

# Life in LAMORINDA

## California Independent Film Festival—What's in it for You?

By Andrea A. Firth

If you have never gone to an independent film festival, here's your chance. The 13th Annual California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF) will be held at the New Rheem Theatre in Moraga from January 28th through February 3rd.

"The first thing to do is to take

### CAIFF Supports the Local Film Connection

When Derek Zemrak launched the California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF) 13 years ago, there was only one other independent film festival in the East Bay. As an independent filmmaker, Zemrak knew how difficult it was to make an independent film and how important it is for the film to be seen. He started the CAIFF to provide an outlet for indie films and created the Bay Area Showcase to support the work of local filmmakers. The East Bay film production industry is very active, notes Zemrak. The CAIFF received about 80 local film submissions from which the selection committee identified twenty to be screened in the five Bay Area Showcases on the Festival schedule. *A. Firth*

a look at the Festival Lineup [available at [www.caiff.org](http://www.caiff.org)]," says Derek Zemrak, the President and founder of the CAIFF. "The lineup is your roadmap. You can pick and choose what you are interested to see. It's a la carte." Attendees can purchase a pass for the entire Festival, but most buy tickets to individual features or showcases, like buying a ticket to a movie.

Attending the CAIFF is like seeing a movie "with benefits." The filmmakers and members of the cast and crew of several of the features and shorts will attend the Festival and question and answer sessions will be conducted following some of the screenings.

"One of the greatest things about the Festival is having the opportunity to ask the director or producer questions directly about his or her work," says Zemrak.

There is something to peak the interest of everyone among the 80 films to be screened. Not sure where to start? Here are some ideas from Derek Zemrak:

#### Star Gazers

For \$25, you can attend the

Friday night opening reception on January 28th and see the feature film *The 5th Quarter*. Mix and mingle with the stars including Ryan Merriman (lead actor in *The 5th Quarter*), Rick Bieber (director of *The 5th Quarter*), Donny Most (remember Ralph from *Happy Days?*), and Lou Diamond Phillips (star of *La Bamba* and other films), and many others. Prefer the sidelines to the direct approach? Get to the theater by 5:00 p.m. on Friday with your camera or pen and paper for autographs, and watch the stars walk the red carpet into the reception. Catch the stars again at the Gala Slate Awards on Sunday, January 30th and Lea Thompson at the closing night reception and screening of her movie *Mayor Cupcake* on Thursday, February 3rd.

#### Getting in the Biz

"We have two very good seminars for people interested in filmmaking," says Zemrak. "Jana Sue Memel will talk about what makes a great short film. She's won three Academy Awards for her work and has been nominated a total of 13 times. There is no one who has received more nominations."

"And for musicians and anyone interested in producing music, Ken Parks from MTV and Matt Kierscht, who has done just about everything in the music and film industry, will talk about how to get music in film and television. These

are great opportunities to learn from and ask question of experts in the business."

*Saturday, January 29th, 10:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m.*

#### Keep it Short

"Every filmmaker starts with short films. George Lucas started with short films," says Zemrak. "It's less expensive but more difficult too," he adds, comparing the process to the writer's challenge of economizing words when crafting a short story. "In a short film, you have to tell the story, beginning, middle, and end, succinctly. There's no room for fluff. The CAIFF always has a great selection of short films to watch. We have had an Oscar-nominated short in the lineup for each of the last five years."

*Shorts Programs, Saturday, January 29th at 10:0 a.m. and 1:45 p.m., and Sunday, January 30th at 10:00 a.m.*

#### For the Younger Set

"We always have a Children's Showcase. It's important for children to learn about film. It exposes them to different cultures and ideas," says Zemrak. The hour-long Children's Program includes eight shorts films from three to 13 minutes in length.

*Saturday, January 29th at 12:15 p.m.*

#### Pick a Winner

"All of the films shown at the CAIFF are quality films," says Zemrak. But there is a lot to choose from;

so let the festival judges help to narrow your selection. Check out the CAIFF website to see which films the judges have nominated for "Best

of" in variety of categories including Picture, Short, Animation, Documentary, Director, Actress, Actor, and more.

### The 5th Quarter Opening Night Feature Film



Photo provided

The last time Joel McDonell was inside the Rheem Theatre he was probably grooving to the techno tunes of the group Techronic and the hip hop hits of artists MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice. That was in 1991, when the East Bay native attended his senior ball, which was held on the stage in the main theater. McDonell will be returning to the main theater on the opening night of the upcoming California Independent Film Festival, but instead of dancing with his high school pals, he will be there to watch the evening's feature film *The 5th Quarter*. McDonell is the Associate Producer of the film. The film's producer, director, and writer Rick Bieber and lead actor Ryan Merriman will also attend the opening reception and screening.

"It's a classic, inspirational football story," says McDonell. The 5th Quarter is based on the story of Jon Abbatte, who dedicated his Wake Forest football season to the memory of his younger brother Luke who was tragically killed in a car accident. It's a very accurate portrayal of the real life events, says McDonell. And there is a chance there will not be a dry eye in the theater at the end of this movie about faith, family, life, and love. *A. Firth*

### Adult Beginner Ballet

#### A Documentary by Michelle Ortega



"Come out. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to bite," says Kathy Mata cajoling her adult ballet students to take their places on the dance floor. The documentary *Adult Beginner Ballet*, will be shown during the Documentary Showcase at the CAIFF on Saturday, January 29th. Photo provided

"I did not have very much interest in ballet when we started the project," admits Jason LaBatt, "But by the time we finished filming I gained a real appreciation for the hard work and perseverance that ballet requires." LaBatt did most of the filming and all of the editing on the documentary *Adult Beginner Ballet*, which will be shown at the California Independent Film Festival (CAIFF). LaBatt's wife, Michelle Ortega, is the producer and director of the film, and together they own and operate North Beach Digital, a video production company based in San Francisco.

LaBatt will be returning to his roots when he attends the CAIFF screening of the documentary. He grew up in Orinda, attended Glorietta Elementary and Orinda Intermediate School (OIS), and graduated from Miramonte High School (class of 1988). He credits a film production class with Mrs. Boomgarten at OIS for his first exposure to the world of movie making. "We were probably using VHS cameras back then," LaBatt adds with laugh.

*Adult Beginner Ballet* is Ortega's first independent documentary and the subject is close to her heart. Ortega has taken adult ballet classes for the past four years, and the film follows her teacher Kathy Mata at work with Ortega's classmates at the Alonzo King Lines Dance Center in San Francisco. Ortega wanted to make the documentary to further explore her own unique experience of tackling ballet—a discipline typically confined to the young and supple—in midlife. "There are all levels of ability in class," says Ortega, and the students range in age from twenty-somethings to Medicare recipients. "It's amazing to see the improvement adults make, watching them master a skill like a pirouette." Ortega hopes the film will motivate others to believe that they, too, can dance. *A. Firth*

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