

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Archived Edition: Friday, June 25, 2010

Reeling: Summer Film Festival Lures All

By MEGAN DOOLEY

Call them critics-in-training.

Children are going to be given more opportunities to speak out about the films they see at this year's second annual Cinema Circus, the portion of the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival summer series tailor-made for kids. For a few years running now, Island kids' reviews of the festival's offerings have appeared in the Tuesday Gazette (they'll be back come Tuesday). Now some of those kids will be behind the camera with other film festival volunteers, videotaping the kids fresh out of the film screenings, sharing their reactions as on-the-spot reviewers.



Film for kids can be wellspring for discussion, as it is for festival's adult patrons. photo by David Welch

Cinema Circus artistic director Lindsey Scott knows just how appealing the job can be for a child. In programming the eight-week series, she often turned to her favorite mini-critics for advice.

"I test out all the movies on my kids," she said. "My son, who is six, is turning into a little bit more of a critic."

In fact, he's perfected the thumbs-up, thumbs-down signal favored by many full-grown critics. "I must have watched 250 shorts," said Mrs. Scott, in the process of creating the program. "I'd show one to him and I'd say, 'So what did you think?'"

Thumbs-up made the cut, thumbs-down didn't. But for some films, the six-year-old was just sort of ambivalent, and his thumb hung horizontal. "When I got a neutral, I knew I wasn't hitting it. It needed to be thumbs-up," said Mrs. Scott.

The film fest directors, always eager to get feedback from their audiences, did launch some discussions among the kids after last year's Cinema Circus screenings, but looked for a more interesting approach this time around. "We're trying to make it a little bit more interactive this year," said Mrs. Scott of the new video-critic element. "[The kids] had so much to share about their reactions."



Eleanor's Secret (July 28) brings reading to life.

The Cinema Circus will kick off the 2010 film festival summer series at 5 p.m. Wednesday with Follow Your Heart, a collection of international short films that will entertain parents and children alike. Through the summer, kids can expect the same string of performers that wowed audiences last year — including stilt

walkers, hula-hoopers, unicyclists and jugglers — and also look forward to a few new surprises. For starters, a troupe of theatre students from Carnegie Mellon University will use music and puppetry, among other things, to keep the kids amused.

Cinema Circus will be followed weekly by a 7 p.m. intermission and dinner from the Scottish Bakehouse. At 8 p.m., when the plates have been cleared and the kids have cleared out, the summer series features will begin.

The film festival staffers, namely founder Thomas Bena, managing director Brian Ditchfield and Mrs. Scott, the director of children's programming, have become familiar faces among the Island's cinema-crazy community. The festival has enjoyed success since Mr. Bena staged the original winter festival 10 years ago and has evolved to include the summer series, children's programming and the monthly Film Family Feast series that runs through the off-season. But this year, the festival planners say their main goal is to reach out to those who haven't yet experienced the magic of the grassroots festival.

"I think variety is on our mind these days because we're trying to expand our audience," said Mrs. Scott. "We have a very loyal audience that returns every March, all summer, and we'd love to expand out of that. So getting the message that we have a varied plate, and that there's something for everyone throughout the summer, will help us connect with people who have never come to our events before."

If there's a theme among the nine films in the summer series, Mr. Ditchfield said it's that each selection is thought-provoking. And just as with the kids, he said he hopes the featured films will prompt a dialogue among viewers.

"They all elicit discussion and fortunately, we have nine films and eight of those

nine films have guests afterward,” said Mr. Ditchfield.

The guests will include producers, directors, and other key players in the making of each film. One film, *Still Bill*, which will screen on August 11, is a return favorite from the festival in March. But this time, family members of the documentary’s central character, singer and songwriter Bill Withers, will attend the screening. And Mr. Withers’s daughter, a burgeoning singer herself, will stage a performance after the film.



The Necktie: in kids' program playing Wednesday at 5 p.m.

The series opener will be a narrative drama called *I Am Love*. “This is sort of a passion piece of [actress] Tilda Swinton’s. She worked for seven years with the director, creating the film,” said Mr. Ditchfield. “It’s a stunning romance and it’s sort of this throwback to European romantic films.”

This represents the diversity of a lineup carefully shaped by the festival directors and their screening committee. Anything goes, from a sweeping romance to a poignant documentary. “We’re trying to serve up different foods at the meal. Not just all straight social-issue [documentaries], not just all straight fiction arthouse films,” said Mr. Bena. “It’s not just first-time filmmakers, not just local interest stories. It’s really a little bit of everything.”



Tilda Swinton in the sexy, arty film *I am Love*, playing Wednesday for the grownups.

“We’ve got star-power, and we’ve got two of the biggest documentaries coming out this year, but we also have something with local flavor. It’s really a broad range,” added Mr. Ditchfield.

Academy award winning director Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*) takes on the failures of public education in the film *Waiting for Superman*, which the festival has slotted for July 21.

The Tillman Story (July 28) investigates the tragic death of Pat Tillman, the soldier who walked away from pro football, and the way the military manipulated that death for its own purposes.

A feature film that centers on a lesbian couple (Annette Benning and Julianne Moore) and their sperm donor, *The Kids Are All Right*, will screen August 18.

The world’s largest garbage dump is the locale for *Waste Land* (August 25), which follows the acclaimed artist Vik Muniz as he turns trash pickers into artists in this Rio de Janeiro favela.

There will be a film about legendary New York Times photographer Bill Cunningham who documents fashion in his weekly column *On the Street* (July 7), and another that tells the story of a Steinway grand piano and the students who compete to win it (July 14).

It’s a mix of features that you can’t find anywhere else on the Island. Which is

what festival directors hope people will keep in mind when they consider supporting the event. “There is no other source of these films here. There’s no other nexus of these parts. There’s no other kids’ event like this,” said Mrs. Scott. “We’ve crafted this thing out of a void.”

“We have very generous supporters, and we need more,” said Mr. Bena.

After 10 years, Mr. Bena said he’s still surprised by the way the festival has grown, but makes an effort not to try to shape it into anything too concrete. “In my mind, this is still evolving. Ten years from now, we could be talking about something entirely different, and I’m open to that.”

The weekly film series begins Wednesday, June 30 at the Chilmark Community Center. To purchase tickets or to watch film trailers, see the festival’s Web site at tmvff.org.