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Gordon Brinckle built a '20s-style movie palace few people have seen. Now, a filmmaker wants to show Middletown's secret to the world.



When filmmaker Kendall Messick saw Gordon Brinckle's creation — a 1920s-style movie palace in his basement — he found the subject for his next documentary.

## Now playing: One man's dream

By RYAN CORMIER  
Staff reporter

From the street, the two-story house near downtown Middletown looks as ordinary as can be, offering no inkling of what it holds.

Pass through the front door and walk down a set of narrow wooden steps, and suddenly you are transported to another time by the life's work of 87-year-old Gordon Brinckle.

The man who worked nearly 35 years at Middletown's Everett Theatre as a manager and projectionist has built a 1920s-era movie palace in his basement, complete with a movie screen above a stage, a ticket booth, an organ, 14 speakers and nine authentic theater seats bolted into the floor.

Brinckle began building the palace after realizing he would never have enough money to realize his own dream: designing, building and owning a full-size theater.

As Brinckle says, "God said you can't have the real thing, but here's the small thing."

Few know of his secret besides his

### FYI

For more information on "The Projectionist" and "Corapeake," go to [www.corapeake.com](http://www.corapeake.com) or [www.kmessick.com](http://www.kmessick.com).

friends and family. Soon, his labor of love will be revealed in a documentary now being filmed at his house by Middletown native Kendall Messick.

Messick, a New York-based filmmaker and photographer, was searching for a film subject in 2001 while finishing his first documentary, "Corapeake." The award-winning, black-and-white portrait of a small North Carolina town has been airing in select markets on PBS.

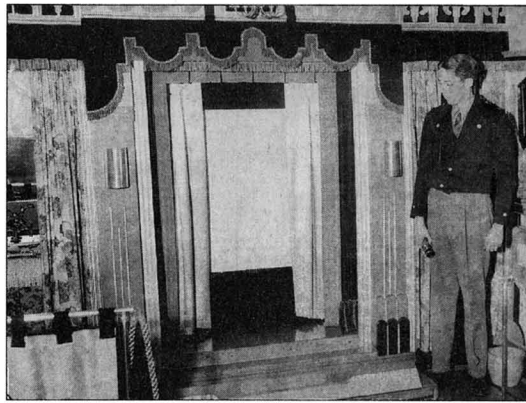
Messick was visiting his parents in December 2001 when news came that Brinckle's 52-year-old daughter, Sandy, had died.

When Messick and his family crossed the street to offer condolences to the Brinckles, the filmmaker had a vague recollection of the movie palace

See THEATER — E4



Gordon Brinckle, 87, worked nearly 35 years as a projectionist and manager in Middletown's Everett Theatre. His home theater includes a tiny projectionist booth.



Courtesy of Gordon Brinckle

Gordon Brinckle built his first theater, which he named the Alvin Casino, in his parents' basement in Philadelphia in the 1930s.

## Theater: Passion grew over a lifetime

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he had once seen as a kid.

Brinckle led him into the basement and showed him the creation Brinckle calls the Alvin Shalimar theater — Alvin after his grandfather, and Shalimar after a New Jersey hotel. When Messick saw the theater again, he knew he had found the subject for his second film.

After talking to Brinckle, the story line came easily. "When it became clear he would not have his own movie palace, he then realized his dream in a really unconventional way," Messick says.

The film, entitled "The Projectionist," should be completed this summer and will be submitted to film festivals around the world. Messick expects it would be shown on television, possibly on PBS stations, if it is not picked up theatrically.

Once he decided to do the film, Messick began talking to older residents in town, telling them about the theater. "Their jaws just dropped," he says. "They had no idea it was here."

### Unconventional beginning

Brinckle (pronounced "Brink-lee") built his first theater, the Alvin Casino, in the basement of his parents' Philadelphia home while doing apprentice work with movie-house decorators around town.

At 27, Brinckle was drafted into World War II and ended up working as a projectionist showing training films to soldiers at bases in Virginia and Georgia. He was then sent to China to build and run an outdoor theater to show Hollywood films to the troops.

On the top of a mountain, with sailcloth as a movie screen and bullet holes in Brinckle's projectionist booth, soldiers watched films at The Fox.

After the war, he moved to Middletown and began working at the Everett in 1946 as a manager. About 15 years later, he began toiling in his basement, building what he now calls the last authentic movie palace in Delaware.

Brinckle estimates he has spent about \$5,000 on the Alvin Shalimar theater, designed partly in the style of John Ebersohn, a leading movie-palace de-

signer in the early 1900s.

Surprisingly, Brinckle rarely showed films in his theater. When he did, it usually was newsreels from the '30s or '40s, or military training films.

The point wasn't so much to watch films there, but to accomplish his dream of building a theater from scratch, he says. Brinckle proudly states that he did all the decorations, carpentry and electrical work himself.

"There is love in the building here," Messick says of what has now become the obsession of both men.

Brinckle's wife, Dorothy, with whom he will mark their 60th anniversary in June, says she sometimes felt a bit neglected by Brinckle's work on the theater.

"It was all of his waking hours," she says. "It was a very big obsession."

### Dream gets a jump-start

While sitting in his theater during a break from filming earlier this week, Brinckle speaks of Messick as a godsend.

Brinckle had worried that the theater would be destroyed after he died. "That's what I was really afraid of," he says. "When I die, I don't want what I have known and done to go with me."

But now, Messick plans to take the theater out of the basement and use it in a traveling exhibition with his film — much to the delight of Brinckle.

Brinckle has gone through rolls and rolls of film throughout the years, trying to capture the essence of his theater. His inexpensive camera and poor lighting never did it justice.

He says he was floored when he saw Messick's photographs with vibrant colors and near-3-D qualities. "They're beautiful. I still can't believe it," he says — with the smile of an obsession renewed.

Brinckle had lost interest in the theater in recent years, especially after the death of Sandy, his only child.

"I didn't have my heart in it," he says. "Kendall has rekindled something that died in my heart."

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