

reel life

BY MARY S. GILBERT

Film Festivals Flourish in the East End

Beginning with the opening of the world's first motion-picture theater on Smithfield Street in 1905, movies have been a prominent part of life in Pittsburgh. Not only is the city popular among production companies as a filming location, but it is among the top 10 cities in the nation for movie lovers, according to rankings by Movoto Real Estate. That statistic relies on several factors, including the prevalence of film festivals. And the highest concentration of annual film festivals is in our own backyard, making the East End a movie-lover's paradise.

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The lobby of Pittsburgh Filmmakers' Melwood Screening Room in Oakland before the showing of a film during the Three Rivers Film Festival.

Presenters of these film festivals run the gamut from universities to art museums to organizations espousing everything from the human spirit to ethnic heritage and religious life. Likewise, the film genres are wide-ranging—documentaries, shorts, foreign works, art-house films, “indies,” classics, and first-run releases. Some festivals offer premieres and prestigious award-winners that appear nowhere else, whose exclusivity imbues the festival with a must-see cachet.

Despite new technologies that enable people to stream films onto their computers, tablets, and smartphones, the allure of watching movies in a darkened theater surrounded by fellow aficionados still resonates strongly. Film festivals are celebrations of communal, social, cultural, and economic events that bond people, however briefly, within a shared experience.

Film directors and writers are often featured speakers at local film festivals. Here, investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill, author of the book *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, addresses an audience at the Melwood Screening Room before a Three Rivers Film Festival screening of the documentary he co-wrote, based on his book.

Gary Kaboly, director of exhibition at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, likens the experience to the age-old tradition of sitting around a campfire telling stories. “It’s just in our genes,” Kaboly says. “People want to be accepted in a group and participate in the group’s activities.”



Pittsburgh Filmmakers sponsors the Three Rivers Film Festival (3RFF), the granddaddy of the city’s special film series, with screening locations in Regent Square, Oakland, The Waterworks, and Downtown. It will mark its 34th anniversary this year with 64 films “offering a little something for everyone,” according to Kaboly.

Moviegoer Mike George of Shadyside considers it “a treat” to see the first-run Hollywood productions previewed at 3RFF prior to their general release, but he also “appreciates the opportunity to see quality foreign films whose perspective and presentation provide an alternative” to standard American fare.

Craig Davis, president and CEO of VisitPITTSBURGH, notes that the festivals help showcase the vibrancy of the city—and fill its coffers. “These amazingly diverse film festivals reflect our history while advancing the hip factor that is Pittsburgh today,” he says. “They create great business at really good times, as many of them take place in the early

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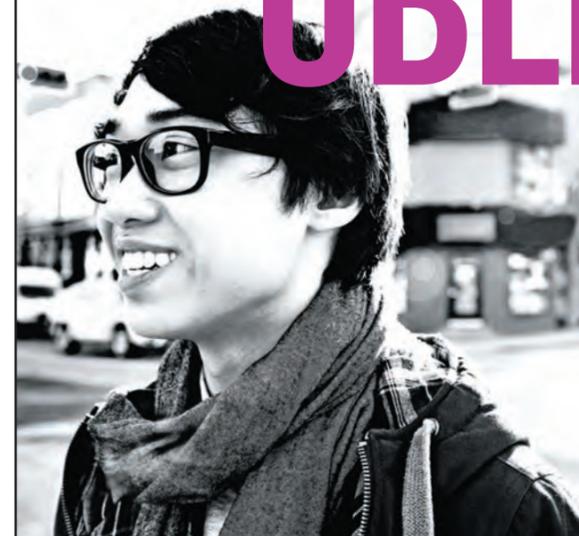
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The Regent Square movie theater is just one of several East End locations where a host of local film festival screenings are held.



A few screenings also take place across the Allegheny River, at the Waterworks Cinemas.

spring and late fall, the shoulder seasons for our tourism industry.”

What make the East End such a hotbed for film festivals?

For Jolanta Lion, founder and director of the Carnegie Mellon University International Film Festival, the answer is academia and diversity. “The fact that major universities are in the East End gives us a great opportunity to encourage younger audiences to participate,” Lion says. “Secondly, the organizations of the major

ethnic communities are centered here, and our students work with them when we show films from different countries.”

