

MARCH 2001

Northern Ohio Live

INTERNATIONAL BEAUTY

25 years of the Good,
the Bad & the Ugly with
Cleveland's Film Festival

Cleveland Film Society
Executive Director
David Wittkowsky

Photograph by
Ian Naysmith

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From the kernel of an idea,
Cleveland's twenty-five-year-old
Film Festival has exploded into

A FEAST OF POP



CULTURE

By Melinda J. Benson

If Ed Feighan had won the Cleveland mayoral race, there might not be a Cleveland International Film Festival today.

In 1977, film buff and journalist Jonathan Forman rented the Cedar Lee Theater to show prize-winning films that otherwise might not play here. With the help of his pal, adman Alan Glazen, and other volunteers, Forman announced that *The Films the Rest of the World Is Raving About Are Coming to Cleveland*, starting with Orson Welles' *F for Fake*. Eight weeks and eight films later, the first Cleveland International Film Festival was a modest success.

Then Glazen, who was running Feighan's campaign, offered Forman a job as press secretary. Forman muses, "Had Ed Feighan won, there

probably wouldn't have been a second film festival. I never could have done both jobs."

Instead, Dennis Kucinich won, and Forman bought the Cedar Lee and planned a second festival.

Forman once doubted audiences would sit through more than one or two films a night for a week, and he was frustrated by people's reluctance to see films they hadn't read about.

Today, the festival shows about fifteen films a day for ten straight days and sets annual attendance records.

Forman, now retired from the festival, and David Wittkowsky, executive director of the Cleveland Film Society, which puts on the festival, agree today's audiences are more knowledgeable and demanding.

"During the first ten years, I had a sense that, for a film to work, usually it had to have had some press beforehand," Forman says. "That's

changed significantly now. I joke that David could program his home movies, and people would show up."

The festival hasn't gone that far, but at times it seemed they might have to.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In 1989, one of the festival's biggest triumphs almost became its most spectacular flop.

Securing a crowd-pleasing, high-profile film for opening night is difficult. So *Major League*, former Clevelander David Ward's baseball comedy about the Indians, seemed a sure bet.

Shortly before opening night, the picture's studio representative arrived to check out the theater. Angry that it lacked Dolby stereo sound, he threatened to pull the film. Scrambling, Forman borrowed another theater's sound system and installed it hours before the opening.

Opposite: David Wittkowsky.
Photograph by Ian Nayzmich



Forman (right) welcomes Peter Falk and friend: The festival had to send a private plane for the actor after he missed his flight to Cleveland.

Other times, the festival hasn't been as lucky. Wittkowsky remembers when several out-of-town filmmakers spent three days waiting for their film, which never arrived. Another festival showed it a few days earlier, then apparently misplaced it.

In 1999, a foreign film arrived without subtitles. Fortunately, *Save a Little Love* was in French and still drew a respectable crowd.

The festival was less lucky that year when Sony Pictures shipped *Tango Lesson* instead of the scheduled *Tango*. Apparently, film cans for both were labeled simply "Tango." Nobody knew about the mix-up until the film rolled. Although most patrons stayed, many requested refunds afterward.

Despite the missteps, what festival staff and patrons remember most are the triumphs.

It took two years of 2 a.m. phone calls and faxes to Japan, plus some deception regarding a "missing" fax, but in 1997 Wittkowsky finally landed the film *Love Letter*, which he'd "fallen in love with." Audiences also adored the film, and it became a festival favorite.

Mindwalk, with Liv Ullmann, Sam Waterston and John Heard discussing politics and philosophy, was a surprise hit in 1991. Wittkowsky recalls the

audience "went crazy for the film. There was electricity in the air following the screening."

Also memorable was the documentary *Return with Honor*. In 1999, it played the festival and the festival's FilmSlam screenings for high-school students. David Ream, a FilmSlam volunteer, admits, "Students often aren't the most sedate audiences while watching the films. However, during this film about prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton, the kids were nearly silent. I've yet to be at any other screening that quiet."

Forman and Wittkowsky regularly cite the British heartbreaker *Lamb*, from 1987, as one of their proudest discoveries. People can judge for themselves this year, when the festival revives it as part of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration.

In 1992, the festival secured the world premiere of Robert Altman's comeback film *The Player*. Other world premiere features include Blake Edwards' *Switch* (1991), Ivan Reitman's *Dave* (1993) and former Clevelander Joan Micklin Silver's *Fish in the Bath* (1998).

In 1990, the festival's commitment

Call me Bob; director Robert Altman came to town in 1984 to introduce his film *Streamers*.

to eastern European film resulted in the U.S. premiere of Jiri Menzel's *Larks on a String*, banned by Czech authorities for more than twenty years.

