

Filmmaker battles to save historic Ghana cinema

The Rex, a single-storey, slope-roofed movie house was once the hotspot for film fans in Ghana, but, like many of the country's cinemas, it hardly shows movies anymore. The building is now abandoned, except on Sundays when dozens of evangelical Christians cram through its century-old walls for weekly, boisterous prayers sessions. The Rex's fate is part of a wider decay of film-going culture in Ghana, the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence and which became the hub for the continent's film industry in the immediate post-colonial era, experts said.

But a 29-year-old Ghanaian-American filmmaker, Akosua Adoma Owusu, has launched a plucky grassroots effort to save the picture house and fight the trend. The "save-your-local-landmark" campaign is commonplace in the West but remains a rarity in some developing countries like Ghana. For Owusu, the motivation behind "Damn the Man, Save the Rex" was partly personal: after building a reputation abroad as a maker of short films, she realised there was nowhere to show her work in the country of her birth. "Whether it's short films or performance or anything, you have to kind of pay a venue to screen your work," Owusu said. Owusu, who won the best short film award at the 2013 African Movie Academy Awards and whose productions have been added to the permanent collection at the Whitney Museum in New York, managed to raise \$9,000 (6,700 euros) online.

It was enough to hire out the old movie hall for a night and show her latest work. But she has bigger plans and wants to convert the Rex into a dedicated artistic space. 'Like the mecca, the place to be' If "Save the Rex" succeeds and the structure built in the early 20th century by Lebanese immigrants becomes a permanent film-

screening venue, it would double the number of functioning cinemas in Ghana's capital.

Currently, the only working movie theatre is an American-style cineplex embedded in an upscale shopping centre. But more are planned to serve the country's growing consumer class, with Ghana boasting one of the world's fastest growing economies, fuelled by gold and cocoa exports as well as a nascent offshore oil industry.

Experts voiced frustration at the current state of film culture in the west African nation, recalling a time when the head of state personally oversaw the industry. At independence in 1957, when Kwame Nkrumah was president, "Ghana was the hub for filmmaking in west Africa and generally Africa," said Anita Afonu, a director and expert of Ghanaian film history.

Nkrumah believed he could shape opinions in the new nation through indigenous films and personally read scripts and viewed pre-release cuts, she added. The former president, ousted by the military in 1966, had set up the Ghana Film Industry Corporation, which helped aspiring artists access film and editing equipment.

"His ability to change the mindset of Ghanaians... to tell them (they) are equally worth what the white man thinks he is worth... and to be able to teach them to do things for themselves was very, very paramount," Afonu said. After the coup, Ghana's once-burgeoning film industry crumbled. Military rulers imposed curfews in the capital, keeping people indoors and away from cinemas.

The film corporation's properties were eventually sold to Malaysian investors, who sloughed off the movie theatres to private owners who gradually converted most of the halls to churches. As in other countries, the proliferation of DVD technology also devastated historic movie houses such as the Rex.



Ghanaian-US filmmaker Akosua Adoma Owusu smiles while posing at the Rex theater in Accra, Ghana.

But the impact has been more acute in Ghana, which is flooded by straight-to-DVD productions from Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, which pumps out more than 1,000 titles per year. Mark Amonaquaah, owner of the Roxy in Accra, said he held on as long as he could, showing movies to the dozen or so people who would sit on the outdoor cinema's faded blue benches.

— AFP



In this photo, a counterfeit Dale Chihuly glass sculpture is displayed. — AP photos



In this photo, the signature on a counterfeit Dale Chihuly glass sculpture is visible etched in the work.

Man who sold fake Chihuly glass gets 5 months

Jim Coombes was trying to surprise his wife by amassing a collection of works by famed American glass artist Dale Chihuly to donate to Gonzaga University in Spokane, where they've worked for decades. They both ended up surprised: It turned out he spent \$25,000 on about 100 counterfeit pieces. He bought them from Michael Little, a Renton man who provided him with fabricated documents attesting to their authenticity. With Little being sentenced in federal court Wednesday, the 74-year-old Coombes said he has learned and moved on. He's still collecting Chihuly art - the real stuff, this time - for the university's Jundt Art Museum.

"I knew I'd been taken, but you get over it and get on with your life," Coombes told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. US District Judge Robert Lasnik sentenced Little to five months in prison, followed by five months at a halfway house and three years of supervised release, for his guilty plea to wire fraud. The case involved two dozen victims, including Coombes, though the others lost less money. Lasnik ordered Little to repay the victims a

total of more than \$75,000, including legal fees for Chihuly's organization. The judge said he would have preferred to send Little to basic training in the Army, if he had the authority.

Citing a doctor's report to the court, Lasnik noted that Little sleeps until 10 am every day, takes an afternoon nap and spends much of the rest of the time on his computer. The 35-year-old lives with his parents. His father attended the sentencing, but his mother forgot to bring identification to enter the courthouse and awaited her son's fate at a Starbucks across the street. Matt Diggs, an assistant US attorney, asked for a 15-month prison term. Little's attorney, Dennis Carroll, sought probation.

The judge said prison might do Little some good. "This is a guy who needs to get out of the house," Lasnik said. Little obtained the generic glass art on eBay and elsewhere, then sold it - mostly through eBay - as bona fide Chihuly, a renowned artist whose sculptures and installations have been displayed all over the world. His customers all told investigators they thought the works they received were real. Chihuly is from Tacoma, where he helped

launch the Museum of Glass. A new Chihuly exhibit space and garden opened recently under Seattle's Space Needle.

According to his plea agreement, Little told some prospective buyers his family bought the works after winning the lottery. As early as 2011, some of Little's online postings were removed because of a fraud alert, but he persisted. Lasnik was unimpressed with Little's statement to the court. The bald, bespectacled man lumbered to a podium in a sharp black suit - "the first time I've seen him in anything other than a hoodie," his lawyer noted - and proceeded largely to blame the crimes on a mysterious woman who supposedly provided him with the pieces he sold.

"I really didn't know what I was selling," Little said, contradicting his plea agreement. The judge asked Little if he told investigators about the mystery woman. "I've been told not to talk to police," he said.—AP