



A shared experience

Vineyard film festival director finds a good movie is reflected in audience reaction

By **Tim Miller**

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The three-day 10th annual Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, featuring a variety of independent narrative and documentary films, kicks off Friday in Chilmark, so we decided to send a few questions via e-mail to its founder and artistic director, Thomas Bena.

Below are his responses:

Q: In your opening statement in last year's festival catalog, you said that the question you're asked every year is: "So, how do you pick your films?" Your answer was there is no recipe, or method, that it's a "magical process," "a mix of fanatical searching, random tips, intuition and alchemy." What was one of the more unusual ways that a film made its way to the festival this year?

A: I hate to disappoint you, but there really weren't any unusual ways that a film made it to us this year. We sent programmers to the largest documentary film festival in the world — the International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam — and to Sundance.

We also created a position called "Director of Children's Programming" and filled it with an art teacher/mom/rock star, Lindsey Scott. Lindsey then worked directly with Nicole Dreiske (director of the largest children's film festival in North America, the Chicago International Children's Film Festival) and the two of them created world-class programs for kids and their families.

And of course, we scoured the programs from festivals all around the world. So, basically, this year it was more a matter of casting a wider net.

Q: In managing director Brad Westcott's piece in the same catalog, he wrote that the festival can't be pigeonholed, that it "has the flexibility to respond to what's 'in the air' from season to season." What's in the air in terms of trends you're seeing in this year's festival lineup of films?

A: First off, I'm happy to say that we now have a new managing director, Brian Ditchfield. Brad has moved on and we wish him well. Brian was already working with us and brings years of event production experience to the table.

Regarding trends that I see this year, I'd say there is a huge trend toward truth-telling. Whether it be the Act 2 reveal from our closing-night narrative "Strella," the in-your-face claims of our opening-night film "Collapse," or the myriad other truths to be told in "The Most Dangerous Man in America," "Reel Injun," "Girls on the Wall," "Still Bill" and "One Too Many Mornings," one thing is clear — the films that we have selected (and even the hundreds that we previewed) do not shy away from sharing truths that are not always palatable.

Q: Do you see a big difference between festival films and the movies shown in commercial theaters?

A: HUGE! Consider this year's nominees for best documentary. We've screened three of them — "The Cove," "Food, Inc." and "The Most Dangerous Man in America" — not one of them has made it to our commercial theaters.

I do love seeing great films in commercial theaters, but I am often horrified by the films that get weeks and weeks

of play in the commercial theaters, and I've walked out of plenty.

It used to get me angry, but now I choose to put that energy into finding the best films in the world and doing my best to bring them to our community.

I'm not a film scholar — never taken a film class in my life — and I never had attended a film festival when I decided to start the MVFF. It's not rocket science — I think that a good film is a good film is a good film. When they play, there is silence in the room and everyone is into the experience.

Q: You've been running this festival for 10 years. Can you tell us about a specific experience that made you think "This is what makes all this effort so worthwhile"?

A: The moment my neighbor, a man not prone to hyperbole, told me that the film "Nobody's Business" changed his life.

While it is that story that almost immediately enters my mind, believe it or not, I've heard it many times, and each time it stops me in my tracks and makes me think it's all worth it.

Q: What are some of your favorite festival films from the past 10 years?

A: "Nobody's Business" (USA), "Family Undertaking" (USA), "Mademoiselle Nigot and the Doctor" (Australia), "Tama Tu" (New Zealand), "Souvenirs" (Israel), "Surfwise" (USA).

Q: There are quite a few annual film festivals in the area these days - in Woods Hole and Provincetown, on Nantucket and even others on Martha's Vineyard. And there are others in Newport, Providence and Boston. Does this affect your festival — positively or negatively — in any way?

A: Yes, there are festivals in both Newport and in Providence, but I don't think that we cause each other any harm.

I do think that the directors could and should all sit down and chat a few times a year. I think that there must be some way that we could streamline and help each other. I'm not sure how, but I am definitely open to it and have recently begun speaking with Maryland Film Festival director Jed Dietz about creating some sort of festival alliance. Way too early to think about the details, but we're going to continue the conversation.

Q: Do you have any tips on how festivalgoers can best enjoy your event?

A: They should spend the weekend, buy a pass, and hunker down on one of the couches that fill our theater. They'll make new friends, have time for walks on the beach, and see films that most likely won't make it to the commercial theaters.

Q: If you were going to be stuck on an island — say, Martha's Vineyard — for the rest of your life and you could only see one movie, which would it be and why?

A: That's easy; the film would be "Nobody's Business" by Alan Berliner. Because it's hilarious, poignant, honest, full of heart, and completely unlike anything that I've ever seen before.

If you go: What: Martha's Vineyard Film Festival. When: Friday through Sunday.

Where: Chilmark Community Center, 520 South Road. Tickets: \$12, \$6 for members, \$5 for kids. Information/reservations: tmvff.org or 508-645-9599.

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