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Film lovers of a feather flock together

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Wisconsin Film Festival director Meg Hamel suggested that moviegoers take in a Wisconsin-made film and a shorts program during the festival. - File photo

So, what's the deal with the chickens?

Our feathered friends are everywhere in the promotional materials for this year's Wisconsin Film Festival -- on the posters, on the T-shirts, in the TV ads. What's the underlying rationale for featuring chickens so prominently in the marketing campaign for a film festival?

"I don't know," said film festival director Meg Hamel with a mock shrug. "I just like chickens."

It's a little more involved than that. Hamel came across a calendar of poultry portraiture by photographer Stephen Green-Armytage -- "I just loved the way these images looked, these glamour shots of chickens" -- that she thought they would be cool to use with the film festival.

But it's not much more involved than that, which is one of the reasons that the Wisconsin Film Festival has retained its funky grassroots charm over the years. There's no huge budget and no big board of directors running the show -- just Hamel, her new operations director Allen Ebert, and a large cadre of unpaid volunteers somehow putting together an affordable four-day 199-film festival each year.

Which means that if they think chickens are cool, they're in.

It also means, Hamel said, that the festival is well-situated to ride whatever economic highs and lows are affecting the rest of the country. Festival organizers and volunteers have always been scrambling to do more with less, always trying to find new partners (its biggest sponsor, Sony, dropped out last fall), always pulling the festival up by its bootstraps even when the economy was great.

"From the beginning, this event as an entity has been run by resourceful, creative people -- creative in the sense of making soup out of a stone," she said. "It's nothing unusual. It defies the laws of physics that we should have an event this big, given what we grow it from."

Given the tough economic times that have hit arts organizations across Madison and the country, it would have been understandable for the festival to hike ticket prices, which have been at the same level (\$7 per film for the general public, \$4 for students, with substantial discounts for multiple orders) since 2002. But they stayed the same.

"It was really tempting to raise them," Hamel said. "I just said, 'If I do come to regret this, it's for reasons that I don't know about right now, but we'll keep it the same, and trust that that is what our audience needs us to do.' "

As of last week, ticket sales were running slightly ahead of where they were last year -- about 26,000 sold as of last Thursday.

The rough economy has had a serious impact on the independent film business, with indie distributors like New Yorker Films closing its doors, and bigger distributors reluctant to spend money on anything that isn't a sure thing. But Hamel said that when she goes hunting for movies for the festival, there's no shortage of quality films. She's particularly high on the selection of new American films in the festival, including Ronald Bronstein's "Frownland" and Marc Webb's "500 Days of Summer."

"There is so much good material out there," she said. "I read the stories about how difficult it is in the industry, but I'm not seeing that firsthand. It's really exciting to have so many incredibly strong films playing together."

For those still trying to choose what they will and won't see at the festival, Hamel said she doesn't have much advice ("I'm the wrong person to ask, because I've never had to make that choice"). But she suggested that anybody who is going to at least a few movies should make time to see both a short-film program and a Wisconsin-made film to get the full flavor of the festival.

As for the future, Hamel said she'd like to see the festival grow, running longer but in fewer theaters so moviegoers don't have to choose between so many different shows on a given night.

She'd also like to sponsor or support other film-related events around town, batting around ideas like a food-related film festival or a children's festival devoted mostly to foreign and classic films.

"There is great potential here," she said. "I'm not slowing down anytime soon."