



# Reel World Experience

A movie lover's paradise, the Syracuse International Film Festival illuminates the works of unknown and influential filmmakers and transforms Central New York into a showcase for world cultures

BY DAVID MARC





## For five days in April, the fourth annual Syracuse International Film Festival (SIFF)

lit up the city with 84 screenings of 140 features, documentaries, shorts, and animations from 30 countries. Films from Argentina and India had world premieres, and films from Canada, China, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, and Romania made their U.S. debuts. Passionate, bleary-eyed marathon movie-going—the number-one concern of most festival-goers—was punctuated by a hard-to-resist schedule of near-screen experiences: close encounters with film artists, panel discussions on high-profile issues, live performances of movie scores, a multi-gallery retrospective of poster art by Silvano Campeggi (*maestro* in attendance), and other events designed to quicken the pulses of *cinéastes*, movie fans, recovering televi-





sion addicts, festival vagabonds, and all who are drawn to the flickering light of dreams made public. "The cinema is a light onto the world and into our minds," says College of Visual and Performing Arts film professor Owen Shapiro, the festival's founder and artistic director. "It is both a window and a mirror, allowing us to confront the 'other' and ourselves."

Since SIFF's launch in 2004, attendance has more than doubled to about 10,000 this year, despite a spring Nor'easter that knocked out travel from Maine to Georgia just days before the opening. Weather or not, the festival has become an occasion for world film and television personalities to converge on Syracuse from Los Angeles, New York City, Taipei, Paris, Mumbai, and other industry capitals. Some of the many alumni who have participated in the festival include Korean director Sang In Lee '96 (*Hula Garu*), television comedy writer Rob Edwards '85 (*In Living Color*), animated feature maker Henry Selik '74 (*Monkeybone*), and talent agent Glenn Rigberg '88. Peter Weller G'05, who was already an accomplished actor and director when he earned a master's degree in art history from Syracuse, is among the festival's enthusiastic supporters. "I've seen great Russian, Italian, and Israeli films in Syracuse," says Weller, a veteran of more than 60 features, including *Naked Lunch* (1991) and two *Robocop* films. "With a major marketing strategy, this festival could bust through."

The festival's international dimension radiated throughout the city this year. Argentinean director Eliseo Subiela screened a work-in-progress, *No mires para abajo* ("Don't Look Down"), at Westcott Cinema. After the screening, Subiela took questions from the audience, which included a share of Spanish-speakers from universities and communities across Central New York. Marek Jicha, a cinematographer with Prague's Lampafilm studio who heads the cinematography department at the Czech State Film Academy of Performing Arts, credits SIFF connections for creating an opportunity for Syracuse students to study in a summer program offered by the academy's School of Film and Television. "At an international film festival, the place becomes a living center of world culture," Jicha says. "The knowledge exchanged in discussions and meetings makes the festivals more than just places to watch films. Collaborations occur, leading to new meetings, affecting other festivals, and influencing local and world culture. In Prague, the good name of the Syracuse festival bears messages about art and cultural events that find their way into magazines and specialized literature."

SIFF is produced each year by Point of Contact (POC), a nonprofit arts organization headquartered on campus that promotes the verbal and visual arts through publishing, gallery exhibitions, and the festival. Shapiro, POC's vice president, says the idea for the annual event came to him from his wife, Christine Fawcett Shapiro, executive manager of POC and SIFF. In 2001, the two were making the rounds of the national film festival circuit to promote his film *Prisoners of Freedom*, a dramatic documentary about refugees from Nazi Germany interred in Oswego, New York, during the Second World War. "In city after city, Christine and I couldn't help but notice how film festivals were helping the communities that hosted them," says Shapiro, who directed and wrote *Prisoners of Freedom*. "So she says to me, 'Why don't we do one in Syracuse?'" His experiences in organizing festivals in New York City, Tel Aviv, and elsewhere tempted Shapiro to answer, "Because it's much too much work!" But with strategic coaxing, he went hunting for enthusiasm and found it.

