

In lean times, Wisconsin Film Fest still goes for broke

The bigger the better

by Dean Robbins

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It's a lean year for local arts organizations, with Madison Ballet canceling performances, the Overture Center laying off staff and the Madison Repertory Theatre shutting down altogether. By contrast, the 11th annual Wisconsin Film Festival (wifilmfest.org) will be as big as ever. It features close to 200 films at 10 venues over four days, April 2-5. There will be even more talks and panels than in previous years.

"The festival means so much to so many people in Madison," says director Meg Hamel. "Not for a second have we considered changing what it is."

How can the Wisconsin Film Festival keep bringing us more, more, more when other arts groups must make do with less and less? It's not as if the festival has been spared in the financial meltdown. Hamel lost two major corporate sponsors this year, Sony and Case IH.

Luckily, the festival is mounted by the University of Wisconsin, so it doesn't have to worry about overhead. And Hamel has many ways to adjust her budget without affecting programming. If need be, she avoids booking films that require expensive shipping and screening fees.

The one budget-saving measure Hamel won't consider, at least for now, is raising ticket prices. They're still \$4 for students and \$7 for everybody else, and even less when you order in bulk. This hasn't changed in the last seven years.

"I think a lot of people expected me to raise prices," Hamel says, "but I wanted to make the commitment to our audience that, whatever else is changing in their world, the film fest was going to be reliable."

Hamel foresees a wild scene at the Orpheum Theatre for April 3's midnight screening of *JCVD*, in which action star Jean-Claude Van Damme, playing himself, is accused of robbing a bank. She saw the film at last fall's Toronto International Film Festival and envisioned a huge reaction from a late-night Madison crowd.

Hamel also talks up *Special People*, part of the festival series "Film*Able: Disabilities on Screen" (April 5, Orpheum Theatre, 1:30 p.m.). It's about a pretentious director creating a movie with three disabled teens.

Austria's *Revanche* and Japan's *Tokyo Sonata* have both generated buzz at international festivals. In *Tokyo Sonata* (April 2, 5 p.m.; and April 3, 7 p.m., Chazen Museum), a businessman loses his job and conceals the truth from his family. In *Revanche* (April 4, 9:45 p.m.; and April 5, 11:15 a.m., Orpheum Stage Door), a prostitute gets mixed up with a bank robber.

The fest's documentaries include ambitious works like *Food, Inc.* (April 3, Orpheum Theatre, 9:45 p.m.), which blows the lid off America's food industry. There are also small gems like the quirky character portrait *Bunnyland* (April 4, 3:30 p.m.; and April 5, 1:15 p.m., Memorial Union Play Circle Theatre). Another oddball choice is *The Rock-afire Explosion* (April 2, 11:15 p.m.; and April 5, 5:30 p.m., Bartell Theatre), about cultists who repurpose the animatronic animal bands from Showbiz Pizza restaurants.

This year's "Wisconsin's Own" series is notable for the number of feature-length works created by state filmmakers. *Being Bucky* (April 4, Monona Terrace, 6:15 p.m.) profiles students who don the UW mascot outfit. *Tracks* (April 5, Monona Terrace, 11:15 a.m.) follows the travails of two Milwaukee high school girls.

Yes, the Wisconsin Film Festival is big. And when Hamel looks to the future, all she can think of is: bigger. "Someday," she says, "I hope it will be more than four days."