



Along the Road Less Taken: Independent Film Festivals in the Mid-Atlantic Region

By Lenwood O. Sloan

Keeping Focus

Webster's dictionary defines magic as the manipulation of ordinary things in extraordinary ways. While this is true of all festivals, it is a driving principle of America's independent film showcases.

In the midst of increasingly innovative technology which personalizes the way we view film, television, and media, independent film fests (INDIE) grow in popularity. As American audiences continue their quest for lifelong learning and personal growth, travel that combines learning vacations with cultural and heritage experiences will prove more desirable.

Indie festivals are cross roads of ideas, convening places for unaffiliated artists, and incubators for best practices. For practitioners and participants alike, they provide a sense of animation for "place based" civic dialogue and cultural exchange. Indie events create instant aesthetic communities through the junction of writers, directors, photographers, independent producers, industry producers and service providers. Agents of the "creative economy," event directors also serve as cultural ambassadors connecting visitors to artisan experiences, cottage industries products and services, and local tourism and hospitality.

Nationally recognized competitions invite some of the film industry's top professionals to local communities. Engagement and exchange provides talented new artists the opportunity to gain feedback on a screenplay, documentary, or short film. These festivals allow practitioners, interns and volunteers vehicles to gain valuable and extensive experience in planning and managing a film festival or similar event. They also provide a market place for small/cottage industry proprietors, vendors, and services that showcase and exhibit during their multi-day events. This helps build the local infrastructure of the industry.

Finding an appropriate home base has required long term collaboration with communities involved in preservation, restoration and adaptive reuse of landmark buildings. Outstanding partnerships abound which serve as case studies for community revitalization. In addition, the annual call for entries from independent and unaffiliated artists constitutes an important database of the region's creative workforce. This data is an important resource for film offices and state film tax credit programs.

Lastly, independent film festivals provide important incubators for new leadership and training grounds for emerging arts administrators. In short, the combination of annual events across the Mid-Atlantic region, constitute an annual diagnostic for defining industry benchmarks and framing best practices.

Connecting Visitor Experiences

It's a fact that the Mid-Atlantic Region is a 6-8 hour drive from 51% of the nation's population. AAA reports that despite the cost of gas, 74% of travelers still prefer the automobile as their means of leisure travel. More and more cultural and heritage travelers dissolve borders between counties and states and look to regional experiences. They have become "shunpikers" - travelers who shun the turnpike and choose "the road less taken."

The construct of vacations has changed in the past few decades. By the end of the 20th century, the 14 day vacation had shrunk to 3-5 days annually. By the 2010, the average leisure traveler took many "mini" 18 hour vacations throughout the year. Often, they build an affinity with a destination and become frequent visitors. For them, the Mid-Atlantic region's Indie fests provide experiences with contemporary artists and connections to unique lodging, great market places, excellent wineries, and fine dining.

Indie festivals are cross roads of ideas, convening places for unaffiliated artists, and incubators for best practices. For practitioners and participants alike, they provide a sense of animation for “place based” civic dialogue and cultural exchange.

Finding Gathering Places

To help you with your travel plans, discover the following yearlong calendar of events presenting snapshots for your aesthetic adventure, journeyman experience, or seasonal leisure road trips. Festivals included throughout have presented annually for the past five years or more with shorts and trailers available on their festival websites. Read on and then get ready to plan a time when you can put wheels on the road, feet on the ground, ears to the dialogue, and eyes on the screen!

July

Head for the other side of the Hudson River and attend the *Newark Black Film Festival* beginning mid July 2012. NBFF is one of the nation's defining voices on behalf of independent film. The festival is free to the public and showcases films that focus on the experiences and concerns of contemporary African Americans. Events provide emerging filmmakers, writers, directors and producers with a high profile outlet for their work.

August

August is beautiful along Pennsylvania's Route 6. Make Warren, Pennsylvania's *The Boonies Fest* your destination. The festival supports education for independent filmmakers of all ages, as well as promotes Northwestern Pennsylvania's location and natural resources to the film industry. Most events are held in the historic Struthers Theater, a national landmark restoration, and the festival helps to anchor the theater's annual activities. Thought provoking civic dialogue among participants and film makers helps create the “affinity community” that gathers there each summer.

