

FOR THE ROCK 'N' ROLL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Movies

John Ewing,

ANNE BROOKS RANALLO

THE MARCO POLO OF MOVIES

You won't hear it from him, but the low-key, increasingly high-profile John Ewing is an adventurer of sorts. He explores the film world, seeking the extraordinary. He delivers the goods over a fearsome chasm: Cleveland's cultural divide.

Luckily, he's planted one foot on each side.

As coordinator of the Cleveland Museum of Art's film program, Ewing

hipper audience perceive the museum as stodgy. It's a loss in both cases."

The gap, he says, is due to misperception, not programming. He's shown everything from Czech Modernism to Elvis movies at the museum, and everything from French classics to "Spike and Mike's Sick and Twisted Animation Festival" at the Cinematheque.

But if anyone is committed enough to bridge the gap, it's Ewing. In the early '80s, having scouted specialized film

As a 14-year-old in Canton, Ewing fell in love with film 30 years ago after reading Jack Schaefer's Western novel "Shane." He had to see the movie.

"'Shane' was the movie that changed my life," Ewing recalls, smiling. "My parents took me out at 11 p.m. to see it. It was at a drive-in with 'Night of the Grizzly.'"

He explains that "Shane" is about a man with regrets

who tries to redeem past sins even though he realizes that "you can't go back, there's no breaking the mold; and you can't stop the progress of history." It's about men outgrowing childhood illusions. The final scene, with its cries of "Shane, come back," represents a yearning to regain that lost childhood.

"[It's] famous as a movie that makes men cry," Ewing says.

That epiphany drove him to review movies for his high school and college newspapers, to major in English and the-

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often shows films to complement the scholarly subjects of the museum's exhibitions — 150 years of photography, African cinema — and major undertakings such as "The 50 Greatest Films of All Time" and "100 Years of French Cinema."

Across East Boulevard, as director of the Cleveland Cinematheque at the Cleveland Institute of Art, he's shown series he's called "Orient Expressionism," "Eastern Unorthodox" and "Roman Polanski: Polish Prince of Darkness."

"The museum is a well-established cultural institution. The Cinematheque is viewed by some as a marginal outfit, an upstart," Ewing says. "There's a segment that doesn't take notice until a program reaches a certain level of prestige. On the other hand, some in the younger

venues in other cities, he resolved to establish their equal in Cleveland, and ended up with two. He handles his two hectic jobs, multiple patrons and family responsibilities with equanimity and humor. A distant co-worker once misread his amiable demeanor as "spooky, like Jack Nicholson in 'The Shining.' Someday he'll come out of his office swinging an ax."

But so far, so good. And he's persevered for 10 years.

Refreshingly, though he deals in the intellectual and the hip, Ewing uses the term "movie" more often than "film," and seldom says "cinema." He's usually on hand to welcome the audience and solicit requests. He's a connoisseur with no pretensions, and a sharp businessman with no cut-throat tendencies. He's also a man with a mission.

ater film at Denison University, and to intern in the film department of New York City's prestigious Museum Of Modern Art. He still writes and reads "a fair amount" (his wife, Kathy, reviews books for Cleveland's *Free Times* and homeschools their children, Margaret, 9, and Doug, 13). But Ewing felt judgmental while criticizing film, and decided that film exhibition is more fair and persuasive.

"I've always been more interested in the presentation of film than the making," Ewing recalls. "As a kid, I would dream up movies, then draw ads for them, including critics' quotes." He remembers one, "Giants in the Earth," based on an O.E. Rolvaag novel, that could have presaged Jan Troell's "The Immigrants."

Ewing's passion for film has continued

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to grow since his childhood. When he talks of "movies," the words he chooses demonstrate his feeling for the medium. "There are movies that are profound and sublime, like 'Late Spring' by Yasujiro Ozu, but a lot of others, like 'The Magnificent Ambersons,' have sublime, transcendent moments.

"I think music is the closest art to film. Cinema in the purest sense can't be put into words. It's a synthesis that works in a musical way. It's like visual music ... I don't respond to movies intellectually — more emotionally. So does my audience," he adds, referring especially to a corps of about 25 weekly viewers.

