



She's bringing art films to Winston-Salem



Lawren Desai is opening a theater for independent and art films.

Credit: H. Scott Hoffmann/News & Record

By [Joe Scott](#) (Published September 10, 2009)

Lawren Desai's favorite movie in high school was the Patrick Dempsey vehicle, "Can't Buy Me Love."

"None of my friends liked it," says Desai, laughing. "They would make fun of me."

In the film, a teenage Dempsey learns money can't find him true love, but in the real world, Desai hopes money might help her fellow Winston-Salem residents find the movies they love.

Desai, along with a group of business partners, is investing in a venture to build a movie theater in downtown Winston-Salem.

Called a/perture, this two-screen cinema at 311 W. Fourth St. will specialize in foreign and independent films, giving residents the only art house theater experience within city limits.

Desai hopes to open a/perture by January 2010.

The RiverRun International Film Festival also will lease part of the theater's office space as its base of operations.

Giving a tour of her renovated facilities, there is not a hint of doubt in Desai's voice that the gutted walls and bare concrete floor will be converted into a home for celluloid dreams.

Patrons will buy tickets and concessions from the same counter. Both of the theater's auditoriums will house about 80 seats, which Desai hopes will be the plushest and most comfortable in the Triad.

Ticket prices and concessions will be comparable to other local theaters, but a/perture will serve beer and wine.

Desai feels the demand for an art house theater in Winston-Salem has been obvious for some time. After all, the city houses RiverRun, the largest film festival in the state and the UNC School of the Arts' prestigious filmmaking program.

"I had to go to High Point to see 'Slumdog Millionaire,' and that was way after it had already been nominated for the Golden Globes," Desai says. "I wasn't resentful. It wasn't that far, but it was kind of sad. ..."

Before earning a master's degree in business from Wake Forest, Desai lived in Los Angeles where she studied film and hoped to find a career in the movie business. It was during this time that she discovered many of her favorite movies, including "Lost in Translation," "Amélie," and the Luc Besson-directed action thriller "The Professional."

She says she wouldn't mind playing any of these titles on the big screen once a/perture opens, but programming her all-time favorite movies was never the point of opening her own theater.

"I don't have any specific film that I have to play," Desai says. "It's more like the idea of doing special events or doing different things."

One project Desai would like to host is a film series that specializes in movies that played in downtown Winston-Salem years ago.

"At the library, they have old clippings of what movies played here a long time ago," Desai says. "I thought that would be cool to see and maybe bring back those films."

She adds that sharing office space with RiverRun also may enable her theater to play some of its bigger hits, as well as some of the films that didn't quite make the cut for the annual film festival.

But most importantly, Desai wants a/perture to become a home for local filmmakers, including students and graduates of UNC School of the Arts.

"There are a lot of people from the community that are making films," Desai says. "I think there's just a lot of potential for different kinds of films that are not coming here now."