

Martha's Vineyard Magazine

Capturing the Character of the Island

mvmagazine.com

SEARCH

HOME

ABOUT US

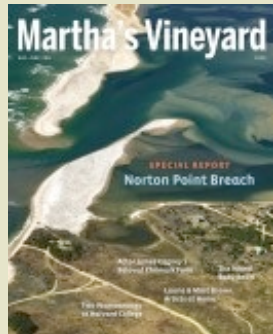
ADVERTISE

SUBSCRIBE

ARCHIVE

CONTACT

ON NEWSSTANDS NOW:



May-June 2011

Special report: Norton Point breach

Island born

James Cagney's Island refuge

The age of asparagus

A couple with vision

The Vineyard as creative muse

In Caleb's footsteps



Adaptation: A film festival's story

The gloom of late winter is set aside as people head to Chilmark and come together over couches, curry, and a weekend of movies at the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival. In its tenth year, the fest has expanded to include a summer series and winter screenings.

BY JULIA RAPPAPORT



photo by David Welch

SUBSCRIBE NOW!



Save 30% off newsstand price!

SIMON GALLERY



Featuring:
PETER'S PHOTOS &
RONNI'S JEWELRY

Open Fri., Sat. & Sun.
11am - 5pm

www.petersimon.com
www.ronnisimon.com

Home & Garden Spring-Summer 2011

An antidote to city life

Crafting a colorful summer retreat

A new architectural vernacular

The simple beauty of canning

Running a yard sale

At home with house guests

Creativity in the treetops



Martha's Vineyard Island Weddings

Planning a wedding or event on the Vineyard? Our publication is the ultimate guide.

IN UPCOMING ISSUES:

Marc and Laurie Brown's Island home.

Summer life at the Martha's Vineyard Family Campground in Tisbury.

Bob Carroll's Harbor View penthouse.

Looking at the Norton Point breach: past, present, and future.

Islanders, born on Martha's Vineyard

It's just about 11:15 p.m. in the middle of March in the middle of Chilmark. But this sleepy town is not ready to shut down for the night.

Inside the Chilmark Community Center – normally shuttered this time of year, save for special occasions and town meetings – audiences settle into folding chairs and coveted couches and cushy armchairs with freshly popped popcorn. Teenagers sit rows behind their parents; filmmakers from across the country sit right alongside Island selectmen, fishermen, and teachers. As the room goes dark, the big screen lights up with the opening credits for the vampire movie *Let the Right One In*.

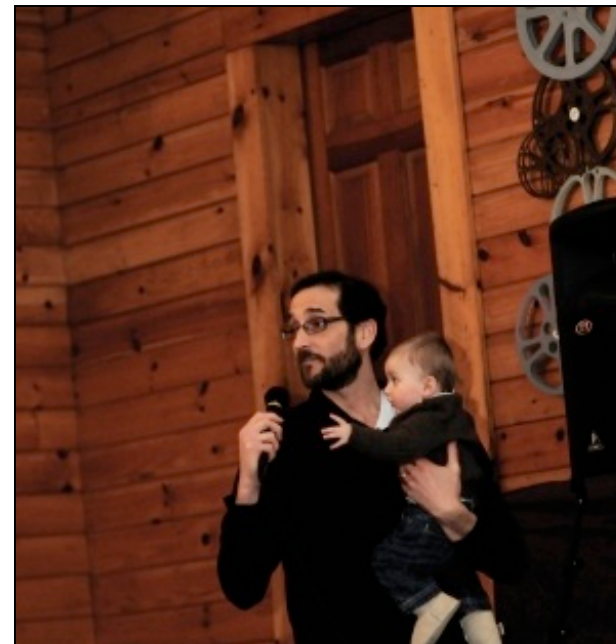
Outside in a tent where it's surprisingly warm for a still-winter evening, Thomas Bena, artistic director and founder of the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, quietly sits back with a beer. He looks tired, but it is almost midnight on opening night of the 2009 three-day fest he's worked on for the past seven months.

