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Nov. 24, 2005, 2:03AM

MOVIES FOR EVERYONE

The very latest flicks, now showing in Spanish

Theaters reach 'underserved market' with timely releases

By JENALIA MORENO
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HOMEMAKER Erika Castellanos took her 5-year-old daughter Elizabeth to see an English version of the Disney film *Chicken Little* when it opened. But she didn't enjoy the movie much.

"I was asleep in the theater because I only understood a little bit," Castellanos said in Spanish.

A few weeks later, she and Elizabeth saw the film again as part of a school field trip for students enrolled in a bilingual program. This time, the chicken warned that the *cielo* was falling, as the movie was dubbed in Spanish.

"Now, I understood it," Castellanos said after watching the movie that played at Pasadena's Cinema Latino, a six-screen theater owned by Sonora Entertainment.

Officials with Denver-based Sonora are basing their business plan on moviegoers like Castellanos — a growing population of Spanish speakers who want to catch the buzz on the latest blockbusters instead of waiting months for the movie to be released on a DVD with Spanish options.


"We knew if we could open films like *Chicken Little* on the same day as the general market, we could be successful," said Anne Tengler, Sonora's president, as she sat inside the Pasadena theater in a shopping center near a taqueria and other businesses catering to the area's growing Hispanic population.

So Sonora officials negotiated with Hollywood studios to rent them the Spanish dubbed or subtitled films they produce at the same time as the English versions. Studios had simply sent those Spanish versions to Latin America, bypassing filmgoers on this side of the U.S.-Mexico border.

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Tengler said Hollywood executives support such theaters.

"We're not cannibalizing from the general market," Tengler said. "We're creating a new revenue stream for them."

In addition to *Chicken Little*, the theater is showing a subtitled version of *The Legend of Zorro* and *Innocent Voices*, a Spanish-language movie about boys recruited as soldiers during El Salvador's civil war. Last week's release of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* gave the fledgling Pasadena theater its biggest weekend to date.

The company opened its first theater near its headquarters in 2001 and later opened locations in Fort Worth and Phoenix.

Last May, it opened the Pasadena cinema, which it spent more than \$1 million gutting and renovating with plush red seats, carpeting with confetti designs and speakers.

Tengler plans to open another location in the Houston area by next spring and perhaps build a third theater in the area.

"This is an underserved market," Tengler said, as she stood near the theater's concession stand, where customers can order spicy salsa to top their popcorn, chile and lime flavored chips or Mexican candies.

The U.S. Hispanic population totals 41.3 million, and about 31 million Hispanics speak some Spanish at home, according to the U.S. Census.

And many of these Hispanics are movie buffs — going to the cinema an average of 12.1 times a year compared with Anglos visiting theaters 9.4 times a year and African Americans buying movie tickets 6.6 times a year, according to 2004 data from the Motion Picture Association of America.

Despite their fascination with films, moviegoers who are Spanish-dominant speakers have had to either struggle to understand the English version of films, wait for the DVD release or simply not watch the movie.

Decades ago, Spanish-language theaters operated in cities like Houston, but instead of showing recent releases, the cinemas offered primarily Mexican movies, such as those starring Cantinflas, a character considered to be the Jerry Lewis of Mexico.

Those theaters became rundown, and in some cities, including the Bayou City, they were ultimately shuttered.

"Things got so dilapidated that no one wants to go anymore," said Alex Nogales, chief executive officer and president of the Los Angeles-based National Hispanic Media Coalition, which keeps tabs on media portrayals of Hispanics.

So when Tengler describes her theaters, Hispanics often think back to those second-class cinemas.

"That's the kind of impression that we have had to fight because that's the only experience Hispanics in the U.S. have had," Tengler said.

To combat that impression and to let customers know about the theater's operation, the company takes a

grass-roots marketing approach, advertising to Hispanics at home improvement stores, on the radio or at churches.

The cinema operates much like a mainstream theater, but charges just \$5 for adult tickets and must advertise more to reach its audience.

But it earns more than most theaters in concession sales because it's a popular destination for Hispanic families, who often treat each of their children with snacks, Tengler said.

In Castellanos, the cinema seems to have a regular customer. She plans to return to the theater to watch *King Kong* when the movie opens next month. And she plans to bring her family to the theater, because otherwise, "where would I leave the kids?"

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