## Web Sites

### Syracuse International Film Festival

[www.syrfilmfest.com](http://www.syrfilmfest.com)

### Four Directions Productions

[www.4dpgroup.com](http://www.4dpgroup.com)

### Landmark Theatre

[www.landmarktheatre.org](http://www.landmarktheatre.org)

### Bristol IMAX Omnitheater

[www.most.org](http://www.most.org)

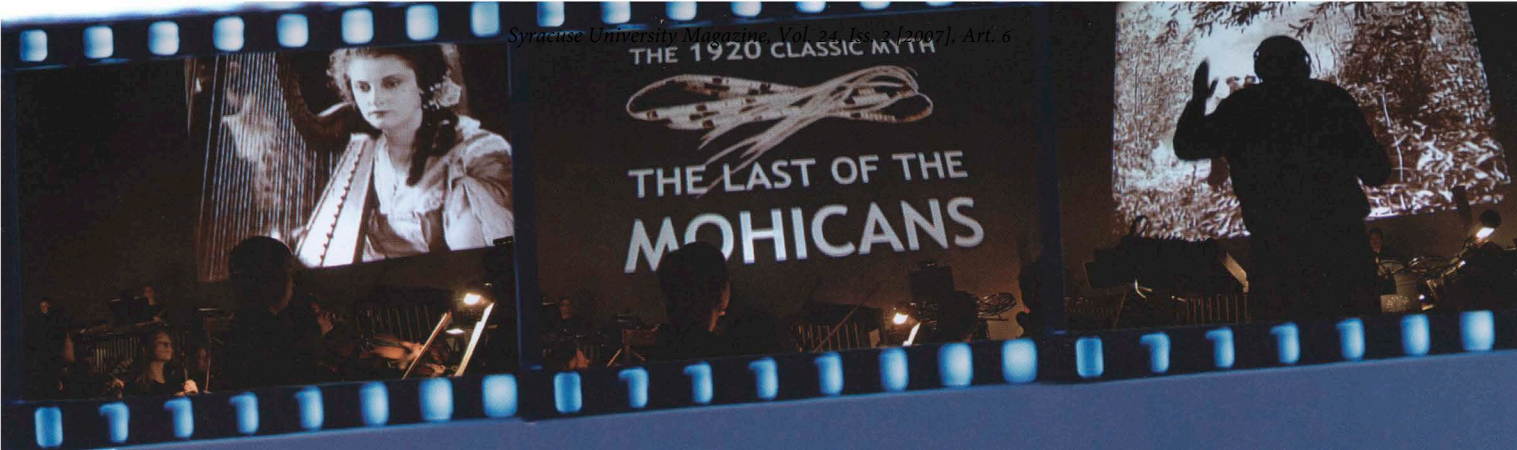
### Palace Theatre

[www.palacetheatresyracuse.com](http://www.palacetheatresyracuse.com)

### Point of Contact

[www.pointcontact.org/00\\_main\\_home.html](http://www.pointcontact.org/00_main_home.html)





THE 1920 CLASSIC MYTH  
THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

## Sounds of Silents

THE SYRACUSE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL IS helping shape the future of film by showcasing emerging artists, underexposed cinemas, and new techniques for audiovisual expression. SIFF is also helping to recover film's past by spotlighting Central New York's rich history as a point of origin for the technology, business, and art of the movies. Film—the kind that can be used to make motion pictures—was invented in Rochester by George Eastman in 1889. In a Syracuse machine shop several years later, Herman Casler and Henry Marvin invented the mutoscope, a mechanical flip book, the most successful of the early penny-arcade peephole exhibition devices. Moving their business to nearby Canastota, they were founding partners in the company that eventually became Biograph, the first great movie production house. Another first—public projection of a moving image on a screen—took place in downtown Syracuse at the Everson Building on March 26, 1896. Ithaca was an early production center, where pioneer cinematographers made use of the city's gorges and waterfalls to produce movie serial “cliff hangers.” During the early '20s in Auburn, Theodore Case invented a synchronous sound system that was used by Movietone, the newsreel unit of 20th Century Fox. “One of our intentions was to put Syracuse and Central New York back on the map of the film world by creating new film history here,” says Syracuse International Film Festival founder Owen Shapiro.