September

Why not relax and take an Amtrak Vacation in September along the eastern

seaboard? Start in Atlantic City and join the cutting edge discourse at the *Atlantic City International Film Festival*. The event is operated and funded by a group of producers, directors and actors with the sole desire of bringing the art of independent film making to the entertainment gaming Mecca of the Northeast, Atlantic City.

Head next to *Wilmington Delaware's WilmFilm Festival*, a three-day celebration of cinema held at the Delaware Art Museum. The festival is dedicated to bringing limited release films to its community, visitors, and residents alike. In addition, the festival and its local partners provide professional development and open dialogue opportunities as well as a variety of social events.

Travel south and attend *The DC Shorts Film Festival*, the Washington, DC area's only film festival dedicated to showcasing and discussing short films from around the world. The festival provides a lineup that covers a variety of genres: dramas, comedies, animation, sci-fi, documentaries, and creative experimental films.

Continuing south, stop by Silver Springs, Maryland, for the *Annual AFI Latin American Film Festival*, presented by the Mid-Atlantic Hispanic partnership and the AFI Silver Theater & Cultural Center. The three week Festival showcases the best filmmaking from Latin America, Spain and Portugal, celebrating Ibero-American cultural connections.

October

Nature's annual display of fall foliage coincides with a harvest of artistic expression each October. Start by experiencing the rich sights and sounds of Asia at *The New Jersey Independent South Asian Cine Fest in Edison New Jersey*. NJISACF's promotes the talents of new, established, underrepresented, and the best and the brightest independent South Asian filmmakers from across the globe. The lineup

of great films reflects the diverse experiences, cultures and histories of the South Asian Diaspora, thereby encouraging cross-cultural dialogue and understanding in a multicultural society.

Journey into Pennsylvania and attend the *Greater Reading Film Festival* which features 4 days of films, panels, and open dialogues introducing the Reading area to the art of independent film and media. An October return trip is in order along PA's Route 6 where nature's beauty abounds.

At the heritage route's most eastern destination you'll find Milford, Pennsylvania and the *Black Bear Festival*. The multi day event supports innovative and independent films, educational programs, speakers, workshops, and walking tours that promote the region's pristine clean air and water, abundant wildlife, and natural beauty. Its unique programming also showcases the area as a popular film-making location. The Festival is housed at the historic Milford Theater, an adaptive reuse and preservation- conservation project which is the pride of the community!

At the heritage trail's western end, you'll enjoy Erie, PA and discover the *Eerie Horror Film Festival* which has become one of the most popular and respected events of its kind in the country. In addition to the four day showcase of features, the event offers informative workshops and presentations by special celebrity guests. The Eerie Horror Film Festival also hosts a full scale Expo in conjunction with their annual event, featuring appearances by some of the top names in the horror and independent film community.

November

November provides great opportunities for industry professionals to work their trade and trade their work. If you are a leisure traveler, why not make all your November weekends red letter days. *The Three Rivers Film Festival*, presented by Pittsburgh Filmmakers, provides a national and international gathering of the industry including exceptional premieres, engaging showcases, and informative trade exhibitions. An impressive list of collaborating institutions includes both edged Carnegie Mellon University, and the innovative programs of University of Pittsburgh.

Plan a trip to Rehoboth Beach, Delaware and attend the award winning *Rehoboth Beach Independent Film Festival*, one of Delaware's premiere cultural events. For five days, film enthusiasts from throughout the Mid-Atlantic region enjoy the convenience of seeing approximately

100 of the best American and international films including features, documentaries, and shorts all at one, multi-screen location. The Festival's "Reel Manners" campaign introduces a vocabulary of conduct that helps to make the Festival an enjoyable viewing experience for all.

February

After December's holiday season and January's cabin fever, you'll be ready to hit the trail again in February! Plan a gathering of family and friends in Philadelphia during Black History Month. Be sure to attend *Temple University's Derek Freese Youth Media Film Festival*. The festival is designed to help support and encourage young filmmakers, ages 12 to 18 and provide opportunities for them to screen their work in front of film professionals. Entrance is free, and all ages are welcome to attend.

The event honors the memory of Derek Freese, a graduate of the Temple film program, who passed away two days after arriving in Hollywood, California. His family decided to keep his love of film alive by founding the Derek Freese Foundation in 1997.

