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2>[From Director's Chair, Film Fest's A Success](#)

## **The Capital Times :: LIFESTYLE :: B1**

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**Rob Thomas The Capital Times**

The equipment is still being packed and the tickets still being counted, but Wisconsin Film Festival director Meg Hamel is confident that festival attendance hit record levels this past weekend.

Hamel, in her first full year as permanent festival director, seemed ecstatic with how things went at the ninth annual festival, which brought 182 foreign, classic and independent films to 10 downtown and campus venues. Last year, a record 26,000 advance tickets were sold.

The biggest screening was the Thursday night sold-out showing of the mockumentary "Chalk," which drew about 1,200 people to the Wisconsin Union Theater. Other films that drew big houses were the Hal Hartley comedy "Fay Grim," which brought about 950 people to the Orpheum, and "Ten Canoes," a wry movie about Australian aborigines, which drew 900.

Hamel said that as audiences have come back to the festival year after year, they've gotten accustomed to its mechanics, from picking up rush tickets at the door to voting in the Audience Awards. That familiarity not only helps make the festival run smoothly for Hamel and her phalanx of 200 volunteers, but for the audiences themselves, Hamel says.

"People know where to stand in the rush line, they know how long it takes to get from one theater to the other, they know what that ballot is," Hamel said. "When that happens, you're no longer focused on the logistics. You're just more freed up to experience the festival in a different kind of way."

One of the big strides forward this year was a strong amount of walk-up business at shows. In past years, Hamel has endeavored to overcome a misconception that just because many films sell out advance tickets, that means there's no point in trying to buy a ticket on the day of the show.

This year, walk-up business was strong; nearly all of the 300 walk-up tickets printed for the horror comedy "Severance" sold at the door, and other films throughout the festival experienced strong sales at the gate.

Hamel served as interim festival director in 2006 and was a high-level volunteer for several years before that, and she said she's able to use that experience to book films that she knows will fit well with the festival's character. It might be a resonant theme - the Wisconsin polka documentary "It's Happiness" was the very definition of a "no-brainer" - or it might be a film that relates to a past festival favorite.

Director Justin Lin brought his first Continued from Page B1 feature "Better Luck Tomorrow" to the festival in 2003, along with one of its

biggest fans, Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert. This year, Hamel had booked Lin's new mockumentary "Finishing the Game," which Lin was scheduled to introduce until travel snafus forced him to cancel his trip to Madison.

"People have a vocabulary of movies that they've built up at the festival," she said. "Now I can expand on that vocabulary."

This year's festival featured four new venues - the Capitol Theater, the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art and the Union Theater - making for 10 venues that were all within a few minutes' walking distance of each other. Hamel said she heard a lot of comments from patrons who enjoyed being able to come downtown for the entire day and mix shopping and dining with movie-going.

She said it spoke well of the city that it had so many eclectic venues to show films downtown. In future years, additional venues within walking distance - including the Chazen Museum of Art, the Club Majestic and a revitalized Union South - could help the festival grow without losing that downtown character.

"I really do feel kind of overwhelmed with pride for my city," Hamel said.

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