


Film buff turns his Melbourne garage into picture palace

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When he retired three years ago, Chris Ball soon became bored watching TV on his own. He feared becoming one of those seniors "who wake up with no purpose".

He devised a little project that has snowballed. His Strathmore garage is now a swish private community cinema, for which he is usher, film critic and MC.



Our own Bill Collins: Rapallo Boutique Cinema host Chris Ball talks to the audience before a Joan Crawford double feature. *Credit: Joe Armao*

Five times a week, his 14-seat Rapallo Boutique Cinema holds free screenings for locals and friends.

Mr Ball modestly likens his role to a pool owner letting neighbours in for a swim.

In fact, it's a little more elaborate.

He has installed padded soundproof walls, plush cinema seats, surround sound and usher call bells.

He wears shirts with the Rapallo name. He even has a cinema cat.

"Customers" chat in Mr Ball's lounge before being shown to their seats. He serves ice-cream and chips on airline-style trays.



At your service: Rapallo Boutique Cinema host Chris Ball serves up snacks before the movie. *Credit: Joe Armao*

Before a screening, Mr Ball gives a short talk about the film, à la Bill Collins. If he's showing the Beatles' film *A Hard Day's Night*, he'll tell how in 1964, aged 15, he saw it at the Athenaeum Theatre, and the girls screamed as though the Fab Four were present.

Last Thursday night's films - a Joan Crawford double feature - were *Mildred Pierce* (1945), for which Crawford won an Oscar, and *The Women*, which was made in 1939. Mr Ball says that was "an incredible year for films; the same year *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* were released".

At the Rapallo, at the touch of a button, gold curtains part to reveal a large screen, and the lights dim.

After the film, there is tea, coffee and a discussion. At a screening of *Sunset Boulevard*, one elderly couple reminisced about seeing the movie in 1950 at the State Theatre (now the Forum).

Being a cinema history buff, Mr Ball, 68, named the Rapallo after the upstairs cinema at the Forum from 1963 to 1983.



Labour of love: Retired flight attendant Chris Ball hosts free films for locals five nights a week from his Strathmore garage turned plush 14 seat cinema. *Credit: Joe Armao*

Eleven years ago the then Qantas flight attendant started hosting DVD screenings at home for workmates. When he retired, he was bored “watching *Judge Judy* on TV”. He missed human contact and started a film club to give him a purpose. His film club morphed into the Rapallo.

"It's a lot of work, but it's love, I guess," he says.

He now has more than 100 members.

The cinema is free and not for profit, but restricted to locals and their friends.



The boutique Rapallo cinema in suburban Strathmore. *Credit: Joe Armao*

Mr Ball believes in an old picture palace style of presentation that offers "a sense of occasion", where the cinema itself is an attraction. "Not those cold shoe boxes as you get at multiplexes, which are boring, and you have to fight your way through the pinball machines to get to them."

He says many of his "customers" are elderly and can no longer go to shopping centre cinemas, which are often full of action movies for teens. For most customers, the Rapallo is near their house, and he has regular matinee sessions so they don't have to go out at night.

Leena Johnson, 47, of Essendon, says she could go to Airport West or Highpoint shopping centres if she wanted to see mainstream movies. Here she can see classic and independent films and documentaries, minutes from her house.



Outside the unique Rapallo cinema. *Credit: Joe Armao*

The Rapallo is more social than a commercial art house cinema and she likes to "have a natter", make new friends and go out for dinner afterwards.

She says it's like a secret society of the area. She has never heard of anything like it. "Don't tell anyone, though," she says.

Leanne Conn, 50, says staying at home and watching a DVD is not the same as the cinema experience. "It's important to make connections with others in the community, and I think this is a really warm and lovely way to do that."