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never runs dry

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Tommy Wiseau's 'The Room' invades OU

By Nick Knittel, Contributor

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Tommy Wiseau, writer/director/producer/star of the cult film "The Room." TheRoomMovie.com/PHOTO

For the past five years, the scowling face of writer/director/producer/actor Tommy Wiseau has stared down residents of West Hollywood high atop a privately owned billboard, advertising a film few have heard of despite its growing cult following.

Wiseau is a name little mentioned outside the tight circles of conscious filmgoers and cinephiles, but his name is one to remember. Wiseau is the mad genius behind "The Room," a D-level film drama involving a love triangle in the great city of San Francisco, that has captured the hearts and minds of viewers across the country.

"The Room" is a beautiful lesson in how to make the worst movie imaginable. Take terrible actors, give them a cringe-worthy script, and throw in an idea of filmmaking that must have been lifted from a "Wishbone" episode, and you get something that approaches the instant-schlock classic of this movie.

The plot revolves around a banker named Johnny (played by Wiseau himself), whose spiteful wife, Lisa (Juliette Danielle), begins to have an affair with Johnny's best friend, Mark (Greg Sestero). Somehow this leads to inexplicable situations with Lisa's cranky and cancerous mother (the cancer is mentioned only once and promptly forgotten about); their annoying, young neighbor Denny (Philip Haldiman); and drawn-out sex scenes (three within the first 30 minutes) set to ungodly mid-'90s R&B.

Since the film's completion in 2003, Wiseau launched a series of monthly film screenings in Los Angeles to promote the film, which has garnered a cult following that rivals the previous ruler of camp cinema, "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." The filmgoers themselves, who dress up like the main characters, smuggle props and booze into the theaters. They also hold trivia

games before every show that have marked the screenings as something more than just the usual movie experience, and the idea has caught on to various college campuses across the country.

Ohio University is now the latest to hold such screenings, and the next screening, tentatively titled "Tommy Wiseau and the Last Crusade," is being held this Friday, May 30. The screenings first started in November 2007 and have been emceed since by Ross Morin. Morin, a graduate student in film studies, first caught the film through his roommate, Evan Clar, who also participates in the screenings.

"Evan showed me [the] trailer for it, and I was like, 'Well, it doesn't look that bad,'" Morin said. "...And we watched it, and it was just shock. Just shock. It was consistently awful in every way possible."

The film reared its head just as Morin was teaching a course on camp cinema within the film school and has since become something of a teaching tool in his classes, especially a scriptwriting course held this past quarter. Students were required to break down the scenes in the movie and rewrite the script in an attempt to learn how bad dialogue and characterization looks on-screen when left unedited.

"['The Room'] is better than 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' because 'Rocky Horror' has intentional camp within it," Morin said. "This is pure, naïve camp. This movie had no intention to be this bad."

Bryan Olinger, a senior majoring in video production, is the third member of the group and has been a staple of the screenings since the very first. He is holding the final screening in the backyard of his home on Smith Street, a location chosen to hold the increasingly growing number of participants. Olinger was also introduced to the film by Clar while they were interning in Los Angeles.

"There's been a billboard for 'The Room' perpetually up in a city full of movie advertisements that change on a weekly basis," Olinger said. "...Every day we would drive to work and see this awful mug of Tommy Wiseau staring you down on Highland as you're driving."

Not only is the image terrifying, but the unattributed quotes citing the film as having "...the passion of Tennessee Williams" add an alluring touch to the already mysterious film. Clar found a copy of the film in L.A., watched it with Olinger and the two have never looked back.

"There's a threshold when you stop watching 'The Room' and start participating with 'The Room,'" Olinger said.

"This is an opportunity to engage with cinema in a way you probably never will again," Morin said. "As awful as 'The Room' is, it brings out the best in cinema and the audience experience."

The film is not one to watch alone. A hardy group of friends is required to fully engage in "The Room," and Olinger and Morin cite the screenings and audience participation as key to fully experiencing and enjoying the movie.

"I left and bought the movie that night," said senior Megan Ervin, relating her first experience with the film to one of the later screenings. "So did my roommate...and our entire group of friends are going to the last one."

Ervin is a relative newbie to "The Room" and finds the screenings as key to what drew her and her friends into the twisted world of Wiseau.

"It's not something you watch at home with popcorn," Ervin said. "It's like you have to have people together to watch it."

Whatever the case, "The Room" has grown in popularity by word of mouth, as evidenced by the growing crowd each month outside of Lindley Hall where the event used to be held. The number has steadily grown from a small group of 15 to a total of 86 confirmed for the final showing via Facebook.

The "final" showing is indeed final — both Morin and Olinger graduate this quarter, leaving the Wiseau mantle up in the air for anybody who wants it. The two hope the screenings will continue in the coming years.

"It's another way of interacting with film that you don't do enough, that you don't ever really do," Morin concluded. "The filmmaking experience is so active, and it's so encouraging to see people commenting on the film."

"I don't know what it is," Ervin said. "...It's not really a favorite movie. It's more like a favorite activity."

Keep up with this week's screening by going to the Facebook group "The Room: Tommy Wiseau and the Last Crusade."

Visit the film's Web site at TheRoomMovie.com.

Read an interview with Tommy Wiseau and see the trailer for "The Room" [here](#).

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