



Alan Alda ("Sweet Liberty," 1986).



CIFF founder Jon Forman, Ellen Burstyn ("Resurrection," 1981).



Television's David Moss, S...

Jon Forman's baby turns 25

Cleveland International Film Festival was born with an election defeat as midwife and moves into adulthood with new leaders

STORIES BY JOANNA CONNORS
PLAIN DEALER FILM CRITIC

If Edward Feighan had won the Cleveland mayoral election instead of Dennis Kucinich in 1977, the Cleveland International Film Festival might not be having its 25th anniversary next week. That's not the only thing that would have been different about Cleveland, of course. We would have missed those heady days of the city's default and the recall election, for a couple of things. But if Feighan had won, and gone on to be elected mayor, the film festival might well have been a one-year event, a blip on the cultural history of Cleveland.

That's because Jonathan Forman, who started the festival in 1977, went to work for Feighan as a campaign press secretary after the first festival was finished. The siren song of politics was calling him, and he thinks he probably would have responded.

"When Edward lost, it was a deeply disturbing moment in my life," Forman said. "I fantasized about being the press secretary for the city of Cleveland. How cool could that be? After he lost the campaign, I said, 'Let's do a second film festival.'"

Forman will be one of the 25 honorees Thursday at the opening night gala of the Cleveland International Film Festival, a celebration of 25 years of being one of the only arts organizations in Cleveland to reach that ripe old age without ever going into the red. (Feighan, who went on to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, is not one of the honorees, though he probably should be, just for having the grace to lose and allow Forman to go on to many more years of running the festival.)

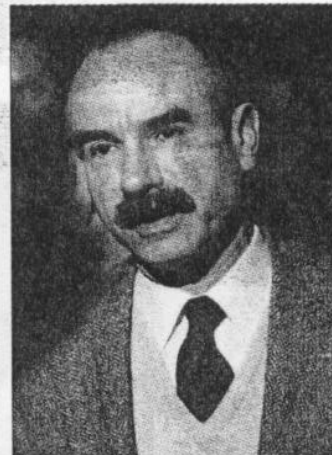
In the years since Forman almost abandoned it for City Hall, the festival has changed dramatically, and grown even more dramatically.

It's now part of the Cleveland Film Society, which was created in 1991 and has an annual budget of just under \$1 million and a full-time staff of six. The film society does much more than the film festival; its education and filmmaker-support programs keep the offices on W. 25th St. busy late into the night year-round. But the festival is its largest event. It now runs 11 days, and last year drew an audience of 36,400.

That's a huge leap from what it was when Forman started the festival. He was 22 years old, and not long out of Case Western Reserve University, where he spent most of his time and energy running the CWRU Film Society at Strosacker Auditorium. This was in the era before VCRs and the Cedar Lee Theatre (which Forman now owns), and Strosacker was one of the few places in Cleveland showing foreign, classic and art films. It was huge, back then, with sell-out houses almost every weekend.

Forman loved running the CWRU Film Society. He loved it so much, in fact, that when he graduated and his time at Strosacker was over, he kept his keys to the place. "It was such a part of my life that I couldn't give it up," he said.

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G. Gordon Liddy ("Return Engagement," 1984).



Director Guy Ferland, writer Joe Eszter Maximilian Schell ("Telling Lies in Am...



Helena Bonham Carter, Samuel West ("Howard's End," 1992)

Debra Winger, Leonard Maltin (1991).

Robert Tubinek ("Ticket to Heaven," 1982).

Maestro, a little retrospective music, if you please

David Wittkowsky, executive director of the Cleveland Film Society, faced something of a Sophie's choice this year when he had to pick the films to represent the past 24 years of the Cleveland International Film Festival. His task was to choose 12 films from a list of 1,169 to show as a 25th anniversary celebration this year.

"I looked for films that were particularly important, or had been popular, or were notorious in some way," Wittkowsky said. "At the same time, I was trying to find a balance of films that represented different countries, different styles and different years."

Once he had selected 12, he was faced with a bit of detective work. Tracking down a good, usable print of a 15- or 20-year-old foreign film is not exactly a trip to Blockbuster. Two of his selections turned out to be unavailable:

"The Tin Drum," the 1979 Volker Schlöndorff adaptation of the Gunter Grass novel, no longer had a U.S. distributor.

If that one was disappointing, though, coming up empty on John Sayles' first film, "The Return of the Secaucus 7," shown at the festival in 1981, was heart-breaking.

"I really wanted to include it for three reasons," Wittkowsky said. "It's a terrific film, which may or may not still hold up; it's sort of a watershed film for American independent filmmaking, and John Sayles has been in our film festival and to our film festival more than once, with 'Lianna' and 'Eight Men Out.'"

Still, Wittkowsky did track down the other films he wanted. They are:
 ■ "The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser," directed by Werner Herzog, from the First CIFF in 1977

■ "Diva," directed by Jean-Jacques Annoud, from the Sixth CIFF in 1982
 ■ "Stranger Than Paradise," directed by Jim Jarmusch, from the Ninth CIFF in 1985

■ "Lamb," directed by Colin Gregg, from the 11th CIFF in 1987
 ■ "Longtime Companion," directed by Norman Rene, from the 14th CIFF in 1990

■ "Baraka," directed by Ron Fricke, from the 17th CIFF in 1993
 ■ "Bad Boy Bobby," directed by Rolf de Heer, from the 19th CIFF in 1995

■ "Love Letter," directed by Shunji Iwai, from the 21st CIFF in 1997
 ■ "Character," directed by Mike van Diem, from the 22nd CIFF in 1998
 ■ Silver Anniversary Shorts, a selection of short films from over the years.

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What happened in 1977, when the CIFF began:

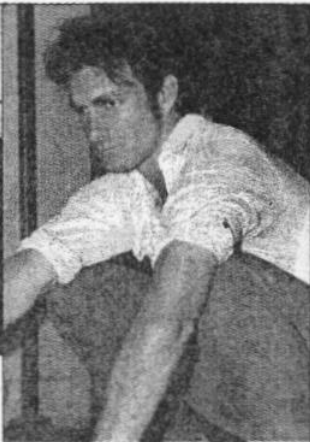
- President Jimmy Carter granted pardons to almost all American draft evaders of the Vietnam War era.
- Alex Haley's "Roots" was broadcast over eight nights on ABC.
- The U.S. Space Shuttle Enterprise made its first manned flight.
- The energy crisis brought long lines to stations and led President Carter to declare "the moral equivalent of war."
- The Nobel Peace Prize went to Amnre International.
- At the Oscars, "Rocky" won Best Picture (for 1976) and Peter Finch won Best Actor posthumously, for "Network."
- George Lucas' "Star Wars" was released.
- A massive blackout in New York City left 1 million people without electricity for up to 24 hours; 3,700 were arrested for looting and vandalism.
- Seattle Slew won horse racing's Triple Crown.
- Passenger service on the Concorde supersonic jet began.
- Elvis is said to have died.

Source: "The Timetables of History," by Bernard Grun. (Simon and Schuster)

What's playing, where and when at the film festival Page 24



actor (1997).



John Sayles ("Lianna," 1983).



Corbin Bernsen, left, unidentified man, center, and Wesley Snipes ("Major League," 1989).



Protest of "Hail Mary." (1986).



Robert Altman (Robert Altman Retrospective, 1984)

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CLEVELAND INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL. PARENTHESES ARE THE FILM'S RELEASE YEAR. THE STARS VISITED THE FESTIVAL IN THE YEAR THEY VISITED THE FESTIVAL.