater I've ever been to at that point. And it's funny to think about it at that point, like when I was a kid being like, oh, you know, my grandma's taking me to this movie theater. I really would rather go. To the big movie theater to see the thing I wanna see with them.

But she's taken me here and now I'm like very. Kind of need that nostalgia of it. Like I'm just like, you know, I should have been grateful for those moments because it was such an interesting moment to have something that was in the neighborhood that like gave discounts that wasn't expensive, that was, [00:21:00] uh, very humane experience.

You go there, you could talk to the people, like, everyone's like, hi, how are you doing? It's a whole experience. Yeah. Where now it's like, I don't even talk to someone to get a ticket. I'll just buy it online.

John Gaspard: Yep.

Daniel Dissinger: And just go there. Um, how do you think, you know, do you think that, and maybe this is just a leading question, but as well, like that this loss, like these, the loss of these neighborhood theaters kind of has created, um, other losses in terms of how we experience either movies or different, or, you know, media culture.

John Gaspard: Well, I think it spreads across any sort of. Uh, experience you were having as a consumer, whether it's going to the neighborhood drugstore, the neighborhood, dry cleaner. Um, we didn't have Target when we were growing up. You went to the drugstore on the corner and they had what you needed. Uh, you knew who the butcher was.

The bakeries right next door. All those things were, were there and they knew you when you came in. You know, I could go [00:22:00] up to the drugstore two blocks from my house and ask for, at, at age seven, ask for a package of Marlboro cigarettes and they would sell it to me 'cause they knew it was for my mother. Uh, they knew me, so it was all just fine.

And, and that was lost when theater owners realized that they could have, uh, four screens running, or six screens running with about the same number of staff. Particularly when the, the large plate movie Projectories where you could get, he didn't have to do real changes when those came in. Um, they could have six times the attendance for about the same cost and uh, they had.

It was all financial. They didn't have any, you know, they would still make money. So why keep, uh, a little theater like the Westgate when you can only show one or two movies a night when you have to pay a full staff and a projectionist [00:23:00] when you could be showing four, five movies a night with one projectionist and maybe one or two extra people.

So it was just all financial, just like all these other things that went away and then you lose that personal touch.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm-hmm. Yeah, you, you, you lose the experience like. The leaving of the house experience, especially now with streaming. Right? Yeah. You just, but also the other thing that you were talking about earlier too, the risk taking.

Right. Harold and Maud is a risk, like as a movie, because it isn't, it's off the beaten path. It's a dark comedy as well, which is always a risk because you have to do that very well. Like there's not a lot of great dark comedies because it's a very specific genre to write in and you know. Being someone who has, you know, been, you know, feature film, uh, who has created feature films like in the Dark Comedy, like what makes a dark comedy, do you feel successful and like what made Harold [00:24:00] Ahad as a dark comedy successful?

John Gaspard: I think I said it before, it's very life affirming. Um, they followed it up a few years after that. Like I said, they tried a bunch of different movies and one of them was called Homebodies, which you've probably never heard of. Most people haven't. It was about a bunch of senior citizens who lived in an apartment building and they wanted to turn it into a condo or something.

And so they started killing off the people who were gonna turn their building into a condo. I think that was the, the gist of it. Um, and it was dark. Certainly it was dark, but it, you didn't really feel. Good about it. Um, and what made Harold and Maude unique and why it was able to be made was at the time, and it wasn't just a paramount but paramount.

As part of it, um, it was just before the big corporations were really putting their thumbs on these movie studios that they'd bought. And you had people, uh, like

Peter Bart, uh, [00:25:00] uh, like Robert Evans, who were running Paramount, who are, you know. Green lighting movies like Harold and Maude with a director, Hal Ashby, who had only made one movie before and who kind of terrified them 'cause he was stoned all the time and it was sort of weird.

At the same time. They're doing The Godfather, they're doing Chinatown, they're doing Parallax View. I mean they're doing risky movies 'cause they are filmmakers. Um, they, uh. They loved that idea of creating something u new and unique. And, um, there, there was a woman who ran physical production for Universal in, I think the eighties or nineties.