Now in its ninth edition, the festival (also known as the Faces Festival) “aspires to create a dynamic and culturally charged environment for global perspective on social issues.” Each season focuses on a particular issue and the human faces associated with it. This year’s theme, Faces of Work, involves a shortFACES competition for films that are under 15 minutes in length created by students. The spirit of the festival—which runs from March 19 to April 11—is dedicated to the memory of the late

Professor Paul Goodman, a renowned CMU psychologist and filmmaker.

As with many fellow film festivals, CMU’s festival offers programs and events beyond the screenings themselves, including question-and-answer sessions with directors, artists, academics, and professionals. Faces participants also engage with student artists through interactive performances, and sample international cuisine from local eateries and kitchens.

Debra Abell of Fox Chapel is the executive producer of *Reporting on the Times: The New York Times and The Holocaust*, a short documentary that was recently included in the Pittsburgh Jewish Film Forum, known as JFilm. She echoes Lion’s observations about the area’s film-viewing population. “The East End is the intellectual hub of the city, with a diverse population,” she says. An avid moviegoer herself, Abell is an enthusiastic supporter of film festivals. “I love the ease of getting tickets to see noncommercial films in Pittsburgh,” she says, “and the fact that you don’t have to leave town to see them!”

Kathryn Spitz Cohan, executive director of JFilm, feels that the role of the 11-year-old festival is to encourage movie audiences to branch out of their comfort zones. “The independent films we show are entertaining, but they also have a level of education, of opening



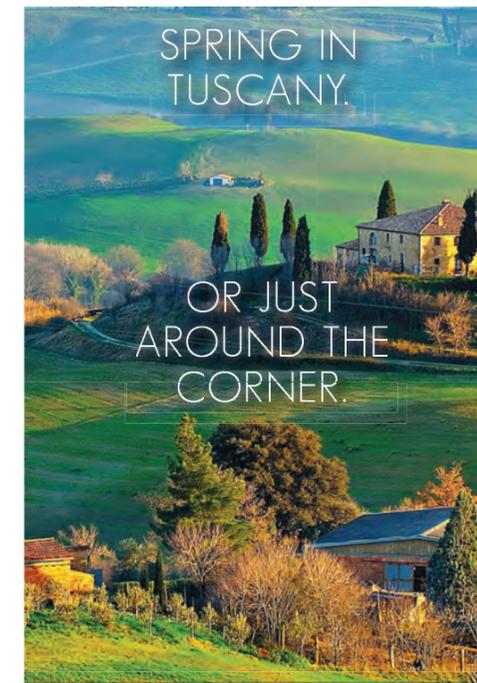
The Carnegie Mellon University International Film Festival often incorporates international foods into its screenings.



Each spring, banners appear on the CMU campus, announcing the International Film Festival.



An audience at the Manor Theatre in Squirrel Hill awaits the start of a JFilm screening last year.



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a window into another culture," she says. "The underlying message is to encourage a world that is more tolerant through film."

While JFilm offerings generally have an "essence of Jewishness," they don't follow a single theme, so as not to be limiting. The 2015 festival runs April 16 to 26 at several theaters around the city, including the Manor Theatre in Squirrel Hill, where the opening-night festivities take place.

In keeping with its interest in providing thought-provoking content with a purpose, JFilm also partners with the FISA Foundation to present a second film festival, ReelAbilities, which promotes awareness and appreciation of

Actress Angela Rockwood with a fan at last fall's ReelAbilities film festival. Rockwell addressed an audience at Rodef Shalom Congregation, following a showing of the documentary *Cinemability*, in which she is featured.



the lives, stories, and artistic expressions of people with disabilities of all kinds. Its big-picture goal is to make Pittsburgh a more inclusive city.

"ReelAbilities reaches beyond the Jewish community," says JFilm's Spitz Cohan. "It's such an important event, and I'm inspired by the diversity of attendance." The festival usually takes place in the fall, with screenings at Rodef Shalom Temple in Shadyside, because of its high level of accessibility.

Another festival that seeks to affirm underserved and underrepresented populations is the My People film series hosted in November by East Liberty's Kelly Strayhorn Theater. The

The Kelly Strayhorn Theater in East Liberty is home to the My People film series, which explores the experiences of gay people of color.

series has the stated goal of exploring the experiences of queer people of color through award-winning films and discussions about sexuality and sexual preferences.

