

Calendar

March 17–March 23, 2005

Island Arts and Entertainment



MVIFF graphic, designed by Jeremy Mayhew.

Independent Film Festival packs the house



The news crew from Camp Jabberwocky interviews Hillary Rodham Clinton.

By Julian Wise

Is the Martha's Vineyard Independent Film Festival getting too good for its own good?

In the beginning, the biggest worry for festival organizers Thomas Bena and Jeremy Mayhew was getting people to show up. Now, in its fifth year, the festival's main concern is finding room for the crowds of people who will arrive at the Chilmark Community Center this weekend for the three-day gala of live music, ethnic food, and a heady blend of documentaries, experimental short films, music videos, animation, and panel discussions. Mr. Bena and Mr. Mayhew assure viewers that there will be room for everyone, but it pays to show up early to avoid standing-room-only status during the packed showings.

The Fifth Annual Martha's Vineyard Independent Film Festival is a festival in the truest sense of the word. Throughout the three-day proceedings filmgoers will have a chance to enjoy not only films but live music performances by singer Marta Topferova (accompanied by Columbian harpist Edmar Castaneda and

drummer Chris Eddleton) and the teen band The Wandering Sheep Thieves; Thai food, Mexican food, and seafood jambalaya; MC entertainment by social critic and satirist Dave Lasagna; a video installation by Jim Kalambokis; poetry readings by local poets, and a panel discussion featuring some of the leading filmmakers in the independent film movement.

And then there are the films, more than 25 of them that run the gamut from biting social commentary to experimental video collages. Anticipated titles include "The Education of Shelby Knox," which details the efforts of a Southern Baptist teen from Lubbock, Texas, to fight for sex education and gay rights in the conservative town (the film's killer tag line: "Sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth, and you should save it for someone you love"). The International Shorts Program features short films from New Zealand, Australia, Spain, Haiti, Penikese Island, and Martha's Vineyard.



The education of Shelby Knox explores one teenager's attempts to bring sex education into a conservative Texas community.

The Vineyard's own Jabberwocky campers are featured in "How's Your News: On the Campaign Trail." Here the Jabberwocky journalists converge on the Democratic and Republican National Conventions during the 2004 election season. One of the most eagerly awaited films is Stacey Witt's "Single on MV," an examination of the plight of single Vineyarders. Ms. Witt, an attendee at last year's festival, was inspired to try her hand at filmmaking; this year her film headlines the Friday night program.

Growing popularity, homegrown roots

With the inclusion of cutting-edge films and the participation of renowned filmmakers on the live panel, the festival is poised to put Martha's Vineyard on the national film map. Yet Mr. Bena and Mr. Mayhew say they're committed to preserving the homegrown roots that tie the festival to the Island community. He cites the festival's living room ambience, with couches set up in the screening room and ample opportunities for socializing between films.

"Something really different happens in that environment," he says. "It's a richer experience. We've all been so moved into the profit motive that there are subtle things we're missing out on, like eating a meal with people, having a conversation, fundamental things about being human."

Mr. Bena and Mr. Mayhew say the festival reflects the attitudes and tastes of the Island community.

"The film lineup reflects the genuine curiosity of people who live here for the way other people live in the world," Mr. Bena says.

He is excited to work with the Wampanoag tribe to present



Unemployed Argentinians take back their factory that was shut down in the film "The Take."

"Trudell," the biography of a Native American activist. Faith Vanderhoop will introduce the film and other tribal members will lead a discussion.

"We're still haven't gotten a Brazilian film yet," he muses.

Money remains the primary obstacle to putting on the festival. The MVIFF has recently received non-profit status, which will allow the organization to begin fund-raising efforts in earnest. Mr. Bena and Mr. Mayhew have decided to keep prices low on food, tickets, and popcorn and will seek funds instead from foundations and individuals. The festival remains unique for the respect it shows to filmmakers; while most festivals charge directors to enter their films, the MVIFF pays filmmakers for their participation and provides them with free lodging.

Whether one comes for a single film or stays the entire weekend, the MVIFF promises to be a unique opportunity to mingle, enjoy great food and music, and view mind-expanding films. It shouldn't be missed, and based on the festival's growing popularity, it won't be by several hundred Islanders. ♦

Julian Wise is a frequent contributor to *The Times*, specializing in music, film, and the performing arts.