Her name was Donna Smith. Um, and I knew Donna and she always referred to herself and her staff as filmmakers. And I would say, well, but you're not the directors. You're not the editors, you're not the actors writers. You're the ones who are figuring out how to. Had to close off a street at three in the [00:26:00] morning and, uh, you're doing all the physical production.

And she said, we're making films. It's the same thing as everybody else. And that's what those people were at Paramount, they were filmmakers. They wanted to take chances and do interesting movies. Uh, and there's. You know, we have it a little bit now with Netflix. 'cause Netflix has deep pockets and they're also willing to go around the world and let other countries make movies and TV series that we get to see.

They're a little bit more open to that, but they're not offering that communal experience that we had back then when we all would go in and sit down. I mean, the first time I saw the conversation, that's Paramount movie. Yeah. Paramount movie 74. I mean, I was blown away. I was with an audience that was simply blown away by it.

Now, something that good will appear and will be a hit, uh, and you may never hear of it. It might be a huge hit on a streamer and you [00:27:00] may have never heard of it. I mean, there are TV series now that have been running for 6, 7, 8 years I've never heard of, and that's different than what we had back then. We all saw the same stuff and it was a more of a communal thing.

Daniel Dissinger: That's funny because I've been thinking about that a lot. How you, this idea that everyone was watching the same things because that was what was available.

John Gaspard: Mm-hmm.

Daniel Dissinger: And even now, when I go on to watch something, I'm so confused. I actually don't, so most of the time don't know what to watch. I'm actually very confused and have no clue what to even consider watching because I'm like, yeah.

Is this the right thing to watch where like, I remember going to the movie theaters with my friends and being like, I guess we're watching this, but it's cool we're together. It doesn't matter because this is the activity. I mean, I remember going to see this weird, this movie, which it probably isn't good, but, uh, that movie *The Cell*, which Jennifer [00:28:00] Lopez and I think where she goes inside, uh, Donofrio's *Mind to find a girl* and, and so anyway,

John Gaspard: that could happen.

Sure.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. Right. The movie wasn't great, but it was like we went with 13 people. Mm-hmm. That was what I remembered. I don't remember the film. I remember that we went with 13 people. The movie theater was packed and it was all of us being like, what is this? And that was the point. The and. Mm-hmm. It's interesting that you say that because with Harold, ah, Maud, it's like.

On the surface, the story is really interesting and amazing, but I think it is about going to see it with a group like, yep. The closest I hear about that is like now with like people going to see movies that are critically terrible, like something like *the room*, but you go to watch *the room* because it's the experience of watching *the room* or *birdemic* or things like that where it's bad.

We know it's bad, but let's all sit here and have this really fun, weird. Midnight experience watching it. So [00:29:00] I feel like it's underneath the culture that that's that want of being together is there, but it's like, it's very different, right? There's a different ex, there's a different need or different desire.

Well,

John Gaspard: there's just too many choices.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

John Gaspard: Um, they did a study years ago, and I'm sure I'll get wrong who did it, so I won't even try that. About, about jellies. And they'd set up a thing,

uh, a display in a grocery store. Yeah. And they had 16 different flavors of jelly and they were on sale and it didn't sell.

And so they read, and this was a, an actual psychological study. I mean, they were goofing around and they redid it to down to like three or four flavors of jelly on sale. And they sold like crazy because people hit a point where you're giving them too many choices and they go. I can't deal with all those choices.

So I'm just gonna go on Tubi and I'm gonna watch, uh, high anxiety 'cause it's there for free. And I know that's a a, a warm fuzzy. [00:30:00] I mean, not of it, it's all that warm fuzzy, but people will watch something they've seen before that gives 'em a good feeling because they're so overwhelmed by all the choices that are out there.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah, I mean,

John Gaspard: it's a different time. It's a wholly diff, totally different time than 71.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah, and I think there's a big pull to a bigger pull now of like nostalgia to like, instead of something new, it's like you said, like, this gives me, this, feeds that, that thing that I'm not getting from something new and it's nostalgia.