At SIFF 2007, that aim was served by several events that gave audiences a chance to experience the aural component of “silent” cinema. “Early movies weren't silent at all,” Shapiro says. “They were multimedia shows that included live performances by musicians and use of many types of sound effects.” On opening night, Chancellor Nancy Cantor welcomed an audience that had traveled from dozens of countries around the world to the Landmark Theatre in downtown Syracuse for a screening of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920). The adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's 1826 novel, set in the Lake George area during the French and Indian War, was accompanied by a new musical score composed by Brent Michael Davids, whose Mohican ancestors were removed from their lands in

Massachusetts to New York State and then to Wisconsin, where the composer was born. Paul Hostetter conducted musicians from the Society of New Music and the Syracuse Symphony, with Davids joining the orchestra on Native American percussion instruments and a handmade crystal quartz flute. Davids also wrote new intertitles for the film, which at times undermined some of the racial and cultural assumptions embedded in the story. Jamesville, New York, native Ben Burt Jr., who won Oscars for his sound effects work in *E.T.* (1982) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), fine-tuned the acoustics of the old movie palace for maximum effect and was the festival's keynote speaker at the event. “I learned to love the movies right here in this very theater,” Burt said.

The feature was preceded by the world premiere of *Raccoon & Crawfish*, an eight-minute animated short. Produced by Four Directions Productions, an enterprise of the Oneida Nation, the film uses jaw-dropping state-of-the-art computer graphics to depict an ancient legend from the Oneida oral tradition concerning the consequences of telling a lie in a battle for survival.

Another extraordinary event was staged at the Palace Theatre in Eastwood. Buster Keaton's 1924 masterpiece, *Sherlock Jr.*, was screened twice, each time accompanied by a live performance of an original jazz score, first by the James Emery Trio; then by Combo Nuvo. When the lights came up again, the musicians engaged the audience in a dialogue that moved, jazzlike, from the movies and music to the purposes of human expression.

Burt, who was visibly moved on opening night by the opportunity the festival created for him to connect his Syracuse childhood and Hollywood career, believes SIFF serves many good purposes beyond sentiment. “A film festival has three great virtues,” he says. “For the filmmaker, it is a chance to communicate passion to an audience; for the student, it's a special opportunity to learn; and for the audience, there is the exhilaration of discovering fresh ideas outside the mainstream humdrum. I always feel refreshed by the new ideas and surprises I encounter at such a gathering.”





## City of Cinema

FESTIVAL-GOERS AT SIFF 2007 CRISSCROSSED THE CITY TO WORSHIP THE muse of cinema at a broadly ecumenical spectrum of temples. Events were held downtown at the palatial Landmark Theatre, a restored remnant of studio system excess that opened in 1928 as the Loew's State; the Redhouse Arts Center, a multimedia outpost on the western frontier of the Downtown Arts District; and the Museum of Science and Technology's neck-stretching Bristol IMAX Omnitheater in Armory Square, where the angle of vision begins at 45 degrees. Two special venues were set up in the Hotel Syracuse, a mixed-use post-urban hotel-and-condominium redevelopment project-in-progress: the Persian Terrace, a once and soon-to-be nightclub sporting 35mm projection capability; and the Bistro Cinema, a former restaurant with tables still standing to prove it. The festival took to the downtown streets with two evening programs of up-against-the-wall *ciné al fresco*, using a ground-level parking lot as a drive-in/walk-in theater, facing a 1,200-square-foot screen hanging from a parking structure across the street. Clear Channel Radio provided sound to cars and personal listening devices via a special low-wattage frequency, and Kitty Hoynes Irish Pub made curbside deliveries of food ordered by cell phone.

