

FILM

Not Just April Anymore

Film fest expands every which way

By NANCY KEEFE RHODES

North of here, Toronto's International Film Festival just concluded Saturday. This large, established festival colors inside the lines. It stays in one spot and it's over now till next year. If you haven't noticed, we're doing something different in our town. Syracuse's 3rd International Film & Video Festival is morphing rapidly. To illustrate, let's go back briefly to early August and travel an hour west to Geneva. In this story, naturally there's a movie screening.

Up on the big screen, a dozen people lean forward around a long, rough table. Their faces shine, bathed in light, emerging from deep shadows. A dark-haired young man, thin, a little disheveled, proclaims his creed for returning cinema to its pure roots. A series of quick cut shots, cookie-cutter moments. Identically framed in close-up, each actor looks up and whips his head around, getting it. Later in the film is a similar sequence: hands lock and load cameras like rifles in wartime. Symphonic crescendos, more rays of light, and our hero finally peers off into – well, eternity.

Offscreen, Owen Shapiro conducts a masterclass for filmmakers, hosted by Geneva's Finger Lakes

brought his film hoping for feed-back.

And, the film is good. It's well and carefully made. Its style recalls some 1940s saga about the workers' struggles. Lasko has astutely, hilariously, used long-held conventions for a type of film scene to dramatize von Triers' arguments for film practice, which reject those conventions. Shoe-horning all this into twelve minutes is quite a feat.

Shapiro comments that the film is good enough for the festival circuit.

Film festivals are now the major outlet for independent movies. Short fiction films such as Lasko's far outnumber other festival entries. Of the 600 films and videos submitted to last year's SIFVF, at least 250 were short fiction. A short-story author may stay with that form an entire career out of preference for the form itself, but most filmmakers aspire to make a feature-length narrative movie. They start with shorts to attract reviews, distributors, and funding at festivals – and prizes. Consequently, short fiction categories are fiercely competitive.

Now into its third season, SIFVF is already successful. Attendance doubled the second year. International partners now number 22. Shapiro projects the festival can offer \$50,000 in prizes next spring. In late July SIFVF launched the first DVD distribution of festival prize winners.

This outfit is already coloring outside the lines.

The festival is expanding in unusual ways. Over the past year, the organizers began significantly shifting the festival's form in time, place and relationship to audience.

Last winter, there were pre-festival activities such as major filmmaker visits and retrospective screenings of documentary pioneer Albert Maysles, actor-director Peter Weller (both SU alums) and director Milcho Manchevsky from Macedonia. Next month's annual New Filmmakers Showcase screening falls inside SIFVF's big tent and Shapiro promises other filmmaker visits.

The festival opened its selection process to the public too, with prescreenings throughout Central New York. With 22 official prescreeners, SIFVF promises filmmakers that all entries get a viewing "in entirety," unlike many festivals where acceptance hinges on the first five minutes. Among the prescreeners are students at Nottingham High



Post Standard file photo
Owen Shapiro.

School, who select the young filmmakers' entries.

Prescreening events at Creekside Books in Skaneateles, Southwest Community Center on the city's South Side, and at LeMoyne College have involved many community film buffs in the labor-intensive process. The prescreenings for the 2006 festival begin at The Lucky Moon Cafe on October 19 and at LeMoyne College on October 26, from 7 to 11 p.m. each night.

Julie Grossman, a founder of LeMoyne's new film program, says the prescreenings "put young people in the role of critic, not just consumer. That communicates immense respect of them as viewers."

The festival's geographic range is expanding. Among the post-festival events are Shapiro's masterclass in Geneva and Best of Fest screenings, and regional outreach is being considered for Binghamton, Buffalo, and Rochester. Shapiro says he wouldn't mind finding the film fest a summer home in Geneva or Chautauqua. In a larger ripple, Best of Fest screenings are in the works for Los Angeles and at international sites through SU's Division of Programs Abroad (DIPA).

Syracuse could be more than a festival site. It could become a more film-friendly place that nurtures its own filmmakers, draws new ones and welcomes the international films that have such problems with many U.S. audiences.

Mary Beth Springmeier, organizer of Geneva's conference, remarks, "I've lived out west. I watched Telluride become a magnet for films, just as Banff did in Canada." She has no trouble seeing Syracuse become a similar magnet.

It's no coincidence that Banff's Mountain Film Festival grew enormously by taking a one-night version of its show on the road. And no coincidence Owen Shapiro went to Geneva.

Shapiro returns repeatedly to SIFVF's mission: "by artists for artists." He stresses, "We aren't Sundance. Of course we have nothing but love for Hollywood and we want films to succeed. That depends on who sees them and talks about them. But we are looking for films and videos that push the boundaries." ■

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Would festival fans be willing to wait in the snow?

Arts Grants and Services (FLAGS). Shapiro directs Syracuse's International Film & Video Festival (SIFVF), and has headed Syracuse University's film program since its inception in 1973.

Of the 20 people at Geneva, 15 are high school and college students. They're laughing by the end of Scott Lasko and Doug Choi's "The Manifesto," a short film that satirizes Danish director Lars von Triers' treatise, "Dogma '95." Shapiro has guided them through the fine points of film festival applications, but watching each other's films is the heart of why they are here. Not everyone here knows von Triers' work (he made last year's controversial "Dogville"). But they are a responsive audience. University of Rochester senior Scott Lasko, 21,