The evening started with a packed screening of *Life.Support.Music*, a stunning documentary about young guitarist Jason Crigler and his against-the-odds recovery from a brain hemorrhage. Jason and his wife, Monica, who is also a musician, came down from Cambridge, and following the film gave an emotional performance. After a short break to refuel on sweets and snacks and to chat with neighbors, next up for filmgoers was *A Complete History of My Sexual Failures*, a humorous look at one self-described loser's quest for love. And then the vampire flick – having that late-night screening was a first for the fest, which will celebrate its tenth year this winter. "It was a risk," Thomas says about the near-midnight showing, as he watches an older couple walk out of the community center and into the Chilmark evening.

Tall and lanky, and continually enthusiastic, Thomas is no stranger to risk. Now forty-two, he arrived on-Island single and carefree twelve years ago, trading a job in the Los Angeles film industry for days pounding nails as a Vineyard carpenter. Thomas loved everything about the quiet this new life afforded – with three exceptions: the lack of ethnic food, no warm water for surfing (though he's still avid year-round), and what he found to be a truly pathetic film selection.

"I absolutely love film," he says in an interview last winter from his office next door to the Chilmark Store. "I would open up the paper every week and be so disappointed to see there were no films I wanted to see, and I knew they were over there playing on the mainland."

So Thomas took a risk. He rounded up some



buddies and applied for a small grant. With the money, they rented out The Grange Hall in West Tisbury, brought in a projector, and cooked up pots of homemade Indian curry. He and his friends – including Brooke Hardman Ditchfield and her now-husband, Brian Ditchfield, and Jeremy and Michele Mayhew, all of whom remain actively involved in the festival today – screened five films on a cold March day. The Grange Hall was packed the entire time.

“If you like film, which a lot of people do on the Vineyard, it can be quite a depressing thing to live here in winter,” Thomas says. That first festival made Thomas realize that part of those wintertime blues can be fixed with a little film, food, and conversation. The next year, Thomas hosted a second festival, and slowly, a tradition was born of feeding an Island with home-cooked meals, good cinema, and company at just the time of year when it needs it most. “I feel like part of my service to society is offering people laughter and healthy diversion,” Thomas says.

Yours, mine, and ours

In its first year, the Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival was a small affair with a roster of independent and Vineyard-made films. Now entering its tenth year, the spirit of that first festival is still alive and well. Brooke says, “Even though it’s much bigger now and has much more robust programming, the festival still maintains that feeling of hanging out with friends, sitting on couches, eating great food, and watching movies.” Brooke, who lives in Edgartown and in that first festival showed a trailer for a Vineyard-shot movie she had made with Brian, works part time for the festival as the production coordinator.

While that home-grown, no-frills spirit is still there, it is undeniable that the festival has spread its wings dramatically. The “winter festival” – as the MVFF crew calls it, though a couple of times the date technically has made it spring – now spans three days and includes upwards of fifty films, some from big-name filmmakers, some award winning, and some that very few have heard of. After shuffling venues in the early years, the festival now has a permanent home at the Chilmark Community Center and a permanent office in Chilmark. Thomas no longer works as a carpenter and he now has employees: one full-time managing director, Brad Westcott, formerly of Magnolia Pictures in New York and the Boston Jewish Film Festival, and nineteen part-time staff members. He’s also got a slew of dedicated volunteers as well as more than two hundred annual members whose dues help keep operations running.

Thomas says turning the festival from a “passion-driven thing run by friends” into a real organization with structure and staying power was a big challenge. “At some point, I had to stake a claim in being the guy that’s going to run the thing,” he says. “Year four was when I got a call from a patron that



Thomas Bena with daughter Emma at the 2008 March festival.
photo by David Welch

believed in what I was doing and wanted to buy us a projector and screen. It became clear that if I wanted to make a go of this thing, I had to treat it professionally and that might mean that friends would not be the ones running it with me in the long run.” Now, he says, he’s still in charge, but he’s had to delegate some aspects to others who are even more qualified than he is.

