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Cinema Latino

A Colorado entrepreneur hopes his theaters showing first-run American films in Spanish translate to profits

By [Louis Aguilar](#)
 Denver Post Business Writer



Post / Lyn Alweis

The reopening of Cinema Latino de Aurora earlier this month featured mariachis and free popcorn.

In a corner of the Aurora Plaza mall, between a cash-advance store and a jewelry shop with bars on the window, is the latest brainchild of Internet empresario Jared Polis: a movie

theater that shows first-run American movies dubbed or subtitled in Spanish.

The eight-screen Cinema Latino de Aurora is the first link of what Polis hopes will be a national chain of Spanish-language multiplexes. Broomfield-based Sonora Entertainment Group recently expanded into Phoenix and Fort Worth, Texas, and has its sights on the top 30 Hispanic markets in the United States.

"Aurora was the beginning," Polis said. "We have 27 more (markets) to go."

Studies show that U.S. Latinos are solid movie fans, attending an average of 10 movies a year, compared with 8.7 for blacks and 7.2 for the overall market, according to the Motion Picture Association of America. But it's not clear how large Spanish-language movie audiences may be.

Polis, 28, calls the venture a new concept in movie chains, and

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admits he's on new entrepreneurial ground. His previous hits have been in technology, including the nearly \$1 billion sale of the e-commerce site BlueMountainArts.com in 1999.

On Wednesday night, a sizable crowd lined up outside the theater at East Sixth Avenue and Peoria Street for movies including "The Cat in the Hat," "Honey" and "Gothika."

At the newly renovated concession stand, the palomitas con salsa - popcorn with hot sauce - was selling well.

"When I lived in Los Angeles, the Spanish-language (theaters) had movies that were, like, five, six months old," said Javier Azios, a 19-year-old Mexican immigrant who lives in Aurora.

"Next week, I get to see the new 'Lord of the Rings' the same time as gringos."

Polis says his is the only theater chain where American films are accessible to Spanish-only speakers at the same time an English-speaking audience can see them.

Polis, who is chairman and principal investor, wouldn't disclose financial information about Sonora Entertainment. But the 2-year-old company is expanding and showing signs of stability after missteps in Las Vegas and Colorado Springs.

The Aurora theater reopened earlier this month after an extensive renovation that included installing new screens and a new sound system and restocking the concession stand to offer Mexican sweets and snacks.

Last month, Sonora Entertainment opened another theater in Phoenix with great fanfare - the mayor of Phoenix declared it Cinema Latino Day. In May, the company opened a theater in Fort Worth.

Each complex is named Cinema Latino. All are six- to eight-screen multiplexes that Sonora bought from a movie chain that had gone out of business or was losing money.

Polis isn't involved in the daily activities of the 45-employee business. That responsibility goes to president and chief executive David Mejias.

Mejias and Polis were buddies at Princeton University. Mejias has worked on other Polis ventures, including BlueMountainArts.com

There have been setbacks. A Las Vegas venture lasted six months, as did a theater in the Citadel Crossing mall in Colorado Springs. Mejias and Polis contend that bad locations were to blame for the failures, which occurred about 18 months ago.

"One of the important lessons to learn is the sensitivity to the market, that a critical mass of Spanish-speakers exists," Polis said.

Polis, who is fluent in Spanish, says he dreamed up the Cinema Latino concept when he tried to take a Spanish-speaking friend to a movie near Boulder.

"I was shocked there wasn't any place to take my friend. Then I saw the opportunity, and that's what I love," he said.

"I'm passionate about creating value (and) about finding a new high-growth business," he said.

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Post / Cyrus McCrimmon

Francia Acosta pours hot sauce over popcorn to create palomitas con salsa, a popular item at Cinema Latino de Aurora. The theater was the first in a planned chain of 30 catering to Hispanics.

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