

**PRESS RELEASE
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Films and Fun

By Mary-Justine Lanyon

While the focus at the Lake Arrowhead Film Festival is on the films and their makers, it's really about much more.

It's about the relationships that develop between the filmmakers and the industry people who are there to view them. It's about Timothy Bottoms stepping up to support the maker of *The Hat Lady* as she gave an emotional acceptance speech. It's about local residents having the opportunity to view a plethora of fabulous films and hear how the stories evolved from their makers.



At the end of each block of films, the filmmakers who were present stepped forward to answer questions about where they got their inspiration, how they stay motivated, how they do their casting, what their next projects are.

The films ranged from shorts only three minutes long to full-length features. The filmmakers were students and industry veterans. Some live in our mountain communities, while others hail from Germany, Japan, Spain and Argentina.

The only real challenge festival attendees had was choosing between theaters. Every block of films screened in the Acorn Theatre was offset by an equally strong block in the Evergreen Theatre.

There may have been diversity in the films, but there was consensus on the LAFF itself: It was an overwhelming success, supported by both the Los Angeles-area film community and mountain residents.

When Joe Mantegna accepted his Award for Excellence in Film, Television and Beyond, his initial comments may have caused LAFF President Mary Dippell to feel just a bit of anxiety: "It's a privilege to be here, but I don't like film festivals.

They're usually a crush of people and press, rushing around."

Dippell must have breathed a sigh of relief when Mantegna continued, "This film festival exemplifies what a film festival should be: People who enjoy seeing movies. You've done a remarkable job. I will cherish this award because it's from a community that's doing it right."

FILMMAKERS MEET

For the first time in its nine-year history, the festival began on Thursday night with a filmmakers' reception. As the filmmakers arrived at the Lake Arrowhead Resort and Spa, they had the opportunity to greet old friends and meet new ones. As the two-hour event unfolded, the buzz in the Lakeview Terrace room became more animated, with filmmakers comparing notes on when their films would screen and agreeing to see one another's work.

Part-time resident Vincent Spano was the host for the evening. As he welcomed the attendees, he said, "We salute your vision, your hard work and your dedication. We are proud to offer this venue for you to share your vision."

The reception was followed by a screening of Helen Hunt's debut directing a feature film—Then She Found Me. The consensus following the film was that it will do well in theaters when it is released in May.

THE FILMMAKER AWARDS

The tension was palpable in the ballroom at the resort on Sunday as the filmmakers waited to hear which films would be taking home the trophies. With 59 films and only 14 awards, there was bound to be disappointment. But, as more than one filmmaker said, they truly felt it was an honor to have been included in the festival.

Best Feature and Best of the Festival went to Greetings From the Shore, described as a coming-of-age tale of love, loss and pirates. Director Greg Chwerchak was in New York on another project, but he told The Mountain News, "Festivals like Lake Arrowhead provide the perfect platform for indie films like ours. There's no better gauge than an audience of real film fans.

"We're so grateful to Mary Dippell, the festival staff and all of the people who came out to see our little slice of Jersey. We were lucky to have Paul Sorvino love the script and come onboard. We were fortunate to have the support of the town of Lavallette, N.J. And we are grateful to the Lake Arrowhead Film Festival for giving us a venue to reach viewers far from our Jersey home. We are enormously grateful for these awards," Chwerchak added.

The awards ceremony was dotted with more than one poignant moment. When *Hold On* was announced as the winner in the Shorts category, a phalanx of strong arms lifted Jackie Julio in her wheelchair up on to the stage to receive her award from Lorenzo Lamas. And later, when her film was awarded the June Lockhart Award for Special Achievement in the Art of Filmmaking, those same arms lifted her once again.

Julio described the process of making her film as stressful and exhausting. “We can’t wait to do it again,” she said. “We feel as though our family as just expanded to include everyone here at the festival.”

That the film industry is a family was brought home by Timothy Bottoms’ actions after he presented the second-place award for Short Documentary to Diane Ambruso, director of *The Hat Lady*.

After saying he loves the world of film, Bottoms handed Ambruso her award, noting her film was especially meaningful to him as his brothers have been battling cancer.

Ambruso told the audience her film started because her mother had cancer. That brought tears to her eyes and her voice. Bottoms’ comment from the side was, “Just breathe.” He then walked to the podium, put his arm around Ambruso’s shoulders and supported her through the remainder of her speech.