The festival still goes down in March as has been its tradition, but for the past six years Thomas has also run a summer series at the Chilmark Community Center, showing weekly films over eight weeks. As he does for the winter fest, Thomas brings filmmakers and special guests to screenings in the warmer months, including producer Doug Liman (*Bourne Identity* and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*) and *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott. A few years after the summer series began, Thomas added children’s films to the mix.

Though Thomas is a veritable film buff – and is now a father himself of one-year-old Emma (he’s married to yoga teacher and author Mollie Doyle) – he is the first to admit that he is no expert in children’s programming. In 2008 Thomas brought in an outside expert, hiring Nicole Dreiske, founder of the Chicago International Children’s Film Festival, to select films for the 2009 winter festival and summer series.



photo by Elizabeth Cecil

At a Cinema Circus screening in July 2009, all eyes are on the movie screen. MVFF doubled attendance at the summer series by adding extras for kids.

result is Cinema Circus – a film-going experience complete with circus tent, stilt-walkers, unicyclists, fortunetellers, and dancing clowns – before the weekly shows. With Cinema Circus in full swing for summer 2009, attendance doubled for children’s movies. “What I was really impressed with in Thomas

This past summer, the children’s fare truly came into its own with the addition of Cinema Circus, an idea that originated when mom and Island art teacher Lindsey Scott brought her two children to the 2009 winter film festival. “I thought it was so great,” Lindsey says, “but that the movies could be better and that there could be more to it. There are all these dimensions to the adult festival – the food, the films, the art, the conversation, the music – but for the kids, there was nothing else going on outside of the film experience.”

She told Thomas, and rather than brush the comment aside, he hired Lindsey to beef up the offerings for young movie fans last summer. The

was his interest in letting this idea really fly,” says Lindsey, who is now artistic director of the children’s program. “I just made one comment and he was so quick to engage me as someone who might be helpful in making the festival better. That’s really important.”

The right stuff

Thomas relies on donations, members’ dues, ticket sales, and grants to pay for his nonprofit operation, but it is through hard work – and watching a lot of movies – that the festival happens every year.

Thomas and Brad spend hours scouring the Internet, reading up on the best films around. They watch trailers and promo videos, and rent movies. Every year, Thomas travels to the Netherlands for the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam and Brad takes on Sundance, the industry’s hallmark festival in Utah. They rely on Chilmark filmmaker Jeremy Mayhew to cull the best short films and to curate the international shorts lineup each year that routinely packs the house.

“Growing up, I used to work at the movie theaters as a projectionist,” says Jeremy, who was raised on the Vineyard and also does all of the graphic design and illustration for the festival. “Then, when I was living in Philly, I’d come back and there was never anything like this. I had to go to Boston or somewhere else to see this type of film. For me personally, all of this is about just bringing this diverse world of filmmaking to the Island.”

While the fare has broadened in recent years for wider appeal – what used to be a festival heavy on heady social-issue documentaries now includes independent, international, Vineyard-produced, animated, experimental, musical, and feature films – Thomas still hunts for movies that will speak to Island audiences. “I’m always looking for movies that will appeal to the Tribe, to farmers, fishermen, to the really wealthy, eclectic, cosmopolitan groups of the summer, and underground artists. We’ve shown two films from Camp Jabberwocky in Vineyard Haven and have always programmed films that relate to Jewish identity and African American identity,” he says. “I know it when I see it. It’s a tangible feeling when a film captures an entire room together. Regardless of politics, gender, or bias, a great film will bring the room together.”

