

Film projectionist makes sure picture is perfect

WHAT I DO Lucy Laird, Projectionist

By Edward Guthmann Published 4:00 am, Monday, April 25, 2011



Projectionist Lucy Laird works in the projection booth at the Rafael Film Center in San Rafael, Calif. on Saturday, April 16, 2011.



Three days a week, **Lucy Laird** projects film and video at the **Rafael** Film Center in San Rafael. She works all three projection booths in the Art Deco building that was restored in 1999 - the main auditorium downstairs and two boutique cinemas upstairs.

Laird, 36, previously worked as print traffic manager and program coordinator at the **Pacific Film Archive** in Berkeley. She also freelances as a program consultant and writer for film nonprofits. She lives in Berkeley.

I've only been a professional projectionist for a year and a half. I received my training here at the Rafael, in a 60-hour internship over two months. In the grand scheme of things, I'm still an apprentice. Many projectionists have been in the booth for decades.

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Paul Baker recorded this video of his dad playing on his practice pad back in 2016. Irwin, who was 88-years-old at the time of recording, showed off his impressive s

miss a beat. Credit: Paul Baker via Storyful





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The first thing I do when I arrive is look over the schedule, see what's playing when and in which booth. I turn on all the projectors, the audio equipment, the computer that runs our slide show and music, and the platter system where all the reels of film are spliced together and lie flat.

Then I clean the 35mm projectors. Using a tiny brush, I gently scrub to loosen the dirt and dust that accumulated the day before. I'll wipe off the sprockets and the gate with a lint-free cloth, making sure every part of the film's path is free of particles.

I install the correct lens and aperture plate. Film comes in several aspect ratios. Last night we showed a Cinemascope film, which has the widest aspect ratio, 2.35:1. So I take that lens out and replace it with the 1.85 lens for the next film.

Each of our booths has two 35mm projectors, which is unusual today given that most theaters either run plattered prints on one projector or screen everything digitally. At the Rafael, we need to be able to screen rare and archival prints, which require two projectors going back and forth - from 20-minute reel to 20-minute reel.

I manually thread the film through the projector. It's a lot like threading a sewing machine. I form a loop at the top so the film has a graceful curve that allows it to feed through the gate without becoming stretched or torn.

I check that it's in frame, the loops are at the right height, and the film fits over the sprockets. Then, if I'm running the platter system, I start the motor and advance the film to its starting point. It's a very pleasing sound, knowing your projector is healthy. All the parts are moving as they should, with no weird clicks or buzzes.

Much of what I do isn't standard procedure at the multiplex. You can't blame them. They don't have dedicated projectionists, and usually a manager will be running from booth to booth, tearing tickets and popping popcorn at the same time. It's a luxury to be able to do everything systematically and with a lot of care.

As you get to know the projectors, you understand their different personalities and quirks. I'm not a very mechanically inclined person, but getting to know these projectors has made me more apt to pop something open and see how it works.

As a projectionist, my main goal is to be invisible. If the audience is thinking about me, either they're fanatical or I've done something wrong. It's all about seamless presentation.

I want our patrons to feel like every screening is a special event and they're being transported to another realm. The first thing they see when they enter the theater is a slide show with announcements. At showtime, I close the curtains, reset the masking to correspond to the aspect ratio of the film, fade out the walk-in music, dim the lights, and open the curtains for the trailer reel.

Everything is timed very closely. I want the image to appear on the screen just as the curtains open and the lights are dimming. After the trailer reel, I'll change over to the other projector, which is being fed by the platter system. I adjust the masking again if I need to and adjust the focus, framing and audio level as necessary.

In most theaters, this whole process is automated, but here we do much of the presentation manually. I'm so grateful to be able to touch and work with film. One day it will be a lost art.

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