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The Boston Globe
Summer festivals offer distinguished rosters

By Leslie Brokaw, Globe Correspondent | June 11, 2006

With the Newport International Film Festival this weekend, the season of sandy feet in dark theaters and lingering evenings spent debating the movies is officially underway.

There are two big festivals this week in Provincetown and Nantucket, and programs later in the summer in Plymouth, Woods Hole, Rhode Island (Providence and Newport, again), and -- for the first time -- Martha's Vineyard. All are great excuses to trade the sweat of the city for the salt air of the ocean and unearth small treasures among the hundreds of offerings that may (or, more likely, may never) show up in local theaters later.

The Provincetown International Film Festival, which runs from Wednesday through next Sunday, had a major shift in leadership just 3 1/2 months ago, when founding artistic director Connie White stepped down and former director of operations Andrew Peterson was named director of programming. Peterson says the change went smoothly and that this year's festival is his.

"I certainly had the opportunity to assemble a transitional lineup," he says, "but am happy to say that I'm solely responsible for all film selections and honorees."

Those honorees include actress Lili Taylor, who will receive the Excellence in Acting Award on Friday. Four of her films will be shown during the festival, including the new "Factotum," an adaptation of the Charles Bukowski novel that stars Matt Dillon.

Peterson also chose filmmaker Gregg Araki to receive the festival's Filmmaker on the Edge award, which last year went to director Mary Harron (who, coincidentally, directed Taylor in "The Notorious Bettie Page" and "I Shot Andy Warhol"). Araki's films "Mysterious Skin," "Nowhere," and "The Living End" will screen during the week.

The Globe's Wesley Morris described "Mysterious Skin" as traversing "a pulpy, punky landscape of ache and rage" and put the film on his list of top 25 of 2005. In his review, Morris wrote that "the director used to be among a group of troublemaking gay directors (including Todd Haynes) who used controversy to combat artistic complacency." With this film, Morris continued, "the usual Araki elements are here (hustlers, rebels, uproar, the absurd), but now he appears to be working with focus and compassion."

The opening-night film is "The Life of Reilly," an adaptation of actor Charles Nelson Reilly's one-man standup show. "The Oh in Ohio," which stars Parker Posey as a woman who's married but has never had an orgasm, closes the festival. Glenn Holsten's feature-length documentary "Saint of 9/11," about Father Mychal Judge, the New York Fire Department chaplain who died at the World Trade Center, is another highlight. The film screens Thursday and Saturday.

Also at the Provincetown fest, gay marriage in Massachusetts is the subject of Mike Roth and John Henning's documentary, "Saving Marriage," which screens on Thursday and Saturday. Roth is a cameraman and Henning is a lawyer, and they were looking for the right subject for their first documentary together. In 2004, while Roth was in Tanzania filming for the TV show "The Amazing Race," talk of the Massachusetts constitutional convention on the issue began heating up.

"It was news even there in Africa," says Roth by phone from California, where he was still editing the film a week ago. "We e-mailed each other that day, decided to make this movie, and arrived in Boston on the eve of the convention."

Just around the curve of the Cape and across the Nantucket Sound, the Nantucket Film Festival also runs from Wednesday through next Sunday. This year its three main events -- the opening, closing, and "centerpiece" films -- are all documentaries: Nick Doob and Chris Hegedus's "Al Franken: God Spoke"; Ward Serrill's look at a girls' high school basketball team, "The Heart of the Game"; and Patricia Foulkrod's "The Ground Truth: After the Killing Ends," about the training of US Marines and their life after war.

The Nantucket fest has a long history in highlighting the people who write films, and that's still a focus this year. A screenwriter award will be given to the writing team of Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor (who collaborated on "Sideways," "About Schmidt," and others). "Sideways" actors Paul Giamatti, Thomas Haden Church, and Virginia Madsen will all be on hand. The festival will also feature a panel called "A Film Is Written Three Times" talking about the ways a film is built by the screenwriter first, director second, and editing team third.