It's more, more fuzzy. It's life affirming or it's, you know. Communal, right? Like I, I do that other podcast 'cause I love talking to my friends. I don't get to hang out with them 'cause we all live in different locations and it's just like, now we don't really want to watch son-in-law. But like it, it's funny because now we're gonna get to talk about it together or hang out and.

It's interesting the type of different experiences you get with Harold and Maude. It's funny because as I'm, as I was reading the book and, and reading about the [00:31:00] movie and thinking about all the types of things that I've gone through and stuff as well, and thinking like this movie running for two years is so, it, it's funny because you could see both the movie goer and the movie house owner.

Having this exchange, the audience wants it, so then it's like, okay, let's give them this movie. Yeah. Mm-hmm. Where there's so many things now where it's like, well, I wanna watch this, but it's not here anymore. Like even in stream, it's gone. Now I have to really look forward in physical media, but like, it's like, wow, I can't get it.

And it's frustrating to think like, even though I have all this choice, I then have. Not, not the choice I want.

John Gaspard: Right.

Daniel Dissinger: Right. Like, and I can't demand it as much anymore. Where like, this was interesting idea of demand and, and the audience really wanting it

John Gaspard: and they knew that when it was gone, it was gone.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah.

John Gaspard: And they wouldn't be able to see it again.

Daniel Dissinger: That, [00:32:00] that is something I didn't even consider.

John Gaspard: That

Daniel Dissinger: is something that's, I didn't even consider as well.

John Gaspard: No, people would bring tape recorders into the theater to record it so they could relive it at home. Mm-hmm. Um, uh, not just Harold Mother, they do it with other, other movies too, because, uh, I mean, you were born when?

81.

Daniel Dissinger: 82.

John Gaspard: 82. So you grew up in a VHS world.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah.

John Gaspard: And um, that was. Enormous when it came out. This idea of you can get a movie and bring it home and watch it again and again and again. And the studios, when they started doing it, um, didn't think there was really much of a market for it. And so they just dumped a lot of stuff to VHS.

Um. And then they started pricing it quite high so that the video stores that popped up would have to pay \$80 for each tape and then they'd rent them for \$2 each and blah, blah, blah. Until, 'cause they thought, well, [00:33:00] there's no

way that people are gonna wanna buy a VHS tape and take it home. They're just gonna want to see it once, not understanding that.

No, they're gonna want to have a whole wall full of their VHSs or then their DVDs and then their Blu-rays, um, so they can go whenever they want and see them. And, you know, I think Disney was probably the first ones to figure that out, that kids will watch their movies again and again and again. So let's price them at \$20 and we'll sell a million of them.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. Wow.

John Gaspard: But it just wasn't possible in 72, 73, 74. When it was gone, it was gone.

Daniel Dissinger: That's amazing. I, I can't even, hmm. It's hard to imagine. I mean, I'm trying to put myself in that and it's hard to imagine because I take for granted and that's something that like, as you said, like take for, I take, so I take for granted the fact that I come watch a movie over and over.

Right? Even if it's there. And you couldn't do that. You'd have to watch it as many times as possible before it was out, uh, before it was gone. That's.

John Gaspard: Well also, [00:34:00] um, as I was, what, what was referred to as a monster kid, so I really liked the Universal Monster films.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah.

John Gaspard: And, um, you, and I'm not alone in this, you talk to anybody in my age range who was a monster kid, you would buy, I would buy my own copy of TV Guide a week ahead of time and go through with a pen and mark when the movies were gonna be shown.

Because you didn't have once, you couldn't, I couldn't record it. That's right. There was no recording. There's no DVR at that point. Um. And it, it just was part of the ritual of, if I'm gonna see this, I've got, I've gotta take some action and actually do it. And then, and then being part of a large family and having one tv, then there's a negotiation of, you know, I know you wanna watch Lawrence Welk or something, but Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein is on Channel 11 and I'll never get to see it again.