When Vincent Spano took the stage to present the awards for animated and student films, he said, “This is a festival about family and heart.”

When Ali Hasan accepted his award for Best Student Film for *Rabia*, he commented on how inspiring he found both *Hold On* and *The Hat Lady*. “I love working with a bunch of people and putting together a film,” he said, summing up the feelings of every filmmaker in the room.

GALA AWARDS BANQUET

When master of ceremonies Ernie Hudson welcomed the guests at the Friday night banquet, he said, “This is Lake Arrowhead. The only thing required is we have fun.” He went on to say many film festivals are downsizing to achieve what the LAFF already has: intimacy.

In addition to the celebrities who were honored at the gala, a special retrospective of the work of costume designer Jerry Skeels was presented by Leslie McClellan from the Lake Arrowhead Communities Chamber of Commerce.

When Timothy Bottoms introduced June Lockhart, to whom he presented the LAFF Lifetime Achievement Award, he described her as “one heck of a nice person to have on the set.” Lockhart, who is proud of her Lake Arrowhead roots, said, “I guess you could say, ‘Local girl makes good.’”

THOUGHTS FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Several of the filmmakers shared their thoughts on how they watch the work of their colleagues. “When I forget about the quality of the picture and the sound, I know it’s a good movie,” said Eileen Connors, whose film *Out of Step* looks at the complicated relationship between a father and his late daughter. Connors’ film was part of the block of Women’s Short Films, and she found their quality to be excellent.

Crestline resident Spencer Holden, whose film *The Red Ballet* screened on Sunday morning, said he watches other filmmakers’ films with a curious mind. “I ask myself, ‘How did that do that? Why?’”

The other local resident with a film in the festival was Jan Skrentny, whose film *Why’d the Beetle Cross the Road* brought laughter and cheers from the audience. “It’s a great feeling to create something,” Skrentny said. “Even greater when people like it.”

Ron Lehmann, director of *Jakob and the Angels*, said, “I have worms in my stomach while I wait to see if an audience reacts how and when I think they will.” He, like many of the filmmakers, almost finds it easier to watch other directors’ films.

At least two films premiered at the Lake Arrowhead Film Festival: *Out of Step* and *The Kiss*. Connors said she chose to premiere her film here because she had enjoyed the area so much on previous visits. After the festival, she said she raved to all her friends about what a great time she had. “We were treated like rock stars!” she said. “I don’t feel bad about not winning. Our film with the Melissa Etheridge song was beaten by the film with the Springsteen song (*Hold On*).”

The Kiss, a film by Rim High graduate Scott Madden, premiered at the festival on Saturday night. Madden dedicated the film to his former Rim teacher, Gerry Vom Steeg, who he described as his “mentor in all things creative.” Vom Steeg, who was in the audience, stood and graciously accepted the applause.

Madden was thrilled to have LAFF honoree Jack Hill play the part of the teacher Mr. Shaw in *The Kiss*. “Jack became famous for B horror movies in the 70s,” Madden said. “He wrote the book on how to do them.” At the awards luncheon on Sunday, Madden presented Hill with his Award for Excellence in the Art of Independent Filmmaking.

“I used to wash dishes with this guy at a meditation center,” Madden told the luncheon crowd. “I had no idea who he was. The more I talk to Jack, the more I’m crippled by what I don’t know.”

The overflow crowd Saturday night would most likely beg to differ with him. They showed their appreciation for the May-December romantic vampire comedy over and over again with boisterous applause.

A GREEN FESTIVAL

Under the direction of volunteer Lori Pearson, the ninth annual LAFF took on a decided green tone. From the tote bags made of recycled material to the centerpieces with Jeffrey Pine seedlings at the gala on Friday to the custom-made frames with certificates announcing a seedling had been planted in the San Bernardino National Forest to the forest of trees begged, borrowed and rented—guests were made well aware this festival takes place in special location.

A guest at each table was encouraged to take home and plant the seedlings from the gala. Timothy Bottoms was quick to scoop up the seedlings at his table, saying he couldn't wait to see if they would grow at his ranch where wild horses roam.

Next year will mark the 10th annual Lake Arrowhead Film Festival. Don't miss it—it's a weekend full of fun, films and family.