

Calendar

March 13-19, 2008

Island Arts and Entertainment

PHOTO COURTESY OF MVFF / PHOTO ENHANCEMENT BY TARA KENNY



Guest director Brad Westcott (left) and MVFF founder Thomas Bena.

MVFF: An idea realized

By Brooks Robards

The determination and passion of Martha's Vineyard Film Festival (MVFF) organizer Thomas Bena has transformed the annual event from a community get-together of local filmmakers into an Island institution.

With its non-profit status, a board of directors drawn from Vineyard philanthropists, and a list of over 200 supporters, the annual festival at the Chilmark Community Center, in its eighth year, has continually expanded its breath and scope. But while far reaching in its collection of talent and selections, it still continues to epitomize the down-home essence of the Vineyard.

Claudia Miller, owner of Edgartown's Point Way, says she joined the board two years ago because of Mr. Bena's intelligence and creativity. "The Festival is unique because of the spirit he brings to it, and the community building it does," she says. "He picks films with issues the community can discuss."

Mr. Bena is quick to extend credit to all those who have become involved, to Cronig's Market owner Steve Bernier, whom Mr. Bena refers to as his mentor, and — offering high praise — to the contributions of first-time guest director Brad Westcott, who worked in marketing for a New York film distributor before coming to the Island in January. With a master's degree in cinema studies, Westcott plays "classical film geek" to Mr. Bena's more visceral approach.

Eight years ago, Mr. Bena was a marketing major at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He then came to the Island and supported himself as a carpenter. He and his Island filmmaking friends, frustrated over the dearth of high-quality films

on the Island, put together the first festival.

"In the beginning it was about just playing the films we made," Mr. Bena says. "Now I watch 1,000 films. I attend the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam." Local filmmaker Jeremy Mayhew attended Sundance this year seeking films to show here.

Thanks to various patrons who believe in the MVFF mission, the program is being expanded to include a children's film festival that is being offered for the first time this year, without charge. Vineyard children will be shown their own set of free films at the Chilmark library Saturday and Sunday afternoons. That way parents can drop their children off to watch their own films while the parents go next door to view the regular selection of films. The children's films selected include everything from classic favorites to new releases.

"I think that people here have a very sophisticated taste," Mr. Bena says. "We've always played international films and social issue documentaries," and he argues that Vineyarders don't tolerate the ridiculous factor prevalent in many commercial Hollywood films. As MVFF evolved, more fiction films have moved into the mix, the balance rising to 40 percent.

This year, there will be social-issue documentaries, like "Uncounted," about election fraud, and 2008 Oscar winner "Taxi to the Dark Side," about American torture methods in Afghanistan. Also included is actor John Turturro's fiction film "Romance and Cigarettes," starring James Gandolfini and Susan Sarandon, and the Russian fantasy film, "Mermaid." All will appear at the 2008 Festival.

A special Sunday program, "Hands in the Land," will address a topic close to many Vineyarders' hearts — organic

farming — in a series of short films. This event starts at 11:30 am in the Community Center. Island farmers and their families can attend for free.

Mr. Bena selected one locally made film on a pressing Island topic. Liz Witham's and Ken Wentworth's documentary, "A Home for Us All," examines the problem of affordable home ownership for Islanders. The 45-minute film will screen at 11 am Saturday, followed by a discussion with the directors.

Food and movie talk have been hallmarks of the Festival from day one, and they will continue to be important components of the Festival this year. Breakfast, snacks, lunch, and dinner will be provided by Danielle Dominick from the Scottish Bakehouse.

"There is something that happens when people come into a space, share a meal together and see a powerful film," Mr. Bena says. "It's magical." He also talks about how on the Vineyard, the lines between performer and audience blur, and Islanders give celebrities room to breathe.

In addition, a free filmmaker panel on Saturday at 5:15 pm will discuss "The Three Questions They Wish the Audience Would Ask."

"It comes from a deep place," Mr. Bena says of his commitment to the Festival. "We provide niche films, and there was a need. The fact that there are four film festivals here is pretty amazing." ♦

Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, Friday, March 14 through Sunday, March 16, Chilmark Community Center, South Rd. Friday: 6 pm-12 am. Saturday: 10:30 am-12 am. Sunday: 11 am-9 pm. Individual tickets: \$10; \$5 for members. Weekend passes: \$100; \$50 for members. For more information, visit tmvff.org

Finding Vineyard homes for everyone

By Brooks Robards

Not to be missed at the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival is Ken Wentworth's and Liz Witham's 45-minute documentary, "A Home for Us All." The only locally made entry this year, it will be shown Saturday, March 15, at 11 am followed by a discussion with the filmmakers.

The film examines the Island's need for affordable housing and how it is being addressed. Contrary to the belief that affordable housing provides free homes to the unemployed or builds housing ghettos, the Island's affordable housing proponents want people who live and work here to be able to own homes despite the Island's high prices.

The project began as a 45-part series of shorts produced by Ms. Witham's and Mr. Wentworth's Film-Truth Productions for the Island Affordable Housing Fund. Used last year in a telethon, it helped raise more than \$500,000 for the housing fund.

The couple then decided to take the most informative and affecting segments and turn them into a full-fledged documentary — something that can apply to any community where natives and year-round residents have a hard time finding or holding onto permanent homes.

"We wanted to go the extra mile," Ms. Witham says. As an Island native, she has watched firsthand the "Island shuffle," which forces those

who can't afford high summer rents to move temporarily into less expensive digs.

"I don't think it's right that people who grow up here or live here year-round can't find a place to live," says Mr. Wentworth. He points out that most of the kids who go to Martha's Vineyard Regional High School will probably not be able to stay and raise a family.

On Nantucket, workers who cannot afford to live on that island are flown in and out as needed. Mr. Wentworth and Ms. Witham suggest that far more important than developing worker housing is preserving the character of the community and the culture that has made Martha's Vineyard such a desirable place to live and vacation.

Otherwise, who gets to live here is determined by who has the most money. Mr. Wentworth points out that while a lot has been done on the Island to preserve land through conservation, it has made housing more expensive.

"You have to open your eyes to the effect the housing squeeze is having," Mr. Wentworth says. "It happens in such small increments that even though we know it's happening, we don't do anything about it. There's a saying that if you drop a frog in boiling water, it'll jump out. But if you put it in water and gradually turn the heat up, it'll die." ♦

Freelance writer Brooks Robards is a regular contributor to *The Times*.



Husband and wife team, Ken Wentworth and Liz Witham of Film-Truth Productions, raise sensitive local issues with their locally based film, "A Home For Us All."