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Subtitles translate to new market

English-to-Spanish a hit with Latinos

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When Ricardo Martinez goes to the movies, a good part of the dialogue is often lost in translation as he struggles with English.

But Martinez recently saw the sci-fi thriller "Aeon Flux" at an Englewood theater without missing an action-packed beat, thanks to Spanish subtitles.

"We can read and hear," Martinez, 27, a construction worker from Mexico who lives in Cicero, said in halting English. "I think it will help ... absolutely."

Catering to a growing Latino market with such blockbusters as "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire," this spring the Inner City Entertainment theater chain started adding Spanish subtitles at its Lawndale theater after learning that customers were traveling from Little Village to its Englewood movie house. With another chain increasingly pushing producers to offer more movies with Spanish subtitles for its theater in Carpentersville, the Chicago area is at the forefront of a burgeoning effort to lure Hispanics to the box office, industry officials say.

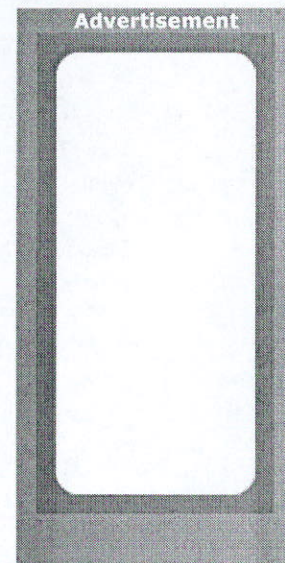
As they try to cash in on what is considered an attractive and growing niche market, theater owners hope to win over the Spanish-speaking audience with everything from first-run hits to specialty concessions and bilingual employees.

Although it is not known how many theaters nationwide offer Spanish subtitles, experts say only about a dozen screens show them regularly, mainly in Southern California and the Southwest. But as theaters struggle with declining attendance, the number nationwide is expected to grow, industry officials say.

At the ICE Theater at 2258 W. 62nd St. in Englewood, about 50 percent of the patrons are Hispanic.

"We noticed the changing demographics right away ... groups that contained grandmothers and grandfathers that might not speak as much English but who wanted to enjoy our theaters," said Venisha White-Johnson, marketing coordinator for the three-theater ICE chain. "We thought we could do more for our Spanish-speaking community and attract them to the theaters."

The theater often shows the same film on two screens, one with subtitles. The subtitled version typically accounts for about 40 percent of the film's box-office take at that theater. At other times, only the subtitled film is offered.



When "The Legend of Zorro" was shown recently at Classic Cinemas' Cinema 12 in Carpentersville, the subtitled version contributed about one-third of the box-office gross, managers said.

Classic Cinemas operates 12 theaters in northern Illinois. The Carpentersville outlet, which recently experienced a spike in Hispanic customers, shows Spanish-subtitled movies regularly and is gradually incorporating more bilingual elements. Among other things, it offers promotional material in both English and Spanish advertising birthday parties, new products and events.

Mark Mazrimas, the chain's marketing manager, said he would like to see more movies offered with Spanish subtitles.

"With us right now, it is hit or miss" trying to obtain them, Mazrimas said. "If a studio provides us with a print, we will show it."

Several major studios say they produce films with Spanish subtitles and have been doing so for years, but mainly for overseas markets.

Jeff Goldstein, general sales manager for Warner Bros. Studios, said the company usually makes Spanish-subtitled versions of all its films.

As a rule, films with subtitles are more readily available than those with dubbed sound. Because dubbing a film after production is costlier and more time-consuming than adding subtitles, it takes longer to get it to market.

"We, of course, want to service whatever population we can," Goldstein said. "If the exhibitors ask for more, we will supply. The exhibitors will ask for more if the patrons ask for more."

Some chains, such as Southern California's Metropolitan Theaters, report that they have been running subtitled movies for more than 30 years and interest has remained steady.

Others, such as Denver-based Cinema Latino, are banking that theaters offering Spanish subtitles will expand into a thriving cottage industry. The chain is considering expanding to Chicago and other markets, a company official said.

Founded four years ago, Cinema Latino operates four theaters in Colorado, Texas and Arizona that exclusively show major Hollywood releases that are either subtitled or dubbed in Spanish.

Beyond the subtitles, the theaters offer language and cultural immersion, a comfort zone of familiar sights and sounds with a decidedly Latin American flair.

At the box office, customers are greeted in Spanish. Inside, vibrant greens, yellows and reds accent the Latin-themed decor. The ambient music ranges from Norteno to Reggaeton. All of the signs are in Spanish.

The concession stand offers imported foods popular in Mexico, including Bimbo baked goods and Aguas Frescas soft drinks. There's also traditional fare like popcorn, available with salsa valentina, a Mexican hot sauce.

Anne Tengler is president of Denver-based Sonora Entertainment Group, which owns Cinema Latino. The popularity of theaters showing movies with Spanish subtitles is expected to grow, she said.

Hispanics are already primed to go to the movies, according to Tengler, who said surveys show that they typically attend 12 movies a year, compared with an average of nine for other ethnic groups.

"One of the reasons we think our circuit is going to be huge is that these behaviors already exist," she said. "We expect to have a presence in all significant Hispanic markets."

Back at the ICE Theater in Englewood, Liz Gonzalez, 21, sat with a few dozen people who braved snow and ice on a recent evening to see the comedy "Yours, Mine and Ours."

Gonzalez, who lives nearby, said the Spanish subtitles provide increased comfort for some people. She said she doesn't need the subtitles to follow the dialogue but realizes that many others depend on them.

"They come and they are able to understand it better," Gonzalez said. "I think it might encourage people to come."

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