

ARTSETC.

## Volunteers, director fuel Film Fest

by Marilyn Johnson

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One hundred and eighty-three films were shown on 10 screens in four days throughout downtown Madison this weekend for the ninth Wisconsin Film Festival. The showings ranged from a 64-minute collection of 13 shorts done by Wisconsin students to full-length films, which included everything from a documentary about air guitar competitions to surrealist, symbolism-laden spaghetti Westerns.

University of Wisconsin alumna Meg Hamel is the director and sole film festival employee hired by the UW Arts Institute. The festival relies heavily on the generosity of others through university grants for funding, sponsorships from local businesses and hundreds of volunteers who devote their time during the festival to take tickets and introduce films.

Hamel likened the festival to a buffet restaurant: “[T]he point of the buffet is to try a little bit of everything,” she said. “You have an opportunity to go where the wind takes you.”

This is also why she chooses to not focus on awards or galas.

“As a festival, my objective is in some ways to counterbalance what we get in the commercial media, which is the idea that films are in competition with each other ... but that’s not why people love the movies,” she said. “It’s true that we’ll acknowledge films, but here in Madison, the path to helping cultivate a lifelong interest in cinema is to recognize that there is merit in any film.”

Steep and Brew audience awards will be given to one documentary and one narrative film, but Hamel said this is “simply a fun way to see what people like.” The festival also features 11 awards for films in the “Wisconsin’s Own” and “Wisconsin Student Shorts” programs, which provide a way for local directors to gain recognition in their field. As what may be their only opportunity for awards, the festival is important for those hoping to move on to larger markets.

Keeping the festival’s buffet options varied is a yearlong process. Except for the “Wisconsin’s Own” and “Wisconsin Student Shorts,” which are selected and voted on by two panels of three volunteers each, Hamel is responsible for selecting all of the films. Throughout the year, she immerses herself in the world of cinema, reading trade papers and industry magazines to keep up on news items like who did well at the Palm Springs International Film Festival.

According to Hamel, college film festivals are often viewed as too stuffy or unimaginative, but the Wisconsin Film Festival has a reputation for being “fresh and accomplished.” Although the event is heavily dependent on the university for money, it is more than just a campus event. Of the 10 theaters used in the festival, seven were located off-campus at venues such as the Orpheum Theater and the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

The day after the festival, in addition to filling out invoice paperwork, Hamel and her team of volunteers are busy mailing out hundreds of heavy film reels, which involves a lot of lifting and blisters.

“A lot of the films in Madison came directly from other film festivals and are getting sent out to other festivals,” she said. “These are time-sensitive deliveries — there could be a movie playing tomorrow night in Mexico City.”

Although Hamel officially runs the show now, the Wisconsin Film Festival was started in 1999 by Madison students Wendi Weger, who was the director of the Wisconsin Union Directorate Film Committee’s Starlight Cinema series, and Jim Kreul, who served as the coordinator of Cinemathèque, UW’s venue for little-seen contemporary and archival films from around the world. After the success of the festival’s first year, the UW Arts Institute offered support and financial assistance, hiring Mary Carbine to direct the event. When she stepped down in fall 2005, Hamel, who had worked as the volunteer coordinator, was hired as the interim director with only four short months to organize the 2006 film festival.

Fortunately for her (and for film festival attendees), Hamel was up for the challenge. After being born, raised and educated in Madison, the former history major developed a very cultured and global taste in film in the ’90s, when

she went to film festivals with friends she was visiting in New York and San Francisco. Since then, she has attended festivals around the world.

Once Hamel established more connections and relationships with her volunteer base, the planning process for the 2007 festival went more smoothly than the 2006 event.

“As a staff of one, you depend on the expertise of so many people who love the event and are doing this because they want to,” said Hamel.

Hamel has even more extensive plans to share her love of film with the Madison community. In the future, she hopes to collaborate with those who use film as a teaching tool, helping them upgrade to showing students 35 mm films instead of DVDs and on big screens instead of old classroom televisions. To help develop a local film community, she also hopes to start a website and e-mail list to organize and inform Madison residents about film-related events in the community. Madison theatres and organizations, from the film committee to Hillel to the Orpheum, could use the website to reach their audiences.

Hamel is also very excited about plans to build a 400- to 450-seat theater in the new Union South, as well as a possible new theater in the Chazen and a remodeling of the Play Circle Theatre. These plans could mean that there will eventually be five theaters on campus for use in the Wisconsin Film Festival and other film-related events.

Hamel is already thinking about which films she is going to bring next year.

“It never stops ... like studying,” she said.

But for now, she can enjoy at least a short break: “(I’m going to) take a nap ... and do my taxes.”