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Diners make great backdrops for classic silver screen moments

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From late-night screenwriting sessions to on-screen scenes, Hollywood and the American diner have had a long, intimate history. It's a relationship epitomized by the film "Diner," No. 57 on the American Film Institute's list of America's 100 Funniest Movies.

Written and directed by Barry Levinson - who went on to direct such films as "Rain Man," "Bugsy" and "Bandits" - "Diner" is the loosely structured story of six Baltimore buddies who while away the hours in a shiny silver box. It's a safe haven where french fries and gravy, cigarettes and amusingly senseless, largely improvised chatter are enough to keep them (and audiences) content.

Modell: "What is that, roast beef?"

Eddie: "Don't ask me this anymore, Modell. Yes."

Modell: "Are you gonna finish that?"

Eddie: "Yeah I'm gonna finish it. I paid for it. I'm not gonna give it to you."

Modell: "If you're not gonna finish it, I would eat it. But if you're gonna eat it. . . "

Eddie: "What do you want? Say the words."

Modell: "No, just go ahead. If you're gonna eat it, you eat it. That's all right."

Eddie: "Say the words 'I want the roast beef sandwich.' Say the words and I'll give you a piece."

Shrevie: "Would you guys cut this out? I mean every time . . ."

But such childish arguments are on the verge of fading. Age is forcing the boys to face their adult futures, and they're desperately trying to hold onto their carefree, adolescent pasts. The mantra that comforts them, no matter the situation, is "We've always got the diner."

Set in the '50s, the film was shot in the early '80s when the cast, which now seems star-studded, was fairly low-key. After all, 1982 was before Steve Guttenberg (Eddie) found out No. 5 was alive.

It was before Daniel Stern (Shrevie) became one of the "City Slickers," Paul Reiser (Modell) got "Mad About You" or Timothy Daly (Billy) flew to "Wings."

It was a time when Kevin Bacon (Fenwick) was only 6 degrees from being a starving artist. Mickey Rourke (Boogie) was still hot, both physically and as an upand-coming movie star, and Ellen Barkin (as Beth, Shrevie's young, unappreciated wife) was embarking on the first in a string of attention-grabbing roles.

To watch it today is to realize "Diner" was more than the beginning of great careers for all involved. It was and is a nostalgic document - not so much of the past but of why living in the now can be so important.

Twenty years later, "Diner" still serves to remind us why the seemingly trivial, easily overlooked things - such as friendly banter about roast beef sandwiches - often end up mattering the most in our memories.

A few other memorable cinematic diner scenes and the director:

"Five Easy Pieces" (1970) - Bob Rafelson - Jack Nicholson desperately tries to order some plain toast when it's not on the menu.

"About Schmidt" (2002) - Alexander Payne - A scene reprising the "Five Easy Pieces" exchange was filmed but never made it into the final film.

"Pulp Fiction" (1994) - Quentin Tarantino - The movie begins and ends (not really) with Ringo (Tim Roth) and Yolanda (Amanda Plummer) knocking over a diner.

"The Road to Perdition" (2002) - Sam Mendes - Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks) comes face-to-face with the man hired to assassinate him (Jude Law) in a middle-of-nowhere diner.

"Chasing Amy" (1997) - Kevin Smith - The meaning of the movie title is revealed and Jay (Jason Mewes) and Silent Bob (Kevin Smith) set the stage for Smith's next movie, "Dogma."

"Heat" (1995) - Michael Mann - A thief, Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro) and the cop who's after him, Lt. Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino), meet for the first time in a diner.

"Swingers" (1996) - Doug Liman - The Hollywood diner dialog turns to the way filmmakers rip off one another ("Tarantino completely bites everything off Scorsese") while the scene itself and the one that follows visually mimic both directors.