

VINEYARD



GAZETTE

**Archived Edition: Friday, March 7, 2008**

## Edgy Films Keep You on the Edge of Your Sofa

By JULIA RAPPAPORT

At just the moment when the drag of winter seems never-ending, a light is shining on the horizon — a projectionist's light.

Spring may still be weeks away, but the eighth annual Martha's Vineyard Film Festival is next weekend, when for three days Islanders can settle onto couches at the Chilmark Community Center and escape. Moviegoers can take in a surf film to forget about the cold, see a story about a deaf couple struggling as they enter the world of the hearing to beat back the blues, or watch the first Academy Award-winner to be shown at the festival to remember that, on the Vineyard, culture is right at our fingertips. Kids even get their own festival this year.



Festival organizers prepare for fun: (back row) Jeremy Mayhew, Thomas Bena and Brad Westcott; (front) Rodeo Purves, Molly Purves, Barbara Puciul and Mollie Doyle.

A special screening of Pete Seeger: *Power of Song*, a documentary on the folk musician, kicked off the festival last night, but for the rest of the goods, movie buffs will have to wait until Friday, March 14. At 6 p.m., the doors of the community center will open for a reception and the first two screenings of the weekend — *The Dhamma Brothers*, voted best documentary at the Woods Hole Film Festival, and *Man in the Chair*, an award-winning independent drama and paean to moviemaking.

Over the course of the following two days, nearly 30 feature-length and short films will screen at the center, including an Island documentary on affordable housing, a musical love story from director John Turturro and a short film about women in the agricultural world.

At least 12 special guests — from directors and cameramen to stars — will attend the festival and will all gather for a filmmakers panel, free and open to the

public, on Saturday evening.

“There are family dramas, comedies, fiction,” said festival producer and director Thomas Bena. “We’re trying to program diverse films. The films have to offer something new and have to be really well done.”

For the first time ever, younger audiences will have their own festival, taking place at the Chilmark Library right next door, on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. Selections include shorts and feature length films, American movies and those from abroad, modern tales and older ones. They are free, allowing parents to attend films they might otherwise have had to miss.

Meals and snacks and drinks from the Scottish Bakehouse will fill the kitchen because, as any true festival-goer knows, movies cannot truly be enjoyed on an empty stomach.

Mr. Bena began the festival eight long winters ago. “I absolutely love film,” he said. Mr. Bena spent his twenties in Los Angeles, where he worked in the film industry. After making the move to the Vineyard, he found he missed the urban offerings. “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,” he said.

So, together with a few commiserators, he applied for a grant and rented out the old agricultural hall in West Tisbury for a one-day film festival. As his roommate sat in the projection booth stirring pots of curry, people started pouring in. Four out of five screenings played to a full house. The Island was starved for quality films. The next year, Mr. Bena moved the operation to the Katharine Cornell Theatre in Vineyard Haven; every year since, it has called the community center home.

In the eight years the program has run, it has continued to grow and evolve. The roster now includes more feature-length films and the submissions do not come from as many local filmmakers. Two new twists came last year with the addition of children’s programming and a guest director to help organize the festival and select films. Both have continued this year. After year four, Mr. Bena was able to give up his carpentry work and devote his full attention to film and this year, for the first time, he has a permanent office. Earlier this winter, he nailed a sign outside.

Despite all of the change, the missions of the festival — and there are many — have remained the same. Mr. Bena believes the festival should support artists. Since day one, he has paid directors for their films, something most festivals do not do. He believes the festival should bring the community together. “It’s not about making money on tickets, it’s about getting it out to the public,” he said. That includes providing a comfortable space to screen movies (he outfits the community center with floor lamps and sofas) and selecting films that parents and filmmakers, teenagers and cameramen, lawyers and fishermen will all want

to see. And he believes the films he shows should have something to say. “So many films out there say, ‘Here’s what wrong.’ It’s basically people whining,” Mr. Bena said. “We work really hard to find films that are about taking responsibility for your own life.”

Selecting films is difficult and time-consuming. “I see hundreds of films,” Mr. Bena said. “I just don’t know if it reaches the thousand mark or not.” He attends film festivals worldwide and brings home his favorites to a programming committee, which this year counts among its ranks Island filmmaker Jeremy Mayhew, Anne Evasick of Island Entertainment, his fiancée Mollie Doyle and guest director Brad Westcott, formerly of Magnolia Pictures in New York and the Boston Jewish Film Festival. “It’s something like going through transcripts at a publishing house,” Mr. Bena said of the process.

The March date of the festival has been another constant, although one year, Mr. Bena did unsuccessfully experiment with April. “I’ve lived here year round for 11 years, I’m building a house here with my fiancée, I live here,” Mr. Bena said. “In the winter, there is not that much going on. For me, it just feels like the right time.”

It’s not too late to offer the festival a sofa if you have one to lend (they pick it up, cover it for the duration, and deliver it back to you — but no sleepers, please). And it’s never too late to make a donation. Despite the fact that the festival did roughly \$2,500 in ticket sales last year, it is not a money-maker. “What keeps the electricity on is donations from the public,” Mr. Bena said. You can go to the Web site [mviff.org](http://mviff.org) for information on how to donate.

Mr. Bena dreams of one day opening a cultural center, like an art house theatre, he explains, which could be a community forum for film, music and food. For now, he is content with the shape the festival has taken, although he still gets anxious before opening night. “I get really nervous before every show — is anyone going to show up?” he asked. “But I have to believe if we play important stories, people will show up. And they have been.”

Doors open for the eighth annual Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival at 6 p.m. on March 14 and runs through March 16. The complete schedule is detailed on this page. All tickets are sold at the door and cost \$5 for members and \$10 for nonmembers. A Martha’s Vineyard Film Festival membership costs \$40 per year and gets you half-price tickets to all screenings shown year-round by the festival. Watch for a special flat-rate pass to the festival, designed by students at the Martha’s Vineyard Public Charter School, and check out [mviff.org](http://mviff.org) for even more information.

[Ticketing Information](#)

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