Yeah. So let's turn that on. Yeah. It was like you say, a whole different time.

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, that's, that's really amazing. Yeah, because I feel the, you know, there's a, [00:35:00] there's a different like, cultural experience. Like you're, you can watch it on your phone now even I know, like yeah. A big budget film and, and it just isn't.

And you're watching it in like while you're going, like commuting somewhere where like it's, you know, you're doing it on the go when like, yep. The movie going experience is something like going to the theater where I was talking to someone one, uh, a, a week ago or something, or I was reading something, I think I was reading it about how theater, live, theater is this space that has.

It suffers because of technology, but it's something that you can't, like you have to go to it like you have to. Yes, there are recordings of plays and things like that that you can watch musicals, but that you have to really go to it. There's a real choice making happening and it's physical. You're there, you're with people and I'm, and I was like.

That's right. Like that is, that is something that has yet been so much drastically [00:36:00] changed by, by technology yet, you know, and I say yet, because there's always a way probably, you know, as they say in Jurassic Park, you know what's gonna happen. You know, it's like, but like you see that and I'm just like, wow.

The sa how many less sacred spaces we have in terms of the, that ex, that media exchange, you know? So what was it like to work at the Westgate when you ultimately saw working there?

John Gaspard: Yep. It's that communal experience that is getting harder and harder to do.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah. What kind of, uh, what was it like to work there at the Westgate?

John Gaspard: Um, being in Usher at that time wasn't a particularly stressful job. Excuse me. Because, uh, yeah, to two shows a night didn't have real large crowds. Uh, so you, someone would be in the box office, they'd sell tickets, they'd walk through the lobby, they'd hand you the ticket, you'd tear it. They get half of it.

The other half [00:37:00] goes in to help the accounting. Someone's behind the candy counter. They've taken last night's popcorn that was in a bag in the basement and thrown it in and added some new popcorn on top of it. So you had

that popcorn smell. Uh, you'd sell some candy or popcorn people go in, uh, you'd sweep up the, uh, the lobby 'cause of, 'cause of the popcorn they spilled.

Uh, and then wait for the movie to get out and for the next people to come in. So. Not particularly stressful. Um, but it was a great chance to see some, some things again and again, although nothing ran for horrifically long time when I was there, but you could kind of bop in and just see, you know, um, uh, Lena Wt Mueller's seven Beauties ran there for a while and they had it in an, it was an English dub version so you could understand what was going on, or they had, um, uh.

Uh, who did that? Uh, who did the Magic Flute? I'm blanking. Who did that? Someone French wasn't Louis Ma. Anyways, you [00:38:00] could hear the Magic Flute every night, or you could go in, uh, to and watch shampoo and see the ending of shampoo and see him standing, you know, on the hill at the end there. Uh, and so that was nice.

Um, but it wasn't, uh, uh. I've had far more interesting jobs since then.

Daniel Dissinger: So how, so you, you're a filmmaker as well. Like what sort of movies have you felt or the, or has have influenced your journey towards being a filmmaker and, you know, does Harold and Maude like factor into that as well?

John Gaspard: It, it absolutely does.

Um, I had an. Unique experience, uh, in high school for my, uh, uh, what do you call it, sophomore, junior and senior years In high school, I would go to normal school in the morning and then get on a bus and go to a special film school in the afternoon. So I was making movies every afternoon on Super eight or Super eight sound.

And, um, [00:39:00] however, was the early seventies and it was a time when filmmaking was a, uh, a means of self-expression. And, uh, Hollywood was frowned on and you weren't supposed to tell stories you were supposed to express yourself, which didn't particularly interest me. I wanted to tell stories with the camera.