When everything watchable has been watched, two screening committees of five people each – one for general programming and one focused on kids – convene. Among the committee members are Michele Mayhew, Lindsey Scott, and Anne Evasick of Vineyard Haven independent movie store Island Entertainment. The process is, in Thomas’s words, “a mixture of structure and chaos.” At the end of the months-long effort, there is what he calls “a knock-down, drag-out conversation” that usually lasts until the wee hours of the morning. “It’s fun to see which film each member will go to bat for,” Thomas says. “I’ve been known to vote for films that look ‘rough,’ but because the story was so compelling, I couldn’t say no.” In the end, the lineups are set.

“What’s important for me when making our programming decisions is that each film provide a different experience for the viewer – in tone, in style, in subject matter, and in exposition,” says Thomas, who wants the audience at the end of the festival to “feel like they went on a wild and wonderful ride.”

The day after tomorrow

Part of what makes the festival so magical is that it takes place in March. The Vineyard in March is the worst of the worst. It's cold, gray, and dreary. It seems spring will never come and memories of summer are dusty and dim. But with the film festival, all the gloom of late winter is cast aside as people make the trek from West Tisbury and Chappy, from Boston and New York, to come together for a weekend of film. "I can always say, 'I saw it first on the Vineyard,'" says New York photographer and summer Chilmarker Gabriela Herman, who makes a special trip with her father to the Island each March. The two attend nearly every film.



photo by David Welch

A packed house at the Chilmark Community Center.

The usually drab appearance of the Chilmark Community Center is gone. Couches and curtains, bright lights and deejay turntables give the space an artsy, glitzy, anywhere-but-the-Vineyard-in-March feel. And then there are the smells. For the past few years, the chef and owner of Vineyard Haven's Scottish Bakehouse, Daniele Dominick, has done all the cooking, serving up dishes Vineyard eaters rarely get: Cuban chicken and black beans, curries over rice, muffins made with sweet Island blueberries frozen since last summer.

"'Thanks for making us feel so welcome and appreciated,' is something that I hear often from our filmmakers," says Thomas, comparing the feeling of the festival to a wedding. "There is nowhere else that you have to go. Your friends and family are here, and the event's been planned for you. All you have to do is sit down, relax, and maybe even start up a conversation with a stranger."

A decade after the first festival, Thomas remains committed to bringing the best of what's out there to his Island audiences – and he's not ready to stop. This year for the first time, MVFF is hosting a winter film series called Family. Film. Feast. Headed up by Lindsey Scott, the new series – to run on the Saturdays of Thanksgiving and Christmas weekends, and on the last Saturday of January – features family-oriented films and fare from Island chefs, including Daniele Dominick, Heather Gude, and ArtCliff diner's Gina Stanley.

Ads by Google

[Film](#)
[Festival](#)
[Nantucket Island](#)
[Vineyard](#)
[Indie Movie](#)

"My vision for the festival is not to keep it small in scope," Thomas says. "I want to grow this thing. I

want to keep it true to its mission, but I'm definitely not looking to just play lightly."

But part of what makes the festival successful is that, even after ten years, it's not about Thomas's vision. It's not about the hard work that goes into it, or about flying the filmmakers in, or about getting big audience turnout. It's about community – and that's what makes the whole thing sparkle. "The warm environment is truly what it's about," Thomas says. "It's the couches. It's the bowls of curry. It's the live music. That is really the star of the festival."

Well, that, and the movies.

» [Share Your Feedback](#)

Reader Feedback

Monday, March 8, 2010 10:33am

To see the festival's schedule for March 12-14, 2010, go to <http://tmvff.org/>.

- editors , Martha's Vineyard Magazine

(Originally published in the Not Summer 2009-2010 edition of Martha's Vineyard Magazine)

[Home](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Subscribe](#)

The Vineyard Gazette Network:

MVGAZETTE.COM | MVBESTREADGUIDE.COM | MVWEDDINGPLANNER.COM | MVISLANDWEDDINGS.COM

MVMAGAZINE.COM - Copyright © 2011 Vineyard Gazette, Inc. - All Rights Reserved