Those regular viewers and others, Ewing says, have assorted demands he strives to meet. "Some avoid anything commercial or violent. One of them saw [the thriller] 'Man Bites Dog' at another theater and wished me bad luck for showing it," he laughs.

There's a method to Ewing's programming madness. "I know a lot about where to get films, but half the battle is the timing," he says. "Take the Polanski series [last June]. It wouldn't have worked three years ago, but now he's back in the public eye."

Through Oct. 15, Ewing will observe Hispanic Heritage Month with rare films: the uncut version of "Like Water for Chocolate" and a 1962 propaganda masterpiece, "I Am Cuba," at the Cinematheque. At the art museum, the Krzysztof Kieslowski trilogy "Tricoeurs: Bleu, Blanc, Rouge" is being shown in its entirety for the first time in Cleveland, having just become available to noncommercial theaters. (The three films represent the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, respectively, as embodied by the French tricolor flag.)

"I'll consider any art film not at the Cedar-Lee or Centrum. No one would give me a two-day booking on a film they can book for a week there," Ewing says. "But some movies are so specialized, they're better off here. Anyway, those theaters show studio movies now. The truly independent and offbeat goes to the Cinematheque.

"We try to keep up with New York, L.A., anything reviewed in the *New York Times*. I can't preview most, but I read about them. We seldom use film catalogues."

That "we" includes Molly Beck, who met Ewing while she was student director of the Case Western Reserve University Film Society, when he rented a CWRU auditorium to found the Cinematheque

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in 1985. By 1987, when she joined as assistant director, Ewing had secured the current space and had taken on the museum film program.

Beck does exhaustive film research and niche marketing to new audiences – vital work, given that the Cinematheque derives 90 percent of its \$260,000 budget from admission fees. Like Ewing, she was hooked on film as a child, joining her sister to watch Cary Grant movies on TV at all hours.

"We're doing important work, and I learn something every day," Beck says. "But the hours. ... I stay because this may be the only job in Cleveland for a woman in film who's not a glorified secretary."

Beck's CWRU professor, Louis Giannetti – who literally wrote the book on film appreciation, the college text "Understanding Movies" – credits Ewing as an "indefatigable" researcher and educator.

"John programs on a very sophisticated level," Giannetti says. "He's resourceful. He shows seven or eight movies a year that make me think, 'How did he find this?' He's like a book lover; everything has some value. He's just very

committed to the medium."

Ewing plays well outside Cleveland, too. Alissa Simon, director of the Film Center at the Art Institute of Chicago, says Ewing's programs are "more innovative than in some bigger markets."

Michael Jeck, director of the American Film Institute at Washington's Kennedy Center, calls Ewing "a guy who really knows his movies. And in this business, that's the highest praise, because you'd be surprised how many people don't."

To show hundreds of films each year, Ewing limits most to two screenings. Filmgoers at both venues must keep close track through newsletters and newspaper listings.

"A lot of events happen only once, like concerts," he says. "People schedule around them. These aren't just old movies that turn up in your video store."

They're not shown on a TV screen, either. Through private and public grants, Ewing obtained a large screen in 1986 and a sophisticated sound system in 1990 for the Cinematheque. At the museum, he floats between two versa-

tile auditoriums.

"The museum is one of the best places in the country to see silent films," he says, "because the variable-speed projector can slow the film to the proper speed."

There is one thing Ewing would change about his work. "I'd like to see us raise more money," he says. "Every year that we do this is a miracle." Audience growth would ensure the life of the Cinematheque, where only 10 percent of the budget comes from the Ohio Arts Council and private donations. Even at the art museum, about 60 percent of the film program's \$60,000 budget comes from the audience.

"And there is one thing that distresses him: 'I worry about the future of film as film,'" he says. "There's a whole generation to whom film and video are indistinguishable. It's a little disturbing. Every time a Center-Mayfield closes ..."

Slowly, he shakes his head. ■

For information on films currently screening at the Cleveland Museum of Art or Cinematheque, call 421-7340 (CMA) or 421-7450 (Cinematheque).