So, although I had this quote unquote film education every afternoon, um. Actually, I think seeing Harold and Maude again and again and again was a far better education because Hal Ashby was a brilliant director and a brilliant

editor, and although he didn't physically cut Harold and Maude, he certainly has his fingerprints all over it.

And you'd learn all kinds of things by watching not only what's there but what he cut away. You know, the whole ending sequence is a montage to a song, which is not in the script at all, uh, in which he's flipping back and forth between, uh, one night and the next day. Uh, there's tons of [00:40:00] dialogue that was cut out of the film.

If you ever, like I did get the novel and read that and go. MOD's jacking all the time. It's like they cut her way, way, way, way down to, to just the essence. And you just learn about something simple as, uh, the impact in a theater of going from a very dark scene and cutting to a very bright scene and what that does to an audience, how it kind of grabs them and how do you do a montage and how do you use music, uh, in this and how, at what point.

On a gag, do you cut? And how do you use sound to help with the cut? You know, the, the term smash cut, what is really a smash cut? Um, all that stuff I learned by just watching that movie again and again, again, because he's Al Ash's a really good teacher.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm, that's amazing. That's amazing. So. In your film career, what type of movies?

Uh, you focus on storytelling movies like character dev? Yeah, like characters, character films.

John Gaspard: Yes. Uh, usually light comedies or [00:41:00] romantic comedies. Uh, one rather dark one. Um, while in, uh, as a senior in that, uh, actually right after, uh, we shot of a couple features on three quarter inch, uh, videotape, which is a.

Big thing to haul around locations. The camera's big, the deck is big. It's, um, did some, uh, a couple features there. And then, um, mostly my, my big feature was in 16 millimeter called Beyond Bob, um, which is actually UCLA now. Uh, all the components for it live there. Uh, but that's a romantic comedy. And then the other features following that are all.

Of that ilk, there's a certain fun life affirming feel to them.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm.

John Gaspard: Uh, definitely influenced by, you know, the filmmakers from the early seventies who I really was interested in, you know, Francis Coppola and Peter Bogdanovich, and, [00:42:00] you know, and absolutely, uh, what Hal Ashby did both in Harold and Maude and in Shampoo and in Being There, you just, you get that sense of, uh, there's a, there's a mind behind what you're seeing.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm. I like that. That's, I like that. Do you, um, do you see like a resurgence of like a neighborhood theater or a smaller theater like happening? I mean, I know. It's very privileged for me to be in a coastal city like Los Angeles, where mm-hmm. I have a couple over at you. I have one or two within walking distance.

One is the Brain Dead Studio Theater, where it's like they, they do all sorts of amazing movies every month that you're, you're there to see, um, mainly not a lot of new stuff, mainly all like older films, but it's there and I think, you know, and the one that Quentin Tarantino has, you know that he Right.

Basically. Shows one of his movies and a few other movies like, um, but do you feel that there is maybe some sort of slower resurgence of the, of that type of [00:43:00] neighborhood theater?

John Gaspard: You know, I, I can only speak to our experience here in Minneapolis and St. Paul and we're very lucky 'cause we have three, uh, different but uh, similar.

Theaters there. There's one called The Heights, uh, in North Minneapolis, which is a beautiful jewelbox theater that still has the big Hammond organ thing that they can play before movies that rises up. And it's a beautiful theater and they've just been taken over by the folks who run the music box in Chicago.

So it's, um, they are dedicated to showing new movies and showing old movies and showing classics and, um. It's, uh, it's a beautiful theater and they're, that's what they're running there. Then in the Minneapolis side, we have a theater called The Parkway, which, um, has gone through a lot of different, uh, figure in Figurations, uh, including, it was a porn theater for a while in the seventies, but now it's all cleaned up and they've got a, um, they put in a performance stage in it.

So [00:44:00] they will have live performers, uh, comedy shows, music shows, and then. Many evenings are live music for an hour and then a movie. For example, Harold and Maude this week we're running there with live music

before it, and then they'll run Harold and Maude after it. Oh wow. And um, it's a big theater and they have, um.