Of course, twenty-four years have produced a few head-scratchers. Wittkowsky still wonders why Sondra Locke's bomb *Ratboy*, about a half-man, half-rat trying to break into showbiz, screened in 1987. Not to mention another unlikely festival film, Troma's grade-Z horror comedy *Class of Nuke 'Em High*.

Up Close and Personal

Visiting directors and actors also can prove memorable.

In 1979, Peter Falk was supposed to fly in from Washington, D.C., to introduce a film the next day. Falk went to the wrong airport, missed his plane and called to say there were no more flights. So Forman called Burke Lakefront Airport, convinced someone to fly to Washington in a charter plane and pick up Falk. Forman's triumph was tempered only slightly by the small turnout to see Falk.

The next year, Forman was amazed that, the day after winning an



Academy Award, director Ira Wohl still arrived for a screening of his documentary *Best Boy*. Perhaps it was Oscar fever that led Wohl to hit on Forman's wife in front of him.

Film Society managing director Marcie Goodman will never forget spending time with Eric Stoltz, here in 1992 with *Waterdance*. Goodman jokes that, if the flirtatious actor had stayed one more day, her marriage might have been in trouble.

Not everyone has been as restrained. Still notorious is the anonymous guest relations coordinator from the festival's early years, who provided very personal service to many visiting filmmakers.

Veteran festivalgoers Jim Wolan and Karen Bloomfield still marvel at the afternoon they spent in 1984 with Robert Altman, here with *Streamers*. Wolan volunteered to take Altman around, and when his girlfriend declined to go along, he invited old friend and *M*A*S*H* devotee Bloomfield. They took Altman to a speaking engagement, then for lunch and a few beers before his flight.

Altman insisted they call him Bob, told stories about making *M*A*S*H*, invited them to visit his New York offices and praised the festival for letting him interact with real movie lovers.

Eventually, Wolan and Bloomfield married, one of several marriages sparked by the festival.

Other celebrated festival guests have included Frank Capra, Janet Leigh, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Alan Alda, Wallace Shawn, Paul Bartel, John Sayles, Harry Dean Stanton, Hal Hartley, Atom Egoyan, Joan Micklin Silver, Jerry Stiller, Maximilian Schell, Joe Eszterhas and Debra Winger.

Almost Famous

The festival is a great place to discover actors and directors.

Forman still chuckles about then-unknown Wesley Snipes being virtually ignored during the *Major*

League premiere, as people flocked around co-stars Corbin Bernsen and Bob Uecker.

Festivalgoers aren't surprised by Russell Crowe's stardom, having seen him in *Proof* (1992), *Romper Stomper* (1993), *Silver Stallion* (1994) and *The Sum of Us* (1995).

Before *Ally McBeal*, Calista Flockhart looked for love at the festival in *Telling Lies in America* and *Milk and Money* (1997). Jennifer Lopez was seen in *Mi Familia* (1995) before she became a star, and life hadn't become beautiful for Roberto Benigni when festival audiences saw him in *Night on Earth* (1992) or *The Monster* (1996).

Many successful directors had early shorts and features in the festival.

Before directing *Basic Instinct*, Paul Verhoeven was a respected European director with *Soldier of Orange* in the 1980 festival.



Harry Dean Stanton stops by for a drink.

Highlights of CIFF 2001

The crowd-pleasing Australian comedy *The Dish*, starring Sam Neill, will be the opening night film for the 25th Cleveland International Film Festival. Director Rob Sitch is scheduled to attend the screening of his film, which is based on true events involving a small Australian town and the *Apollo XI* moon landing.

The festival runs March 15-25 at Tower City Cinemas on The Avenue at Tower City Center in downtown Cleveland.

This year's anniversary celebration also will include an opening night tribute to twenty-five people and organizations instrumental in building the festival and a series of memorable films from the festival's history.

Each day, the festival will have a retrospective screening of one past film, including the notorious *Bad Boy Bubby*, *Baraka*, *Character*, *Diva*, *Lamb*, *Longtime Companion*, *Love Letter*, *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser*, *Stranger than Paradise* and the *Best of the Fest Shorts* program.

The festival also will present about seventy other feature films and more than 100 short subjects from dozens of countries.

Likely highlights include the violent and controversial films *Chopper from Australia* and *Love's a Bitch from Mexico*; the award-winning Korean musical *Chunhyang*; a mental health film forum, featuring several films; the offbeat *Beaver Trilogy* about an Olivia Newton-John impersonator, starring Sean Penn and Crispin Glover; and several new films from eastern Europe, including Jan Svankmajer's latest *Otesanek*.

For information about purchasing film festival passes or tickets, call 216-623-FILM.



Major League, with Carbin Bensen and Wesley Snipes, was almost yanked from the lineup when the sound system was pronounced bush-league.

Joe Berlinger's short film *Outrageous Taxi Stories* played at the 1990 festival; acclaimed documentaries *Brother's Keeper* and *Paradise Lost* were seen in 1992 and 1996, respectively. His most recent film was *Blair Witch 2*.