Subtitled "A Film Series in Color," the annual event is inspired by the life of Billy Strayhorn, the openly gay, black composer who is one of KST's namesakes. According to KST's marketing and communications associate, Paula Simon, My People "connects Strayhorn's legacy with the rich history and contributions made by generations of LGBTQIA [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer—or questioning—intersex, and asexual] people of color," and strives "to create a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQIA people of color and their allies to come together and discuss ways we can build our community in Pittsburgh."

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The Russian Film Symposium, sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures in conjunction with Pittsburgh Filmmakers, targets an academic audience. In addition to free screenings of Russian films for the general public, this annual event—now in its 17th year—includes panel discussions specifically for academics, featuring film historians and critics from Russia and the United States, as well as the United Kingdom and Germany.

Associate Professor Vladimir Padunov, founder and director of the festival, has built Pitt's Russian film holdings into the largest collection outside of Russia. Each year he hosts an opening reception at his Highland Park home, featuring live entertainment and 17 flavored vodkas that he makes himself.



Participants in the Russian Film Symposium gather every year for an opening-night party at the Highland Park home of the symposium's founder and director, Vladimir Padunov (not pictured).

Another cinematic celebration of cultural heritage is The Silk Screen Film Festival sponsored by the Silk Screen Asian Arts and Cultural Organization. In the 10 years since its founding it has become one of the largest Asian-centric film festivals in the country.



One of the largest Asian-centric festivals in the country, Silk Screen brings in a variety of films, including horror flicks and anime films, as indicated by these poster boards outside the Melwood Screening Room.

"Our Asian and Asian-American films are thoughtful, beautiful, character-driven, remarkable, and memorable," says Harish Saluja, the artist and filmmaker who founded the festival, which takes place in May. He also serves as executive director of the organization. "Appreciating our films requires a certain amount of education, sophistication, and a mindset that comes from a multicultural audience like that in the East End," Saluja continues. "Our festival is for people who've traveled, know other languages, and have curiosity."

The term "silk screen" refers to both the silver screen and the Silk Road, the famous trade and culture routes between East and West. But

the title can be misleading, as some people think they make tee-shirts, Saluja explains with a laugh. The name notwithstanding, the festival is designed for non-Asians as a way to build cultural bridges. All selections are shown in the East End—in Oakland, Regent Square, and Lawrenceville.

Young and emerging filmmakers have an opportunity to showcase their work, thanks to the Shot for Shot Student Film Festival organized by the Carnegie Mellon University Filmmaking Club. This intercollegiate event creates collaboration and conversation among Pittsburgh students and the film community. Talia Shea Levin, an undergraduate who serves



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as club president, says that films must be under 30 minutes in length, created by students at a school in Pittsburgh, and completed within the past year. Now in its third season, Shot for Shot “is a starting point for people working their way to Hollywood,” Levin says.

Another forum for aspiring filmmakers is the Carnegie Museum of Art’s 2-Minute Film Festival (2MFF) in July, offering a compendium of super-short entries. Conceived in 2010 as a way to attract younger audiences with a penchant for cellphone videos, 2MFF solicits a wide variety of theme-based submissions that are 120 seconds in length. The museum staff then incorporates them into a single, continuous, roller coaster-paced presentation. No one walks out if they don’t like a particular film, says Amanda Donnan, assistant curator of contemporary art. “They can grin and bear it for two minutes.”

An external panel names the Judges’ Award, and the People’s Choice award is determined by viewers, who may also see the offerings online. Weather permitting, the screening takes place under the stars in the museum courtyard, with food and drinks adding to the party atmosphere.

In 2003, film-festival fever spread from the East End across the Highland Park Bridge, where the Projecting Hope Film Festival launched at Waterworks Cinema. Since then, the annual festival has featured films that “inspire, uplift, encourage and transmit positive values,” according to founder Scott Anderson. While the Projecting Hope theme comes from a viewpoint of faith, the films aren’t necessarily faith-based. “We light a candle to the human spirit by showing beautiful, impactful stories that anyone can relate to,” he says.

A 2015 festival is planned for the spring, with dates and details to be determined.

JFilm’s Spitz Cohan, like movie lovers throughout our area, relishes the fact that film festivals are still alive and thriving, especially in the digital age. “I was concerned for a while about being viable and relevant,” she acknowledges, “yet [the festivals are] as important as ever in this cultural landscape. It’s a great time to be a film festival in Pittsburgh.” SA



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