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Indie Film Festival-A Big Draw for Orinda

By Andrea A. Firth



Actress Linda Gray Photos Doug Kohen

In its new home in the historic Orinda Theater, the California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF) screened 75 movies last weekend. In addition to the variety of independent film options, movie-goers had the opportunity to interact directly with filmmakers and participate in Q&A sessions with the actors. "We are happy with how things went this year," stated CAIFF Executive Director Leonard Pirkle, adding, "With the move to Orinda, we retained the intimate feel of the independent film festival, and we gained a greater sense of community."

Here are some highlights from the four-day Festival:

The Festival kicked off with a VIP reception in Theater Square attended by Hollywood celebrities and local dignitaries including Orinda's Mayor Tom McCormick, Vice Mayor Victoria Smith and City Council Member Sue Severson, along with Lamorinda Film and Entertainment Foundation Board members Laura Abrams and David Mayeri, to name just a few.

Meanwhile, Orinda Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Candy Kattenburg, President Sue Breedlove, and a handful of other local business owners were busy out front pouring wine for willing patrons awaiting the arrival of the actors. In Oscar night fashion, a black stretch limousine pulled

up in front of the theater and cameras started flashing as the smiling stars emerged and walked the red carpet into the theater. A bit of Hollywood glamour had found its way to the semi-rural hills of Orinda.

The Festival's opener was *Expecting Mary*, the heartrending and hilarious tale of a pregnant teenage runaway, played by 24-year Olesya Rulin, who finds solace among the eccentric residents of a trailer park in New Mexico. Bucking the industry's standard film formula, the movie features a host of stellar performances by actors slightly past Hollywood's requisite age limit. Elliot Gould plays a polka music-loving trucker, Cloris Leachman is a crotchety old woman with a fetish for pigs, Cybill Shepard portrays a crazed and snobby mother, Della Reese is the comically irritable trailer park owner, and Gene Simmons does a respectable version of himself as an aging rocker about to go on tour. Lainie Kazan, as the casino owner, gives a funny and warm performance and shares her beautiful voice in a couple of songs. Linda Gray (famous for her role as Sue Ellen in the television drama *Dallas*) leads the cast, playing a past-her-prime showgirl. Gray, who had the initial idea for the story, looks better than great and gives a poignant performance in this independent production that can make you laugh and cry in the same scene. If you missed the film's screening at the Festival you are still in time to see it, the executive producer anticipates that the film will be in theaters in the fall.

For the fan that prefers variety, one of the great things about film festivals is the movie shorts. CAIFF included several short film programs including the Sapporo Short Fest Showcase, which featured six shorts hand-picked for the Festival. These high-quality foreign films ranged from 4 minutes to 23 minutes in length and covered a diversity of themes including a former refugee's memories of his dangerous boat escape (Vietnam), the impact of introducing the internet to nuns in remote convent (Slovenia), and a documentary about a 73-year old power lifter (United Kingdom).

Japan's Sapporo International Short Film Festival, now in its fifth year, is the sister-film festival to the CAIFF. A seven-member entourage from Sapporo came to Orinda to view the CAIFF selections and to identify potential films for their upcoming festival later this year. The Sapporo Festival, the largest short film festival in Japan, received over 3,000 film submissions from 97 countries last year and drew over 12,000 attendees. New this year, the Sapporo Festival will screen the top five video shorts from the CAIFF's Iron Filmmaker competition (see above).

Theater Square was buzzing on Friday evening and local restaurants had diners waiting in line for seats. "We haven't had a Friday night that was this busy in a while," said a waitress at La Piazza, who added with a smile, "and I am not complaining." The movie *The Lightkeepers* attracted over 650 attendees, who were entertained, after the screening, by anecdotes from the film's star Richard Dreyfuss; and there was not an empty seat for the documentary, *Race to Nowhere*, by Lafayette filmmaker Vicki Abeles. Shelby's tables stayed filled through lunch, dinner, and late night drinks throughout the weekend and were graced by the cast of *Expecting Mary*, Richard Dreyfuss and his family, and several other Festival VIPs. "The Festival has been really good for business," said Shelby's manager Carlos Rangel as he rushed off to seat a large group for lunch.

As the Festival came to a close on Sunday, CAIFF's Executive Director Leonard Pirkle was already thinking ahead. "We'll be at work next week planning next year's festival," he stated. "We're excited to make it even bigger and better."



Photos Doug Kohen



Visitors from Sapporo, Japan



L to R) Laura Abrams, Derek Zemrak, Lainie Kazan, Linda Gray, Oleya Rulin, Victoria Smith, Tom McCormick, and Leonard Pirkle

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