In July, the second annual Plymouth Independent Film Festival will take place over four days, from July 20 to 23. The opening party will be held at the Plimoth Plantation with music by Boston jazz artists Stan Strickland and Rakalam Bob Moses.

Like the Nantucket fest, Plymouth is showcasing nonfiction films and some of the top masters of the craft this year. Director Richard Leacock will visit from Paris with partner Valérie Lelond to lead master classes and workshops and receive the festival's Honorary Award. Also scheduled to attend are famed documentarians Albert Maysles, D.A. Pennebaker, and Robert Drew.

If you miss Leacock there, you'll have a chance to catch him at the Woods Hole Film Festival, which runs from July 29 to Aug. 5 and will also honor the filmmaker.

The festival will screen nearly 100 films, in genres including narrative feature, documentary, experimental, animation, and short films. Included is "Dirt Nap," a buddy movie by D.B. Sweeney and Massachusetts native Brian Currie, and "Kettle of Fish," a romance starring Matthew Modine, Christy Cashman, and Gina Gershon.

"Programming for a summer festival is different," says Judy Laster, the festival's director. "We really try to match the films with who our audience is -- and being in Woods Hole, that means science-oriented people, academic-oriented people, and tourists. It's an interesting juxtaposition."

Back up the coast, the Rhode Island International Film Festival, which screens in part in Newport, is celebrating its 10th anniversary and expects to have 225 films this year. About 75 are already

selected from approximately 1,800 submissions, according to the festival's executive director, George Marshall.

Of special note is the festival's short film category: the Rhode Island fest is one of only about 60 worldwide that count as Academy Award qualifiers. That means that if a short film wins at Rhode Island, it's eligible for Oscar consideration.

“The Academy designation is only available to a festival which has ‘survived’ five years and has a track record within the given category,” says Marshall. “We’ve had 11 films come out of RIIF in nine years, with four wins -- and these are films that actually premiered with us.”

Finally, looking out to Sept. 14–17 -- we can still call that summer, can't we? -- the first Martha's Vineyard International Film Festival is being put together by the longstanding Martha's Vineyard Film Society. The full festival program will be announced in early July.

The society is hosting a short film contest for island filmmakers on the theme “Think Globally, Shoot Locally.” Martha's Vineyard Community Television will provide equipment and training to newbies, and MVOL.com will post the films online, with the best films, as chosen by online viewers, awarded prizes.

With so many festivals to choose from, it's worth asking if there might be too much of a good thing going on.

“At some point,” concedes Woods Hole festival director Laster, “people are going to say, ‘What's a film festival, really?’” But festivals, she notes, are an important touchstone for a community: They show the vibrancy and, sometimes, renaissance of an area.

“I've heard that a \$5 million feature film will be shooting in Woods Hole and the Vineyard,” she says, although she says she doesn't know the details. “I think there's a really a direct relation between having a film community in a place and people wanting to film here.”

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The season's slate

The summer cinema season kicked off Tuesday with the Newport International Film Festival and continues through the Martha's Vineyard celebration in September. Schedules and tickets are generally available online or by calling the festivals.

Newport International Film Festival, ends today: 401-851-6963, www.newportfilmfestival.com .

Provincetown International Film Festival, June 14-18: 508-487-3456, www.ptownfilmfest.org .

Nantucket Film Festival, June 14-18: 212-708-1278, www.nantucketfilmfestival.org .

Plymouth Independent Film Festival, July 20-23: 508-801-2530, www.plyfilmfest.org .

Woods Hole Film Festival, July 29-Aug. 5: 508-495-3456, www.woodsholefilmfestival.com .

Rhode Island International Film Festival, Aug. 8-13: 401-861-4445, www.rifilmfest.org .

Martha's Vineyard International Film Festival, Sept. 14-17: 508-696-9369, www.mvfilmsociety.com .

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