Probably 300 and 400 seats, something like that, and all kinds of good projection. Then there's a little tiny guy called the Trilon, and the Trilon I think seats 50 or 60 people. Uh, and that's pretty old school when it comes to, here's the. You know, uh, back in the seventies there were revival houses and they had different themes, and you'd see two different movies a night, and there'd be, you know, um, Casablanca and Beat the Devil one night.

And then it would be, uh, meet me in St. Louis and singing in the Rain the next night. And the trilon. Isn't just in that era, but it, it runs all kinds of, uh, independent and studio films that you just haven't [00:45:00] seen for a while because it's a small space that generally sell out and you have a really enthusiastic audience.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm, that's awesome.

John Gaspard: So in, in the Twin Cities, we have a lot of opportunities that other cities just don't have because for whatever reason, they just don't have enough, uh, enough interest.

Daniel Dissinger: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, you know, uh, as we're, as we're winding down, I'm curious, like, what would you want, what do you want your readers to walk away?

You with your walk away from your book, like knowing, or what do you want them to kind of get from reading and basically touring your book? I mean, really, that's what I, I feel like that's what it was like. It was like a tour, really beautiful tour. What do you want them walking away having experienced or knowing?

John Gaspard: Well, on a selfish level, I did it just for myself really, because it was of such interest to me. And, um. I had done a lot [00:46:00] of fiction writing since I retired, uh, and this was a chance to do research and a nonfiction thing and really dive in. I mean, I had no clue as to the history of the Westgate Theater until I started diving in and realized that half the book had to be how this theater morphed over the years.

So selfishly, uh, the, the, the book is very much for me, but I think what I'd like people to take away from it is here, um, uh. There's a very good book out there on the making of Harold and Mud. Um, and I didn't want to do that. I wanted to,

to just sort of let you come in and see what it was like for those two years, this unique combination of theater and film and audience and what was that like.

And in order to do that, I had to tell you everything about the theater up to that point and some history of the making of the movie. Although I don't, there's some photos in there that haven't been seen before, but. And some, maybe some facts that haven't been before, but there's a better [00:47:00] book on the making of Harold Mott.

If you wanna dig deep, this doesn't dig deep. It just says, here's where the theater was, here's where the movie was, and here's what happened when they came together, and here's what happened when they went apart. So it's very much a timeline book. You know, it starts in 1935 and it ends sort of today, um, where it says, you know, Harold, the theater's gone.

The theater is now a, a condominium. And there's a picture of it at the back of the book. It says, see where the parking ramp is, where it says enter here. That's where the box office was. Yeah. Um, and Harold and Maude is still being shown, you know, everywhere. In fact, it is still shown every Sunday evening at uh.

Theater in Germany that has never stopped showing it. I think even during COVID they ran it, it has never stopped showing. It's shown once a week there. Wow. And it, and it pops up everywhere. And, and now with the recent passing of Bud Court, I'm sure that's gonna reignite, uh, interest in that because it was for better or worse what he was best known for.

Daniel Dissinger: Hmm. Yeah. It, it, it's, [00:48:00] I I really encourage everyone to get the book and, and look at it. 'cause like you said, it is much more, it, it is. It's like a time capsule of a moment from the theater to the, and then the movie. And kind of really shows a moment in time as you know, how important movie going was, but also the communal experience of it, but also this film in particular, Harold La Maud and the kind of impact it had for people.

And it also, the impact it had on the theater. I, I really enjoyed that it was, you know, it's really, it was a fun read.

John Gaspard: It was a fun project to do, and I will say this, it is a coffee table book.

Daniel Dissinger: Yeah.

John Gaspard: Uh, filled with photos on high grade paper, which makes it a little more expensive than a normal book. And so what I tell people is, yeah, if you can afford to go buy yourself a copy, but.

Better for everybody is reach out to your local library. A lot of them have, [00:49:00] uh, online you can suggest books and suggest they buy a copy because you can then take it out and see it and then a bunch of other people can see it too. And it's, libraries can absolutely order it. They, it's right in the system where they know how to get books and that would get it out to more people.