March

Film festivals are one of the most popular expressions of Jewish culture today, providing unparalleled opportunities for moviegoers to plumb every aspect of the Jewish psyche and experience. Take your own heritage journey in March and stand with those who honor the diversity and contributions of Hebrew heritage. *The New Jersey Jewish Film Festival* has become one of the premier Jewish cultural events in the region. The festival brings the best of Israeli, American, and international films of Jewish interest to enthusiastic audiences throughout New Jersey's Essex and Morris Counties and beyond. The event also offers insightful speakers and commentators, including scholars, actors and directors.

April

The perfect prescription for spring fever is a trip to *The Billtown Film Festival*. Held each April at the 2100-seat Community Arts Center in the downtown business district of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, the multi day event stimulates economic prosperity through arts alliances with community businesses and economic development partners. Thought provoking and intelligent workshops, panels, and facilitated dialogues help to expand visitors' aesthetic horizons while promoting cultural harmony among participants from throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

May

Independent film festivals are much like tulips! A year of labor, nourishing, and development underground yields a brilliant display of creativity. Here are two great events that blossom each May for your edutainment.

The week long *Silk Screen Asian American Film Festival* is held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in honor of Asian American Heritage Month. The festival showcases filmmakers both Asian Americans and those with origins in India, Japan, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and other Asian countries. The feature length films all present universal themes that transcend political and cultural boundaries. Silk Screen Asian American Film Festival events are held at multiple Pittsburgh area locations, thus visitors and participants also receive a "mini tour" of some of Pittsburgh's best cultural neighborhoods.

Maryland Film Festival is an annual four-day event that takes place the first weekend of each May, in Baltimore. The festival presents local emerging, nationally significant, and internationally acclaimed artists including approximately 50 feature films and 75 shorts of all varieties -- narrative, documentary, animation, experimental, and new hybrid productions.

June

Travel a crooked road across June's calendar of activities throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

Start in Philadelphia at the *Philadelphia International Film Festival and Market (PhilaFilm)* the regions longest-running, international independent film and video competition. *PhilaFilm* showcases the productions of worldwide multicultural artists across an impressive array of venues. Don't plan to sleep, though! The night time is the right time for making both artistic and business connections. You won't want to miss the evening red carpet events or the daytime trade and exhibitions hall which is a must for serious practitioners.

Make time to experience the *Philadelphia Independent Film Festival* that overlaps *PhilaFilm*. The intimate event is committed to showcasing foreign, domestic, and locally produced work by film makers while creating unique cinematic experiences that dissolve conventional boundaries between film makers and audiences.

Less than an hour away, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania's eclectic south side becomes an artist colony during the *Southside Film Festival (SSFF)*. The festival is a celebration of the artists' struggles and triumphs in bringing their creations

to the local and independent screen. Industry professionals, artists and patrons enjoy a relaxed and inviting festive atmosphere. (You just might meet the film's star on a stool at the town's favorite diner after the event!) However, the Southside Film Festival is more than just a great week of films, friends, food and spirit. It is also the area clearinghouse for answers, information, resources, opportunities, feedback and assistance to encourage the creative process.

Creative artists and their patrons enjoy convening at the *Hoboken International Film Festival ("HIFF")* which presents a star-filled event every June. The festival is dedicated to showcasing and promoting fine non-studio cutting edge films, TV pilots, and screenplays from local, regional, national, and international filmmakers. Several Academy Award and Emmy winners and nominees, and numerous other fan-favorite celebrities are invited to present screenings, attend panels, workshops, and award ceremonies and a variety of other special events.

Come full circle and return to the Hudson's "other shore" at Newark's annual *New Jersey International Film Festival*, held each June. The festival presents over 100 annual film screenings and events showcasing the best in independent video, feature length film premieres of award winning Indie works, professional development workshops, and guest appearances by recognized film and video makers. The event provides a wide variety of geographic opportunities for film audiences through an array of distinctive festival components. These include: the NJ International Film Festival, and the United States Super 8 Film and Digital Video Festival.

Lenwood O. Sloan is a nationally acclaimed American creative director, arts administrator and strategic programming consultant.

Most recently, Mr. Sloan served as Pennsylvania's Film Commissioner, Director of the Film Tax Credit Program and Director of Cultural and Heritage Tourism for the Pennsylvania Commonwealth.

During his forty year career, Mr. Sloan has also served as Director of the National Endowment for the Arts Presenting and Commissioning Program, Deputy Director of the California Arts Council, Co-Chair of the New York State Council on the Arts Presenting and Commissioning Panel, Board Member of the Southern Arts Federation, and Director of the New Orleans Arts Tourism Partnership.