Long before *Four Weddings and a Funeral* opened the 1994 festival, director Mike Newell was an audience favorite with *Soursweet* (1989), *Enchanted April* (1992) and *Into the West* (1993).

Atom Egoyan, Luc Besson, Zhang Yimou, John Sayles, Peter Weir and Fred Schepisi also got early exposure at the festival.

Local Hero

The festival has supported Ohio filmmakers since year one, when a local short was shown before each feature. Since then, dozens of current

Cleveland's Wet Hot Summer

Hoping to get locals to see *Wet Hot American Summer* in this year's Cleveland International Film Festival, David Wain says, "Tell them it's directed and co-written by a guy from Shaker Heights. And it stars Molly Shannon - from Shaker Heights. Tell them it's not for little kids. In fact, it's not for everyone. But if they appreciate smart and silly comedy in one film, they'll love it.

"Oh, yeah, and tell them to look for a derisive Cleveland reference."

Isn't he afraid that will upset local viewers, not draw them in? "No, they'll be able to tell that, underneath the surface, I love the city," he says.

And he does. Although he now lives in New York City, the son of Norman and Nina Wain is thrilled that his first feature, a raunchy summer camp comedy, is playing in the hometown film festival he used to attend.

Not only does he plan to be here for the screenings, he's trying to get some of the cast to come along.

In addition to Shannon, whom Wain didn't know previously despite their mutual Shaker Heights roots, the film stars Janeane Garofalo, David Hyde Pierce and Paul Rudd. It also features co-writer Michael Showalter and several of Wain's fellow performers from the MTV cult sketch comedy troupe *The State*.

Wet Hot American Summer recently made its debut at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, where it drew sellout crowds, even at 8:30 a.m., and lots of press.

Some reviewers didn't exactly see this vulgar homage to '80s teen flicks, influenced by Bill Murray classics such as *Meatballs* and *Caddyshack*, as a Sundance-type film. Others disagreed.

Picking up on the film's buzz, *Entertainment Weekly* declared it a hit, and reviewer Owen Gleiberman called it "a hilarious...and wickedly ingenious pop-culture parody."

Even Wain admits that, when he submitted the film to Sundance, he figured things could go either way, depending on whether they viewed it as a "low-budget American indie with a cool cast" or a "film that's way too silly and doesn't take itself seriously."

Cleveland audiences can judge for themselves. They also can check out Wain's first directorial effort, the short *Aisle Six*, which will be part of this year's 25th anniversary Best of the Fest Shorts Program. *Aisle Six* originally played in the 1992 Cleveland festival and at Sundance in 1993.

- Melinda J. Benson



and former Ohioans have had works in the festival.

Cleveland filmmaker Robert C. Banks, whose shorts have played festivals worldwide, has had five films in the festival, from *X-the Baby Cinema* (1993) to last year's *Outlet*.

The premiere of John Hlaven's completely local feature *Flattered* sold out in 1996. Michael Barron's feature *The Language of Kickball* was popular in 1999.

Local filmmakers Joe and Anthony Russo's first feature *Pieces* was in the 1997 festival. In April, Courtney Love is expected in town to star in their second film, *Welcome to Collinwood*.

Former Clevelander Joe Eszterhas wrote 1997's *Telling Lies in America*, which was filmed here. And Sandusky native Todd Stephens' *Edge of Seventeen*, filmed around Cedar Point and Lakewood, played in 1999.

Anything Goes

People picketed the gay film *Taxi Zum Klo* (1982), although what Forman recalls more is a "line of about 900 people, mostly men, mostly in black leather, stretching down the



Ian Bannen (left) and Liam Neeson in *Lamb*: one of the festival's proudest discoveries.



Former Cleveland Play House actor Alan Alda trades quips with film buff Dick Celeste.

street” and the open-mouthed reaction of his 70-year-old theater manager to an explicit oral sex scene.

Four years later, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Hail Mary* sparked protests and bomb threats. Forman checked under every seat and hired security to sit facing the

audience during the sold-out screenings.

In 1990, audiences flocked to two unrated films – the festival didn’t accept the MPPA’s X rating for the “disturbing tone” of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* and

Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer.

More recently, 1995’s *Bad Boy Bubby*, sort of an Australian *Forrest Gump* with incest, murder and a dead cat, prompted applause and walkouts.

Yet the festival’s biggest controversy was not a film, but its decision in 1991 to move from the Cedar Lee to Tower City.

Tower City had a central location, more screens, bigger restrooms, a convenient food court and an attached hotel to host visiting filmmakers. Festival staffers feared moving downtown would alienate long-time patrons, but were overruled by a unanimous board of trustees, which thought the move was essential.

Today, virtually everyone agrees the move was necessary. “We couldn’t be half the festival we are now if we hadn’t moved,” Wittkowsky admits.

Melinda J. Benson has been attending CIFF since 1988.