But if, you know, if you got the money, go ahead and buy yourself a copy. But I think it's in, in. Particular here in Minneapolis, although obviously we have a greater interest here than a lot of other places. Our library, even without me asking, reached out and bought five copies of it. And I have, I check every week and there's like 26, 36 people in line waiting for those five copies.

So, um, it's just a great way to take. To not only help the author 'cause the library buys book, but also get other people a chance to see who might not otherwise get that chance.

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, that's amazing. I, well everyone do that. I'm gonna do that actually, I'm gonna suggest it to the West Hollywood Library because [00:50:00] that's, that's something I never even can see.

See, I learned something. This is why this podcast is my classroom. Like I always learn some, I learn a bunch of stuff all the time. That's amazing. Um. Wow. Well, John, this has been such a great conversation. Thank you so much. I, I, I wanna have you on again to talk about a lot of other stuff because I have so many other questions.

Uh, like my ADHD brain is like going, you didn't ask this question, didn't ask that question. I'm like, oh, it's okay.

John Gaspard: We can always do it again, Dan. Don't worry. Yeah, we can always do it again.

Daniel Dissinger: It was so much fun. Thank you so much. I, um. I'm encouraging everyone go order the book, but also yes, encourage your local libraries to get, um, held over Harold ah Maud at the Westgate Theater by John Gasper.

It's a really beautiful read and it is a gorgeous book, so please like, and if you do buy it. Definitely present it. Put it out at your coffee table. It is a, it is a beautiful book. So, um, thank you [00:51:00] John again so much. And oh, why don't you, is there anything else that you'd like to plug or anything else?

John Gaspard: Um.

For film people who are interested in filmmaking. I just put out the 20th anniversary of, of, uh, low budget filmmaking book called Fast, cheap, and Under Control Lessons Learned from the Greatest Low Budget Movies of All Time. And in that there's 60 some lessons that I've pulled out of 30 some classic low budget movies, and I got to talk to filmmakers like, uh, Roger Corman and, uh, boy Steve Soderberg.

Yeah, Steve, I'll call him Steve. And. Uh, John Favreau and Tom Noonan and, uh, Cassie Lemons, a lot of great people. But the, the book has been around for 20 years and I just put out the 20th anniversary, uh, edition version of it, which has, um, some additional stuff in the back and a lot of links in it that, uh, didn't exist when it first came out.

Daniel Dissinger: Oh, wow. That's excellent. And also you. You know, you told me like also if I'm, you know, also you do a podcast as well, so [00:52:00]

John Gaspard: I do have a podcast called Behind the Page, the Eli Marks podcast. And that's concerns my, uh, mystery series that I've written. I have 10 books about a magician in Minneapolis and the crimes he stumbles into in each, uh, each season we listen to, uh, one of the books on audiobook every episode.

And then we also have interviews with people involved in the entertainment industry in one way or another.

Daniel Dissinger: Wow. That's amazing, John. Thank you. Uh, it's, it's been so great. I cannot wait to release this episode. People please, like, like, subscribe and also reach out, leave a comment, and, um. Just, I don't know.

My brain is going in all sorts of directions, but, and get the book, order the book to your library. Check out the other book. Now I'm gonna, I just wrote that down because I have to check that out. 'cause I, I'm wondering about John Favreau and a lot of movies I want to do, I want to have, I made to me was one of the most weird under Yeah.

Rated films that he did that movie's [00:53:00] so weird and uncomfortable to watch in the best way possible.

John Gaspard: Yep.

Daniel Dissinger: So

John Gaspard: he's, he's a heck of a filmmaker.

Daniel Dissinger: He, he really is. Yeah. And check out his pod, check out John's podcast as well. But John, thank you so much.

John Gaspard: Thanks,

Daniel Dissinger: Dan. I really appreciate it. Very grateful and everyone, and see you on, uh, the next episode.