

In Woodstock, Redefining 'Festival'

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Correction Appended

WOODSTOCK

EVEN if you are not a child of the '60s, chances are the word "Woodstock" evokes images of flower-powered pilgrims gathering for that most famous of rock festivals. But Meira Blaustein wants the fabled town (where the concert wasn't held) to be known for something else: world-class cinema. In homage to both past and present, the eighth annual Woodstock Film Festival arrives on Oct. 10 with a nod to both the town's rock 'n' roll roots and the future of cinema.

"This festival has risen from the essence of what Woodstock is, the Colony of the Arts," said Ms. Blaustein, the festival's executive director and co-founder. "The first criterion of our programming is artistic merit, because the festival is an extension of the artistic image and character of Woodstock."



SIDEWALK SERVICE The Woodstock Film Festival has opened a new box office on Tinker Street.

Indeed, Woodstock, nestled at the base of Overlook Mountain in the Catskills, abounds in galleries, showcases for the performance arts, and artist and recording studios.

“The whole town celebrates the festival,” Ms. Blaustein said. “Everyone is out and about to soak up the atmosphere, experience the vibe and meet people.”

Still billing itself “fiercely independent,” the festival has grown to 2,000 film submissions this year from 250 in 2000. It has also doubled in size, from a first-year offering of about 75 films and events to this year’s 150 films, panel discussions and concerts, spread out over sites in Woodstock, the nearby towns of Rosendale and Hunter (of ski-resort fame) and across the Hudson River in scenic Rhinebeck. Yet the festival retains its small-scale appeal.

“Oswald’s Ghost,” a film by the award-winning documentary filmmaker Robert Stone, is one of several having its United States premiere at Rhinebeck’s Upstate Films. Showing the film as part of the Woodstock festival, but outside of town, enables visitors to “enjoy the festival in a wider area than just Woodstock and use that as an excuse to check out the area,” Mr. Stone said.

He added that the Woodstock festival is “what film festivals used to be like 15 years ago” and, simultaneously, “like no other in the country.”

“You have big-city artistic sophistication combined with an idyllic small-town setting and a relaxed atmosphere,” Mr. Stone said. “Woodstock is also a mecca of artistic types who recently, or long ago, fled the Big Apple.” In fact, Mr. Stone moved his family to the area three years ago.

Hugo Perez, a director-producer with a documentary (“Neither Memory nor Magic”) in this year’s sneak previews at Woodstock, also appreciates the democratic approach. “What makes Woodstock special is that it puts an emphasis squarely on celebrating films and filmmakers, as opposed to the velvet-rope attitude that you find at a lot of the larger festivals,” he said. “There’s a great community and audience in Woodstock who are just as interested in progressive and social causes as in the craft of film. You really feel that they are receptive to hearing what your film has to say and finding out how to get involved.”

Festivalgoers are as likely to encounter energetic post-showing conversations between filmmakers and audience at Woodstock hangouts (like Joshua's, Oriole 9 or Landau Grill) as at official panel discussions.

"It has a lot to do with the place itself," said [Melissa Leo](#), a former star of the TV series "Homicide: Life on the Street," who appears in this year's festival selection "The Cake Eaters" and who moved to the Hudson Valley some 18 years ago. "It's small because of the location, and a venue like that is of vital necessity to the film industry."

Godfrey Cheshire, a critic and filmmaker whose "Moving Midway" will be shown during the 2007 festival, put it this way: "I've covered and participated in many festivals, and Woodstock is unique in its combination of cinematic sophistication, user-friendly scale and down-home hospitality. It's inarguably the closest thing the East Coast has to the Telluride Film Festival, the ne plus ultra of North American boutique festivals. Both have super-intelligent programming and draw a 'who's who' of independent filmmaking because of their reputations for collegial conviviality, yet both are small enough to allow filmgoers and filmmakers to intermingle freely throughout the weekend."

Among the highlights of the 2007 festival are "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," which won the best director award for [Julian Schnabel](#) at Cannes, and "I'm Not There," a biography of [Bob Dylan](#), a onetime Woodstock denizen, directed by [Todd Haynes](#), who wrote and directed the Oscar-nominated "Far From Heaven." ([Christine Vachon](#), one of the producers of "I'm Not There," will be receiving the festival's Honorary Maverick Award.)

"The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" is based on the memoir of the French Elle editor Jean-Dominique Bauby, who suffered from post-stroke "locked-in syndrome," a near-total paralysis that left him living a life of the mind.

"I'm Not There" features six actors (including [Cate Blanchett](#), [Heath Ledger](#) and [Richard Gere](#)) portraying Mr. Dylan at different stages of his life. A number of concerts, exhibition openings and receptions, like one celebrating Elliott Landy's famous Dylan photographs, have been coordinated with the film showings.

The documentaries this year include one featuring a Westchester couple, Jaap and Ina Polak. "Steal a Pencil for Me," directed by Michèle Ohayon, is about a young Dutch Jew (Mr. Polak) who is transported to a Nazi labor camp in 1943 with his wife and, coincidentally, the woman on whom he has a crush. The love letters between Mr. Polak and Ina Soep, who became the second Mrs. Polak, are testimonials to the power of the human spirit.

"We are bringing history to the audience in a way that is accessible," Ms. Ohayon said, "through a very intimate love story that tells what it takes to survive." As something of a corollary, the film's producer, Ted Sarandos, chief content officer of Netflix Inc., is to receive the festival's Honorary Trailblazer Award for "unwavering dedication" to providing wide distribution to alternative and small film projects.

The Polaks, who live in Eastchester, plan to attend the festival, where the film will receive its East Coast premiere. Mr. Polak, 94, said the film makes a powerful statement: "It shows the horror of the Holocaust, and the wonderful life that comes after it."

The documentary is very much in line with the festival's focus, which Ms. Blaustein describes as "cultural icons, the enduring power of art and the triumph of the human spirit."

Woodstock Film Festival tickets available at 34 Tinker Street, Woodstock; at (845) 810-0131 through Oct. 7 and at woodstockfilmfestival.com through Oct. 6. Beginning Oct. 12, tickets for screenings at Upstate Films in Rhinebeck, Mountain Cinema in Hunter, and Rosendale Theater in Rosendale will be available at the respective theaters. Tickets are \$8 to \$20 for films, and \$15 to \$20 for panels discussions. Concert prices vary.

Correction: October 7, 2007

An article last Sunday about the Woodstock Film Festival misspelled the given name of the director of "Moving Midway," one of the films. He is Godfrey Cheshire, not Godrey.