Downtown did not have a corner on the festivities. Events drew crowds to the elegantly rehabilitated, vastly enhanced Palace Theatre, a fixture since 1927 on James Street, the main stem of the city's Eastwood district; to Gifford Auditorium in Huntington Beard Crouse Hall on the Quad; and to Westcott Cinema, an extracurricular factor in the socio-cinematic educations of generations of Syracuse students since opening in 1926 as the Harvard Theater. Le Moyne College, a SIFF co-sponsor, hosted a festival forum, *Images of Genocide in World Cinema and Media*. Among the eight panelists were feature filmmakers Ben Diogave Beye from Senegal, whose *Un Amour d'Enfant* ("A Childhood Love," 2004), a paean to puppy love set in contemporary Dakar, won a UNICEF award for the promotion of children's rights; and Milan Cieslar from the Czech Republic, whose many acclaimed films include *Pramen zivota* ("Spring of Life," 2000), a fact-based drama set in a Nazi school where women are prepared to breed a "master race" with SS officers.

Carole Morley, a Londoner who has been the British pre-selector for SIFF since it began, admires the way the festival has avoided the elitist isolation of many film events. "The festival is a vibrant and exciting cultural experience that seems to involve the entire city," she says. "There is good reason for everyone who works and lives in Syracuse to be proud. It's their festival." Jim Morris '77, G'78, production chief at Pixar Animation Studios, which has produced such hits as the *Toy Story* films and *The Incredibles*, agrees. "The Syracuse film festival exemplifies the vibrant arts culture that emerges when the Syracuse community and Syracuse University collaborate," he says. "It is extremely impressive, with a depth and a breadth of films to rival many of the world's great film festivals. Everyone who has helped make it happen should be extremely proud. It's a massive accomplishment and a gift to all of us who love cinema."

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Among the first to get excited about the idea was Rob Pietrafesa '47, a Syracuse resident and longtime patron of all things Orange. "Rob was the first private donor to back the project," Shapiro says. "Next, I spoke with Dennis Brogan of the Syracuse mayor's office about getting the city involved, and he got Mayor Matt Driscoll on board. I then met with New York State Senator John DeFrancisco ['68], and he responded by bringing back financial support from Albany." Among others receiving high marks from Shapiro for an early understanding of the festival's cultural and economic possibilities were then-Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw and Assemblyman William Magnarelli, who was instrumental in creating an outreach program that brings "taste of the festival" screenings to Syracuse public schools. "There's nothing like showing great movies to kids," Shapiro says.

More than money (as well as more money) is needed to run the festival, and hundreds of Central New Yorkers, SU alumni, and SIFF affiliates in 28 countries give time, energy, and talent to the thousands of tasks, big and small, necessary to make the festival happen. "There's quite a range of opportunities for participation," says Les Friedman G'69, G'75, a professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. "People can work on the various kinds of steering and screening committees, and we need people just as much to take tickets, run hospitality events, and take guests from all over the world around Syracuse and the area to show them what we have."

While most cultural events are never short of work for volunteers, SIFF offers area residents something unique: an opportunity to become involved in shaping the character of the annual festival. "As far as I know, we're the only film festival in the world that invites people from the community to attend pre-screenings with the judges, and to voice their opinions on what should be accepted," Shapiro says. "Real people have real input on these decisions." In the lead-up to this year's event, a dozen such pre-screenings—all free to the public—were held across Central New York. Sites included the town movie theater in Hamilton, New York, across the street from Colgate University; college screening rooms at Le Moyne, Cazenovia, and Hobart and William Smith; the Lucky Moon Café, a Syracuse restaurant on the east end of the Connective Corridor; and the Southwest Community Center on the city's South Side, where, as several residents noted, there hasn't been an operating movie theater in years.

Taiwanese director Ho Ping G'87, whose latest thriller, *Gei sun yan* ("Sweet Revenge"), was released earlier this year, enjoyed returning to Syracuse to serve as a festival judge and panelist. "Films are like windows," he says. "They can open different worlds and different cultures to you by putting them in your sight. They also allow you to see what is close, from a new angle. Syracuse's residents and University students are lucky to have their own international film festival. By working together, they become grateful to each other."